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Anne Fogarty

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## *Introduction*

by ANNE FOGARTY

LITERARY HISTORIES have been for some decades in a state of flux as seemingly sacrosanct notions of canonicity, the author, periodisation, and easily definable and discrete artistic movements have come under attack. Although Irish literature, as David Lloyd has argued, may be seen as constituting, in many of its aspects, a minor, counter-hegemonic tradition, and hence as less guilty of enshrining conservative, monolithic authorities, it too has been subject to renegotiation in recent years. The publication of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* under the general editorship of Seamus Deane in 1991 was a landmark endeavour which sought to redraw the boundaries of a narrowly conceived, national literature and to produce a more expansive, variegated, and inclusive account of literary production in the country. This radical remapping of Irish writing, however, proved to be beset by problems. The dismantling of a privileged and limited corpus of writers and works ironically threw into relief multiple omissions, including most glaringly women's writing. A remodelled literary history seemed to be defined by, and secretly dependent on, its own occlusions, as countless critics readily pointed out. More problematically, however, the very history of women's writing in Ireland in the debates which ensued about questions of gender and literary value appeared to be determined by its silence and marginalisation and by triumphalist and often unexamined concepts of feminist radicalism.

Although a further volume of the Field Day series concentrating primarily on texts authored by women, gay writing, and literature in the Irish language is currently at press, in the interim since the anthology's first appearance simplistic beliefs in feminist literary history as a watertight, unassailable, and undifferentiated entity and as constituting the ultimate antidote to the distortions of patriarchal tradition and of exclusionary canons have been challenged. Moreover, the validity of retrieving a seemingly endless series of neglected female writers from oblivion and adding them to an ever-expanding and all-embracing counter-canon of radical, subaltern voices has been questioned. Above all, as Laura Marcus has pointed out, feminist criticism must now confront the problems caused by circular definitions of women's writing whereby newly recuperated texts are read through the lens of, and as mirroring, reigning political values and orthodoxies. Increasingly, gaps have opened up between feminist ideology and the widening array of texts which

have been added to the archives of women's literary history. In particular, the assumption that works written by women belong to a single, immutable counter-genre or literary sub-stream and that they are necessarily and inherently subversive has proven to be falsifying and untenable.

Traditional histories of the Irish novel frequently posit a female point of origin for this mode of writing, namely Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*. Thereafter, however, women's contribution to the course of Irish fiction is invariably depicted as fitful, discontinuous, and negligible. By and large, with a few notable exceptions such as Somerville and Ross and Sydney Owenson, women novelists and short story writers are seen as only coming into their own in the twentieth century when Elizabeth Bowen, Kate O'Brien, and Mary Lavin embarked on their writing careers. The objective of the essays collected here is to re-examine the history of the Irish novel from the numerous vantage points offered by the women writers who contributed to the development of this genre in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The chief concern of the contributions to the volume is not to posit the existence of an entirely separate counter-tradition of women's fiction or to use their work as a rallying call for, or affirmation of, current feminist concerns but to consider how a reinvestigation of the texts produced by women at varying important moments might allow a more differentiated account of the specific historical conditions that shaped them and of the closely entwined operations of gender and genre. A further aim of this special issue is to review the claims made by critics such as James M. Cahalan and Terry Eagleton that Irish novels are anti-bourgeois and inveterately hostile to the dominant modes of English fiction, especially that of realism, and to test their validity in the case of writers such as Maria Edgeworth and Charlotte Riddell amongst others.

A common finding that is reflected on in various guises throughout all of these essays is the way in which the material conditions of literary production and reception shape and influence the work of individual women and also affect their reputations during their lifetimes and posthumously. In particular, ideological and political conflicts lastingly determine the terms of reference within which these authors are read. The early press reviews of Maria Edgeworth's novels, as Cliona Ó Gallchoir demonstrates, are instructive as they foreshadow the current view that her fiction is flawed because of its seemingly improper mingling of realism, romance, and didacticism. Where critics such as John Wilson Croker condemned Edgeworth for her reliance on narratives that hinged on sudden reversals and transformations, Ó Gallchoir indicates that these seemingly wayward features of Edgeworth's plots often mark moments where the conservative, moral elements of her bourgeois tales clash with the Enlightenment ideals of social improvement which covertly underpin them. In addition, she shows that Edgeworth consciously curries a middle-class audience by utilizing, intermarrying, and fracturing popular narrative modes such as those of the moral tale and of domestic realism. A read-

ing of one of her Irish novels, *Ennui*, against the background of her tales centring on English protagonists reveals her fiction to be uneasily poised between the urge to cancel out cataclysmic, political revolutions and the recognition of the necessity for social change.

