

## Irish Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Theory

Eoin Flannery  
*Oxford Brookes University*

I

The impact of theory, or specifically the advent of an Irish franchise of postcolonial studies, has produced a contentious, as well as progressive, commerce of ideas and theoretical paradigms within the broader discourse of Irish studies. Despite the poststructuralist murkiness, paradigmatic vanity, and indulgent verbosity of some international postcolonial theory, the resources of postcolonial literary theory and historiography provide singly-enabling mechanisms for Irish cultural inquiry. Indeed such critical importation became, and remains, what might be nominated a postcolonial cathexis within Irish studies. Since the advent of poststructuralism, deconstruction, and postmodernism, the integrity of narrative representation and the unified subject position has become increasingly precarious. However, the historian Gyan Prakash provides a moment of definitional clarity with respect to the project of contemporary postcolonial theory, as distinct from the pursuits of poststructuralist critical theory:

[postcolonial theory is] concerned not so much with decentering the individual as a founding subject, [but] it has nevertheless forced a crisis in universalist ideologies and provoked a genuine confrontation of discrepant histories and cultures by taking a combative stance with respect to the legacies of the application of such parts of the “Western tradition” as reason, progress, and history to non-European cultures. (378)

The discursive resources of postcolonial theory, then, have both supplemented and pillaged this critical narrative incredulity. Postcolonial studies is manifestly concerned with foregrounding exigent historical and contemporary experiences and legacies of all forms of imperialism. By facilitating discussions of imperial and anti-imperial experience across borders and within a protracted historical continuum, theoretical readings strive to, indeed must contribute to, ethical readings of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and postcolonialism.

A range of internal factors complicates readings of Ireland’s colonial history, in which all notions of language, ethnicity, faith, class, and gender were drastically affected—factors that expand and challenge the mandate of postcolonial studies. The depth and protraction of Ireland’s colonial experience, together with the vanguard initiative of its anti-colonial agitation, are judged as both instrumental and informative of subsequent “Third-World” anti-colonial movements. Indeed, Ireland’s “mixed” (Kiberd 5) position in relation to imperialism, its collusion and subjugation, can—in Declan Kiberd’s

view—“complicate, extend and in some cases expose the limits of current models of postcoloniality” (5). Irish literary and historical studies seem to offer propitious material with which to explicate the temporal and spatial differentials of imperialism, anti-colonialism, and postcolonialism. Given Ireland’s historically-ambiguous position *vis-à-vis* British colonialism and the recrudescence of such a position in contemporary politics—as well as the “current re-invigoration of Empire Studies” (Cleary 12) under the neo-imperial conjuncture of American foreign policy, in which Ireland is directly implicated—relations of Irish culture, politics, and histories to empire, both contemporary and historical, must be part of current and ongoing critical debate and practice.

The work considered in this issue, and indeed in the many literary historical and historical interventions within the field of Irish postcolonial studies, belongs to Ireland’s protracted engagement with British colonialism, which also encompasses its variegated anti-colonial efforts and its incomplete process of decolonization. Many of the interventions exhibit traces of, and likewise interrogate, Ireland’s liminal political and cultural location. Robert Young addresses the significance of Ireland’s co-option into debates on colonial history and postcoloniality:

The forms of revolutionary and cultural activism developed by the Irish against the entrenched self-interest of its rule by the British aristocracy and bourgeoisie meant that it remained the standard bearer for all anti-colonial movements in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries...[Ireland] provided a model for the most effective combination of tactics for all future anti-colonial struggle aside from those dependent entirely on military insurrection. (302)

Equally, the militant critical output of African anti-colonial writers and activists of the 1950s and 1960s, as well as the later revisionist historians of Indian nationalism, have provided Irish postcolonial studies with theoretical resources with which to confront anew Ireland’s colonial history and postcolonial present. In other words, Irish postcolonial studies belongs to a protracted continuum of resistant engagement and to a historically-constituted circulatory system of theoretical and ideational exchange.

