

FOREWORD

The influence of the literature of a tiny country like Ireland on Twentieth Century literature in English has been extraordinary. Yeats is the greatest poet, Joyce probably the most important novelist and playwrights such as Wilde, Shaw, Yeats, Synge, O'Casey, Behan and Beckett have revived an English language theatre that had been for the most part moribund. Nor have things changed all that much in the post-Yeatsian literary world, that is, since Yeats "handed in his gun."¹ If — in view of contemporary developments in Canada and the United States — *The Times Literary Supplement* and *The Literary Review* are somewhat guilty of overstatement when they describe Irish poetry as "the richest verse being written in English today,"² their words, nevertheless, do point to the fact that the Irish muse has lost little of her beauty or sublimity.

Even before the modern Cuchulain sprang from Yeats' forehead, however, Ireland and its literary canon had been especially prominent in the English cultural tradition. Indeed, the brilliant essay by Seán Golden with which the present volume opens, not only illustrates the influence of traditional Irish music on contemporary Irish literature, but also traces that influence and that of the literature with which such music had been "inseparably intervined" on English literature since earliest times, beginning with a description of the reaction of Gerald the Welshman to Celtic poetry and music. Patrick O'Neil's essay, in turn reveals that the Irish influence extended far into continental Europe. Similarly, other essays in this volume — those of Mary Helen Thuente and John P. Harrington for example — clearly establish that the Irish tradition in literature has not been nearly so discontinuous as many perhaps uninitiated scholars have assumed, but that it has always been old, rich, powerful, and curiously, at the same time, young, vital, and flexible.

A journal like MOSAIC, then, has little difficulty in justifying a special issue devoted to Irish writing. Still, there is another less apparent justification that became more and more salient in my own mind as I read and reread the numerous submissions to this collection. Not only has Irish culture undoubtedly had an enormous influence on writing in Canada, but also the similarities between the two literatures are particularly striking.

Because an editor can only invite — not usually determine — the focus of submissions, special issues often contain a group of essays rather loosely held together by some rather tenuous point of contact. One thinks, for example, of two of the collections of essays reviewed in the back of this volume. *The Irish Tradition in Literature* possesses the same kind of variety, and yet, there is a principle of unity in it as well. Many of the essays in the present volume consider the question of what is distinctively Irish in literature. Golden speaks about the inter-relationship of Irish music and Irish literature, Thuente, of the influence of the oral element on Irish writers, especially the two giants, Yeats and Joyce, while Barbara Brothers describes the "sense of community"

Elizabeth Bowen discovered in the Anglo-Irish milieu in Ireland and absorbed into her novels. In addition to Thornton's comments about the treatment of woman as both hag and queen that floats through much of Irish writing, we discover that both essays on Kavanagh — that of Foster and that of Thornton — not to mention Maxwell's paper on Yeats, deflate the pretensions of the Irish world invented by Yeats.

On the other hand, Kavanagh himself has attempted to escape this preoccupation with Irishness, saying ironically on one occasion: "Auden and Dylan Thomas, Moravia, Sartre, and Pound are all Irish poets. They have said the thing which delighted me, a man born in Ireland, so they must have a great deal of Irish in them."³ And, of course, Kavanagh is correct. Many apparently Irish characteristics are shared by the writing of other countries. Furthermore, there is obviously a great deal of disagreement about what is distinctively Irish.⁴ Nevertheless, even Kavanagh's comments and his disgust at Yeats' fraudulent Irishness reveal the same concern in his own work⁵ and it seems undeniable that this preoccupation with identity is a fairly constant feature in Irish writing in contrast to English or American writing. We might even say that this is a fundamental element in the literature of any nation continually colonized over a long period of time, particularly a nation whose language has been uncertain and whose culture straddles two traditions. In Canada this concern about identity has very often manifested itself in the literary struggle to connect voice and space, or to voice that space faithfully and completely, uninhibited by foreign impositions. The same may be true of writing in Ireland. In contemporary Canadian literature one thinks of the quests of such people as Robert Kroetsch, Rudy Wiebe, Pat Friesen, Margaret Laurence, Al Purdy and Eli Mandel (in the French tradition Chamberland, Miron, and Lapointe) for the voice of Canadian space,⁶ especially of F. R. Scott's poem "Laurentian Shield":

Hidden in wonder and snow, or sudden with summer,
This land stares at the sun in a huge silence
Endlessly repeating something we cannot hear.
Inarticulate, arctic,
Not written on by history, empty as paper,
It leans away from the world with songs in its lakes
Older than love, and lost in the miles.

