

“A Pole of Differentiation”: Pasts and Futures in Irish Working-Class Writing

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As Declan Kiberd has observed, the Irish working class has often been characterized by its apparent belatedness, forming much more slowly in a less industrialized setting than many of its European neighbors (2017a). This understanding of Irish class dynamics and the concept of “modernization” that subtends it routinely fails, however, to acknowledge the complexity and diversity of national and indeed regional experiences of capitalism. Modernity has many guises. As Breda Gray has written,

Practices and institutions of modernity such as industrialisation, urbanisation and state craft have different histories, conditions of emergence and effects in different parts of the world (and even in different parts of the same country) so that instead of speaking of modernity, it may be more accurate to speak of multiple modernities [...]. The question is how these different constellations of practices and relations to time might be thought in ways that do not constitute some as “belated.” (2004: 21)

Understandings of “modernity” and “belatedness” are accompanied, in the Irish case, by curiously persistent denials of the country’s class politics. Some in Ireland have even suggested that Irish society never had much of a class structure at all.¹ But recent, more rigorous scholarly analyses have revealed a much more complex picture. Approaches to the history of Irish industrial development and class relations that fail to properly account for its role in the expansion of imperialist and capitalist Britain risk missing the significant part the Irish played in providing labor for

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England as that country emerged, during the nineteenth century, as the primary global manufacturer of goods—earning its reputation as “The Workshop of the World.” After all, as David Convery has most recently pointed out, the role of domestic Irish workers in feeding the empire, through their work in agriculture, distribution and associated industries, was significant from before the Act of Union in 1800 and continued to be so in the centuries that followed.² Additionally, despite longstanding romantic views of the Irish countryside in popular culture, Ireland’s northeast has had a long history of intense industrialisation in shipping, engineering, rope-works, linen and other industries. As migrants, the Irish were equally vital in British and American industrial development, as navvies, laborers, nurses, servants and workers in a range of areas in the bustling trans-Atlantic economies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In British working-class life, the Irish also provided a number of political activists and proletarian leaders from the Chartist movement on, as well as some of the most memorable proletarian writing, including Patrick MacGill’s *Children of the Dead End* (1914), Robert Tressell’s *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (1914) and James Hanley’s *They Furrys* (1935). Seán Ó Cualáin’s television documentary *Lón sa Spéir* (2013) and Pavel Barter’s Newstalk broadcast *The Sandhogs* (2015) have recently drawn attention to the often hazardous work carried out by twentieth-century Irish emigrants. For example, Ó Cualáin’s documentary found that some of the men in one of New York’s most iconic twentieth-century photographs, Charles C. Ebbets’ “Lunch atop a Skyscraper” (1932), were Irish-speaking immigrants from rural county Galway. These men atop a skyscraper may not have seen a building larger than their local church before they left home, and their precariously perched figures on a beam above the rapidly developing cityscape are an evocative reminder of the shock of displacement common to many Irish emigrants. They joined millions more who, across the last two centuries, flocked east and west (and south, to Australasia, many due to penal transportation) as part of a large, mobile and often vulnerable working class. These emigrants didn’t simply leave, of course, but retained relationships with Ireland that compel us, amongst other things, to consider the class structure of Irish experience in a complex, connected, international context.

Ireland, then, if "often thought of as a classless society" (Share, Tovey, and Corcoran 2007, p. 170), was very much part of the most advanced experiences of working-class life in the last two centuries. "All of Ireland until 1922 was an integral part of the United Kingdom (UK) and, as such, was therefore not a 'backward' society any more than a primarily agricultural part of England was" (Convery, 2017, p. 52). From this perspective, "Ireland had a role as part of the UK economy": "There has been some debate about how much this role was engineered, or whether it was accidental, but nonetheless, Ireland was useful to British industry as a source of food and of cheap labour" (Ibid.). Some of the Irish working class has been urban and industrial over the past two centuries and more; much of it has also comprised of rural, often insecure and temporary wage labor. Since the middle of the twentieth century, as Ireland's economy rapidly changed, labor has been increasingly in technological and services sectors, while women since the 1960s have increasingly worked outside the home. However, during the 1950s, 1980s and in the decade following the economic crash of 2007, large-scale emigration returned in waves. For these reasons, despite the temptations of seemingly straightforward comparisons, the Irish working class cannot be characterised in the same way as that class on its neighboring island. Instead, the Irish working class must be viewed in relationship with that island, colonialism, and emigration, and with regard to the particularities of class in other common destinations for Irish workers.

The Irish working class has also been integral to the politics of decolonization, some of its most recognized intellectuals and writers – James Connolly, Peadar O'Donnell, Seán O'Casey, Frank O'Connor, Brendan Behan, Bobby Sands and Gerry Adams, for example – being active in decolonizing revolutionary movements. Irish workers have been prominent in major labor movements and left-wing politics in the countries to which the millions of them flocked: in the Chartists, Bronterre O'Brien and Feargus O'Connor; in the USA, Mary "Mother Jones" Harris and, as a daughter of Irish immigrants and acutely conscious of her country's legacy of rebellion, Elizabeth Gurley-Flynn. Joan Allen notes that by "the early years of the twentieth century a significant

percentage of Irish workers in Britain came to privilege their proletarian solidarities at the local level and to regard the nascent Labour Party as best positioned to defend their day-to-day interests” (Marley, p. 35). As Ruth Dudley Edwards and Bridget Hourican (2005, p. 140) note, the Irish in Britain maintained a “long-standing antipathy to the Conservative Party” and “for class reasons, there has been a disproportionate number of Labour politicians of Irish descent, including around a third of Labour MPs in the late 1960s and, recently, two Labour prime ministers, James Callaghan and Tony Blair.” Tim Pat Coogan (2000, p. 312) points to John J. Sweeney’s observation that in the USA “most trade union leaders at the turn of the [twentieth] century were Irish”; Coogan proceeds to enumerate some of those various leaders “taken from a list which, if given in full, would fill this page.” Much later, as conflict raged in the north of Ireland, Irish organized labor would be a key contributor to the republican struggle, raising finances for the Irish-American (Irish) republican support organization Noraid from the 1970s on (Hanley, 2004, p. 4). As this suggests, not only was the Irish working class integral to trans-Atlantic capitalism over the past century, its worker emigrants and their descendants continued to exert considerable influence on life in “The Old Country”. Irish working-class experience, then, is complex and multi-faceted, and exceptionally globalized.

The tendency to underplay class in Irish life has at least something to do with the emphasis on “horizontal comradeships” (Anderson, 1991, p. 7) that emerged running up to and following Ireland’s Revolutionary Period (1913–2023) and the partition of the island of Ireland, after which the foundation of two deeply problematic and conflict-ridden states followed. The Free State, later Republic of Ireland, in separating from the British Empire and founding a polity said to be based on a vision of “cherish[ing] all of the children of the nation equally” (the Proclamation of the Irish Republic, 1916) had a vested interest, like all post-independence former colonies, in underplaying the extent to which it was in fact riven with class distinctions. As Aaron Kelly (2008, p. 84) argues, “Irish nationalism conceived of itself as liberating resistance to British law and power but yet, when afforded its own state and political institutions, served to reterritorialize

identity, to move from being minor to being dominant or major in its own (repressive) state." The Catholic working class north of the Irish border was subject to unionist supremacist misrule in the new Northern Ireland, while the working class south of the border was compelled to identify with the horizontal comradeship of the state at the expense of its own class interests. In the Irish Free State, there was a "long-standing nationalist desire to sub-ordinate divisive party and class concerns to the national interest" (Farrell, 2017, p. 70). In the North, unionism bound the Protestant working class to a vision of "Northern Irish," or simply British, nationalism, which had the effect of privileging Protestant above Catholic workers through pervasive discriminatory practices, thereby keeping many poorer Protestants firmly loyal to unionist elites within the statelet. The Irish "Free State," then Republic, was founded on utopian promises of fraternity and equality and on the enormous sacrifices and martyrdom of revolutionaries whose august words would come back to haunt the "free" polity that their struggle produced. Northern Ireland, as a contrived, gerrymandered, sectarian statelet, designed to maintain a planter-descended elite at the expense of an oppressed Catholic minority, germinated the seeds of injustice from which the conflict known as the "Troubles" (1969–1998) would spring.³ In both jurisdictions, working-class writers most often set themselves against these states' troubling inequalities, though most often in a complicated and sometimes conflicted relationship with the nationalisms that subtended them. Respective hegemonies emphasized national imaginaries in which class, gender, and sectarian inequalities were troubling and inconvenient realities.

