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Title	UK and Irish Television Comedy: Representations of Region, Nation, and Identity, edited by Mary Irwin and Jill Marshall
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Publication date	2026-09-04
Original Citation	Ortega Martín, D. (2026) 'UK and Irish Television Comedy: Representations of Region, Nation, and Identity, edited by Mary Irwin and Jill Marshall', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 31, pp. 159–162. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.31.20
Type of publication	Article (non peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.31.20
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Download date	2026-11-02 17:33:32
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/19166

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Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 31, 2026, pp. 159–162
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.31.20

alphaville
JOURNAL OF FILM AND SCREEN MEDIA

UK and Irish Television Comedy: Representations of Region, Nation, and Identity, edited by Mary Irwin and Jill Marshall. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, 251 pp.

Diana Ortega Martín

UK and Irish Television Comedy: Representations of Region, Nation, and Identity, edited by Mary Irwin and Jill Marshall, offers an in-depth scholarly examination of how television comedy reflects and shapes ideas on region, national identity and cultural belonging. Bringing together a multiplicity of perspectives, the book explores the patterns and topics through which comedy has helped anchor a sense of community in the UK and Ireland. The introduction, written by the editors, succeeds in establishing the key concerns of the collection, such as the target of comedic television, the power dynamics behind or the representation of region and nation. This variety of concerns is reflected in the range of topics addressed, which at times may feel slightly dense, as many ideas are introduced within a relatively short space, and the order can occasionally appear somewhat unclear. However, this does not detract from the commendable effort of producing such a comprehensive and well-referenced introduction for such a broad and complex topic. The editors state how "[t]he focus of this collection is the specificity of lived experience situated within a geographically and culturally bounded time and place. Concurrently, embedded in the texts featured are many of the seeds of the wider identity debates which have become of such critical and polarising significance in the recent years" (14). In doing so, the collection also reflects and selects voices and debates which have not often been heard, vindicating subaltern communities and departing from traditional stereotypes about them, one of the volume's greatest strengths.

Part I corresponds to England and its regions. Rather than treating British comedy as a single and unified tradition, the book takes a refreshing and realistic regional approach. The selection of TV case studies from a variety of decades and places highlights the diversity that has been morphed and marketed many times into a unified idea of national comedy. The chapters are audacious and suggestive, emphasising how different topics such as race, class or gender interact with regionality. The diverse case studies may also allow readers to become familiar with sitcoms from previous decades, such as *Ever Decreasing Circles* (BBC, 1984–89), and to understand how crucial the series was in articulating suburbia as a middle-class space where traditional Englishness is defended against societal fears of the era, such as otherness or social mobility. Similarly, it is appealing to find chapters that deal with representations of the north and northerness against traditional stereotypes, a historical demand that many scholars, such as Alex Niven, have been making for a long time: "Away from such chocolate-box clichés, which litter the property and travel sections of lifestyle magazines, and right-wing newspapers, there are, of course, less mindless ways of responding to the long-term plight of the north" (284–85). Jill Marshall's chapter on Victoria Wood's humour is especially compelling for its analysis of the

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complexities of othering northern-ness, but also the slipperiness of turning it into a comedic spectacle. Moreover, James Leggott's chapter on *Hebburn* also digs into the stereotypes of northerness. The scarce representation of the northeast is, in this sitcom, celebrated by describing "a community that understands and defines itself through its own mediation (whether through the stories in the regional newspaper, or the wit and wisdom of local celebrities like Cheryl), but also in distinction to somewhere else" (98).

While some chapters address the North-South divide, one of the axes through which national identity has been historically articulated, other chapters focus on another greatly discussed historical opposition: the city vs countryside debate. Both Mary Irwin's chapter on *This Country* and Bret Mills's chapter on *Detectorists* examine two shows whose depictions of working-class life in rural spaces escape traditional assumptions. Both chapters feel like different sides of the same coin, as they each focus on the absence of a clear future for working-class rural communities haunted by austerity and isolation. While *This Country* presents the lack of opportunities for youth, making comedy about the everyday and the mundane, *Detectorists* exposes how many citizens return to the past in the absence of a coherent narrative of the present or the hope for a better future. According to Mills, the show also makes comedy of everyday life, but it does not "offer up the relationship between the past and the present as funny. It instead places these different temporalities alongside onscreen precisely to visualise the land as a place made up of countless moments and acts throughout time" (149). In inviting the audience to rethink the relationship with the mythologised past, the show offers an innovative vision about land, culture and national belonging. Irwin and Mills's chapters are rich, readable and suggestive, providing the reader with engaging analyses on topics not very often dealt with.

It is notable but pleasing that the chapters that deal with more urban topics do so by interrogating intersections with race, as do Paul Elliot's chapter on *Citizen Khan* and Laura Minor's chapter on *Chewing Gum*, exploring the humour that arises from multiculturalism in large urban conurbations. Elliot highlights how *Citizen Khan* manages to make humour culturally specific but "understandable by those outside the demographic" (75). It redefines a TV format with historically racist tropes while establishing a correlation between the character and the city as a liminal space, since both "city and character provide examples of hybridity in action or alternatively in crisis" (77). In contrast, *Chewing Gum* actively redefines the national assumption that low-income households inhabit bleak spaces, resisting traditional narratives about race, class and sex. Minor argues that "Coel offers fresh and contemporary representations of black women on-screen by subverting the comic tradition of the 'unruly' woman" (120). Introducing this concept, first coined by Kathleen Rowe, allows Minor to expose how Coel undermines it in the series through intersectionality, making a vibrant portrait of the diversity in London's East End.