Although the development of Irish postcolonial studies is frequently attributed to the work of literary and cultural critics, Joe Cleary rightly points out that “the work that appeared in the 1980s built on earlier scholarship and intersected with other intellectual currents” (“Misplaced Ideas?” 17). Specifically, the historiographical initiatives and research of David Beers-Quinn and Nicholas Canny positioned Ireland’s colonial history within what became known as “Atlantic History.” As Canny recently commented, historians of the Atlantic world

seek to establish whether the Atlantic Ocean, like the Mediterranean, as imagined by Fernand Braudel...had served more to bring together people of vastly different cultures than to separate them...Atlantic history is necessarily comparative

history, with historians re-constituting the African slave-trade as it was pursued on the Atlantic by adventurers of various European backgrounds. (739)<sup>1</sup>

Equally, within Irish economic history, the work of Raymond Crotty and Jim MacLaughlin drew on international theories of dependency. Crotty's theory of dependent development, then, linked Irish economic performance to other postcolonial societies; such ideas of lateral exchange and comparability have since been extended to cultural, theoretical, and ethical discourses, and retain a disputatious valence. These historiographic and economic currents, together with the diverse international critical, and further historiographic influences have contributed to the heterogeneity of Irish postcolonial studies (Cleary, "Misplaced Ideas?" 24).<sup>2</sup>

In the Editorial of a specially commissioned issue of the *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies: Ireland as Postcolonial*, Caitríona Moloney and Helen Thompson dispatched a manifesto for prospective interventions in Irish cultural studies. They suggested that "in order for Ireland to be considered part of the postcolonial paradigm, the paradigm itself must change. And conversely, Irish studies must do away with its isolationism...in order to see itself relationally with other cultures and nations" (4). I have chosen this particular editorial clarion-call not because it heralds any revolutionary theoretical strategy or seismic methodological innovation, but rather because it pithily, and at times unwittingly, alludes to and simultaneously embodies what has, is, and needs to be addressed within the broader discourse of Irish postcolonial studies. The overriding assumption of the editorial is that Ireland does indeed seek to be part of the *postcolonial paradigm*. The presumptions of the editors consequently elide two inherent problems of their manifesto. First, there is an unequivocal aspiration to locate Ireland *successfully* within a nexus of postcolonial cultures. More troubling, however, is

---

<sup>1</sup> Canny argues,

Scholars must emphasize in their writing and in the design of their courses that the questions they raise are with the purpose of shedding light on European (and for that matter global) experiences, since these are the perspectives of students of the twenty-first century...I believe that scholars and students will benefit from an exposure to a plurality of historiographies, methods, and perspectives so that we may look confidently to the histories of the peoples of Ireland and Britain, at home and overseas, during the early modern centuries, recovering the plurality they once enjoyed while retaining their academic credibility. ("Writing Early Modern History" 746-747)

<sup>2</sup> On this point Mary Jean Corbett writes,

Within this frame, attending to the local in the nineteenth-century English-Irish context means acknowledging that the history of colonial Ireland in the nineteenth-century can no longer be written in the sweeping terms of a simple opposition between colonized and colonizers...[b]ut acknowledging that nineteenth-century Irish people participated in the domination of others...need not mean that we relinquish the interpretive perspective that postcolonial theories of discourse and representation can provide. Instead, we should push towards the kind of specific and local analysis that attends precisely to the multiple positions available within a given formation. (*Allegories of Union in Irish and English Writing, 1790-1870* 9)

the inference of an undifferentiated postcolonial paradigm. The project of Irish postcolonial studies is emphatically not to formulate serviceable theoretical archetypes, typologies, or vocabularies; its usefulness is adumbrated clearly by Colin Graham and Richard Kirkland in their own editorial introduction to *Ireland and Cultural Theory: The Mechanics of Authenticity*:

a cultural theory informed by postcolonial criticism... locates moments of transience, instability and inauthenticity; a process designed not so much to buttress the existence of a new state but rather to question the frame in which the ideas of the state are articulated. (4)

The underlying conviction in the Editorial of Thompson and Moloney asserts that both Ireland and postcolonialism must engage in a process of critical symbiosis, in which specific Irish discourses neither dictate the terms of postcolonial critique nor allow any brand of postcolonial typology theoretically to essentialize Irish cultural and political discourses. Equally, Irish cultural studies must eschew any form of critical “isolationism” and must remain receptive to the mutually-enriching exchange of ideas with alternative cultures and nations. Clearly such a prescription is designed to transcend the unenlightened simplicities of criticism that perpetuate Irish “exceptionalism.” The Editorial echoes, and harmonizes with, the tenets of Kiberd’s critical oeuvre:

Because the Irish were the first modern people to decolonise in the twentieth century, it [seems] useful to make comparisons with other, subsequent movements...[i]f Ireland once inspired many leaders of the “developing” world, today the country has much to learn from them. (Kiberd 5)