As Convery has shown, the problematic discrepancies of modernization theory – of applying a model of class and industrialization more appropriate to centers of capitalist and imperialist power than to "peripheral" countries like Ireland – combined with Ireland's postcolonial experience, have diminished the appreciation of class consciousness and narratives of working-class life. Irish working-class writers have produced some of the most stinging condemnations of power and privilege on the island, both before and after the country's achievement of partial freedom from British rule, and they have produced some of Ireland's

most internationally recognized literature. The writing that has emerged from, or represents, the Irish working class, in ballads, fiction, poetry, drama, film, life-writing, Irish-language writing and other forms – most recently, for example, rap-poetry – has been far more extensive than previously acknowledged in scholarship. Recent developments in the historiography of the Irish working class and the study of its representation and cultural production, though, are transforming the terrain of Irish studies itself, suggesting the urgency of Irish working-class studies as a serious and important academic specialism. Dermot Bolger, in his review of Cambridge University Press’s recent *A History of Irish Working-Class Writing* (2018), observed how its focus “restor[es] a lot of these voices and narratives to their rightful context within Ireland’s literature” (Bolger, 2018). Furthermore, developments in public history, grassroots local historical initiatives and trade union and other organizational support for the curation and celebration of Irish working-class history and writing, illustrate the growing importance of this work in terms of social commitment and political development; among them, the openings of the Irish Centre for the Histories of Labour and Class at National University of Ireland Galway in 2013 and the James Connolly Centre in Belfast in 2019 suggest renewed vitality in the broader field. While it would not be possible, in such a relatively short essay, to survey in depth the many texts unearthed and explored in recent research on Irish working-class writing, the following will provide a brief introduction to this growing area of inquiry. This essay will consider some of its major themes and potential future trajectories, suggesting the extent to which this area requires an extensively international as well as national framing.

Academic Framing of Irish Working-Class Writing

Irish working-class writing sustains common themes and strategies of engagement with the politics of class in Ireland and beyond, though as I have noted elsewhere (Pierse, 2017, pp. 1–36), until recently this writing has received less scholarly attention than it merits, most particularly *as* working-class writing. The Irish working-class writer has a lot to offer, not only in terms of our

understanding of Irish society and culture but also our understanding of Britain in particular. In an essay for *The Cambridge Companion to the Twentieth-Century English Novel* (2009), for example, John Fordham notices how

It is no coincidence that the two most significant working-class literary voices of the early century were Irish – Patrick MacGill, born into the Donegal peasantry in 1890; Robert Tressell (Robert Noonan) into “middle-class” Dublin in 1869 – because it is their combination of class and diasporic consciousness that enables their texts to adopt a unique narrative position: one that observes the changing nature of labor from both within and beyond the laboring class. The formal implication for such writing is that, as distinct from classic English realism, it has no affirming tendency toward “settlement and stability,” but, as Terry Eagleton suggests, is characterized by strategies of irresolution that “cut against the grain of the fiction itself.” (2009: 132–133)

Fordham rightly suggests that both formal and thematic correspondences between Tressell and MacGill, the “most significant working-class literary voices of the early century,” provide fascinating historical and cultural insights (*ibid.*). But in John Wilson Foster’s collection, *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel* (2006), MacGill is referred to only fleetingly, Tressell not at all. Another of those Irish emigrants who joined the working class elsewhere – in his case, in South Africa and then England – Tressell’s posthumous achievements are extraordinary, though few have placed him beside Irish working-class writers of his times (Sean O’Casey, James Stephens, and MacGill) as part of a specifically Irish literary trend. There are many more Irish writers who too have written about working-class experience and who have, until recently, not been thought of in terms of a tradition of worker writing. In 1984, Ruth Sherry could write that “the concept of Irish working-class writing is not a well-established one” (Sherry, 1984: 111); three decades on, even after her article identified a host of writers in this category, very few scholars were writing about Irish working-class writers. Mary McGlynn’s *Narratives of Class in New Irish and Scottish Literature* (2008), my own *Writing Ireland’s Working Class: Dublin after O’Casey* (2011) and Aaron Kelly’s 2013 special issue of the *Irish Review* on “Cultures of Class” in Ireland are among the very few exceptions

in this regard. Ray Ryan's decision to commission *A History of Irish Working-Class Writing* (2017), in which scholars discuss further some of the issues mentioned here, was partly prompted by the publisher's commissioning of volumes of scholarship on British and American working-class literature and partly also by Ryan's own knowledge of the scarcity of academic research on this subject. Extraordinarily, while monographs have appeared on prominent Irish working-class writers such as O'Casey, Frank O'Connor, Brendan Behan, Sam Thompson, Christy Brown, Stewart Parker, Roddy Doyle, and Christina Reid, studies have rarely linked them, in any depth, in terms of one of the fundamentally formative aspects of their upbringings and great preoccupations of their works: class. *A History of Irish Working-Class Writing* has both partially addressed this neglect and opened up a range of possibilities for renewed exploration. Much of the following is indebted to what the scholars who contributed to that volume have achieved.

“A Land in Which No Justice to be Done to the Poor!”: Early Writers

The poor in Ireland's seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries are often characterised *en masse* as “peasantry,” distinct from a properly constituted “working class.” But this distinction is problematic, both in terms of categorising labor within a system of agrarian capitalism and in terms of its frequent failure to acknowledge the porosity between peasant and proletarian. For example, Christopher J.V. Loughlin (2017, p. 62) asks, to what extent were the secretive agrarian combinations of eighteenth-century Ireland “a form of agricultural trade unionism”? Known as “Whiteboyism,” or *na buachaillí bána*, these often violent organisations defended subsistence farmers against exploitative colonial practices, bringing together some of the poorest people in Ireland at that time. As Michael A. Gordon (2012, p. 190) argues, trade unions “had much in common with Whiteboy associations [... which] included mostly small tenants and cottiers whose rent was paid from wages they earned as labourers.” This is not to conflate the two, but rather to suggest a porosity between them. As the Irish economy advanced to meet England's needs, laborers landed

or landless shared a great deal in common. In terms of literature, the rural laboring poet is particularly compelling figure in the emerging colonial capitalism of a country in which formerly elite Gaelic aesthetes were thrown down the social order. As Ireland was conquered in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Irish-language poetry – which had till then provided many of its finest practitioners with an elevated status in the clan system – lost much of its prestige. Poets, or *fili*, formerly patronized by Gaelic elites, found themselves toppled from their lofty station, many of them and their children becoming laborers. One of them, Aodhagán ó Rathaille (1670–1726), would lament the upending of traditional order, through which, he opined, the poor were badly treated:

Tír gan chomhthrom do bhochtaibh le déanamh!
 [...]

 Fán smacht nahmhad is amhas is méirleach.

A land in which no justice to be done to the poor!
 [...]

*Beneath the tyranny of enemies and mercenaries and robbers.*⁴
 (Crowley, 2000, pp. 105–106)

One of the most globally recognised eighteenth-century satires on the treatment of the poor originates in the political climate Ó Rathaille described. Jonathan Swift’s essay, *A Modest Proposal for preventing the Children of Poor People from being a Burthen to their Parents or Country, and for making them Beneficial to the Publick* (1729), excoriated both the colonial and the class politics of those eager to lay the blame for Irish poverty on the Irish poor themselves. Swift’s “proposal,” a parody of the supercilious rationalisations of political economy, mockingly recommends that the poor in Ireland might reasonably be persuaded to sell their children to English elites as food. As Ireland indeed increasingly fed the English economy with physical labor and food, formal education was limited to the Protestant Church of Ireland by the Penal Laws, and children, particularly girls and Catholics, were often considered more usefully employed in labor than in schools. Few were able to write of their own experiences, and as Andrew Carpenter notes, “any assessment of the activities of these Irish working or labouring classes before 1800 is hampered by the fact that the sources of information about most of those who lived on

the lowest rungs of society are so meagre” (2017, p. 73). However, he also observes how “modern Irish working-class consciousness – its traditions, its folk-culture and its sense of its place in the world – derives, at least in part, from perceptions of what life was like for the underdog in eighteenth-century Ireland” (Ibid.).

Some of the accounts of class consciousness that survive from pre-Great Famine (1845–1849) Ireland are those of the much-abused landless laborer, or *spailpín*, described by the Devon Commissioners of 1843 as the most “wretched of the many wretched classes in Ireland” (Ó hAllmhuráin, 1999, p. 115). Some of these, like Ó Rathaille, were formerly revered *filí* (poets) from the vaunted *aos dána* (intellectual class) of Gaelic Ireland, for whom the shame of poverty was often more of a misery than its material privations; as one put it, “ní hé an bochtanas is measa / ach an tarscaine a leanann é” (“it is not poverty that is the worst thing, but the insult that follows it” (Kiberd, 2017b, pp. 13–14).⁵ Kiberd compares these “ruined bards of the lost Gaelic order” to Beckett’s wise tramps in *Waiting for Godot* (1953); their “arduous and mandarin training [as poets] left them ill-equipped for a new mercantile world” (Ibid, p. 13). In one well-known poem of unknown authorship and date, though probably late-eighteenth century, “An Spailpín Fánach” (“The Wandering Labourer”), a Kerry-born *spailpín* records the humiliation of hiring fairs, where these laborers would seek employment:

Go deo deo arís ní raghad go Caiseal
 Ag díol ná ag reic mo shláinte,
 Ná ar mhargadh na saoirse im’ shuí cois balla
 Im’ scaoinse ar leaththaoibh sráide –
 Bodairí na tíre ag tíocht ar a gcapaill
 Dá fhiafraí an bhfuilim hírálta.
 O! Téanam chun siúil, tá an cúrsa fada;
 Seo ar siúl an spaipín fánach.

