

*Explorations in Irish Literature*

Heinz Kosok

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*Explorations in Irish Literature* is a collection of seventeen essays about various periods, genres and writers in Irish literary history. The essays were originally published between 1973 and 2004 but have been revised considerably and/or translated from the German. They are arranged in chronological order—not of their publication history but of the writers and subjects covered in the individual essays: the book begins with Jonathan Swift and ends with a discussion of Irish literature as the “Oldest of the ‘New Literatures in English.’” Kosok’s different research subjects are finally put into conversation with each other, and while each essay can stand alone, taken together they provide historical, cultural and conceptual frameworks for one another, especially if the book is read from cover to cover.

As a German scholar, studying Ireland from the outside, Kosok is particularly successful discussing transnational aspects of Irish writing; the first two essays are good examples. The first is a very critical analysis of several British, French and German stage versions of *Gulliver’s Travels*, and a comparison to the original text. Kosok’s closer look at the shortcomings of the stage adaptations only highlights the complexity of Swift’s novel. In a similar comparative manner, Kosok examines twenty-three German children’s versions of Swift’s famous novel, trying to find out “how much of its substance does a work of world literature retain or lose when it is turned into a book for young readers?” (41). He sadly concludes that adaptations of world literature for children bear little resemblance to the originals.

His chapter on John Mitchel’s *Jail Journal* is subtitled “Reflections on Defining the Canon of National Literatures” and presents a variety of criteria (biography, subject matter, theme, linguistics, implied reader, publishing history) that may be useful in demarcating national literatures—not without pointing out that they provoke more questions than give definite answers. Applying these criteria to Mitchel’s text, Kosok concludes that the book is both Irish and Australian, thus demonstrating the usefulness of his model for many other cases of diasporic or transnational literatures.

The last two essays are further examples of Ireland’s intercultural and transnational connections in literature. In the penultimate essay, Kosok tries to differentiate between the terms “translation,” “adaptation,” “translocation,” “acculturation” and “appropriation” by applying them to recent examples of continental plays that were rewritten—in one form or another—by Irish writers for the stage in England or Ireland. He focuses on Frank McGuinness’s *Peer Gynt*, Brian Friel’s *Three Sisters*, Thomas Kilroy’s *Seagull*, John Banville’s

*Broken Jug* and John McGahern's *Power of Darkness*. His final chapter presents Ireland as a case study in a larger examination of national literatures in a post-colonial context. Making clear distinctions between colonial and post-colonial literatures, Kosok extends the discussion from his chapter on Mitchel by a new set of criteria: the genesis of a certain work, the author's purpose and the work's reception. He discusses generic differences between England and its former colonies, emphasising the prominence of the short story and the short play in the "New Literatures" and concludes with a short reflection on how Ireland provided literary models for other decolonizing countries and can be seen as a forerunner.

Colonial and post-colonial echoes ring through many other essays. From Jonathan Swift, Kosok moves right on to Robert Maturin. First, he analyses how colonialism affected Maturin in three different ways. As an Anglican curate Maturin was a member of a colonial institution; as novelist he drew attention to the negative effects of colonialism; and his reputation suffered from "literary colonialism" (43), having had to cater for a reading public in a country other than his own. The next chapter concentrates on "The Gothic World of [Maturin's] *Melmoth the Wanderer*" and places the text both in the traditions of the English Gothic and the Irish travel novel. This aspect is taken up again later with a comparative study of nineteenth-century Irish writers who used travel as a plot element to paint Ireland in a more positive light for the English reader. Other chapters on nineteenth-century writing concentrate on folklore and poetry. Thomas Crofton Croker's *Fairy Legends* are discussed both in a separate paper and in a larger study of the "Forerunners of the Modern Short Story." Thomas Moore, Thomas Davis, Samuel Ferguson and James Clarence Mangan are at the centre of an examination of "The Four Faces of Nineteenth-Century Irish Poetry."

As for the twentieth century, three chapters focus on representations of World War One. First, Kosok discusses Yeats's peculiar position on the war, including the writer's rejection of Sean O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie*. O'Casey's play is analysed more closely in the following chapter and compared to Bernard Shaw's *O'Flaherty V.C.* A third essay looks at how both the 1916 Battle of the Somme and the Easter Rising have been represented in Irish drama, particularly in a number of plays written in Ulster in the 1980s. Finally, *Explorations* contains an essay on the story "The Man Who Invented Sin" by Sean O'Faolain, one on the plays of Hugh Leonard, and one on the early novels of Jennifer Johnston—three writers who have largely disappeared from contemporary literary studies.

Tracing more than two centuries, *Explorations* visits important historical moments in the making of Irish literature. Moreover, as the book summarizes Kosok's contribution to Irish Literary Studies over the course of several decades, it documents the discipline's development from its institutional beginnings in the seventies until the present moment. Kosok is no adherent to a particular critical theory; rather, his book is a very readable, wide-ranging empirical and intertextual study. Several of the essays come with appendices that

may serve as starting points for further explorations. Since the book is particularly strong in its comparative discussions of various kinds of adaptations and writing patterns, it serves a wide readership both within and outside the field of Irish literature.