

*Versions of Ireland: Empire, Modernity and Resistance in Irish Culture*

Eóin Flannery

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The question underpinning *Versions of Ireland*—"was, and is Ireland a colony?"—has preoccupied scholars of Irish Studies for some time. Such a question is as crucial as it is contentious, addressing disputes which are political, disciplinary, constitutional, sectarian, temporal, theoretical, historiographical, oppositional, national, and international. The veritable plethora of texts that have been published focusing on issues associated with Ireland and postcolonialism attests to the importance of contributing to and challenging the field of debate in which this collection locates itself. Included among recent examinations are Stephen Howe's *Ireland and Empire* (2000), Nicholas Canny's *Making Ireland British* (2001), and Colin Graham's *Deconstructing Ireland* (2001). Does the wealth of scholarly polemic on the subject diminish the significance of Flannery's study? Has the author passed or missed the post?

Upon reading this book, one's answer should surely be an emphatic "no!" Indeed the author acknowledges the "intellectual courage and tenacity" of the postcolonial vanguard in Irish Studies (Deane, Kiberd, Gibbons, and others) and then sets out his own theoretical and contextual stall: his attempt to "take such work in new directions." It is fair to say that this is exactly what he does, adopting a genuinely cross-disciplinary approach that enhances and adds to current scholarship in the area of Ireland and postcolonial theory. In many ways Flannery subscribes to David Lloyd's agenda for Irish Studies, which seeks to "locate the connections and emergent possibilities in quite heterogeneous projects that are often structured, theorised and periodised in quite diverse ways." With analyses of Michael Hartnett's poetry, through comparative work on Irish subalternity, to discussions of photographs and tourism in Ireland, Flannery surveys Irish cultural forms and sets this exploration in a blessedly jargon-free meta-critical and applied-theoretical framework. He provides an often-provocative and always-dexterous reading of Irish literature, history, and politics, demanding critical inspection of its manoeuvres and premises. While the study may not be groundbreaking in its focus, it represents what can be regarded as a new maturity of postcolonial theory within Irish Studies. This maturity is evident in Flannery's dialectical considerations of versions of Ireland, in which he acknowledges competing voices and versions as sites of actual or potential contestation within the overall national narrative.

One of the significant strengths of this book is the meticulous theoretical methodology employed by the author and his reconceptualization of the applicability of a postcolonial paradigm to Ireland. The publisher's blurb suggests that "Flannery is an engaging and persuasive critic whose writings are both theoretically informed and politically engaged." This is absolutely accurate. The text is theoretically-precise, well-informed, and unswerving in its intent to confront the problematics and complexities associated with marrying the postcolonial with the Irish. Flannery is acutely conscious of the dangers of repeating the problems which have been identified in the application of postcolonial theory to the subject of Ireland. He eschews the tendency to substitute new polarities or conflate textual with material realities often found in postcolonial analyses, choosing instead to embrace the problems and contradictions that emerge in examining Irish literature and to incorporate these into his argument. Moreover, the author never shirks from acknowledging the oppositional and often chiasmic dichotomy between revisionism and postcolonialism in an Irish context: far from it, he engages with these issues head-on in a selection of diverse, judicious, lucid, and cogent essays that are important not for the answers they provide but for the compelling questions they ask us to address.

The book is divided into two sections, the first of which (from chapters one to four) sets the terms of the theoretical debate addressing key theorists such as David Lloyd and perspectives such as subalternity. Chapter One grounds the reader in the long and complex intellectual history of postcolonial theory offering salient sub-headings such as "Ireland and Empire," "Revising Postcolonial Studies," "Revising Irish Postcolonial Studies," and "Theory, Metatheory and Postcolonial Studies." This history offers the reader a theoretical map with which to negotiate the remaining chapters addressing the complex, multifaceted, and dynamic course of Irish historiography without taking recourse in stark oppositions or facile binarisms. Flannery's critical stance is genuinely illuminating, avoiding the messianic rhetoric of some other contemporary scholarship. There are some areas where the examination and assumptions are somewhat outdated, but in a theoretical field that is in perpetual motion this would be unreasonable grounds for criticism. The application of theory is masterfully-handled, astute, and addressed with admirable confidence. This approach in itself makes the study quite readable. More compellingly, it contributes to wider intellectual debates beyond but adjacent to the immediate concern of Irish Studies such as feminism, cultural theory, historiography and photographic theory.