*I’ll never again go to Cashel
 Selling and bartering my health,
 Nor at hiring fair sit down against a wall
 Nor hang about the street –
 The boors of the district coming on their horses
 Asking if I’m hired.*

*O! Let's make a start, the journey is long
It's off with the wandering labourer.*⁶

As Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin notes, the *spailpín* would also have his plight memorialised in the song "Caoineadh an Spailpín" ("Lament for the Spailpín"), and in other songs such as "A Spailpín, a Rúin" and "Peigín is Peadar" (2016, p. 129). Eighteenth and nineteenth-century Irish poetry of the poor is collected in Seán Ó Tuama and Thomas Kinsella's *An Duanaire 1600–1900: Poems of the Dispossessed* (1981). The sense of dispossession reflected in the collection's title indicates the class antagonisms that emerged among poets fallen on hard times. As Micheál Ó hAodha observes, "Many anecdotes relating to the Travelling poet/tradesmen such as the legendary poet/mason Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin depict the poet/craftsman engaged in verbal duels with priests, often in response to their 'flexible' working hours" (Ó hAodha, 128).

Carpenter illustrates that so much of the representation of the poor in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is in the form of lampooning or vilification. The Irish poor appear as comic (ab)users of the English language in mid-to-late seventeenth century poems written for the merriment of the English in Ireland (see Carpenter, 2017, p. 83); they appear also at this time in sensationalist tales about alleged criminals facing execution (*ibid.*, pp. 78–9). Due to the illiteracy of most of the Irish working class at this time, we have little of their self-expression in English poetry and prose. But there are some, like Drogheda bricklayer Henry Jones (1721–1770), or Kilkenny housemaid Ellen Taylor (unknown b. and d. dates; eighteenth to early nineteenth century), who rose socially with their poetry and were marvelled at by their social "betters," at least in part due to a form of primitivist fascination. As Carpenter notes, however, "there was virtually no leisure time for those who could work so that it is not surprising to find little writing that one can say was actually the work of members of the labouring class in seventeenth- or eighteenth-century Ireland" (2017, p. 74).

The poor Irish were subject, then, to simultaneous and interlinking colonial and class snobberies. "One way of assuaging one's fear of an opponent is by satirising or burlesquing him to make him look ridiculous" (*ibid.*, p. 75), and this kind of lampooning

was deployed *ad nauseam* to the Irish poor, notably in the form of the comic stage-Irish buffoon, which from the nineteenth century became “a staple of music hall entertainments and melodrama” (Maureen Waters, 1984, p. 41), and which the Irish Literary Revival later that century would set itself explicitly against.⁷ Indeed, the legacies of stage Irishry, as Liz Curtis (1983) has shown, were still to be seen in English political cartooning and stereotypes that persisted into late twentieth-century British press and comedy. John Hill (1987) and Martin McLoone (2000), in relation to film, and Patrick Magee (2001), in relation to fiction, have also noted how the recent north of Ireland “Troubles” ramped up popular cultural imagery of the Irish as simian. From the earliest, depictions of the Irish poor as either laughable buffoons or dangerous brutes – or some combination of both – served both comic and political purposes. Mid-to-late seventeenth-century long poems that circulated in elite English circles in Restoration Dublin ridiculed the Irish for their apparently risible use of English (Carpenter, 2017, p. 75), reinforcing the sense of racial superiority that the colonial project required. Ireland’s oral tradition, along with its language barrier, mean that we are left with few texts of the poor Irish person’s reply to such slurs.

Carpenter does find a more sympathetic depiction of the Irish worker in early eighteenth-century writing by Swift, such as his “A Pastoral Dialogue” (1733) and *A Dialogue in Hybernian Stile* (c. 1735). But it is telling that so much of what remains of the apparent words of the poor at this time is in relation to alleged criminality.⁸ It is often in the “dying words” of apparent criminals, sentenced to death by hanging, that narratives of the eighteenth-century Irish worker appear, their “stories” fabricated by others for financial gain. As Carpenter notes, these accounts do nonetheless provide some (dubious) insights into the experiences of workers at the time, not least how easily they might fall afoul of the law. One of those he cites, Sisly Burke, was hanged at the age of twenty-six years for allegedly stealing clothes (Carpenter, 2017, pp. 78–79).⁹

We know less of what the significant population of Irish soldiers in the British army wrote during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Irish enlisted significantly in the British army,

particularly prior to the Great Famine, when they were nearly one third of the population of the United Kingdom but constituted more than 40 per cent of the military's manpower (Nelson, 2012, p. 123). This significant working class has not produced any literature I am aware of, though it appears, for example, in the recent Lance Daly film, *Black 47* (2018), in which a fictional returned Irish soldier goes on a rampage against British elites when he discovers the cataclysmic effects of the famine at home. The avenging soldier now refuses to speak English, reverting to the Irish language as a portent of the sharply nationalist turn of the following seven decades that led to partial independence in 1922. But this romanticised version of Irish soldiers serving the Empire is hardly representative.

As with much of Europe and America, from the late nineteenth-century labor politics in Ireland began to grow, and the representation of Irish workers and the poor grew apace too. Working-class characters would make their way into writings by some of Ireland's most well-known writers: Dion Boucicault, W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge and G.B. Shaw, all hailing from the middle and upper classes, would depict aspects of workers' lives. In Boucicault's drama, the experiences of class and emigration are central to the crafting of his dramatic productions, not merely in terms of theme but also audience. When his "peasant girl," Eily, "a vulgar bare-footed beggar" in his melodrama *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), tries to rid herself of her dialect to improve her social position, learning that she must stop to "spake like the poor people" and must now be "getting' clane of the brogue, and learnin' to do nothing" (Boucicault, n.d. (188?), p. 8), the conflation of idleness and social mobility no doubt speaks to class consciousness in his audiences at home and abroad. When his picaresque, loveable-rogue, stage Irishman, Conn, in *The Shaughraun* (1874), observes that "a poor man that spoorts the sowl of a gentleman is called a blackguard" (Boucicault, n.d. (187?), p. 7), there is a more caustic commentary on the demonization of the poor. Eily is the daughter of a ropemaker, more clearly working class, while Conn is a vagabond and more difficult to categorise. But in both cases, Boucicault's success with, and consciousness of, his Irish-American audiences, who were likely to find affinities with the poor characters on

stage, is evident. They had no doubt experienced those class inequalities at home and now, in other ways, in the New World. Boucicault's success in Ireland, Britain and America indicates a complex relation of cultural production and class, as befits a first-world working-class with, to adopt a phrase of Luke Gibbons', a "third world memory" (1998, p. 27). Notably, after a New York performance of *The Colleen Bawn*, Boucicault would remind his audience "that Irishmen do most of the hard work in this country—I mean real, hard, manual labour" (Rohs, 94). Melodramas such as Boucicault's were also popular with Irish working-class theatregoers in London and at home.¹⁰

But other forms of cultural transmission were more common over the centuries in Irish working-class culture. Song was extremely important in the repertoire of a postcolonial working class with limited literacy and few educational opportunities. As John Moulden shows, a great deal of what survives of the Irish workers' popular imaginary in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is stored in ballads and broadsides, which could "express the lives of the people more fully than other kinds of record" (Moulden, 2017, p. 105). Folk song was a relatively fluid, democratic, responsive form of art, through which grievances could be aired, shared, and then adapted according to particularities of political context, time and place. In this sense, it was also a collaborative, bottom-up form—a route through which those with limited education, light and leisure could articulate thoughts and communalise experiences. As Moulden shows, many of these songs shared similarly counter-cultural sentiments, and some of those who sang them learned to read and write from folk songs that were written down (Moulden, 2017, p. 104). Given how easy they were to disseminate and hide, folk songs also made space for more seditious ideas. Moulden also emphasises the transnationality of the form, which could be modified from place to place with a central grievance or concern remaining much the same—illustrating how much the poor of different nations held in common. Folk song in Ireland enjoyed a revival in 1960s and 1970s and remains a popular current in working-class life. It was integral to the civil rights and separatist movements that emerged in the 1960s, particularly in urban working-class communities in Belfast and Derry.

