



Introduction

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Introduction: “Enlightenment Legacies”

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Titled “Enlightenment Legacies”, this Special Issue brings together articles, poems and discussions which address the continuing relevance to modern Irish culture of the period and movement known as “the Enlightenment”. As shown by the varied range of topics, people and debates covered by contributors, our present continues to be shaped by Enlightenment themes and values in ways both unexpected and unignorable. Not surprisingly, canonical Irish authors from this period feature extensively: these include George Farquhar, Jonathan Swift, Oliver Goldsmith and Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill. They are joined here by some perhaps lesser-known figures from cultural and popular history including the “Earl Bishop”, Frederick Hervey, as well as two women remembered for their place in Irish legal history, whose cases speak to issues of gender, rationality and justice: Bridget Cleary, murdered by her husband under the claim that she was a changeling, and Mary Dunbar, accuser in Ireland’s only mass witchcraft trial. Events and shifts in the political and cultural spheres such as the interplay and conflict between oral and textual Irish literary cultures, the goal of world peace pursued via an ideal supranational union, and indeed the union between Great Britain and Ireland enacted in 1800, continue to reverberate today.

Reaction – positive or negative – to the intellectual outfall of the Enlightenment continues to shape much of our critical discourse. In the articles that follow, the decolonial thought of Walter Dignolo and Nelson Maldonado Torres, Jacques Derrida’s hauntology, the negative dialectics of Theodor Adorno and the wider Frankfurt School, in Irish critics’ adoption of Edward Said and Fredric Jameson’s postcolonial and postmodern critique, as well as in recent accounts of identity and class from political writers like David Goodhart and Toby Judt, furnish a diverse range of approaches to the central issue. Traces of and countercurrents to Enlightenment thought emerge in the course of these investigations.

Enlightenment’s legacy is literary as much as philosophical or political. This issue discusses poems written in response to Swift by Jessica Traynor, Rita Ann Higgins and Derek Mahon and includes original compositions in the form of poems by Joe Lines and Milena Williamson. The *Islandmagee Witches 1711 Project* at Ulster University, represented here in an edited roundtable discussion, has engaged with its subject across multiple media, from

traditional academic history to graphic novel and videogames. These ongoing responses to the events of Islandmagee show how the Enlightenment past acts as a lens to focus attention on controversial matters in contemporary society. This issue offers new contexts for Brexit, femicide, the revisionist controversy, reproductive politics, and the Irish state's treatment of asylum seekers.

For all their ubiquity, Enlightenment legacies seem increasingly precarious in the context of what Alfred Markey's article calls "an increasingly digitalised, globalised world, and a growing perception of geopolitical instability" (84). Such contexts place these legacies under attack from two directions. In one sense, the idea that rationalism and empiricism ever attained any kind of ascendancy can seem optimistic. As the world reeled from a global pandemic, unreason – seen in denial of the efficacy of Enlightenment-era scientific advances such as vaccination – flourished in the laboratory conditions provided by the internet. From another perspective, histories placing secular western Europe at the forefront of "progress" can seem at best partial, at worst wholly compromised, especially since the Black Lives Matter movement came to global prominence following the murder of George Floyd in 2020. New light continues to be cast on the inequalities of race, sex, gender, status and geography that existed during, and persist from, the Enlightenment as an era in which the imperial power of European nations was waxing.

