

A Nation, Yet Again

The Field Day Anthology

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Anthologies are strategic weapons in literary politics. Authored texts of all kinds – poems, novels, plays, reviews, analyses – play more or less telling parts in a theatre of shifting alliances and antagonisms, but anthologies deploy a special type of rhetorical force: the simulation of self-evidence. Here it is as it was: the very fact of re-presentation, flanked by equally self-attesting editorial learning, deters anyone so merely carping as a critic. And so, in principle, whole corpuses, genres, movements and periods can be ‘finished’ – resolved, secured, perfected or, as the case may be, killed off. Anthological initiatives may be purely antiquarian, but more often they are not. The venerable Oxford compilations of English verse functioned for many decades as the official gazette in their field; Michael Roberts’s *Faber Book of Modern Verse*, published in 1936, reordered the recent past and, by suggestion, indicated the future course of English poetry. Anthology-making has played a significant role even where the main means and stake of battle are not only symbolic and not at all polite. There cannot be many nations on earth that have not affirmed the integrity of their struggles or triumphs in such rallies of the national imagination.

The Field Day Theatre Company has for more than a decade played a conspicuous role in Irish cultural politics. Formed in 1980 in Derry to produce Brian Friel’s now-classic play *Translations*, it has become a constant factor in Irish theatre. The company’s repertoire now includes, as well as Friel’s subsequent work, Tom Kilroy’s *Double Cross*, Tom Paulin’s version of *Antigone (The Riot Act)*, and Terry Eagleton’s *Saint Oscar*, all touring well beyond the familiar city venues and some adapted for television. Impressive in itself, this is only one aspect of Field Day’s activity. Academics, critics and poets feature largely in its membership – Seamus Deane, Seamus Heaney and Tom Paulin are all three, and have recently been joined by the equally versatile Eagleton – and a second notable Field Day project has been its pamphlet series. These productions are often more occasional in character, and correspondingly more pointed; in other cases they promote a counter-academic discourse in which familiar literary topics are boldly reframed. Paulin, speaking from a northern Protestant background, explores the existing cultures of language in

Ireland; Heaney addresses an open letter to the London anthologists who have assimilated him to the history of ‘British’ verse; Edward Said writes on Yeats and decolonisation; Joyce is refocused by Fredric Jameson, in a synoptic discussion of modernism and imperialism.¹ Meanwhile, Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*, retuned for Irish voices, plays in the school halls of provincial towns, and the Belfast actor Stephen Rea, co-founder of the company, introduces southern audiences to their latest and least probable ‘saint’. This is a vivid, sometimes startling record of activity, and even if its cumulative meaning eludes summary, nothing so determined is likely to be merely eclectic. For any who are still inclined to make light of the company’s ambition, there is now the overwhelming testimony of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*.²

The ambition is patent in the very scale of the anthology, which must be among the most extensive of its kind anywhere in the world. Efforts at qualitative description, overcome by mounting feelings of sublimity, quickly lapse into blurbspeak; but the measurable proportions of the work are telling enough. Three large-format volumes bind some 4,000 pages of double-column print presenting 1,500 years of writing and recorded speech from St. Patrick to the present. The roll of authors numbers something like 600. A crude count gives six languages of composition (with translations where needed): Latin, Norman French, Medieval and Modern Irish, Middle English, and what may be called, in inadequate shorthand, Modern English. Twenty-three editors have collaborated to produce a selection ordered in forty-three categories, all with introductions that would themselves fill a substantial book.

Together with vastness of scope goes complexity of design. This is not a pageant of the centuries. Chronological marking is constant, but does not imply a single temporality; calendar time is cross-cut here or there by any of six parameters. Some of these are familiar: language (Early and Middle Irish Literature, Latin Writing in Ireland), period culture (Anglo-Irish Verse 1675–1825), mode (Poetry, Prose Fiction, Drama, Political Prose), or biography (Swift, Edgeworth, Joyce). Others are less so: genre (Irish Gothic) or historico-thematic (Constructing the Canon: Versions of National Identity). The effect is of an irreducibly plural

history, polyphonic and differential, in which voices are echoed or answered by other voices, are heard again, and differently, in the changing acoustics of the period, place and interest, in which events (the plantations, the risings, the Famine, independence) are in some ways punctual and decisive but in other ways go on happening with unabated subjective force.