Working-class writers such as Brendan Behan and Patrick Galvin were fascinated by folk ballads. Sometimes these ballads appear in other forms of literature, for example in Behan's play *The Hostage* (1958) or in Ken Harmon's play *Done Up Like a Kipper* (2002), the latter ending with an African newcomer to Ireland singing, in a somewhat twee nod to social inclusion, "Dublin in the Rare Oul Times" (p. 86). Tony Murray (2012, p. 52) notes another example: a "semi-legendary figure on the building sites of London," Irishman The Horse McGurk, who appears in Dominic Behan's 1965 ballad "Building Up and Tearing England Down," also makes an appearance in Timothy O'Grady and Steve Pyke's photography and novel collaboration (or "photographic novel"), *I Could Read the Sky* (1998). Folk songs are well placed to travel between places and across artistic forms. They also are the form most likely to be part of the vernacular creativity – "the doings and sayings of everyday life" (Hawkins, 2017: 12) – of the Irish working class. Brendan Behan's song "The Auld Triangle" (1954), for example, is undoubtedly more familiar to working-class people than is his play *The Quare Fellow*, in which the song was first performed.

All of these forms will bear the markers of historiographical selectivity and silencing. A very obvious example is Irish broadcaster Radio Teilifís Éireann's decision to ban ballad group The Dubliners' 'Seven Drunken Nights' in 1967, despite its achievement of a number five ranking in the British singles' charts that year. But it is important not to underestimate the extent to which worker-writers were capable of responding to inhospitable circumstances, both ideological and material. For example, Ireland's linen industry progressed rapidly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and with it a new kind of writer. Weavers in this period became associated with poetry, especially in Ulster, which was influenced by the work of Robert Burns and by changing industrial circumstances. As Frank Ferguson (2008, p. 17) explains, "numerous coinciding factors – economic, social, political and cultural – are responsible for lower-class Presbyterians, whose caste had been mocked much earlier in the century, gaining a voice as poets in the late eighteenth century." The initially home-based linen industry entailed flax spinning and linen

weaving in cottages. This rapidly developed in the north of Ireland during the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century, though the industry began to move into mills from the 1820s.¹¹ Jane Gray considers how the poetry provides an insight into the plebeian culture of the period. This culture, before the arrival of mills, is distinguished by fairs, revelry and amusements such as card-playing, cockfighting and bullbaiting, but religious influences and industrialisation led to these pursuits falling into abeyance: “The advent of the factory was therefore accompanied by the suppression of plebeian culture” (Gray, 1996, p. 48). Gray notes how weaver poetry would reflect this transformation, rhyming weaver James Orr’s poem “Ballycarry Fair” (1804) celebrating how the fair’s “bargains, courtships, toasts, huzzas, / Combine in the blythe disorder, O!”; his “Address to Beer” (1809), however, paradoxically (and apparently without irony) commends beer’s healthy and moderating influence in a place where whiskey is the preferred alcoholic drink: “Renown’d Reformer! Thou has freed / Frae sufferin’s tragic, / Unnumber’d fools, wha turn’d their head / Wi’ Whiskey’s magic” (qtd. in *ibid.*, pp. 49–51). As Ferguson shows, far from being simply derivative of the Scots vernacular poetry, as some have assumed, Ireland’s rhyming weavers developed styles and themes of their own (Ferguson, 2008, pp. 16–19). Undoubtedly, the monotony of the work of spinning and weaving itself facilitated flights of imagination and impelled self-expression. Even as the weaving became increasingly intensive, the writing – noteworthy for its embrace of Ulster Scots dialect – persisted. Ferguson describes the process of “a manifesto of linguistic and class aesthetics being defined” (2017, p. 92) as these writers cultivated and shared commonalities of ideology, philosophy and form, while vying with previous forms. This Scots-Irish tradition was closely related to the industrial waxings and wanings of Ireland’s traditionally most dynamic manufacturing region. As Ferguson notes of the nineteenth century Ballymena poet, David Herbison, for example, his poems would “accentuate the rage felt against the industrial processes and consumerism of mid-nineteenth century Antrim” (2017, p. 97):

Oh had I the power the past to restore,
The reel wad still crack, and the spinning-wheel
snore,

Mill-yarn wad sink doun as it never had been,
 Trade flourish as fair as it ever was seen;
 Distress and oppression flee far frae our view,
 Our hamlets rejoice and their beauties renew. (Qtd. in *ibid.*)

A later poet of the northern Irish left, John Hewitt, did much to help revive these rhyming weavers, who had been neglected partly due to their perceived low level of prestige. This neglect has since been significantly remedied by Ferguson's *Ulster Scots Writing: An Anthology* (2008). The sectarian character of Irish politics has also no doubt impeded the appreciation of weaver and Ulster Scots poetry which is mostly (though not exclusively) associated with northern Protestants.

Writing across Borders: Emigration and International Contexts

The shock of emigration from mainly rural Ireland (more lived in rural rather than urban Ireland until the early 1970s)¹² to global urban centers of capitalist development is crystalized in pioneering Irish poet Joseph Campbell's¹³ plaintive "The Newspaper-Seller" (1911), where an Irish emigrant worker in New York bemoans his estrangement from his children and indeed from home, yet finds new affinities there too:

In a bakehouse. He was German, sir,
 The boss; and Germans, mostly, mixed the dough,
 And watched the fires. That's how I came to know
 The Deutsch. I speak it better than I used to do
 The Gaelic at home. (Gardiner, 181)

The poem speaks to a people stripped of their language and traditions, cast adrift by empire and poverty, surviving in the New World. Just as Irish trade unionist and republican-socialist rebel James Connolly learned Italian to ply his trade unionism to New York's workers in the early 1900s, Campbell's newspaper seller learns German to succeed at his trade. The gulf between the two, though – one isolated and losing his past, the other deeply connected to Ireland and its early twentieth-century politics of cultural revival – captures something of the diversity of Irish emigrant experience, of the varied experiences of survivors and agitators. And many fall into both—or neither—category.

The Irish working class abroad has a grim history of reactionary politics, but it has an extraordinary history of trade unionism and radicalism too.¹⁴ It would be too much to present left-radicalism as characteristic of Irish working-class experience: so much of Irish emigrant mythology, particularly in America, has been of accommodation to an “American Dream” narrative of social mobility and achievement (see Lee, 2016). As Hallissy and Lutz (2017) convey, Irish working-class writers in America had very mixed responses to capitalism. In nineteenth and twentieth-century Irish-American fiction, from Mary Anne Madden-Sadlier to Colum McCann, they discover a wide range of approaches to the predicament of Ireland’s uprooted new arrivals. For example, in the short stories of James William Sullivan’s *Tenement Tales of New York* (1895), they note the author’s sympathy with those poor Irish who fall into crime. One of them, “Slob Murphy” – a child who ends up a thieving street urchin – is depicted as a victim of social circumstance rather than a mere disruptor of the social order. Sullivan portrays the harshness and loneliness of Slob’s short life and death, for example, when a friend discovers that Slob has died in an accident:

In the upper hallway stood little Johnny McNaughtally. He said
 “How’s Slob?”
 “He is dead.”
 “Wot’s dey a-going to do wit’ his old cloze?”
 (Sullivan, n.d. [1895], p. 23)

In the story, life is precarious and there is little time for sentiment. Other writers Hallissy and Lutz explore include Finley Peter Dunne, Sarah Orne Jewett, William Kennedy, James T. Farrell, Mary Anne Madden Sadlier, Betty Smith and Maeve Brennan. In Brennan, Hallissy and Lutz find stories of female Irish emigrants’ subjection to the same sexist constraints in the “New World” that they suffered in the old. Despite the tens of millions who claim Irish heritage in the USA, rarely is this diasporic literature discussed in terms of its relationship with Irish literature at home, or as integral to a broader history of Irish cultural experience. As Mary Burston (2009, p. 64) pertinently argues in her discussion of Irish-Australian women’s narratives:

The emigrant experience cannot be reduced to a physical crossing over of national boundaries or an unloading of cultural baggage when emigrants literally step on to new shores to be re-clothed in the habits of settlement. Emigration is not an eradication of identity. Notions of home remain embedded in cultural and geographic spaces as well as in memory, and in constructs of self-identity and in metaphorical and allegorical landscapes that can be traced to the memories of homeplace.

Hallissy and Lutz are the first to bring Irish-American worker writing into relation with other Irish working-class literature, providing salutary opportunities to consider how the Irish working class retained, transformed or indeed jettisoned aspects of its pre-emigration cultures and experiences, and how their experiences may have inflected Irish culture at home. Peter Kuch's recent research paves a path for parallel developments in research on Australasian-Irish working-class writing. Across a range of writers, Kuch observes a class consciousness that intersects with the outsider status of the migrant, and a concomitant "aspirational, class-conscious respect for education" and "palpable sense in which religion and inherited traditions – whether oral, historical, political, literary or folkloristic – invariably constructed the Irish as 'other'" (2017, p. 241). This recent research by Kuch, Hallissy and Lutz, is the first to interrogate such class, colonial and diasporic themes in proletarian Irish-American and Irish-Australasian emigrant writing, to my knowledge; the still relatively weak foothold of these areas in Irish studies is noteworthy.