Chapter Two, entitled "The Chauri Chaura Express: Irish History and Subaltern Studies," is a careful, detailed, and perceptive analysis of subalternity in an Irish context. Herein Flannery addresses what is an almost incalculable conundrum in Irish Studies: Is it possible to recoup any singular historical narrative as *prima facie* evidence of a past event? Drawing parallels between the works of the Subaltern Studies group and critical commentators such as David Lloyd and Angela Bourke, Flannery addresses the notion of whether the Irish

subaltern can speak, and he draws the conclusion that moments of subaltern agency and enunciation, while present, are silenced at “the margins of imperial modernity.” Further, he interrogates Spivak’s notion of the gendered subaltern—doubly disenfranchised by colonial discourse and indigenous patriarchy—and concludes that “through the variegated strategies of postcolonial studies, women’s history and feminist critique, alternative and culturally enabling narratives can be found.” Such previously-marginalized voices open up a field of possibilities beyond the monoglossia(s) of Rationalism, Imperialism, and Nationalism. Such voices which re-write the histories of the repressed and peripheral destabilize the logocentrism of colonial historical accounts by “authorizing” the marginal figure of the colonized subject.

The rest of Section One and indeed the book *in toto* continues in this interrogative and theoretically-accessible vein, delving into the poetics of Michael Hartnett and comparing them to Patrick Kavanagh’s “sublimity of the commonplace”; then, seamlessly sweeping into the potent socio-symbolic force of mural art as an expressive tool for the divided, sectarian communities of the north. Flannery’s potent analyses of such diverse representational genres do no less than activate a critical mandate to inquire into the question of “Irish” identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

While it is fair to say that this is a readable and consistently-engrossing book throughout, a particular highlight for me was the chapter on Irish Gothic entitled “Ghost Stories: Gothic Memory in Irish Writing.” Herein Flannery offers a rigorous and methodical investigation into a freight of conventionally-gothic themes which were combined in 19<sup>th</sup>-century British discourse related to race, in order to depict the Irish as threatening others: the racialized dark underside of Enlightenment progress and civility. Flannery’s bold positioning of the indigenous Irish, and more pointedly the Catholic Irish at the centre of post-Enlightenment colonial power relations, is provocative and compelling. This is a theoretical segue which provides the scaffolding for his readings of 20th-century “gothic” fictions by Eugene McCabe, and also *Reading in the Dark* by Seamus Deane. In his theoretical analysis of the latter Flannery strikes a seam of hitherto unquestioned complexities relating Deane’s celebrated bildungsroman to “tales of haunting, possession and insanity” and to the “extension of Anglo-Irish territorial proprietorship in Ireland.” This approach in itself is not new, but Flannery’s critical hermeneutics offer an intriguing excursus into the politics of Irish Gothic as a postcolonial mode of representation.

The final two chapters of the book again address representation in their examination of photography and tourist discourse. Herein Flannery examines the visual production of Ireland as a text for tourist consumption. His deft analyses take into account the semiotic and ideological contents of representations of Ireland in visual images as part of a hermeneutic of subjugation and domination which (paradoxically) locates “truth” in invention. He concludes by

addressing the “subterranean strands of Irish cultural resistance” to the dominant discourses of Empire and post-Enlightenment modernity.

In the ongoing debates between the applicability of the postcolonial to the Irish context, Flannery’s book is a welcome contribution. Flannery is theoretically-precise, perceptive, and pertinent, offering a number of relevant and revelatory analyses of Irish culture in a postcolonial context. His incisive textual criticism, combined with deft theoretical analyses, make this an eloquent and intelligent intervention into a rapidly-expanding debate. As such it will appeal to, and undoubtedly deserves, a wide readership.