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The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture (review)

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(Review)

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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO MODERN IRISH CULTURE,
edited by Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly. Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 2005. 363 pp. \$65.00 hardback; \$24.99 paperback.

As the historian R. F. Foster notes, "the idea that Ireland underwent a process of 'modernization' (economic, political, and social) in the nineteenth century is much contested; certainly a good deal of what characterized the country in the mid-twentieth century was obdurately pre-modern."¹ Yet, if parliamentary self-rule, industrial capitalism, and other integral components of the modern experience lagged behind in Ireland during that time, the nation's unique cultural perspectives and contributions continued to develop within and beyond its borders, often as a direct result of the restricted growth in the political and economic realms. A brief look at the contents of the new *Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture* makes this abundantly clear. The volume presents a comprehensive survey of Irish culture from 1800 to 2000 for the advanced undergraduate or graduate student. Its eighteen essays introduce readers to a diversity of Irish cultural topics housed under the two broad rubrics of cultural politics and cultural practices. The individual writings display a wealth of expertise from across the humanities and social sciences, addressing such disparate topics as language, religion, migration, the Famine, feminism, poetry, music, and sports. While many of these essays can stand in their own right as introductions to their topics, their collective arrangement demonstrates logical progression and comprehensive coverage, despite a prefatory disclaimer to the contrary.

Readers of the *Cambridge Companion* are introduced not only to a vast warehouse of content but, more importantly, to the conceptual and theoretical questions that underlie it. The discerning reader will exit the volume with a dual awareness: of the development of modern Irish culture and of the current direction of Irish cultural studies. If the idea of culture undergoes dynamic reconsideration within these pages, as the collection aims "to steer its way between the more all-inclusive and the more specialized notions of 'culture' as adroitly as possible" (xv), so too does the notion of Irishness, with most of the essays in the volume giving balanced consideration in their specific topic area to the varied experiences of North and South, Catholic and Protestant, unionist and republican, urban and rural, and so forth. For practical purposes, the book defines the modern as spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but on a conceptual level it invites continuation of the critical debate to which Foster alludes.

An introductory chapter by Joe Cleary sets the stage in this regard by addressing the slippery question of how to theorize Ireland in historic relation to modernity. The difficulty of such a project, as Cleary

describes, has nevertheless “constituted an abiding stimulus or tonic to Irish cultural activity” and generated “a complex, contested history of claim and counter-claim [whereby] in an Irish context the term ‘modernity’ is stripped of its semblance of obviousness: its meanings have been consistently interrogated” (2). A good portion of Cleary’s essay traces this interrogation across the two centuries in question through a well-chosen series of dialogical groupings: capitalism and Catholicism, W. B. Yeats’s aesthetics and the Catholic Church, feminism and Field Day. In arguing how each of these discourses comes simultaneously to critique and rely upon modernization, Cleary usefully frames his discussion with Fredric Jameson’s notion of the disassociation of past and present.² All of this mounts an exciting challenge to the conventional historiography of modern Ireland, which Cleary deems vulnerable for its overdependence on diffusion theories that typically characterize modernity as emanating along intellectual, cultural, and material lines that extend outwards from metropolitan center to rural periphery. This one-way perspective, Cleary argues, has consistently denied an alternative narrative that demonstrates how, because of (and not in spite of) its marginal and colonized status, Irish culture has assumed an active agency in the realization and reconstitution of modernity.

Upon such a theoretical foundation, Part 1 assembles eight essays under the rubric of “Cultural Politics.” These chapters track the broad historical trajectory of issues and ideologies ranging from language to religion and feminism to the Famine. Alvin Jackson’s essay considers the history of the 1800 Act of Union as a “history of crises of expectation” that extends from Catholic emancipation, the Famine, and land reform in the nineteenth century to Home Rule in the beginning and the Belfast Peace Agreement at the end of the twentieth (39). The chapter argues for the overriding influence of the Union as it played out in the political, social, and economic lives of virtually everyone living in Ireland from 1800 to the present day. Kevin Whelan examines even greater shadows in a chapter on the cultural consequences of the Famine. He offers convincing accounts of the “devotional revolution” and rise of Mariology in the post-Famine years, finding these inversely related (and causally linked) to a widespread decline in such traditional cultural forms as crossroads dancing and keening (139). The last thread in this cultural tapestry is the sport of hurling, which Whelan conveys as the “invention of a tradition” in sport by Michael Cusack and the Gaelic Leaguers (151). Joyceans will note praise here for the man demonized as the Citizen, a difference Whelan acknowledges: “Joyce’s focus in *Ulysses* on Cusack’s Cyclopean fixity relates to the later and embittered man when the initial creativity had hardened into the sclerotic institutional structures of the GAA, overseen by its first generation of professional administrators” (151).