Both Claire Connolly and Margaret Kelleher graphically illustrate the manner in which the work of women novelists is determined by economic and political conditions. They persuasively argue that aesthetic practices and literary genres are materially shaped by reigning modes of production and consumption. Claire Connolly, in describing the attendant publicity surrounding the publication of Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* as a media event, uncovers the ways in which the author fought against, intervened in, and was complicit with the controversies that greeted the appearance of her novel. In particular, by eliding her public persona with her fictional creation of the romantic, harp-playing, wild Irish girl and by engaging overtly in the critical debates fostered by her fiction, Owenson succeeded in gaining a degree of control over her literary career and standing.

Margaret Kelleher, by contrast, examines the fate of an author, Charlotte Riddell, who was also aware of the market value of her fiction and of the material struggles with which the woman writer had to contend, but was ultimately the victim of changes in literary fashion and in the forms of circulation of novels. In interpreting Riddell's self-reflexive fiction, *A Struggle for Fame*, against the background of the author's own career, Kelleher provides a vivid insight into the precarious position of a writer whose success was dependent on a literary mode, the three-decker novel, that was gradually abandoned in favour of more commercial forms of fiction at the end of the nineteenth century. In her examination of things, Riddell provides a means of probing the conditions in which Irish women's fiction was produced and received in Victorian England, of constructing a detailed account of the vagaries of female literary reputations, and of revealing the hidden sophistication and feminist underpinnings of the popular novels of another era.

Similarly, Lia Mills and Tina O'Toole consider writers whose work once enjoyed considerable currency but whose literary fortunes suffered a decline because of the difficulty of categorizing and construing their miscellaneous and maverick creative output. Lia Mills addresses the instance of Emily Lawless whose fiction has regularly been dismissed because of its political bias and failure to conform to the nationalist ideals of the Irish Literary Revival. Instead of seeing Lawless's *With Essex in Ireland* as vitiated by its political contradictions, Mills argues that it should be read as an experimental narrative that plays with notions of truth, authenticity, and point of view. Tina O'Toole makes a comparable case for the avant-garde work of George Egerton by tracing the connection between the transcultural and cosmopolitan status of the author and the themes of subversion and sexual transgression that dominate her decadent narratives. The failure of literary history to consider women writers as anything other than fleeting presences also explains,

as O'Toole points out, the current neglect of Egerton as an important *fin de siècle* figure whose work influenced that of Joyce and Kate O'Brien.

Gerardine Meaney examines the fiction of Emily Lawless and of Katherine Cecil Thurston in terms of decadent aesthetics and of the conventions of New Woman narratives. By focusing on the intertextuality of Lawless's *Grania*, she reveals the complexities and tensions that underlie this novel and the split modes of identification that define its workings. A similar attention to the expectations of genre and the devices of popular fiction uncovers the subversive elements of Katherine Cecil Thurston's largely unknown novel, *Max*, which centres on the story of a cross-dressed heroine. Meaney, however, argues that the heterogeneity and historical specificity of late nineteenth-century Irish women's writing come most fully into focus if a twentieth-first century, feminist readership avoids the temptation of using literary history in order to validate the present and of anachronistically projecting its values backwards in time. Jennifer FitzGerald in her elucidation of Helen Waddell's *Peter Abelard* makes a similar point. In teasing out the theological and philosophical problems broached by Waddell's writing, she notes that, although the author provides a compassionate portrait of Heloise, her sympathies lie primarily with Abelard. A reading of the novel that assumes otherwise would miss out on the subtlety and complexity of Waddell's fiction.

In conclusion, the aim of these essays is not to produce a comprehensive survey of forgotten or neglected Irish women novelists but to arrive at a more nuanced and precise understanding of the material and political realities and aesthetic choices that conditioned the works of individual female authors. Instead of fitting the texts which they examine into a feminist grand narrative they gesture towards the multiple micro-narratives that make up the broken plot lines of Irish women's creative endeavours in the field of fiction. The fact that many of the writers considered here made use of popular forms such as moral and national tales, romances, historical fictions, and decadent stories and addressed a middle-class audience means that the prevailing views of the Irish novel as *sui generis*, necessarily avant-garde and anti-bourgeois, or always at odds with either British or European literary practice require modification. Above all, these essays indicate the way in which feminist scholarship is capable of altering the canon of Irish literature, the need for further bibliographical and historical study of women writers, and the vital necessity of continuing debates about the methodologies and ideologies that inform the reconstructed literary histories which are propounded in the century ahead.

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