Less understandable is the lack of attention given by scholars to Irish working-class writing in Britain. Given Britain's proximity, it is odd that emigrant and diasporic Irish-British literature rarely gets the scrutiny it deserves. Tony Murray and Liam Harte, in academic studies and anthologies, have produced some of the most noteworthy recent research. Harte describes his anthology, *The Literature of the Irish in Britain, Autobiography and Memoir 1725–2001* (2009), as being much characterized by writing of the margins and working class: "In many respects, this is a literature of outsidersness and exclusion, not only because of the writers' exilic status and the themes of struggle and alienation their work encodes, but also because of the sizeable number of plebeian

worker-writers encompassed by this tradition” (p. xv). While Murray has written about the many accounts of male Irish laborers in Britain, he also points to the importance of moving away from the general over-focus in scholarship on male-labor and “navvy” narratives—those stories of lives in occupations typically taken up by Irish emigrant males, such as in writing by Patrick MacGill, Dónall Mac Amhlaigh and Maidhc Dainín Ó Sé (some written *as Gaeilge*). As he illustrates in his recent research on Irish nurses’ writing, for example, Irish women workers’ experiences of racial prejudice, sexism and class snobbery, along with their attempts to gain “respectability” and dignity through their work, in an often challenging climate, provides for fascinating insights into both British and Irish class dynamics (Murray 2017). The freedom from conservative Irish sexual and religious norms that was available to Irish working-class emigrants in Britain during the twentieth century – as evident, for example, in O’Casey’s *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy* (1949), Brendan Behan’s London-produced play *The Hostage* (1958), Neil Jordan’s film *The Crying Game* (1992) and Patrick McCabe’s novel *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998) – suggests that if emigration can be alienating, it can be liberating too. Working-class writers like O’Casey, Behan, Paul Smith, and more recently Anna Burns, all left stifling contexts in Ireland, working abroad to great success.

But to overemphasize the freedoms of emigration would be to collapse into a stereotypical romanticizing of the Irish emigrant, which authors abroad so often problematize. There are also other areas in which international experience complicates the histories of Irish working-class writing. Scholars, such as Stefanie Lehner and Mary McGlynn, have illustrated, for example, interesting commonalities and contrasts in working-class writing across both Irish and Scottish literature. Lehner’s 2011 study notes the potential for what she terms an “archipelagic subaltern aesthetics” which employs a “comparative postcolonial approach,” arguing for “a number of important historical, socio-political and cultural affiliations” (1, 2) across the two nations. The present volume is, of course, a further important step in this direction; comparative work on Irish and international working-class writing is currently scant.

"I Fought to Raise a Daughter on these Streets": Writing Working-Class Irishwomen

Inequalities *within* the working class are, in general, less explored in academic research on working-class writing. My own recent work on portrayals of newcomers – of immigrants arriving to Ireland mainly since the post-1990s economic boom – considers a much-transformed context of class-race intersectionality in recent Irish drama and fiction (Pierse, 2020). Writers such as Bisi Adigun and Ursula Rani Sarma have attended to this question through theatre, as have writers of non-immigrant backgrounds such as Dónal O’Kelly, Jim O’Hanlon and Roddy Doyle, with varying degrees of success (see *ibid.*). Women’s working-class writing in Ireland is receiving new attention from scholars such as Emma Penney and Heather Laird. Penny has been researching in the less-explored area of women’s writer groups in working-class areas of 1980s Dublin.¹⁵ Laird (2017) has recently written on Irish women’s working-class writing since the late nineteenth century. Overall, writing by working-class women has been relatively scarce in Ireland, though, not least because so much of the burden of parenting – so often in large families – went to women, with very little time to write (see Kearns, 2004, p. xxii).

Representations of working-class women in Irish writing have been problematic in a range of ways. Male writers, such as James Stephens, Seán O’Casey, Paul Smith, James Plunkett, Peter Sheridan and Roddy Doyle have all written significantly of or “from” women’s perspectives, though this is, of course, problematic. As one would expect in a culture in which the Catholic worship of the Virgin Mary has been so extensive, there is also a tendency in Irish working-class writing to represent women in the role of saintly victims of a sinister system, the “careworn but diligent mother/nurturer” being “the dominant female figure in narratives that draw on Irish working-class life” (Laird, 2017, p. 126). As Gerardine Meaney (1993, p. 230) has argued, “in Ireland, sexual identity and national identity are mutually dependent,” and therefore “the images of suffering Mother Ireland and the self-sacrificing Irish mother are difficult to separate.” A central concern for feminist scholars is that “both serve to obliterate the reality of women’s lives. Both seek to perpetuate an image of

Woman far from the experience, expectations and ideals of contemporary women” (ibid.). Even where writers attempt to validate women’s experiences, they risk collapsing back into such imagery. Dermot Bolger’s poem, “Neilstown Matadors” (2008), in which twenty-first century heroines take up the fight against drug dealers and addiction in urban Dublin, might stand accused of reproducing this image of the martyred mother, yet the poem’s power is in its lyrical championing of the everyday courage and tenacity of Neilstown women, which is implicitly (and positively) compared with the faux-courage of men:

I fought to raise a daughter on these streets,
 I stood in queues and worked on checkouts,
 I searched for my child on dangerous estates,
 I stood up to debt collectors calling to my door,
 When she shivered in detox I tried to nurse her,
 [...]
 In time I wrapped my grandchild into my arms
 And took the place of the person I loved most,
 I made a nest amid the belongings I possess,
 I stood up in the ring every time I was gored,
 I watched the bulls run and raised my cloak [...]. (Bolger 2008)

An interesting aspect of this poem is its production as part of the Night and Day (2008) visual art and poetry project, which engaged questions of cultural capital and class spatially and graphically. “Neilstown Matadors” and other poems about working-class and immigrant experiences were erected on city streets in evocative “mural poem” posters with striking images and words, bringing Bolger’s poetry to the places and people it depicted. But, despite her combative stance, Bolger’s suffering mother, conjured by a male writer, is inevitably echoing that trope of the ever-suffering female embodiment of Ireland from Yeats’s *Kathleen ni Houlihan* (1902) or Patrick Pearse’s ‘The Mother’ (1906?). Bolger’s “matador” defends her grandchild, however, whereas Yeats’s and Pearse’s women-as-Ireland are defended by their sons.

Laird has considered differences between men writing women and women writing themselves in an Irish context and will expand on this work in her contribution to the *Routledge Companion*

to *Literature and Class* (ed. Georgia Lee McMillan, forthcoming with Routledge). Laird notes how the degradations that women suffer through poverty became a trope in Irish working-class literature. This frequently portrayed poverty's effects on women's capacities to meet hegemonic female behavioral standards as a means of critiquing the prevailing politics of class; "immoral" or "fallen" women were a powerful symbol of the society that failed them. Such a manoeuvre entails the partial reinforcement of the hegemony even as it assails it, but the trope of the "fallen" woman, from MacGill's reluctant prostitute, Norah Ryan (*The Rat Pit*, 1915), to Doyle's teenage mother, Sharon Rabbitte (*The Snapper*, 1990), has, in diverse ways, been a mainstay of Irish representations of working-class life. Oliver St. John Gogarty's Lily, in *Blight* (1917), rejects the toils of her poorly paid work in a laundry for a job in a restaurant where she earns "seven and six a week [...] and free temptation" (1973, p. 23), hinting at illicit relations with customers and accusing capitalism of creating this moral malaise. James Plunkett's prostitute in *Strumpet City* (1969), also ironically named Lily, escapes from the horrors of the factory for a more lucrative life in sex work (see Pierse, 2011, pp. 158–9, for further commentary on this trope). In MacGill's *The Rat Pit*, Norah's progress into prostitution analogises a swift, corrupting transition from rural life in Ireland to urban life in industrial Britain. Such depictions indict inequalities in the status quo, but these women's taboo "fallen" status is never in doubt. Mirjana Rendulic's one-woman play *Broken Promise Land* (2013), however, depicts sex work much differently. If, similar to these earlier works, Rendulic's lap dancer Stefica escapes into sex work from the humdrum and low pay of "sliding, scanning, typing, bagging" (2013, p. 2) in a retail job, here the sex industry, despite its dangers, is depicted as a welcome alternative. "I was always asked 'why are you doing it?'" Rendulic recalls of her own experiences as an exotic dancer, to which she would respond, "Well, why are you a waitress?" (Keane, 2013; further commentary on this play in Pierse 2020). In other recent writers, the trope continues more straightforwardly. In Lance Daly's 2008 film *Kisses*, for example, in which two children from dysfunctional families run away from home, their brief misadventure in a

lap-dancing club symbolises the grim underside of economically booming “Celtic Tiger” Dublin.

