

# Writing Ireland

## Lecture 2: History and Politics

- 1) Before 1790
- 2) Modernity and Nationhood since 1790

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### 1) Before 1790

#### *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature (2006):*

c. 400 to c. 800	The Literature of Medieval Ireland (1) (St. Patrick to the Vikings)
800 to 1200	The Literature of Medieval Ireland (2) (From the Vikings to the Normans)
1200 to 1600	The Literature of Medieval Ireland (3) (From the Normans to the Tudors)
1550 to 1690	Literature in English / Literature in Irish (1) (From the Elizabethan Settlement to the Battle of the Boyne)
1690 to 1800	Literature in English / Literature in Irish (2) (From the Williamite Wars to the Act of Union)

**Edmund Spenser, *A View of the Present State of Ireland* [1598].  
Publ. in a version edited by Sir James Ware 1633.**

Preface: “although it sufficiently testifieth [Spenser’s] learning and deepe judgement, yet we may wish that in some passages it had bin tempered with more moderation.”

Discoursed by way of a Dialogue betwene Eudoxus and Irenius.

[Irenius, an expert on Irish affairs, describes to Eudoxus the evil customs of the Irish, condemning their nomadic herding practices, their religion, their social and familial organization, their bards, their hair and dress, and so on. He derives the origins of the Irish from the barbarous Scythians and explains the circumstances which led to the degeneration of the Old English. In the second half, he outlines a program for the military pacification of Ireland.]

**Excerpt 1:**

EUDOXUS. You have very well run through such customs as the Irish have derived from the first old nations which inhabited the land; namely, the Scythians, the Spaniards, the Gauls, and the Britons. It now remaineth that you take in hand the customs of the old English which are amongst the Irish; of which I do not think that you shall have much cause to find fault with, considering that by the English most of the old bad Irish customs were abolished, and more civil fashions brought in their stead.

IRENIUS. You think otherwise, Eudoxus, than I do. For the chiefest abuses which are now in that realm are grown from the English, and some of them are now much more lawless and licentious than the very wild Irish. So that as much care as was by them had to reform the Irish, so and much more must now be used to reform them. So much time doth alter the manners of men.

EUDOX. That seemeth very strange which you say, that men should so much degenerate from their first natures as to grow wild.

### Excerpt 2:

IRENIUS. For it is to be thought that the use of all England was in the reign of Henry the Second, when Ireland was planted with English, very rude and barbarous; so as, if the same should be now used in England by any, it would seem worthy of sharp correction and of new laws for reformation, for it is but even the other day since England grew civil. Therefore, in counting the evil customs of the English there, I will not have regard whether the beginning thereof were English or Irish but will have respect only to the inconvenience thereof. And first I have to find fault with the abuse of language; that is, for the speaking of Irish among the English, which as it is unnatural that any people should love another's language more than their own, so it is very inconvenient and the cause of many other evils. [...]

I suppose that the chief cause of bringing in the Irish language amongst them was specially their fostering and marrying with the Irish, the which are two most dangerous infections. [...]

### Excerpt 3:

IREN. The end will, I assure me, be very short, and much sooner than can be in so great a trouble, as it seemeth, hoped for. Although there should none of them fall by the sword nor be slain by the soldier, yet thus being kept from manurance and their cattle from running abroad, by this hard restraint they would quickly consume themselves and devour one another. The proof whereof I saw sufficiently exemplified in these late wars of Munster, for, notwithstanding that the same was a most rich and plentiful country, full of corn and cattle, that you would have thought they should have been able to stand long, yet ere one year and a half they were brought to such wretchedness as that any stony heart would have rued the same. Out of every corner of the woods and glens they came creeping forth upon their hands, for their legs could not bear them. They looked like anatomies of death; they spake like ghosts crying out of their graves; they did eat the dead carrions, happy where they could find them; yea, and one another soon after, insomuch as the very carcasses they spared not to scrape out of their graves. And if they found a plot of watercresses or shamrocks, there they flocked as to a feast for the time, yet not able long to continue there withal; that in short space there were none almost left, and a most populous and plentiful country suddenly left void of man and beast. Yet sure, in all that war there perished not many by the sword, but all by the extremity of famine which they themselves had wrought.

[cf. Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Proposal for preventing the Children of poor People in Ireland, from being a Burden to their Parents or Country; and for making them beneficial to the Publick.*  
*Written in the Year 1729*]

**Jonathan Swift, *A Short View of the State of Ireland. Written in the Year 1727.***

[...]

There are many other Causes of a Nation's thriving, which I cannot at present recollect; but without Advantage from at least some of these, after turning my Thoughts a long Time, I am not able to discover from whence our Wealth proceeds, and therefore would gladly be better informed. In the mean Time, I will here examine what Share falls to Ireland of these Causes, or of the Effects and Consequences.