In this context, Ireland may well appear an ideal, or at least intriguing, place from which to assess the presence or predicament of enlightenment in more detail. It was once thought that Irish writing had little to add to global accounts of the Enlightenment. But the "epoch, ideal, or project" of an Irish Enlightenment has, in the words of David Dwan, become "one of the more significant transitions in recent scholarship" (2020: 91). Nonetheless, Michael Brown's important *The Irish Enlightenment* (2016) characterises the "epoch" as fragile and short-lived. There is an echo here of W. B. Yeats' famous reading of the eighteenth-century Irish writers Swift, Burke, Berkeley and Goldsmith as his key (Anglo-Irish) forebears: "I collect materials for my thought and work, for some identification of my beliefs with the nation itself, I seek an image of the modern mind's discovery of itself, of its own permanent form, in that one Irish century that escaped from darkness and confusion" (1966: 957-8). Yeats found in the eighteenth century both an originary, Cartesian moment of self-consciousness and a brief idyll of peace. But as Conrad Brunström remarks in his article in this issue, literary "[p]anoramas of peace and tranquillity invariably provoke urgent, sceptical, and necessary questions regarding exactly whose peace is being guaranteed at whose expense" (44). Today, it seems more prudent to take the longer view, reckoning with "darkness and confusion" – or, in the words of James Ward, "putting some shadow back into the Enlightenment" (59). Indeed, if this issue is any guide, it is characteristic of contemporary Irish writing to see the era of Goldsmith and Swift not as a beginning or apotheosis but as a foreshadowing; the writings collected in this issue emphasise parallels and continuities, shadows and hauntings.

As a text that "both haunts and is haunted" (30), Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill's 1773 lament for her dead husband, *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, epitomises for Sonja Lawrenson the spectral presence of the Enlightenment past in our present. Belonging to an Irish-language culture of female oral composition and performance, but canonized through translation as a literary text, the *Caoineadh* haunts the narrator of *A Ghost in the Throat* (2021). Documenting a poet and translator's immersion in the *Caoineadh* and desire to know its composer, Doireann Ní Ghríofa's autofictional essay-memoir evolves, Lawrenson argues, "into its own lament upon the 'impossibility' of imagining 'what the past really sounded like'" (30). The text's ultimate recognition of the irrecoverable or illusory nature of Ní Chonaill's voice and presence, Lawrenson argues, enacts a confrontation with "longstanding European anxieties regarding the relationship between writing and orality" (30). Enlightenment debates about the invention of writing often took on a gendered subtext by equating speech with emotion and text with reason.

Refocusing Derrida's reading of spectrality through *Hamlet* by drawing attention to his omission of Ophelia, Lawrenson shows that this legacy survives in the age of deconstruction. Gothic, a mode which Ní Ghríofa's text uses, like the poets Joe Lines and Milena Williamson, to evoke the obscurity and enchantment of lost histories, is for Lawrenson no mere literary flourish but rather an epistemological method which "resides in and is inscribed on female bodies" (37).

Modern Ireland is haunted by visions of lost futures as much as vanished pasts. Chief among these is the Enlightenment ideal of a non-sectarian, politically radical and intellectually progressive society associated with the United Irish movement of the 1790s. Frank Ferguson's essay on the immediate legacies of the 1798 rebellion and 1800 Act of Union in Northeast Ireland registers trauma and defeat but also continuity. Sublimating high politics into a concern with nature, work and vernacular speech, the work of labouring class poets like Samuel Thomson and James Orr contrasts with writing produced by or under the patronage of cultural and political gatekeeper Bishop Thomas Percy of Dromore. A poem on an ostensibly apolitical subject like Thomson's address to a "hurchin" (hedgehog) becomes, Ferguson argues, "a dense and thoughtful peregrination on the vulnerable and the outcast" (108). Form itself comes under strain in the post-rebellion context: though Thomson works in the "Lowland Scots tradition of addressing an animal as a means of Enlightenment philosophising" (108), his Irish speaker struggles to maintain a rationalist, natural history of the events, while ultimately concluding that what is best for the hedgehog is "retreat and survival" (108) beyond the limits of the verse. Sublimating the United Irish project into modes of pastoral and elegy allowed these poets to evade the moral and legal censure aimed at any anti-Establishment critique under the new dispensation of Union. And even within more orthodox Establishment circles, some of Percy's protégés reflected obliquely on recent political events by means of humour: Hugh Porter's poem on the effects of overindulgence carries intimations of a wider community caught up in the pain and lassitude of a "hangover" which manifests political as well as alcoholic aftershock.

