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Where We Are Now: The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Fiction

Michael Gleason
Millsaps College

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Where We Are Now: *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Fiction*

LIAM HARTE: *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Fiction*.

New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

\$145.00 hardcover.

Michael Gleason

His Honour Judge Twinfteet, mounting the bench, said, ‘Now, no jargon. Whoever uses jargon is for it.’ —Flann O’Brien, *The Best of Myles*

As the centenary of *Ulysses* shapes your undergraduate syllabus, you will find a new best friend in Liam Harte’s compendium of thirty-five scholars’ essays, counting the editor’s own 45-page essay-by-essay introduction to the volume’s context and content. *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Fiction* offers accessible yet authoritative investigations of short stories and novels stemming from the last two hundred years or so, covering historical, cultural, and literary themes such as colonialism, emigration, gender roles, language, economics, sectarianism, and violence, all the way up to today’s headlines involving, well—colonialism, migration, gender roles, language, economics, sectarianism, and violence. Loosely chronological, the collection is arranged in ten sections: Introduction; Nineteenth-Century Contexts and Legacies; Irish Revivalism and Irish Modernism; After the Revival, In Joyce’s Wake; Fiction in the Modernizing Republic and the Troubled North; Irish Genre Fiction; Fact into Fiction, Fiction into Film; Crossings and Crosscurrents; Contemporary Irish Fiction; and Critical Evaluations. In footnotes and “Further Reading,” the *Handbook’s* contributors acknowledge rivals and predecessors in the effort to nail down what makes modern Ireland’s fiction both “Irish” and “modern,” including “recent monographs and essay collections” (4) from Penguin, Cambridge, Field Day, and Palgrave, along with many individual scholars and writers. A thirty-six-page index lists people, places, events, genres, themes, films, critics, authors, titles, and topics from “Abbey” to “Zola, Emile.” Measures of a critical anthology’s appeal—its range of perspectives, the breadth and depth of analysis and insight, the

quality of the writing—must include, ironically, raising the urge in us to drop the book and run off to read all the novels and short stories under discussion. By this yardstick, Harte's collection succeeds admirably. Gothic, romanticism, the historical novel, magic naturalism, social realism, modernism, hard-boiled noir, children's lit, film, political thrillers, police procedurals, the domestic novel, fiction in Irish, the Bildungsroman, post-modern experimentation—it's all here. If you teach modern literature, you will love this book. If you teach Irish literature, you will need it.

The *Handbook's* "overarching aim is to provide a reliable and critically perceptive guide to the principal strands of modern Irish fiction as they have evolved in the English and Irish languages since the nineteenth century, a time frame that expands where required to facilitate discussion of literary trends, modes, and authors from earlier periods" (4). And what are those strands? Acknowledging that "the urge to search for nationally defining characteristics is irresistible" (5), the editor first incorporates Dorothy J. Hale's view of the novel as genre—"Irish prose fiction exists 'as a rich problematic rather than a monolithic idea'" (5)—before offering Thomas Kilroy's more pertinent and still useful insight from 1972:

At the centre of Irish fiction is the anecdote. The distinctive characteristic of our 'first' novel, *Castle Rackrent*, that which makes it what it is, is not so much its idea, revolutionary as that may be, as its imitation of a speaking voice engaged in the telling of a tale. The model will be exemplary for the reader who has read widely in Irish fiction: it is a voice heard over and over again, whatever its accent, a voice with a supreme confidence in its own histrionics, one that assumes with its audience a shared ownership of the told tale and all that this implies: a taste for anecdote, an unshakeable belief in the value of human action, a belief that life may be adequately encapsulated into stories that require no reference, no qualification, beyond their own selves. (5-6)

Harte is quick to point out that Kilroy's "incisive assessment" of Maria Edgeworth's gothic masterpiece from 1800 "only begins to tell the story" (6); for much of what follows in the *Handbook* analyzes the degree to which Irish literature follows, modifies, or rebels against the role of that "Voice." Positions vary. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, Jack Fennell (#21), citing Joe Cleary, points out that at a time of burgeoning European modernism, "Irish cultural revivalists instead turned to folk culture, mythology, and pagan epics" (373). Democratic Joyce's "epic modernism" (which is also the

title of Sam Slote's essay #8) achieves Bakhtin's "epic distance"—the all-inclusive *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* are as "decentraliz[ed]" as possible—and pushes that native "Voice" as far as it can go across the former's eighteen narrative modes and the latter's world mythology (155). In direct opposition, contrarian Beckett's "art of failure" and his "career-long search for a 'literature of the unword'" (Sinéad Mooney, #11; 205) arose from his contempt for local censorship and his need to escape native tradition's stultifying (and Joyce's overwhelming) influence. Sally Barr Ebest, examining themes of "Sex, Violence, and Religion in the Irish-American Domestic Novel" (#28), notes the "stereotypical" treatment of the spinster daughter, the sainted mother, and alcoholism in male authors' satirical works of the mid-twentieth century, with "plots revolving around guilt, redemption, and forgiveness, the leitmotifs of an Irish Catholic identity" (498, 499). Eve Patten argues that anthologist and author Colm Tóibín saw an identifying set of themes that includes "the father/son conflict; the dance; destruction by fire; the killing of women by men; the stranger returned from exile" (637) while younger writers' work is now "almost wholly detached from recognizable markers of place, state, language, and nation" (636). Heather Ingman sees Mary Lavin "breaking new ground" and "introducing new themes into the Irish short story, such as conflicted mother-daughter relationships, female sexuality, and widows" (265).