Part II of the volume is structured around the Celtic UK nations and Ireland. Once again, the comprehensiveness and scholarly richness of the study make it not only readable and entertaining but also compelling in the way it brings forward identities commonly underrepresented in discourses and productions about the nation. The pairing of the Celtic nations and Ireland also makes much more sense both academically and culturally, leaving no part of the Isles without proper representation, something that the vast majority of volumes do not always achieve.

Marcus Free looks at genre, generation and the questioning of Catholic Ireland in *Father Ted,* a metatextual sitcom that manages to avoid the usual clichés about the nation, such as traditional music or sexual repression. However, as in many chapters of the book, Free depicts the inherent contradictions of the show, making a nuanced portrait of the limits of a comedic form, encapsulating references and reflections about a nation, but with limited gender perspective or confusing structures.

The chapter on *Gavin and Stacey* is a particularly rewarding contribution, given the show's significant cultural impact and the underrepresentation of Welsh culture in academic discussion. Daryl Perrins accomplishes an excellent analysis that engages with space and language, exploring how the series and its comedic tropes reimagine Wales. In doing so, the chapter highlights both the dialectical oppositions and the hybridities between Wales and England, while also offering a nuanced portrait of the complexities of Welsh working-class communities post-devolution.

Anthony McIntyre's chapter analyses how *Derry Girls* navigates regionality, trauma and nostalgia through its sitcom form. The inclusion of a chapter dealing with these topics is especially timely, in light of the noticeable resurgence of cultural products that revisit and reimagine the period or deal with its ongoing consequences, such as *Kneecap* (Rich Peppiatt, 2024), *Blue Lights* (BBC, 2023–) or *Trespasses* (Channel 4, 2025). Moreover, *Derry Girls* was arguably one of the first to mark this resurgence. McIntyre's analysis focuses on the convergences and ambivalences between girlhood, trauma and transnationality, arguing that "[t]he series' light touch engagement with contested histories in the UK and Ireland offers a hopeful narrative of resilience and optimism that is heavily indebted to its temporal setting during the peace process of the 1990s and the affective exuberance of the school girls depicted" (205).

Both chapters on Scottish comedy examine how contemporary forms reflect and reshape Scottish identities. Nicola Dobson analyses Scottish online and animated comedy, animation being an often-overlooked genre in comedic analyses that, according to Dobson, provides new opportunities for regional creativity and innovative comedy. She focuses on animators Anderson and Henderson, who, according to Dobson, "demonstrate a sensibility in the use of the internet as a distribution method, the particularity of language and the use of the absurd and the tradition of the comedy duo in animated shorts" (213). Dobson concludes that the animators' work integrates awareness of new forms of distribution with a vindication of the Scottish folk tradition. Ian Wilkie studies how the work of humourist Brian "Limmy" Limmond redefines Scottish sensibilities through Glaswegian cynicism, self-reflection and masculinity, "problematising notions of identity and authenticity […] while meta-problematising comedy's role and functionality" (237). Wilkie explains how the comedian's "limmy-nal" humour creates a space based on simulacrum in a realm beyond traditional laughter (237). Taken together, the two chapters demonstrate how Scottish comedy negotiates identity and modernity in refreshing ways.

In conclusion, *UK and Irish Television Comedy: Representations of Region, Nation, and Identity* succeeds in broadening the parameters of comedy scholarship by emphasising the particularities that sustain comedy in the UK and Ireland. Through its diverse case studies, the study highlights the importance of often-overlooked regional representation and the evolving role of TV in representing marginalised narratives. Most chapters foreground the ambivalence of comedy and how perspectives can both challenge and reinforce social and cultural boundaries, making this a highly nuanced overview of contemporary comedy in the UK and Ireland. It is therefore a valuable resource for media scholars, as it makes a rich and significant contribution to ongoing debates on identity, TV, and cultural representation.

References

Blue Lights. Created by Declan Lawn, Adam Patterson and Louise Gallagher, BBC, 2023–present.

Chewing Gum. Created by Michaela Coel, BBC, 2015–17.

Citizen Khan. Created by Adil Ray, BBC, 2012–16.

Derry Girls. Created by Lisa McGee, Channel 4, 2018–22.

Detectorists. Created by Mackenzie Crook, BBC, 2014–22.

Ever Decreasing Circles. Created by John Esmond and Bob Larbey, BBC, 1984–89.

Father Ted. Created by Graham Linehan and Arthur Mathews, Channel 4, 1995–98.

Gavin and Stacey. Created by Ruth Jones and James Corden, BBC, 2007–24.

Hebburn. Created by Jason Cook, BBC, 2012–13.

Kneecap. Directed by Rich Peppiatt, BFI, 2024.

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This Country. Created by Daisy May Cooper, BBC, 2017–20.

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Suggested Citation

Ortega Martín, Diana. "*UK and Irish Television Comedy: Representations of Region, Nation, and Identity*, edited by Mary Irwin and Jill Marshall." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 31, 2026, pp. 159–162. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.31.20.

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