Laird’s work illustrates how often working-class writers reinforce gender norms, even as some of them attempt to dismantle them, and how often women are deployed as victims, rather than agents of change: “a common characteristic of fictional accounts of the Irish working class is that the women they feature are often presented as having little or no awareness of the structural basis of class and gender inequalities” (2017, p. 25). Yet Laird also illustrates how working-class women have used literary and fictive means to challenge their subjection to various forms of oppression. Paula Meehan’s poetry has repeatedly eschewed Catholic Ireland’s vision of womanhood as submissive and domesticated. One of her most harrowing poems, “The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks” (1991), centres on the 1984 death of a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl, Ann Lovett, who died in childbirth at the foot of a grotto to the Virgin Mary in Longford. Lovett, having hidden her pregnancy for fear of social censure, died with her baby, causing a wave of revulsion and anger about the stigma of pregnancy outside marriage in Ireland. In twentieth-century Ireland, this issue was always class-ridden, for example in how a “hierarchy of institutions” dealt with the perceived moral problem of unmarried mothers, “with mother and baby homes used for women from well off families who were pregnant for the first time and Magdalene asylums used to incarcerate poor women and women with more than one pregnancy, who were then forced to work in the associated laundries” (Gilmartin and Kennedy, 2019, p. 125). That Lovett died beside a statue of the mother of Christ added particular symbolic power to her and her baby’s deaths. In Meehan’s poem, she imagines this statue speaking:

On a night like this I remember the child
 who came with fifteen summers to her name,
 and she lay down alone at my feet
 without midwife or doctor or friend to hold her hand
 and she pushed her secret out into the night,
 far from the town tucked up in little scandals,
 bargains struck, words broken, prayers, promises,
 and though she cried out to me in extremis

I did not move,
 I didn't lift a finger to help her,
 I didn't intercede with heaven,
 nor whisper the charmed word in God's ear. (2002, p. 637)

This silence is emblematic of a stifling Ireland in which women who defied the strictures of hegemonic morality were vilified and abandoned, particularly if they were poor. But if Meehan invokes here an iconic image of the suffering mother, it is not to reinforce the orthodoxies of its cultural potency, for the statue rejects her assigned place: "They call me Mary — Blessed, Holy, Virgin. / They fit me to a myth of a man crucified: the scourging and the falling, and the falling again, / [...] They name me Mother of all this grief / though mated to no mortal man" (Ibid.). Rather, the image excoriates the hypocrisy of Irish ideals of motherhood in a society where some mothers are condemned. Laird shows how women's writing, from Fannie Gallaher's slum fiction of the late nineteenth century, to Christine Dwyer Hickey's fiction of the 2010s, has exhibited a complex range of responses to intersectional oppression. Some of those responses have entailed organizing culturally too, from the development of women's theatre groups, such as Charabanc and JustUs in the 1980s and 1990s, to the 2015 rallies of the #WakingtheFeminists movement, in which women challenged the entrenched sexism of Irish theatres. Working-class women have repeatedly sought to bring to the stage a feminist perspective that includes issues of class.¹⁶

An important related point here and in the study of all working-class writing, but particularly in a country where the kind of large-scale, enclave industrialization experienced in Britain and America was largely confined to one region (the northeast), is that working-class literature is never reducible to labor history—to the struggles of unions and industrialized workers. Nicola Wilson observes the continuing merit in Ken Worpole's observation of more than three decades ago in Britain that "the two major traumas that dominate working class life are, not the strike, not the factory accident, but early and unwanted pregnancy and hasty marriage, or the back-street abortion" (Wilson, 2015: 89). In Irish working-class writing that refers to or foregrounds labor politics, however, there is a range of responses to laborism and

leftism. Seán O'Casey's play *Red Roses for Me* (1942), in which a young socialist hero dies for his beliefs, is an example of a play in which the politics of the left are straightforwardly valiant in a theocratic state "in th' grip o' God" (289), but in many other works, the politics of labor fail. St John Ervine's *Mixed Marriage* (1911) depicts a Belfast in which labour agitation descends into sectarian strife, while A.P. Wilson's *The Slough* (1914) portrays a Dublin in which socialists are overzealous in their hatred of "scabs." James Hanley's Liverpool-Irish *The Furys* (1935) has a cynically self-serving labor organiser, and Sam Thompson's *Over the Bridge* (1960) caused controversy for its depiction of some labor activists as deeply sectarian in a pre-Troubles Belfast. In the Republic of Ireland, James Plunkett's 1977 short story "The Plain People" depicts a subdued trade union movement that has eschewed its revolutionary roots; tepid and technocratic labor relations dominate. Martin Lynch's *Dockers* (1981) would raise ethno-national sectarianism again, and his collaboration with Charabanc, *Lay Up Your Ends* (1983), would portray sexism in labor politics too. Dermot Bolger's novel *Night Shift* (1985) has workers plan an "accident" that attempts to seriously injure a scab. Jimmy Murphy's *Brothers of the Brush* (1995) and Owen McCafferty's *Scenes from the Big Picture* (2003) would both continue to criticise the grasping self-promotion of union activists. Yet these works all portray some of the positives of unions as well.

Something of a constant in post-Partition Irish working-class literature is the disenchantment of workers with the unfulfilled promise of Irish freedom. This is not to suggest that disenchantment was anything other than intense in years of the Irish Revival that led to the 1916 uprising that precipitated partial decolonization. From the onset of the First World War in particular, the sense of anger at the waste of working-class lives – portrayed for example in MacGill's *The Great Push* (1916), Liam O'Flaherty's *Return of the Brute* (1929), and much later in Paul Smith's *Esther's Altar* (1959) and Jennifer Johnston's *How Many Miles to Babylon?* (1974) – was feverish. But the failure to deliver on the idealist hope espoused by the Proclamation of the Irish Republic has lingered to the present. That Proclamation declared the rebels' purpose as the "happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and

of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally."¹⁷ The deep, if quite different, inequalities that emerged on both sides of the British border in Ireland after Partition made this promise seem a haunting mockery of opposing nationalist hegemonies north and south. Writers from working-class backgrounds ever since have repeatedly drawn attention to the failures of both jurisdictions and the subsequent politics of elites descended from that revolutionary moment.

Seán O'Casey, Peadar O'Donnell, Liam O'Flaherty, Frank O'Connor and Brendan Behan, writing in the Free State, all channel the alienation of the poor. Much of this criticism takes a social realist approach, for example in Peadar O'Donnell's depictions of grinding rural poverty; the following is from his 1928 novel *Islanders*:

Then the family went back to the three daily meals of potatoes. And when the potatoes became scarce they took to doing without any supper, except sloak and dulska. Sheila took to vomiting when she tried to eat either of these, and the mother borrowed a tin of Indian meal from Peggy. Sheila was now being slapped at school, because she hadn't three halfpence for a new reader. Once she came home at midday crying bitterly. She had been put into a corner by herself and would be refused admission to the class until she bought the book. (2005, p. 25)

However, O'Casey for example departed from the more realist drama of his most successful plays in the 1920s (*The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926)) in order to make some of his most trenchant criticisms of Ireland's newly "free" polity. In plays from *The Silver Tassie* (1928) on, expressionist and experimental stagecraft is deployed in order to jolt audiences from their complacencies. *The Silver Tassie* depicted the horror of First World War battlefields in its bewilderingly expressionist second act, where music, chanting, exaggerated symbolism and language, and the kind of studied *gestus* from actors that we associate with Bertolt Brecht, create a kaleidoscopic condemnation of the increasingly rationalized barbarity of war. Here, the playwright suggested that the propaganda of war had made its madness so normal that only a defamiliarizing dramaturgy could explode the common sense.

The plight of working-class soldiers lured to the battlefields, and their subsequent realization that war means “Shells for us and pianos for them” (1950, p. 38), is central to the play. This desire to estrange audiences would recur two decades later in O’Casey’s “*Totaltheatre*” play, *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy* (1949), though here the focus is on renewed emigration under self-government. As in other later plays, such as *Hall of Healing* (1952), which castigates the Irish health system, O’Casey is keen to stress in *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy* the fetters of class inequalities in post-independence Ireland. At this stage, his focus has turned on the theocratic proximity of (Catholic) church and state – what O’Flaherty had termed “the dour Puritanism of the young generation, arisen since the revolution” (1998 [1928]: 81) – and its role in maintaining the status quo. *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy* deploys the outlandish in its attempt to expose these realities: a local priest of a small rural town attempts to rid it of a comic masque figure, the “Cock,” who personifies the pre-Christian worship of nature, but which represents the vital energy of youths who are “fleein’ in their tens of thousands from this bewildered land” (O’Casey, 1950: 194). The stifling moral climate and its role in hegemonic power is assailed through a comic, surreal theatrical experience. To again assail the sclerotic moral order, Brendan Behan also would transform his naturalist tragedy, the Irish-language play *An Giall* (1957), based in working-class Dublin, into a more experimental piece, *The Hostage* (1958), for the London stage.