Naturally, there is considerable overlap among essays—no bad thing for newcomers or experts in need of a refresher—so that we meet more than once the landmarks of Irish history and politics: the Famine, the Diaspora, the Celtic Revival, the Easter Rebellion, neutrality in war, the Troubles, the Celtic Tiger (and its Crash), the Magdalene schools, the Belfast Accords, the Church abuse scandals, and so on. For example, Laura O'Connor's "The 1916 Rising in the Story of Ireland" (#24) discusses (among other themes) homosexuality in Jamie O'Neill's *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001) as does Michael G. Cronin's "'Our Nameless Desires': The Erotics of Time and Space in Contemporary Irish Lesbian and Gay Fiction" (#32). Similarly, we look to both Heather Ingman (#14) and Eve Patten (#35) for differing takes on the long-running "modernist-versus-realist debate" (Patten 637) and whether the English novel's realism is suited to "undeveloped" or unstable societies under colonization. Unsurprisingly, that fraught relationship between Irish writers and England appears many times amid treatments of the Diaspora, most explicitly in Tony Murray's "The Fiction of the Irish in England" (#26), which analyzes the emigrant experience recently depicted in "the discernible shift of emphasis away from matters of primarily public concern to those of a more private nature" (461). Strikingly, a fertile connection between Irish and Spanish writers appears in Sinéad Moynihan's "A Sly, Mid-Atlantic Appropri-

ation': Ireland, the United States, and Transnational Fictions of Spain" (#29), Derek Hand's "Dublin in the Rare New Times" (#30), and Pádraig Ó Siadhail's "Contemporary Irish-Language Fiction" (#33).

This review, although aimed at the college instructor, gratefully takes a page from Dylan Emerick-Brown, "As One Generation Tells Another: Teaching James Joyce in the Secondary Classroom in the Twenty-First Century," (*JJLS* Spring 2020, 2-3). From the standpoint of an American classroom teacher engaged in the eternal struggle to persuade young people of the vitality and necessity of art, I ask how Harte's anthology can help us introduce modern Irish fiction to our students. Answer: Quite apart from historical and political treatments for the specialist, many of these essays grapple graphically with the stuff of young (and not so young) readers' lives, from love and sexuality to poverty and alienation, to drug abuse and diversity and social justice. (Cf. #34, Susan Cahill's "Post-Millennial Irish Fiction.") What Emerick-Brown's practical advice enables us to do for high school students, the *Oxford Handbook* enables us to do for undergraduates. Here in Mississippi, for example, we debate the ostensible cultural parallels between our experience and Ireland's, notably in agricultural poverty, rural illiteracy, civil war, emigration, a long-standing antagonism between landowner and peasant, a quenchless love of storytelling, and a Big House tradition—as plantation, prison, or insane asylum—evident in modernists William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Richard Wright, Margaret Walker, and Jesmyn Ward among others. (Cf. #2, Jarlath Killeen's "Irish Gothic Fiction.")

Faced with nearly three dozen essays, a reviewer must play favorites. We are lucky to find an example of how to review and compare anthologies in the *Handbook* itself, in the form of Eve Patten's magisterial analysis of the *raison d'être* behind *The Picador Book of Contemporary Irish Fiction* (1993; revised 1994), edited by Dermot Bolger, and Colm Tóibín's *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction* (1999; reissued 2001). As the *Handbook's* final selection, Patten's "The Irish Novelist as Critic and Anthologist" (#35) is given pride of place; it is a nuanced and insightful exercise in mind-reading, deriving editorial motive from Bolger's and Tóibín's patterns of inclusion and exclusion as well as from their more explicitly stated or implied positions in their respective introductions. Patten sets up a fascinating polemic between the editors while staking out her own position as reader and citizen. She finds that "where Bolger detached contemporary Irish fiction from its Joycean moorings, Tóibín recuperates them" (637). Given "Tóibín's admission that an Irish fictional 'tradition' is in many respects a misnomer," Patten implies that Tóibín's emphasis upon a half dozen "distinct tropes" enables him to beg the question, for his broader, more cosmopolitan view of the short story "successfully avoids the

pressure for the anthologist either to define a tradition in the first place or to force connections between a wide variety of writers” (637-38). Patten points to Tóibín’s defense of the emphasis on “small details” by writers such as Mary Lavin and Kate O’Brien, whose tales “tell you very little about ‘Irish society’ and a great deal about the human heart” (638). Tóibín, we learn, looked to Jorge Luis Borges and his 1932 essay, “The Argentine Writer and Tradition,” to understand Ireland’s literature in relation to the wider world:

For Borges and his generation in Buenos Aires, the real world was elsewhere... they were in a cultural backwater, and they had no intention of becoming chroniclers of their half-formed time or their badly formed country. They realized that they had no choice but to invent their own time and their own country. They believed as many Irish writers came to believe (and later writers García Márquez in Colombia and Amos Tutuola in Nigeria came to believe), that you cannot write social realism in an undeveloped country. (638)

Again, for this Mississippi reviewer, Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha was likewise a cultural backwater, yet his “postage stamp of native soil” proved nonetheless inexhaustible. The fruitful tensions between local realism and global influence, between native tradition and universal appeal, are tailor-made for undergraduate research and writing. If you are pressed for time, you could do worse than choose this last essay as your first, so thorough is Patten’s knowledge, so clear her presentation, of modern Irish literature.

—*Millsaps College*