³"Diary," *Envoy*, Vol. 2, No. 7, p. 85.

⁴Eavan Boland has commented, for example: "There are so many more compelling definitions of Irishness than can come out of poetry that I think it is unwise for poets to get into the competitive treadmill with history, and to keep turning out counterfeits, or even true bills, of the national identity." "Nationalism and Obsession in Contemporary Irish Poetry," *The Literary Review*, XXII, No. 2 (Winter 1979), 241. The Irish writer, and, for that matter, the Canadian and perhaps the Quebecois, is constantly reinventing himself.

⁵Especially when Kavanagh makes statements such as "We are a dark people, / Our eyes are ever turned / Inward" (*Collected Poems*, p. 9).

⁶In particular I am thinking of Robert Kroetsch's *But We are Exiles*, Friesen's *the lands i am*, and Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* where Big Bear is transformed into stone at the end of the novel.

¹Patrick Kavanagh, *The Collected Poems of Patrick Kavanagh* (London, 1964), p. 90.

²TLS quoted in "Editors' Comments," *The Literary Review*, XXII, No. 2 (Winter 1979), 130.

This waiting is wanting.
It will choose its language
When it has chosen its technic,
A tongue to shape the vowels of its productivity.⁷

It is also rather interesting to notice that in Jack Hodgins' new novel *The Invention of the World* the mythic hero Donal Brendan Keneally begins by rising out of a circle of stones in Ireland and ends by descending into the bowels of the earth on Vancouver Island.⁸

On the Irish side, perhaps we should focus on D.E.S. Maxwell's comments later in this volume about Yeats' creation of his own Irish space, Maureen Murphy's analysis of Padraic O'Conaire's stories, and on John Montague's moving poem about the disappearance of Irish Gaelic:

... Dumb,
bloodied, the severed
head now chokes to
speak another tongue: —

An Irish
child weeps at school
repeating its English.

.....
To slur and stumble

In shame
the altered syllables
of your own name;
to stray sadly home

and find
the turf cured width
of your parent's hearth
growing slowly alien:

In cabin
and field, they still
speak the old tongue.
You may greet no one.

To grow
a second tongue, as
harsh a humiliation
as twice to be born.

Decades later
that child's grandchild's
speech stumbles over lost
syllables of an old order.⁹

⁷*Selected Poems* (Toronto, 1966), p. 38.

⁸Keneally's end vaguely recalls that of another similar protagonist who disappears into the bog in Martha Ostenso's novel about the inter-lake in Manitoba: *Wild Geese*.

⁹*The Rough Field* (Dublin, 1972), pp. 34-5.

Seamus Heaney's "Bogland" is so relevant here that it defies omission:

We have no prairies
To slice a big sun at evening—
Everywhere the eye concedes to
Encroaching horizon,

Is wooed into the cyclops' eye
Of a tarn. Our unfenced country
Is bog that keeps crusting
Between the sights of the sun.

They've taken the skeleton
Of the Great Irish Elk
Out of the peat, set it up
An astounding crate full of air.

.....
Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before.
The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.
The wet centre is bottomless.¹⁰

The words of the ancient Irish poet still echo through Irish writing: "I cham of Irelaunde/Ant of the holy londe of irelande. . . ."¹¹

It may very well be, then, that an important principle of cohesion in both the Canadian and the Irish literary traditions is this concern about space, about what Robert Kroetsch has called "What is I?"¹² It is the principle that operates behind most of the essays in this book.

A shadow of cloud on the stream
Changes minute by minute;
A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
And a horse plashes within it
The long-legged moor-hens dive,
And hens to moor-cocks call;
Minute by minute they live:
The stone's in the midst of all.¹³

¹⁰*Door Into the Dark* (London, 1972), pp. 55-6.

¹¹Epigraph, *The Book of Irish Verse*, selected and introduced by John Montague (New York, 1977), p. 7.

¹²Kroetsch's complete statement (in conversation in April of 1979) regarding the question of Canadian identity and Canadian geography was: "Not, 'Where am I?' or 'Who am I?' but 'What is I?'"

¹³*Collected Poems* (London, 1961), p. 204.