Whelan's account of Cusack's re-discovery and tireless promotion of hurling still might not excuse that other hurling—of racist epithets and biscuit tins—by his fictional counterpart, but the reminder that such two vastly different men, with their vastly different contributions to Irish culture, were both on some level responding to the society's deepest tragedy of natural disaster and *laissez-faire* economy, is not to be disregarded.

Part 2 of the *Cambridge Companion* devotes itself to "Cultural Practices and Cultural Forms," and its diverse topics range from folklore to modern architecture. Readers of this journal will likely be most drawn to two chapters—one on modernism and the Revival, the other a survey of Irish prose fiction. Both include a little about Joyce but probably nothing with which *JJQ* readers are not already familiar. The essay on prose fiction by Padraigin Riggs and Norman Vance offers an accurate overview that positions Joyce at the frontier of Victorian and modernist fiction. Riggs and Vance perform their surveyors' task admirably but do not relate anything extraordinary. All the same, their summation of *Finnegans Wake* sounds a helpful and hopeful note to any reader embarking for the first time on that challenge: "Baffling, fascinating, endlessly discussed and explained without being exhausted, *Finnegans Wake* is a unique achievement which celebrates the inexhaustible vitality of language itself" (259). Emer Nolan's contribution in a chapter on modernism and the Revival assesses Joyce along the lines of her previously groundbreaking work, reading him as a cosmopolitan practitioner of modernism who nevertheless cannot be entirely excluded (nor exclude himself) from Revivalist discourse.³ To support this point, Nolan gives a brief but luminous close reading of Paddy Dignam's ghostly re-appearance in "Cyclops"; her account of Joyce's "mapping of the dream-world of modernity" might well serve as emblematic centerpiece for the broader discussion of not only this essay but the entire collection (167).

One might expect James Joyce to figure in a chapter on Irish cinema for his work in founding the Volta Cinematograph, Dublin's first movie theater in 1909, but Luke Gibbons's essay "Projecting the Nation" overlooks this short-lived entrepreneurial role. It does briefly point to Joyce's writing for its direct (John Huston's 1987 *The Dead* and Pat Murphy's 2002 *Nora*) and indirect (Gerry Stembridge's 2001 *About Adam*) influence on contemporary cinematic storytelling. Beyond this, Gibbons provides a fine summary of the principal movements in Irish filmmaking and audience reception across the twentieth century, continuously informed by the conflicting agendas of homegrown and Hollywood films, or what Gibbons respectively terms the "localizing lens" and "esperanto of the eye" (206).

There are a few oversights in this generally well-conceived project,

none of them glaring. For instance, one wonders how a discussion of modern Irish culture can proceed without particular focus on mass media such as newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. All of these have been widely accepted as major influences on the emergence of modern culture and modernity; they are certainly as much a part of the story in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ireland. The history of Dublin, Belfast, and provincial newspapers over two centuries merits at least a chapter of its own, especially in this volume that deliberately and consciously “makes space alongside what are conventionally deemed the ‘high’ or ‘fine’ arts for more popular pursuits” (xvi). The same might be said of television and radio broadcasting, in its emergence from British and Continental channels to four decades of Radio Telefís Éireann (RTÉ).

Still, true to its name, the *Companion* offers an effective accompaniment to the texts of any literary seminar or cultural-studies course with an Irish component or focus. Owing to the variety of disciplines represented, the collection achieves a unified sense of depth and constancy of tone that asserts the current and future promise of interdisciplinary thinking in the realms of national and cultural studies, whether that culture happens to be Irish or not.

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NOTES

¹ R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (London: Allen Lane, 1988), p. 569.

² Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso Press, 2002), p. 25.

³ Emer Nolan, *Joyce and Nationalism* (London: Routledge Publishers, 1995).

BEZIEHUNGEN UND IDENTITÄTEN: ÖSTERREICH, IRLAND UND DIE SCHWEIZ/CONNECTIONS AND IDENTITIES: AUSTRIA, IRELAND AND SWITZERLAND, edited by Gisela Holfter, Marieke Krajenbrink, and Edward Moxon-Browne. Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, Oxford, and Wien: Peter Lang, 2004. 381 pp. \$65.95.

Relations between Ireland and Germany have been the subject of numerous studies, but at least in one respect these countries are hardly comparable: Ireland is a small country dominated culturally and linguistically by a larger neighbor (Great Britain), whereas Germany is a large country that culturally and linguistically domi-