It is not my Intention to complain, but barely to relate Facts; and the Matter is not of small Importance. [...]

*IRELAND* is the only Kingdom I ever heard or read of, either in ancient or modern Story, which was denied the Liberty of exporting their native Commodities and Manufactures, wherever they pleased; except to Countries at War with their own Prince or State: Yet this Privilege, by the Superiority of meer Power, is refused us, in the most momentous Parts of Commerce; besides an Act of Navigation, to which we never consented, pinned down upon us, and rigorously executed; and a Thousand other unexampled Circumstances, as grievous, as they are invidious to mention. To go on to the rest.

It is too well known, that we are forced to obey some Laws we never consented to [...] Thus, we are in the Condition of Patients, who have Physick sent them by Doctors at a Distance, Strangers to their Constitution, and the Nature of their Disease [...]; in all which, we have likewise the Honour to be distinguished from the whole Race of Mankind. [...]

Now, if all this be true, upon which I could easily enlarge; I would be glad to know by what secret Method, it is, that we grow a rich and flourishing People, without Liberty, Trade, Manufactures, Inhabitants, Money, or the Privilege of Coining; without Industry, Labour, or Improvement of Lands, and with more than half the Rent and Profits of the whole Kingdom, annually exported; for which we receive not a single Farthing: And to make up all this, nothing worth mentioning, except the Linnen of the North, a Trade casual, corrupted, and at Mercy; and some Butter from Cork. If we do flourish, it must be against every Law of Nature and Reason; like the Thorn at Glassenbury, that blossoms in the Midst of Winter. Let the worthy Commissioners who come from *England*, ride round the Kingdom, and observe the Face of Nature, or the Faces of the Natives; the Improvement of the Land; the thriving numerous Plantations; the noble Woods; the Abundance and Vicinity of Country-Seats; the commodious Farmers Houses and Barns; the Towns and Villages, where every Body is busy, and thriving with all Kind of Manufactures; the Shops full of Goods, wrought to Perfection, and filled with Customers; the comfortable Diet and Dress, and Dwellings of the People; the vast Numbers of Ships in our Harbours and Docks, and Ship-wrights in our Seaport-Towns; the Roads crouded with Carriers, laden with rich Manufactures; the perpetual Concourse to and fro of pompous Equipages.

With what Envy, and Admiration, would those Gentlemen return from so delightful a Progress? What glorious Reports would they make, when they went back to England?

But my Heart is too heavy to continue this Irony longer; for it is manifest, that whatever Stranger took such a Journey, would be apt to think himself travelling in *Lapland*, or *Ysland*, rather than in a Country so favoured by Nature as ours, both in Fruitfulness of Soil, and Temperature of Climate. The miserable Dress, and Dyet, and

Dwelling of the People. The general Desolation in most Parts of the Kingdom. The old Seats of the Nobility and Gentry all in Ruins, and no new ones in their Stead. The Families of Farmers, who pay great Rents, living in Filth and Nastiness upon Butter-milk and Potatoes, without a Shoe or Stocking to their Feet; or a House so convenient as an English Hog-sty, to receive them. [...]

*ENGLAND* enjoys every one of those Advantages for enriching a Nation, which I have above enumerated; and, into the Bargain, a good Million returned to them every Year, without Labour or Hazard, or one Farthing Value received on our Side. But how long we shall be able to continue the Payment, I am not under the least Concern. One Thing I know, that when the Hen is starved to Death, there will be no more Golden Eggs.

I think it a little unhospitable, and others may call it a subtil Piece of Malice; that, because there may be a Dozen Families in this Town, able to entertain their English Friends in a generous Manner at their Tables; their Guests, upon their Return to England, shall report, that we wallow in Riches and Luxury.

To conclude. If Ireland be a rich and flourishing Kingdom; its Wealth and Prosperity must be owing to certain Causes, that are yet concealed from the whole Race of Mankind; and the Effects are equally invisible. We need not wonder at Strangers, when they deliver such Paradoxes; but a Native and Inhabitant of this Kingdom, who gives the same Verdict, must be either ignorant to Stupidity; or a Man-pleaser, at the Expence of all Honour, Conscience, and Truth.  
[...]

## 2) Modernity and Nationhood after 1790

### *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature (2006) cont'd:*

#### **Literature in English:**

1800 to 1830	Irish Romanticism
1830 to 1890	From Catholic Emancipation to the Fall of Parnell
1890 to 1940	The Irish Renaissance
1940 to 2000	Contemporary Irish Literature in English

#### **Literature in Irish:**

1800 to 1890	From the Act of Union to the Gaelic League
1890 to 1940	The Irish Renaissance
1940 to 2000	Contemporary Irish Literature in Irish

### **Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790)**

[...]