Surreal hauntings recur in Irish working-class theatre. North of the border, in Stewart Parker’s *Pentecost* (1987), a Protestant working-class woman haunts a home during the 1974 Ulster Workers’ Council strike, seemingly signalling, as with the worker ghosts of Parker’s earlier play *The Iceberg* (1975), that those excluded from “history” often need to be re-inserted through magical means. Dermot Bolger has used ghosts to represent the excluded, implying the power of the literary to disrupt the hierarchies of empiricist histories. For example, in his play *The Passion of Jerome* (1999), a poor suicide victim haunts and terrifies an affluent couple, as a spectral indictment of the class divide. Bolger’s earlier novel *The Journey Home* (1990) repeatedly deploys surreal, cartoonish hyperbole to signal the extent to which an extraordinary state of political affairs in Ireland’s 1980s has been normalized. In one

episode, corrupt politicians take their ailing revolutionary socialist grandfather on election canvasses but villainously "remove his false teeth so that the people mistook his tirades against the smugness of the new state for the standard pieties they expected" (p. 214). This outlandishness gestures at the obfuscation of a deeper reality: the reliance of corrupt crony capitalists on the population's allegiance to absurd lines of descent between rebels who fought for a socialist republic and their grandchildren who govern a capitalist state. It gestures as well to the dangers of realism's naturalizing drives. Roddy Doyle, though generally preferring more realist forms, would suggest something similar in his play *Brownbread* (1992), where young men, who have watched too much of the television series *Miami Vice*, decide to kidnap a bishop. And in Philip Casey's novel *The Fabulists* (1994), an unemployed couple descend into a fantasy world of tall tales that seems to make life on the dole more bearable. From James Stephens' novel *The Charwoman's Daughter* (1917) to Emmet Kirwan's recent play and then film *Dublin Oldschool* (2014 and 2018), fantasy, the bizarre and surreal are deployed by working-class writers to highlight the normalization of what ought to seem grotesque. This is not to overplay the innovations of Irish working-class writers, but to suggest instead that they are at the very least more aesthetically complex than is often assumed. This is a perceptual issue that accompanies all working-class writing, of course: the worker-writer's value is too often simplistically measured in terms of their "reflection" of reality, their writing assumed to be "realistic in the most unpremeditated and unselfconscious fashion" (Davies, 1984: 125).

To be sure, realist depictions of the lives of poor people are a larger part of Irish working-class writing, which often simply aims to make outgroups visible. As John Brannigan observes of O'Casey, for example, "a persistent theme [...] is the attempt by working-class men and women [...] to become visible as thinking democratic subjects" (2017, p. 294). But in the more realist too there are various forms of innovation. The experience of the immersive play *Binlids* (1997), for example, written by Brenda Murphy, Christine Poland, Danny Morrison and Jake Mac Siacais, aimed to replicate, in a performative way, the disorienting tumult

of British Internment policy, which facilitated the mass arrests and jailing without trials of mainly working-class Catholics in early 1970s Belfast. On five stages, and with actors intermingling unannounced with their audience, *Binlids* simulates the chaos of early 1970s working-class West Belfast, including through a riot scene that some observers found uncomfortably real (Rooney, 2018, p. 35).

Here, as in much northern writing of working-class experience in the past half-century – such as John Boyd’s *The Flats* (1971), Christina Reid’s *Tea in a China Cup* (1983) and *Joyriders* (1986), Danny Morrison’s, *West Belfast* (1989), Glenn Patterson’s *The International* (1999), Marie Jones’s *Somewhere Over the Balcony* (2006), Anna Burns’s *Milkman* (2018) and Scott McKendry’s *Curfuffle* (2019) – in fiction, drama and poetry, writers continually represent the experiences of class inequality on a level often ignored by the over-focus on high politics and ethno-national tensions that writing of the “Troubles” so often entails. Poets are often keenly aware of the dynamics of class in northern Irish life, even when they come from relatively comfortable backgrounds. Adam Hanna (2018) conveys how some of the most celebrated of Irish late twentieth-century poets, such as Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley, have felt very personally their remove from the working class. Others, such as John Hewitt, John Campbell, Michael Brophy and Gerald Dawe, suggest that the conflict in Northern Ireland between rich and poor is more important in understanding local political dynamics than often imagined (also Hanna, 2017). But preoccupations more generally wax and wane during this period. As Mary McGlynn observes, for example, a “substantial evolution” takes place in fictional representations of Irish working-class experience from the 1960s to the 1980s, with earlier texts exhibiting “preoccupations common to modernist and postwar texts: the centrality of clergy; social hypocrisy; the sprawling family with abusive alcoholic father and weary, loving mother; dreary squalor” (2017, p. 305). Later writers are more likely “to take these as clichés to be avoided if possible” (*ibid.*, p. 306).

When the boom of 1993–2007 came, it transformed the Republic of Ireland, not just economically, but socially, culturally,

and perhaps most profoundly, psychologically: Ireland, for the first time, was a global economic marvel, and if the old Ireland had peddled myths about its dreamy otherworldliness, the new one would have its own collection of myths. Not least among these was the perception of embourgeoisement that affluence brought. Martin J. Power, Eoin Devereux and Amanda Haynes observe that if "class inequality has been and remains a significant element of Irish society [...] the myth of a classless Ireland was perpetuated most strongly during the 'Celtic Tiger' economic boom" (2013, p. 3). Eamon Jordan illustrates, however, that "rather than reinforce binaries of hegemonic and non-hegemonic, marginalised and centralised, privileged and subjugated," Celtic Tiger dramatists "demonstrate something more complicated" (2017, pp. 392, 393). Some evince a still-vibrant communality in Irish working-class communities, even if capitalist ways of thinking have taken hold through ethics of competition and efficiency, a "dog-eat-dog world [...] which dominates most ways of relating" (Ibid., p. 392). Mark Phelan and George Legg note how, north of the border, the linking of reconciliation with notions of progress through economic rejuvenation has been problematic; late twentieth and early twenty-first century northern Irish plays, such as Owen McCafferty's *Scenes from the Big Picture* (2003) and Brian Campbell's *Voyage of No Return* (2004) attempted to challenge neoliberal notions that political progress for the working class is inextricably linked with economic "regeneration." In the later play, a socially mobile tourism executive sees his emergence into the lower rungs of bourgeois society, as part of a "a young, confident, upwardly mobile, aspiring-to-own-a-silver-BMW" cohort of "Taigs [Catholics] With Attitude" (Campbell, 2004, p. 13), as evidence of social progress. His collusion in neo-colonialism, however, through an American business venture in Montserrat, suggests the exploited has merely learned to become the exploiter.

Throughout this writing, as this necessarily short survey has sought to illustrate, working-class writers continually seek to dismantle the rationalization of class inequalities by colonial and decolonizing regimes alike. Sociologist Michel Peillon argued in the 1980s that Ireland's "stark class contrasts" revealed themselves "not only in differences of status but also in differences of

behaviour" (1982: 2). These differences of behavior in the working class forged, at least in his assessment of working-class urban Dublin, "a specific life-style" in which "the particularity of the working class appears from whatever aspect one studies it, and it asserts itself *as a pole of differentiation in Irish society*" (35). This "pole of differentiation" is evident, in diverse ways, throughout most Irish working-class writing.

Future Scholarly Trajectories

There are a number of areas in which future scholarship on Irish working-class literature will find hitherto underexplored writers and trends. In the nineteenth-century song "Rocky Road to Dublin," Galway poet D.K. Gavan narrates the comic-tragic tale of an Irish man from Tuam, in the impoverished west of the country, who makes his way to the Dublin and then to Liverpool, England. Along the emigrant's journey, there is self-aggrandizing comedy, as he leaves "the girls of Tuam nearly broken hearted"; melancholy, as he drinks "a pint of beer, my grief and tears to smother"; and prejudice, as he suffers the taunts, first of his compatriots in Dublin, who mock his "Connaught brogue," which "wasn't much in vogue," then of the people of Liverpool, who ridicule his native country (Huntington, 1990, p. 178). The defiant emigrant, who has just journeyed across the sea in the pigs' quarter of a ship, finds his first helpers in fellow western Irishmen, who join him in fighting the offending Liverpoolians. This quick-cadenced song, performed at impressive speed and requiring exceptional skill on the part of the singer, reminds us that for many Irish a sense of kinship and community was more easily found among the Irish abroad than it was in other parts of the island of Ireland.

