

Routledge International Handbook of Irish Studies, edited by Renée Fox, Mike Cronin, and Brian Ó Conchubhair, Routledge, 2021, 502 pp. ISBN: 978-0-367-25913-6.

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With 500 pages, 37 chapters and 40 authors broken down into seven different subject headings, simply to list and write a two-line summary of each chapter of the *International Handbook of Irish Studies* would take up half the space available for this review. Besides, I am not an expert in all the topics covered here: from the antiquarian genealogy of interdisciplinary scholarship to architecture and from music studies to the speculative imaginaries of the Anthropocene. Instead, I propose to approach the book like a teacher of Irish Studies and ask how useful it is to the teacher and to students. Would I consider making this chapter or that prescribed reading? And if so, for what level of student? If students have little to gain from reading a given chapter, perhaps it would still be useful for their teacher?

This may seem unfair, as it is at odds with the editors' stated purpose. In "Irish Studies from Austerity to Pandemic," Fox, Cronin, and Ó Conchubhair announce that the handbook, taking the "dire economic events of 2008 as its starting point," investigates "how scholars of Ireland and Irish Studies have radically revised our fields of inquiry as Ireland moved through a dozen years of economic trauma, austerity, recovery, and global pandemic" (5). Further, "the central function of this collection is to consider how, why, and to what ends Irish Studies has changed in the years since the economic downturn" (8). A study of studies, then – perhaps a bit rarefied, a bit "meta" for an undergraduate taking an elective course in, say, Irish literature or cultural history?

In the event, though, there is much here that is useful both in the hurly-burly of the classroom and in the peaceful solitude of the monkish cells in which we prepare our lessons, broaden our minds and keep up to date with the state of the art. To the latter category, perhaps, belong "Towards a history of Irish Studies in the United States" by John Waters and "Irish Studies in the non-Anglophone world" by Michael Cronin. And were I preparing even the most cursory "outline of a general introduction" to Irish history and folklore for

first year BA students, I would definitely read Guy Beiner's "Irish Historical Studies *Avant la Lettre*" and Kelly Fitzgerald's "Beyond the Tale: Folkloristics and Folklore Studies." For more advanced students on a more tightly focused course, I would make them prescribed reading. These pieces avoid the perils of navel-gazing that come with the territory of studying study, while encouraging practitioners to reflect on their practices. Also belonging to this group of "studies of studies," with talk of "invocations for decolonized reading that rely less on changing *what* we read than on changing *how* we read" (278), is, as might be expected of one of the volume's editors, Renée Fox's "Reading Outside the Lines: Imagining New Histories of Irish Fiction."

Other chapters are more directly useful in the classroom and might be put on reading lists for students of any level. Oliver P. Rafferty's "The Catholic Church in Irish Studies" is unsparing, Eric Falci's "Lyric Narratives: The Experimental Aesthetics of Irish poetry" deftly characterises modern Irish poetry, and Margaret O'Neill and Michaela Schrage-Früh's "Surplus to Requirements? The Ageing Body in Contemporary Irish Writing" has much of interest to say about literary responses in 21st-century Irish writing to the "cult of youth" (437) and how it impinges on women, in particular. For classroom use, Paul Rouse's "Sport and Irishness in a new millennium" has a professional athlete's almost devastating efficiency, covering the GAA, soccer, rugby, gambling, community participation in sport and government policy, while finding time to mention kitesurfing and meet the aims the editors set out at the start of the book: a study *of* the study of sports. All in 11 pages. Kathleen Costello-Sullivan's "Trauma and Recovery in the Post-Celtic Tiger Period: Recuperating the Parent-Child Bond in contemporary Irish fiction," in which she argues that Irish fiction of the last 20 years is more concerned with recovery than the trauma which is a feature of 20th-century fiction, and Margot Gayle Backus and Joseph Valente's "Abused Ireland: Psychoanalyzing the Enigma of Sexualized Innocence" should also be useful in the classroom, even if their focus (Anne Enright and Sebastian Barry, respectively) is narrower than other chapters. The same can be said of Elizabeth Grubgeld's "Contemporary Irish Studies and the Impact of Disability," which concentrates on Christopher Nolan's *Under the Eye of the Clock*. Grubgeld's thought-provoking chapter will give anyone arguing against biographical approaches to the study of literature a run for their money. Laura Farrell-Wortman's "The Crisis and What Comes after: Post-Celtic Tiger Theater in a New Irish Paradigm" offers a clear thesis—that, of late, the emphasis has shifted from the playwright to the "theater-maker"—and supporting examples.

It would sit comfortably on an Irish studies reading list for more advanced students or, of course, for students of contemporary Irish theatre.

Eoin O'Malley's "The Great Normalization: Success, Failure and Change in Contemporary Ireland" is a useful overview of what has been happening in Ireland over the last 30 years. A normal left-right division in politics is emerging, amidst "what was surely the complete breakdown of the old established order" (97). A depressing conclusion that might be drawn from this chapter is that Ireland has normalised its way into boom-and-slump economics. "Ireland Inc." by Diane Negra and Anthony P. McIntyre is strong stuff, beginning thus: "This analysis of the cultural coordinates of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland explores how a government closely aligned with elite interests has doubled down on its commitment to corporate citizenship" (158). It is of a piece with Brian Ó Conchubhair's "The Irish Language and the Gaeltachtaí: Illiberalism and Neoliberalism," and indeed the tone in many chapters, as well as in the introductions to the book's seven sections, is decidedly hostile to the neoliberalism that drove Ireland's economy off the cliff in 2008, bringing in years of austerity. (Naomi Klein's *Shock Doctrine* is referenced (only) twice in the collection.) Ó Conchubhair—let me admit my bias by saying he is a friend and former colleague of mine—shows, among other things, how austerity has hit Údarás na Gaeltachta (the authority in charge of the economic and social development of Irish-speaking regions) particularly hard, but looking at the figures I cannot help wondering if it was neoliberalism or malice: from 2008 to 2015 Údarás lost 73.7% of its funding. The budget of the organisation was €25.5 million in 2008 so the saving to the state cannot have made much of a dent in the billions owed abroad. Ó Conchubhair cautiously raises the possibility that there is "wide-spread antagonism toward Irish within the Civil Service and elected officials" (84).