But the age of chivalry is gone. – That of sophisters, oeconomists, and calculators, has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever. Never, never more shall we behold that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart, which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom. The unbought grace of life, the cheap defence of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprize is gone! It is gone, that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honour, which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity, which enobled whatever it touched, and under which vice itself lost half its evil, by losing all its grossness. [...]

Along with its natural protectors and guardians, learning will be cast into the mire, and trodden down under the hoofs of a swinish multitude. [...]

Their liberty is not liberal. Their science is presumptuous ignorance. Their humanity is savage and brutal.

### **Edmund Burke, *Letter to Richard Burke* (1792)**

This Protestant ascendancy means nothing less than an influence obtained by virtue, by love [...]; full as little an influence derived from the means by which Ministers have obtained an influence, which might be called, without straining, an *ascendancy* in publick Assemblies in England, that is, by the liberal distribution of places and pensions and other graces of government. This last is wide indeed of the signification of the word. It is neither more nor less than the resolution of one set of people in Ireland, to consider themselves as the sole citizens of the commonwealth; and to keep dominion over the rest by reducing them to absolute slavery, under a military power [...]

### **Wolfe Tone, *The Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone* (1797)**

To subvert the tyranny of our execrable Government, to break the connection with England, the never-failing source of all our political evils, and to assert the independence of my country – these were my objects. To unite the whole people of Ireland, to abolish the memory of all past dissensions, and to substitute the common name of Irishman in place of the denominations Protestant, Catholic, and Dissenter – these were my means.

### **Robert Emmett, *Speech from the Dock* (1803)**

[...] The man dies, but his memory lives. That mine may not perish, that it may live in the respect of my countrymen, I seize upon this opportunity to vindicate myself from some of the charges alleged against me. [...] [W]here is that boasted freedom of your institutions—where is the vaunted impartiality, clemency, and mildness of your courts of justice, if an unfortunate prisoner, whom your policy, and not your justice, is about

to deliver into the hands of the executioner, is not suffered to explain his motives sincerely and truly, and to vindicate the principles by which he was actuated? [...] Be yet patient! I have but a few words more to say. I am going to my cold and silent grave; my lamp of life is nearly extinguished; my race is run; the grave opens to receive me, and I sink into its bosom.

I have but one request to ask at my departure from this world; it is—THE CHARITY OF ITS SILENCE. Let no man write my epitaph; for as no man who knows my motives dare now vindicate them, let not prejudice or ignorance asperse them. Let them and me rest in obscurity and peace, and my name remain uninscribed, until other times and other men can do justice to my character. When my country takes her place among the nations of the earth, then, and not till then, let my epitaph be written. I have done.

### **Daniel O’Connell, Speech at Tara (1843)**

[...] History may be tarnished with exaggeration, but the fact is undoubted that we are at Tara of the Kings. We are on the spot where the monarchs of Ireland were elected. [...] I have no higher affection for England than for France. They are both foreign authorities to me. [...impeachments of the Union...]

Remember that my doctrine is that ‘the man who commits a crime gives strength to the enemy,’ and you should not act in any manner that would strengthen the enemies of your country. You should act peaceably and quietly, but firmly and determinedly. You may be certain that your cheers here today will be conveyed to England. [...]

I wish you could read my heart, to see how deeply the love of Ireland is engraven upon it, and let the people of Ireland, who stood by me so long, stand by me a little longer, and Ireland shall be a nation again.

### **Patrick Pearse, “The Coming Revolution” (1913)**

[...] I believe that the national movement of which the Gaelic League has been the soul has reached the point which O’Connell’s movement reached at the close of the series of monster meetings.

[...] A thing that stands demonstrable is that nationhood is not achieved otherwise than in arms [...] Ireland unarmed will attain just as much freedom as it is convenient for England to grant her; Ireland armed will attain ultimately just as much freedom as she wants. [...] We may make mistakes in the beginning and shoot the wrong people; but bloodshed is a cleansing and sanctifying thing, and the nation which regards it as the final horror has lost its manhood. There are many things more horrible than bloodshed; and slavery is one of them.

### **Roger Casement, Speech from the Dock (1916)**

I may say at once, my lord, that I protest against the jurisdiction of this court in my case on this charge and the argument that I am now going to read is addressed not to this court, but to my own countrymen. [...] The law I am charged under has no parentage in love, and claims the allegiance of to-day on the ignorance and

blindness of the past. I am being tried, in truth, not by my peers of the live present, but by the fears of the dead past; not by the civilization of the twentieth century, but by the brutality of the fourteenth [...] But, for the Attorney-General of England there is only England; there is no Ireland [...] Yet for me, the Irish outlaw, there is a land of Ireland, a right of Ireland, and a charter for all Irishmen to appeal to, in the last resort, a charter that even the very statutes of England cannot deprive us of – nay more, a charter that Englishmen themselves assert as the fundamental bond of law that connects the two kingdoms. [...]

(cf. Vargas Llosa's *The Dream of the Celt* 2010/12)

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