As I have argued here, the Irish who fed capitalism's machinery in Australia, Britain and America across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were part of a global working class, but in many cases, as with our doughty traveler from Tuam, isolated within the countries they had arrived in and acutely aware of their othered identities. These Irish often provided support for their families at home, made way for siblings and relatives who followed them, and contributed immensely to Irish cultural production. Their experiences at the coalface of capitalism are not other to, but

integral to, the story of the Irish working class in a country where emigration forms a very significant part of the national tale, and research on the writing of that experience is undoubtedly among the most urgent for scholars of Irish working-class culture and literature.

Very little has been written about Irish-language working-class writing too, with writers like Dónall Mac Amhlaigh, Maidhc Dainín Ó Sé, Séamus Ó Grianna receiving little attention as a group writing in that language and often about emigrant experiences and poverty. Neither has enough been written about the most othered group within the Irish working class, Irish Travellers, who have been subject to a great deal of condescension and vilification, which Peter Sheridan challenged, for example, in his play, *The Liberty Suit* (1977), and Rosaleen MacDonagh has more recently explored, from a Traveller perspective, in her play *Rings* (2010). Another urgent trajectory is the investigation of class in the Irish arts infrastructure: little has been written on the quantifiably material dynamics behind Irish cultural and arts institutions and their qualitative impact, though Cultural Policy Observatory Ireland, established in 2015, has been keen to expand the research base in this regard. Sandy Fitzgerald's 2004 reader on community arts in Ireland, *An Outburst of Frankness*, considered some issues around the funding and support available to working-class writers and arts practitioners, but the overall field of Irish arts management studies has been lacking in research on this issue. Helena Sheehan's studies of Irish television drama point to the extent of the national broadcaster's role in reproducing class inequalities. But Sheehan's research on this subject is mostly more than two decades old, and has yet to be followed by such significant interrogations of class in television drama in more recent decades: what are the unthinking class biases in the hit crime drama *Love/Hate* (2010–2014), which is largely focussed on working-class communities, or in *Fair City* (1989–), Ireland's long-running and leading soap opera, which again attempts to capture contemporary urban working-class life?

The recent publication of *The Children of the Nation: An Anthology of Working People's Poetry from Contemporary Ireland* (November 2019), edited by Jenny Farrell, along with author

Paul McVeigh's forthcoming collection, *The 32: An Anthology of Irish Working-Class Voices* (scheduled for publication in 2020) suggest that the resurgence in scholarly interest in working-class Irish writing is matched by a renewed vitality and connectivity in the writing itself. McVeigh's book follows and is modelled on Kit de Waal's British collection, *Common People: An Anthology of Working-Class Writers* (2019), and inspired by his own observation that "too often, working class writers find that the hurdles they have to leap are higher and harder to cross than for writers from more affluent backgrounds" (O'Toole, 2019).

Another area in which further research is urgent is that to which the present volume turns. As Sonali Perera has recently insisted, "working-class writings from different parts of the globe share more points of connection than are acknowledged by most literary histories" (2014, p. 5). Close attention to the nuances of local and national context are indispensable to working-class writing; as I have suggested here, the particularity of Ireland's postcolonial context provides but one example of why scholarly caution about how we historicize the global working class ought to make us wary of simplistic international comparisons. However, if class is a relationship and not a "thing," as E.P. Thompson (1980 [1963], p. 10) famously declared, the emotional, cultural, psychological and social experiences that emerge from class relationships—experiences of alienation, shame, anomie, alterity, defiance, depression, collectivity, "radical openness" (hooks) and much more—provide undoubtedly rich comparative contexts. If workerist claims, such as those made by George Orwell that "poverty frees [the poor] from ordinary standards of behaviour" (1933, p. 6), risk idealising the poor, there are yet many commonalities in experiences of class that traverse national boundaries and suggest the wisdom of a more concerted networking of scholars researching the literature of the working class globally; the fine grains and knotty contradictions of particularity need not be lost in the wide sweep of these comparisons.

This point seems implicit in Jeremy Gavron's recent novel, *Felix Culpa* (2018), which draws almost two thousand lines of its text from over one hundred other books. Pinning this novel to a concrete location is a fruitless endeavor: one reviewer suggested

its landscape of mountains and jungles might point to South Africa (Cioni, 2018), but its borrowed lines from narratives located in Britain, Mexico, Tibet and a range of other climes, draw on vernaculars that suggest such speculation is redundant. *Felix Culpa* follows its protagonist, an unnamed artist-in-residence in a male-only jail, in his quest to discover how one of its inmates, a mysterious loner, died. In utilising the diverse international stories of a range of marginal, loner figures, from, for example, Cormac McCarthy's novel based on the Mexican border, *The Crossing* (1994), and Patrick MacGill's narrative of an Irish 'navvy' in Britain, *Children of the Dead End* (1914), Gavron suggests something of an uneven but powerfully evocative fellowship of the marginalized. Each line beseeches us to reveal its mystery—to seek elsewhere for its origins in another text and what that might reveal about Gavron's unfolding story. This innovation enables a multiplicity of rich interpretations, invites the reader to participate more actively in the making of meaning, and repeatedly entreats one to be open, not just to the parallels and crossovers it suggests, but to the transgression of norms and inversion of ethical hierarchies Gavron's focus on the margins—on criminals and outcasts—suggests. In a neoliberal age in which the relentlessness of what Henry Giroux terms "disimagination" (2014)—the idea that there is no alternative to the political status quo—holds sway, connecting the margins across space and time in *Felix Culpa* attests to the role of history's outsiders in unsettling complacencies and rejecting orthodoxies, and to their continuing relevance. This is by no means to suggest a reductive characterization of those margins and their local political complexities, but rather to make a more modest claim, as bell hooks has, that the margins can be, and often are, a "space for radical openness" (1990), though which alternative social visions emerge. When Gavron invokes MacGill's anti-improvement story of an Irish outcast who rejects Victorian norms, or a more sympathetic reading of the legendary criminality of another Irish diasporic outcast, Ned Kelly, in Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000), and when he puts them in relation to more than a hundred other texts and a central tale that speaks to the wisdom to be found at the edges of social acceptability, this connectivity indicates how we can reach beyond

disimagination. Where we make imaginative leaps across barriers and contexts, to connect diverse experiences of the poor, we find resources for imagining beyond the “disimagination machine” (Giroux, 2015, pp. 74–76). This is what we do when we make those imaginative leaps in the study of international and transnational working-class literature.

Endnotes

1. See Convery’s critical account of this, 2017, pp. 45–50.
2. See Convery, 2017.
3. The northern state would secure for British rule only six of the nine counties of historic Ulster, in order to maintain a Protestant majority there.
4. Translation by Crowley.
5. Translation by Declan Kiberd.
6. Translation by Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin (1999, p. 116).
7. The manifesto of the Irish Literary Theatre (1897), for example, pledged to “show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment.” Qtd. in Lee, 1995, p. 166.
8. As Carpenter writes: “Given the social structures of the day, it is not surprising that most of those who fell foul of the law and ended up on the scaffold in early eighteenth-century Ireland were from the working class, as were most of those who came to enjoy the spectacle of a public execution. Thus though Irish was the language of the many of the onlookers, the ‘Dying Words’ of the malefactor, printed on half sheets and sold to the crowd before the fatal drop, were in English. Few of these texts would have been composed by the criminals; it is more likely that they were the work of hack writers or even of those who printed them. But still, they probably reflect the attitude of working people towards each other and the law” (Carpenter, 2017, p. 78). See also James Kelly, *Gallows Speeches from Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001).
9. Georges Denis Zimmermann has also illustrated how the sensationalism of public trials and executions attracted significant interest from the peddlers of broadside ballads (Zimmermann, p. 62).

10. See Christopher Fitz-Simon (2011). See also, for example, commentary on Hubert O’Grady, J.W. Whitbread and P.J. Bourke in Stephen Watt (2004), esp. pp. 27–28.

11. See Jane Gray (1996) for an account of the shifting economic, industrial and social circumstances behind this poetry.

12. See Terence Brown (2004), p. 246. From 1971, for the first time, more than half of the population of the Republic was living in urban areas.

13. I am grateful to Scott McKendry for introducing me to Campbell’s work and to this poem. McKendry’s research on Campbell is ground-breaking and will be published soon.

14. See B. Kelly (2018) for some discussion of this contradiction.

15. Penney recently completed a PhD on narratives about the feminist movement in Ireland through a mixed-methods analysis of working-class women’s writing, publishing, testimony and community work, focalized through the work of the Kilbarrack (Dublin) women writers’ group that was active during the 1980s; her project is briefly outlined here: <https://www.writing.ie/resources/on-being-an-irish-working-class-writer-part-3-by-dave-lordan/>.

16. See Armstrong 2015 in relation to class and #WakingtheFeminists.

17. The full proclamation is available here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/bfa965-proclamation-of-independence/>.

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