Now, I hate neoliberalism as much as the next tenured academic—in fact I was agin it when hating it was neither popular nor profitable—but several chapters of this book are a bit trigger-happy. Nessa Cronin, in "Environmentalities: Speculative Imaginaries of the Anthropocene," claims we need "new modes of thinking" (351) to deal with the climate emergency. This sounds like a job for Slavoj Žižek, who is duly quoted blaming capitalism, doubtless having no lived experience (a phrase that occurs a dozen times in the book) of socialist industrialism. This essay painfully demonstrates the ineffectuality of the humanities. The planet is burning up, so "A reconfiguration of the relationships between people, place, and planet will demand new kinds of thinking and action to challenge received ways of being so that a post-carbon world

can be created” (351). Also, we must decide if we are living in the “Capitolocene,” the “Anthropocene” (or maybe the “Popular Anthropocene”) or the “Chthulucene” (353). STEM graduates would be laughing at us if ever they wasted their time reading this kind of stuff. Scholars in the hard sciences will also find much to chuckle at in Malcolm Sen’s “An Ordinary Crisis: SARS-CoV-2 and Irish Studies,” with its plaintive insistence that arts graduates are important too: “In what follows I reason that the biological nature of the coronavirus’s threat, its pathogenic inscrutability, and its attendant alphanumeric nomenclature, makes critical humanistic engagement with COVID-19 crucial” (472). An extraordinary claim, if anyone were to take it seriously. What other kind of nomenclature could the virus have, if not alphanumeric—hieroglyphic? And what difference would it make what we called it? And if the virus has “pathogenic inscrutability” how come vaccines were developed so quickly? If this is what arts and humanities have to offer, perhaps we should be grateful for “the cooption of climate change by STEM fields [which] has meant that critical humanistic engagement with the greatest planetary threat has often been subdued” (478).

Ed Madden’s “Queering, querying Irish Studies” analyses a saucer (he also calls it a plate) and rediscovers, not to say appropriates, defamiliarisation: “These [aesthetic] objects disorient us because they ask us to see the familiar as strange, the normal as queer. They queer use” (254). He avoids the obvious pitfall of writing “queer saucer” but nevertheless takes us straight to Pseud Corner with: “the saucer is also emphatically partial, an incomplete thing, ever marked by its lack of teacup” (253). Not for ever, surely. You could just buy a teacup. “But the saucer also orients us [...] toward migration, global capitalism, and precarity” (255). As far as I can tell, it orients us towards global capitalism because it has “Made in England” written on it.

The editors might have put the foot down a bit more firmly here and there in the book. Lucy Michael’s “Immigration and Citizenship” is badly written. “Migrants have no entitlement to social welfare...” (209) she writes (in a run-on sentence) but she also writes—and on the same page at that—“Most migrants from new EU member states, including Poles, did not leave during the recession because the majority were still employed, able to access welfare in case of unemployment” (209). The language is so sloppy that, on reading, “By 2011, 16.9% of the Irish population had been born elsewhere, representing a 6% increase on the 2002 figures” (205), one wonders if she meant six per cent or six percentage points.

Claire Bracken struggles with subject–verb agreement in “Gender and Irish Studies: 2008 to the Present,” writing, “The scholarship analyzed in this chapter

traverse...” (231) and “Suspicion of neoliberal economics and ideologies (governing the policies of austerity) increasingly overhang Irish cultural life of the post-Tiger period...” (233). This is not just grammatical nit-picking. Under the cover of sloppy language dodgy reasoning can slip by. The sentence just quoted continues: “as an energized and popular feminist and queer activism, both on the streets and online, calls for change, responding both to the harshness of the neoliberal landscapes of austerity and the far-right ideological apparatus that police, control, and minoritize bodies. The intensity of this visibility is evident for example in the well populated marches and vigils organized after Savita Halappanavar’s death...” (233). Wait—what visibility? And what exactly is the connection between neoliberalism and the death of Savita Halappanavar?

There is an air of desperation in some of the weaker chapters—there are another two or three that I do not have space to deal with—as if their authors thought bandying around human rights issues and precarity was necessary to remain relevant. Maybe they are right: the editors admit that after the mid 1990s “academic culture at large relegated Ireland to the aggregate of white Western European cultures that had long had more than their fair share of scholarly attention...” (8) so something must be done to justify all these Irish Studies courses and departments. Perhaps if scholars paid more attention to biopolitics, lived experience, and intersectionality in *Táin Bó Cuailnge* universities would endow more chairs of Old Irish.

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The rapid development of new, digital media at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries brought about multiple prophecies of the imminent disappearance of the book and all the values it represented, soon to be replaced by new, hypertextual forms of communication and literary expression. As early