Seamus Deane's general introduction gives direct expression to the editorial self-consciousness of the project. Understanding that the excuses proper to such occasions are both counter-suggestive and naive, he moves directly against critical common sense. The anthology is, as it must be, a selection, neither comprehensive nor neutral, not a transcript of 'cultural creation' in Ireland but 'one further act' in that history. Further, the selected material is not proposed as a 'canon'. The substantive term of the title is not 'literature' but 'writing': here, as in the eighteenth-century convention, 'many forms of discourse are "polite" and ... literature is one of them', but the idea of the literary neither controls the corpus of eligible writing nor serves as an index of distinction within it. The notion of an *Irish* canon is similarly discounted. The return of the northern crisis has exposed the lack of 'any system of cultural consent that would effectively legitimise and secure the existing political arrangements' of the island, least of all one based on the usual nationalist appeals to an originary identity. Indeed, Ireland is 'exemplary' as a real-world *mise-en-abîme*, the place where canon-making achieves little more than the exposure of its own political partiality. Nor is there salvation in the ideal of history 'as it really was', Deane continues. The anthology is, perforce, 'at the mercy of the present moment'; its governing question cannot be answered in the perspective of eternity, but it may at least be posed in the relative freedom of self-awareness: 'How, in the light of what is happening now, can we re-present what was, then and since, believed to have been the significance of what "really" happened?' And thus, the grand modesty of the editorial aim: 'to re-present a series of representations concerning the island of Ireland[,] its history, geography, political experience, social forms and economy', and to do so without appeal to the essences of art or nation, instead exploring 'the nexus of values, assumptions and beliefs in which the idea of Ireland, Irish and writing are grounded'.³

Deane proposes a bold venture in what someone will sooner or later call 'post-anthological reason'. Avowedly situated and committed but repudiating customary foundational assumptions, it illustrates a cultural orientation that the northern critic Edna Longley has captioned 'Derry with Derrida'. Yet Derry-as-sign is the nemesis of deconstruction, and the 'post' marks of Deane's opening statement are not unambiguous tokens of its provenance. 'There *is* a story here,' he writes, 'a meta-narrative, which is, we believe, hospitable to all the micro-narratives that, from time to time, have achieved prominence as the official version of the true history, political and literary, of the island's past and present.'⁴ This cool recall of the 'micro-narratives' and their vicissitudes is in keeping with the general theme of the introduction (though the disarming

appeal to the 'hospitality' of narrative echoes the manner of mid-century Anglo-American literary criticism, with its self-consciously 'civil' versions of art as reconciliation). But the main claim, registered with sudden, proleptic emphasis, remains an alien, unsupported and not even elucidated in the pages that follow. It can hardly concern the 'national story' (nationalism, Deane asserts, is 'no more than an inverted image of the colonialism it seeks to replace') and no other meta-narrative is seriously considered. Late on in his text, Deane entertains the possibility that the work as a whole may turn out to be a supersubtle gnostic compilation, within which the 'story' awaits the adept. 'If we could claim that in every corner of the anthology one could find contained, *in parvo*, the whole scheme and meaning of it, then our ambitions would be fulfilled. But if the scheme ... is not so discovered, we have little doubt that some alternative to it will be revealed, whatever page is opened, whatever work or excerpt is read. It is the endless fecundity of such reading that gives justification to the selections with which we here attempt to define our subject.'⁵ It is not the least provocative feature of this sequence that it should close on the incongruous verb *define*. Nothing could be further from the 'attempt to define' than these teasing sentences. But they are the more significant for that: and not as tokens of a familiar literary-academic coyness (Deane's characteristic style, splendidly exercised in his local introductions, is quick and biting) but as symptoms of a splitting of knowledge and belief – belief in a 'story' that, in spite of so many critical probabilities, remains compelling ...