Political violence, defeat and repression embody global as well as national Enlightenment legacies. The fractured, elegiac quality of Theodor Adorno's philosophical thought in the wake of the atrocities of 1939-45 is often read as rejection of an Enlightenment project that abandoned imagination and sympathy for the untrammelled pursuit of instrumental reason. The essays of Brian Dillon continue this tradition, as Alfred Markey argues in his contribution to this issue. Dillon's refusal of the "bullying *cogito*" constitutes a critique of "the Cartesian inheritance of Enlightenment thought" (93). Dillon constructs a counter-aesthetic based on the minutiae of literary style, grounded in supposedly subpar forms and modes of being associated with weakness or triviality like illness and slapstick. Through such means, argues Markey, Dillon follows the Frankfurt school's abandonment of "singularity of meaning" in favour of "contradiction and paradox" (93). Markey expounds an Irish context for Dillon's negative aesthetics by interposing the postcolonial politics and aesthetics developed Field Day to address the violent crisis of the late twentieth century. As a geographic and stylistic "exile", Dillon conducts what Markey calls a "vagrant [...] praxis of cultural intervention" which offers the chance to "explode a flawed history and remake more enabling relations for all" (96).

Despite Dillon's alternative vision, the Irish fervour for historical introspection shows no signs of letting up. The conceptualisation of the decade from 2012-22 as a time of reflection on and commemoration of the violent birth of the modern Irish state functioned to focus attention on moments of origin, and away from Ireland's longer-term entanglement with and within the United Kingdom. Abstract ideas of unity and partnership seemed to recede further as the decade saw a referendum on independence from the UK in Scotland, and another on the UK's membership of the European Union – the latter serving to underline the marginalization of Northern Ireland and Scotland (both of which recorded majority Remain votes) and further endanger peace north of the Irish border. The contingency and vulnerability of international

settlements and accords is a concern emerging from Brunström’s article on the concept of world peace, a key Enlightenment value. As Brunström shows, eighteenth-century peace treaties, and theorists, anticipated the concept of the EU as a buttress against future conflict on the continent, and reflected on the difficulties of multilateralism in ways that parallel how global organizations such as the UN must reckon with authoritarianism today. In the eighteenth century, too, England’s difficulty became Ireland’s in due course. One solution, Brunström suggests, has been to unilaterally withdraw from colonial and continental commitments, and the article illuminates the contemporary resonance of the eighteenth-century tradition of “blue water Toryism”, which posits Britain as “a tight little island that flourishes smugly while the rest of the world burns” (46). Brunström’s “disconcertingly ‘Brexit’ reading” of Swift and Pope suggests parallels with the present day. Indeed, the relevance of blue water Toryism is truly disconcerting given the UK Conservative party’s opportunist attacks on international obligations to accommodate refugees, for instance by attempting (in 2023) to house people seeking asylum on a converted barge moored symbolically off the Dorset coast. For Brunström, Joel Barlow’s *The Vision of Columbanus* (1787) illustrates “the need for and the difficulty of a *Pax Humana* that is not a *Pax Europa*” (47). Yeats’ ideal of enlightenment as an escape from “darkness and confusion” finds parallels in Brunström’s invocation of “Fortress Europe”, of peace and prosperity rooted in an imperial status quo.

Today, displays of sympathy towards refugees and those directly affected by war and natural disaster to Europe’s southeast are belied by increasingly militarised and violent practices at the physical borders of EU nations. A “fortress” mindset continues even as global heating prompts sobering predictions of the numbers of people who could soon be displaced by extreme weather. Michael Griffin’s contribution to this issue brings this global context home with an account of a festival commemorating the life of Goldsmith, which provided a venue for dialogue on inward migration to the Republic of Ireland, in the context of a cost-of-living crisis and a worrying rise in right-wing nativist extremism. The cosmopolitan Goldsmith was himself a migrant, to Scotland, mainland Europe and then to London, and his works attempt rational and disinterested comparisons between countries and political systems. According to Griffin, Goldsmith manages to find a place for local attachments and affections alongside cosmopolitanism, while recent UK prime ministers have instead assailed the imagined cosmopolitan as “a citizen of nowhere” (73). Works such as *The Deserted Village* testify to “the poetic, communitarian and personal resonances of place” (80), and thus achieve “dialogue between two positions which seem to some to be locked” in Manichean opposition (73). In Griffin’s synthesis, Goldsmith represents a “middle way” between cosmopolitanism and localism, thus providing us with a route beyond the defensive and inward-looking “new water Toryism” of the UK Conservative party.