The Editorial issues a variety of critical injunctions, and also summarily embodies both the most enabling and limiting features of postcolonial criticism. Moloney and Thompson posit the question “what is at stake for both Irish and postcolonial studies?” (3-4), and they conclude that recent debate within and surrounding Ireland’s “putative postcolonial condition” (Lloyd 158) is related to matters of “intellectual territory” (Moloney and Thompson 3-4). By deploying an overtly spatial metaphor, the editors imply a linkage between the power structures of imperialism and the politics of disciplinary autonomy within the academy. Thus, postcolonial scholars not only diagnose the imbrication of political and cultural practices within colonial discourse, but also perforce must contend with the vicissitudes of political chicanery within their own academic disciplines. Postcolonial critics are profoundly sensitive to the politics of cultural representation and access to political participation within colonial, decolonizing, and postcolonial societies. The editorial alludes to the coeval development of academic rivalry within the field of postcolonial studies, and much of the vituperation reserved for the flourishing discipline can, at least partly, be traced to this territorial dispute. And Irish postcolonial studies is no different; while the proliferation of critical and historical works on Irish colonial histories and postcolonial status might suggest a level of critical consensus

within Irish studies, the opposite, in fact, is true. Postcolonial studies emerged first as a challenge to the dominance of “New Critical” literary criticism and education in Ireland, as well as providing critiques of purely empirical and depoliticized historiography. Likewise, the escalation of the nationalist-republican violence in the North of Ireland was figured as a late-colonial crisis by many Irish postcolonial scholars, and thus the field of postcolonial studies within the Irish context became embroiled in a very real ideological, and no less military, conflagration.

Ireland’s location within debates on postcoloniality has always been—and will no doubt remain—contested, yet its inclusion is vital because of that very contestation. Ireland’s long-term, and historically differentiated, colonial experiences have been instructive to those societies who have more recently emerged from physical colonization, but who remain ensnared within the grasp of neo-colonial economic formations. Equally, the inclusion of a society that is currently an economic success story and that is geographically situated within “Fortress Europe” contradicts the disingenuous contention that imperialism is either geographically, or historically, distant. As Cleary notes above, the prevailing political and economic conditions of our times are salutary reminders that empire is not an extinct ideological concept or material reality.

## II

The current issue of *Postcolonial Text*, then, is both a response to and an extension of the debates and issues alluded to above. While the relevance of postcolonial studies to Irish culture—and the urgency of “imperialism” as a contemporary critical category—are frequently wished out of existence by certain critical and political constituencies, the essays contained herein and in other recent Irish studies challenge such agendas. Indeed, the interview included in this volume with the late Edward W. Said is an eloquent testament to the contribution that Irish cultural resistance has made to the paradigms of anti-colonial resistance and postcolonial studies. Conducted by Andy Pollak and Kevin Whelan in Dublin in 1999, the interview is given its first full academic publication in this issue. Its significance is perhaps best explained by the energy that Said’s postcolonial works have given Irish postcolonial studies over the last three decades, particularly in seminal publications such as *Writing Ireland* by David Cairns and Shaun Richards and *Inventing Ireland* by Declan Kiberd. Of equal significance is Said’s own intervention on William Butler Yeats, *Yeats and Decolonization*, which was published as part of the *Field Day Theatre Company*’s pamphlet series in 1988. Timothy J. White’s essay opens the issue, however, and furnishes the volume with a contextualizing theoretical précis of some of the principal critical ideas that have circulated within Irish postcolonial studies in recent times. White draws on the work of Luke Gibbons, expanding on Gibbons’s reference to Thomas McEvilley’s four-stage model of dynamic interaction between the colonizer and the colonized that is offered as a modular explanation of the imperial process. White argues that the

utility of McEvilley's four-stage model lies in its ability "to comprehend the changing realities of Irish politics. This model is not meant to explain all of Irish politics but to help understand those aspects of Irish politics that differentiate it from politics in other European or advanced industrial societies." This is a valuable point in relation to Ireland's interface with British imperial modernity, and one that has been recently articulated by Cleary (2007). Ireland's economic and political reality cannot simply be treated as comparable to that of other currently-wealthy Western European nation-states; Ireland's geographical location and contemporary economic status are not reliable indices of its colonial heritage.