The Special Issue is cognizant of recent work in eighteenth-century studies which has validated the common-sense view that while Ireland might have been marginal to “the Enlightenment” as traditionally viewed, it was very much a part of wider, even global, networks of communication, correspondence and migration which could be viewed as both enlightened and enlightening (O’Shaughnessy 2015; Roberts and Wright 2019; Prendergast 2020). Henrietta Harrison writes that “[h]istorians who have looked at the rise of scientific knowledge in Britain in this period have argued that many new ideas came to be accepted through social relations of trust between gentlemen: class, status, and personal connections mattered to who was believed and who was not”. Harrison is describing the friendship between the Anglo-Irish diplomat George Leonard Staunton and Li Zibiao, a priest and interpreter from China, which developed during the British embassy to Beijing in 1792-93, and was eased by a mutual spoken fluency in Latin, derived from a shared Jesuit education (2021: 71). Irishmen such as Staunton took full part in global networks of enlightening exchange which were enabled by institutions such as the church and empire. The poems by Joe Lines included here attend in similar fashion

to cosmopolitan, hidden and “ex-patriate” Irish spaces – the “big house” or landscaped estate, physically at home but reflecting continental, neoclassical fashions, and the Italian fine art market frequented by grand tourists, which was also a venue where many Irish painters found employment. Recent scholarship within literary studies has set out to recover writers from the eighteenth-century Irish diaspora who might once have fallen outside the ambit of nationally-focused literary traditions, such as Charles Johnston, Charles Macklin and Regina Maria Roche (Lines 2021; Morin 2012, 2017; Neiman and Morin 2020; Newman and O’Shaughnessy 2022). Such figures draw attention to the effects of place, emigration, audience and affiliation on selfhood and national identity. Also reflecting a growing fascination with the limits and contradictions of Irish and British identities is the article in this volume by David Clare, who emphasises Farquhar’s “Irish-British hybridity”. Clare surveys the changing critical fortunes of Farquhar’s plays in theatres in the south of Ireland after partition. Clare’s case is that adaptations of Farquhar reflect a squeamishness about the sectarianism of his texts, and he calls for more historically informed productions that engage robustly with this element of the plays, rather than eliding it. Clare makes the case that the early modern playwright’s productions have something to teach people across Ireland, with their “interesting ‘Irish’ reflections on the English ‘national character’” and “insight into the Ulster Loyalist mindset” (7).

While some of the essays in this volume trace the legacies of key figures in Irish and European literature, others engage with the lesser-known writers of the time, such as Henry Murphy (Brunström), or Thomas Percy and his circle (Ferguson). The issue thus underlines the fact that canons – whether national traditions such as that plotted by Yeats from Swift to himself, or multilingual agglomerations such as the Enlightenment – are, and have always been, contingent and porous entities. The Enlightenment was itself an era of compilation and canon-forming, during which anthologies of English novels such as James Harrison’s *The Novelist’s Magazine* (1779-1788) and Walter Scott’s *Ballantyne’s Novelists Library* (1821) included Irish novelists such as Swift, Goldsmith, Johnston and Hugh Kelly alongside tales translated from the French of Le Sage and the Spanish of Cervantes (Gamer 2015). As the focus of scholarship turns towards international networks, national literary canons continue to undergo processes of revision and critique, an effort exemplified by Eoin Ó Cuinneagáin’s article on Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* (1729). Writing from a decolonial perspective, Ó Cuinneagáin re-envisions Swift’s satire as a form of colonial violence, drawing attention to its “weaponization of irony” in order to reinforce “the colonial/racial matrix of power” by delegitimising the culture, literature and language of Gaelic Ireland and dehumanising the Irish subject. Ó Cuinneagáin’s questioning of Swift’s status as a “glorified ‘father figure’” answers and rebuts Yeats’ spotlighting of the Anglo-Irish writers of the eighteenth century.