Nevertheless, it cannot be said that Ireland has been thoroughly embraced by the progressive narratives and machinations of western capitalist modernity. And this series of developments over the last four decades has necessarily had profound social and cultural repercussions within the country. Many critics suggest that postcolonial theory is, and has been, the most forceful interlocutor of modernization theory, of capitalist modernity, and of the manifold cultural and political consequences of these aggregated phenomena. As a result, the traditional bases of Irish identities have come under intense scrutiny—issues such as sexuality, faith, gender, and most acutely, nationalism. And in this vein, Paul O'Brien's contribution introduces a suite of ideas that have not previously been addressed within the context of Irish postcolonial studies, namely contemporary Irish identities and global digital cultures and technologies. O'Brien acknowledges the shuddering impacts of Ireland's participation in the dominant economic and technological conjunctures of the contemporary world. And, likewise, he traces the political and cultural reactions to the sudden diversity within Irish society precipitated by the return of Irish emigrants, the influx of economic migrants from Eastern Europe, and the arrival of asylum seekers from Africa and Asia—much of which is attributable to the vitality of the Irish economy since the early 1990s. But O'Brien is more interested in teasing out the potential ramifications for "Irishness" of the proliferation of a global digital culture. In a country that placed so much historical identitarian faith in the unity, one might even say sanctity, of the national community, O'Brien foresees deep structural and imaginative changes awaiting Irish society as it becomes increasingly reliant on, and implicated within, the transactional systems of global digital networks. In O'Brien's estimation, "The Internet simultaneously highlights the instabilities in the notion of 'Irishness' as a culturally and politically unifying term, while hastening, through cyber-globalisation, both its dissolution and its migration to new forms."

In their essay, "Suspect Grounds: Temporal and Spatial Paradoxes in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*: a Postcolonial Reading," Robert Smart and Michael Hutcheson broach the narrative strategies of the Irish Gothic tradition, Stoker's *Dracula* in particular. Smart and Hutcheson focus first on the widely-acknowledged textual evasiveness of the Gothic mode and relate these aspects of Stoker's text to the narrative recalcitrance of the colonized culture. This essay draws on the

theoretical strands of poststructuralist postcolonial criticism, as the authors forward a triangulated theoretical argument that has clear implications for historiography and for the literary history of Ireland. They outline their first two contentions as follows:

The first argument explores the types of historiography provided in the novel as temporal modes of sense-making that would have been familiar to most Victorians. In this critical application, all of the characters' attempts to "tell the story" fail to bring order and sense to a world which is turned upside down in the novel. The second argument in this re-reading of the novel maintains that these various ways of telling history "fail" because the "real story" in *Dracula* is neither historical nor temporal: it is spatial, logged and preserved in cultural memory which the principals of Stoker's story are continuously enjoined to ignore or forget. Imperial narratives, whether historical or fictional, are arrangements of detail and events to serve a purpose: casting events and their causes into a progressive chronology which argues for the greater good of the colonial enterprise. Thus, in failing, the historical stories in *Dracula* point to the one tale they cannot or will not tell.

Crucially, and intersecting with recent appraisals of the significance of the Great Irish Famine (1845-1849) for the subsequent history of Irish culture, Smart and Hutcheson argue, "This subversive tale is hidden in cultural memory and becomes the third argument in this interpretive triangulation: it is about the Great Hunger or Famine of 1845-51, which had remained unmentioned in public discourse for over forty years by the time Stoker published his masterpiece. At the core of this strategy of re-reading is our claim that the Gothic, as practiced by Stoker, requires a spatial as well as a temporal mode for understanding the story."

In her essay, "Re-Imagining Women's History in the Fiction of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Anne Enright, and Kate O'Riordan," Caitriona Moloney addresses a matter that has proven highly contentious within the contemporary critical transactions between postcolonial studies, Irish studies, and women's studies: namely the relevance of so-called "Third-World" theory as a suite of reading strategies for Irish women's literary history. Moloney's piece is perhaps the most topical as it includes a discussion of the work of Anne Enright, the most recent winner of the *Man Booker Prize* for her novel, *The Gathering*, as well as considerations of the works of two of the most influential Irish female writers of the past couple of decades, Eilís Ní Dhuibhne and Kate O'Riordan. Moloney confronts the relative historical elision of female authorship from accounts of Irish literary history, and she does so at the level of both content and form in looking at these three writers. The essay highlights the suggestive deployment of myth, symbol, and private confessional narration as formal means of gendered agency in Irish literary history. Contradicting the silence of the subaltern theorized by Gayatri Spivak, Moloney concludes that "the historical fiction of these three women writers uses myth, biography, and family history to deconstruct simplistic essentialist hierarchies of good/bad, female/male, rural/urban, and Irish/English, creating a voice for the subaltern woman."