Ó Cuinneagáin’s trope of the “father figure” invokes both patriarchy and the paternalism of imperial government. As such, the article’s reading of Swift is of a piece with the renewed anticolonial consciousness-raising and activism that has emerged as one legacy of the Black Lives Matter protests. Popular impatience with traditional, uncritical or partial memorialization of history is encapsulated most powerfully and literally in the toppling during protests of statues of men associated with empire, such as George Washington in Portland, Oregon, and Edward Colston in Bristol, England, both in June 2020. The same tensions were also apparent in the recent debate over how to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the first voyage of Captain James Cook’s ship, the *Endeavour*, which left England in 1768 and reached Australia in 1770. In Australia, the commemoration was slated to include a replica of the *Endeavour* circumnavigating the nation’s coast, whereas New Zealand marked Cook’s arrival in 1769 in more even-handed fashion by stressing indigenous histories of seafaring in the South Pacific. These commemorations present an ideal case for Astrid Erll’s point that “we can no longer think solely in terms of national memory. Instead, religion, ideology, ethnicity and gender are increasingly the central coordinates of cultural remembering” (2011: 2). Erll uses the term

“transcultural memory” to describe “practices of remembrance in (post)colonial and multicultural societies” (2011: 64) such as Australia, New Zealand, and Ireland. While this Special Issue seeks to accentuate connections between Irish thought and wider postcolonial currents as forms of “transcultural memory”, it also reveals an impatience with the concept of the national canon.

The now standard disciplinary division between “critical” and “creative” writing is misleading in the sense that a new flourishing of creative projects derives impetus from a critical approach to historical events and figures. Such projects combine historical research with memoir, poetry and fiction by attending particularly to gaps in the archival record. The poems in this issue by Milena Williamson illustrate this approach, taking as their starting point the life of Bridget Cleary (1867-1895), an Irish woman who was suspected of being a witch. The interview included here allows Williamson to discuss her research process: “perhaps poetry is a little bit like judicial archives, revealing things that ordinarily go unspoken, albeit through a different process. One of the frustrating things is that Bridget’s death is so heavily documented, whereas her life remains a mystery...I would love to know how Bridget lived, but my understanding is limited by the criminal and legal documentation, which tries to answer “how did she die?” (122). Williamson’s poems avoid straightforward biography or monologue in favour of exploiting the possibilities of the poetic sequence. They offer necessarily partial, limited and fragmentary glimpses of the life of Cleary, often filtered through the perspectives of those that knew, came into contact with, or judged her. In Ireland, the Cleary episode has customarily been remembered as a kind of late-Victorian curio, with Cleary herself typed as a tragic victim who harks back to a more superstitious age, as one of the last women in Europe to meet her death as a result of witchcraft belief. But she emerges from Williamson’s poems as a figure that is “ahead of her time”: “I started working on these poems in 2018, not long after #MeToo went viral; the story of strong, wilful women being silenced by men was all too familiar. If the Gothic view is that history haunts the present, then what is the word for what women experience every day? So many women are haunted by the past and the future, by the violence we have experienced or fear we (or the next generations) will experience” (122).

In seeking a fresh perspective on a figure whose life and death had approached the status of stereotype, the poems are comparable to two recent Irish novels, Laura McKenna’s *Words to Shape my Name* (2021) and Neil Jordan’s *The Ballad of Lord Edward and Citizen Small* (2020). Both focus on Tony Small, who came to Ireland as the manservant of Lord Edward Fitzgerald, having escaped from slavery in America. McKenna’s novel further foregrounds Tony’s daughter Harriet Small as the narrator. Little is known of Harriet’s life, but in McKenna’s story, she is charged with investigating and recovering the actions of her deceased father. As this novel illustrates, the return to the past in Irish writing is often bound up with the illumination of women’s interior lives, which can involve a reorientation of perspective, an attention to gaps and silences, or innovations in genre, also exemplified by Ní Ghríofa’s *A Ghost in the Throat*. This approach, oblique but unflinching, playful but haunted, mixing critical and creative impulses, unites the diverse reckonings with Enlightenment legacies undertaken in this issue.

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