From the question of postcolonial studies and gendered authorship and representation, we move to Tom Maguire's essay, "'You're only

putting it on' - dressing up, identity and subversion in Northern Irish drama." Maguire's argument centres on the notions of dress and performance as key indices of communal identity, and he delves into these features of communal distinction in relation to the divided political topography of Northern Ireland. As he asserts, the essay is an investigation of "how costume has been used in pursuit of a variety of postcolonial concerns in contemporary Northern Irish dramas." Equally Maguire draws "attention to this use of costume... [in order to] evaluate how theoretical propositions about the use of costume in performance might be operative in practice." The essay, as the author further outlines, "look[s] at the ways in which costume signifies within Northern Irish society more generally and then at examples of strategies in the use of costume from the Northern Irish dramatic repertoire." With its focus on theatrical drama, the essay expands the generic span of this special issue, which also includes women's writing, Gothic fiction, postcolonial theory, and poetry. Maguire's piece looks at the dramatic productions of notable playwrights such as Brian Friel, Frank McGuinness, Christina Reid, Tim Loane, and Marie Jones, and considers whether dressing up, costume change, and dramatic performance are capable of generating genuinely subversive sentiments in the viewers/audience members.

In the final essay in this issue, "Postcolonialism in the Poetry of Mary Dorsey," Rose Atfield addresses the dual valence of the term "colonialism." She acknowledges the impact of the colonial relationship of Ireland and England and gestures to the social and cultural impacts of this long-term historical process. But Atfield is equally concerned with teasing out the internally-colonizing consequences of social and literary patriarchy in Irish society. In employing such a strategy, Atfield is most obviously in step with the methodologies of subaltern historiography, in particular the notion of "double colonization." The essay combines feminist and queer theories and strives to ascertain "the relevance of postcolonial readings to the work of Mary Dorsey... [and to] outline how her work is a collective process of recognition and exposure of a colonialism that denies and represses identity, and also how she achieves the restoration and reconstruction of female identity in political, sexual and literary contexts." Taking further critical guidance from Irish feminist scholars such as Linda Connolly, Gerardine Meaney, and the poet Eavan Boland, Atfield does not passively assume the applicability of postcolonial theory to the Irish context. Indeed her essay correctly alludes to recurrent dissension within Irish studies regarding the relative ascendancy of postcolonial theory as a series of literary and historiographical reading strategies within the field. The significance of Mary Dorsey's life and poetic work for Atfield is that it challenges the identitarian complacency of Irish society, by focusing on female subjective experiences, and on the specifics of female sexualities. In other words, the national self-image is interrogated through Dorsey's formal and thematic experimentalism; the cosy memories of Irish literary form and content, so often dictated by male writers and canon-makers, are disturbed and renovated through Dorsey's poetry.



The essays in this issue are by scholars who offer Irish and international perspectives on the applications of postcolonial theories to Irish culture. Irish studies is often a hermetic, even insular, field of academic endeavour; however, these essays, as well as the resources of postcolonial studies at large, represent enabling interventions in the discipline. The issue is a further reminder that Irish culture has a central role to play in the development of postcolonial studies: in the efforts to chasten its theoretical excesses or omissions, or in the attempts to refine or broaden its historical and geographical foci.

#### Works Cited

- Canny, Nicholas. "Writing Early Modern History: Ireland, Britain, and the Wider World." *The Historical Journal* 46.3 (2003): 723-747.
- Cleary, Joe. "Misplaced Ideas? Colonialism, Location and Dislocation in Irish Studies." *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory*. Ed. Clare Carroll and Patricia King (eds.) Cork: Cork UP 2003. 16-45.
- . "Amongst Empires: A Short History of Ireland and Empire Studies in International Context." *Eire-Ireland*. 42.1 and 2 (2007): 11-57.
- Corbett, Mary Jean. *Allegories of Union in Irish and English Writing, 1790-1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.
- Crotty, Raymond. *Ireland in Crisis: a study in capitalist colonial underdevelopment*. Dingle: Brandon, 1987.
- Graham, Colin, and Richard Kirkland, eds. *Ireland and Cultural Theory: The Mechanics of Authenticity*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999.
- Kiberd, Declan. *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*. London: Vintage, 1996.
- Lloyd, David. *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment*. Dublin: Lilliput, 1993.
- MacLaughlin, Jim. *Ireland: The Emigrant Nursery and the World Economy*. Cork: Cork UP, 1994.
- . "Emigration and the Peripheralization of Ireland in the Global Economy." *Review* 17.2 (1994): 243-273.
- Moloney, Caitriona, and Helen Thompson. "Introduction: 'Border Traffic.'" *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* 7.1 (2000): 3-14.
- Prakash, Gyan. "Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Indian Historiography Is Good to Think." *Colonialism and Culture*. Ed. Nicholas B. Dirks. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992. 353-388.
- Young, Robert J.C. *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001.