The Feminist Response

However, Deane was not mistaken in his expectation of 'alternative' meta-narratives. 'Fecundity of reading' was confirmed immediately, though not, it seems, in a spirit the editors had foreseen. The 'story' now discerned was of an all-male editorial team sponsored by an all-male company and an anthology in which women and their distinctive concerns had been swept to the margins of cultural life. Over the past year or more, this case has been elaborated in newspapers and magazines, television programmes and public meetings in Ireland, Britain and elsewhere, and it is not easily answered.⁶ The selectivity of the anthology is, in an odd way, downright resourceful. Some forty of the identified authors are women – well under 10 per cent of the total. They are, of course, better represented in the twentieth than in earlier centuries, but not nearly so strongly as comparative historical probabilities would indicate. If the eighteenth century can show a dozen women writers (half or more of them part of Swift's circle), the twentieth can surely muster more than sixteen, including only five poets. The representation of specifically feminist writing is bizarre. The anthology contains only two self-identified feminist texts, and both are by men: William Thompson's *Appeal of One Half of the Human Race...* (1825) and Francis Sheehy-Skeffington's 'Feminism and War' (1914), which, as it happens, is a polemic against the positions of Christabel Pankhurst. Thompson's friend and co-thinker Anna Wheeler

appears in the biographical apparatus, but her role in the production of the *Appeal* is minimised and her literary collaboration, as 'Vlasta', with Robert Owen goes unrepresented; apart from Sheehy-Skeffington's pacifist intervention, the files of the suffragist *Irish Citizen* are left to the mice. Nell McCafferty has observed that, while the anthology rightly makes room for Ian Paisley's oratory and for the late Harold McCusker's moving Westminster speech on the Anglo-Irish Agreement, it passes over a signal moment in the recent history of the south: Senator (now President) Mary Robinson's parliamentary intervention on behalf of legalised contraception in 1970.⁷ (McCafferty would not add, but others may, that her own pioneering work as an *Irish Times* columnist is also central to an understanding of Irish public life in the seventies.) The more strictly literary domain of feminist writing is, apparently, an untitled field. In 1781, 'An Irish Lady' publishes *The Triumph of Prudence Over Passion*; two centuries later, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill writes an invective against rural machismo, a short poem in Irish with the Latin title 'Masculus Giganticus Hibernicus'. But now and in English, as the story goes, there is little or nothing. Declan Kiberd, who finds a 'sharp feminist intelligence' in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, proffers an explanation that Myles na gCopaleen would have enjoyed: 'In the south, the struggles of women against a patriarchal church and an archaic legal code are, if anything, under-represented in contemporary poetry.' He mentions, but does not represent, the 'cool elegance' of Eavan Boland's poems on middle-class suburbia, before commending her more public concerns, instanced here by a poem on emigration. (Boland, a veteran feminist, is a fierce critic of the anthology.) The 'general political reticence' that limits the range of female expression may be, he concludes, 'a measure of the privatisation of all poetry...'.⁸ – And, as the whole world knows, feminism has nothing to say about private life.

After months of nearly complete silence, Field Day responded to its critics with the offer of a supplementary volume in which the shortcomings of the original trio might be made good. This was a large admission and a large gesture of reparation, but many will judge that it is inadequate if it serves to lull critical interest in the selective mechanism at work in the anthology 'proper'. Seamus Deane, in an early, individual response to critics, conceded 'a serious flaw' left by 'prejudice, which is all the worse for being unconscious'.⁹ These are plain words, but not, on that account, revealing ones; further probing is called for. The inference encouraged here, as by the pattern of the controversy as a whole, is that Field Day's editorial judgement has been misled by generic sexism. However, it may be that the marginalisation of women and feminism, together with a certain lightness of touch in matters of sexuality in the public sphere,¹⁰ is more than a local instance of universal 'prejudice'; that it is the spontaneous negative effect of positive preferences – all the stronger for being, perhaps, unconscious – in the assessment of 'Irish' writing.

'Irishness' is, unsurprisingly, a constant preoccupation in the anthology, whose avowedly critical purpose is to dramatise and test the notion in its various, more or less refractory historical meanings. Perhaps not one of the numerous cultural-nationalist writers presented here would freely underwrite the work in which they now appear. Irish birth is neither a necessary nor a sufficient criterion for inclusion: Edmund Spenser is present, as having devoted much of his literary and political life to the island, while Congreve, merely born there, is not. Old English, Anglo-Irish and Ulster Protestant traditions participate on equal terms with Gaelic Ireland and its rivalrous posterity. The aporias of authenticity are traced in frequent returns to Field Day's founding theme of cultural translation. Yeats's Celticist programme for the Literary Revival makes its way against 'Irish Ireland' positions and in the face of critical fire from the universalist John Eglinton. In the ranks of militant nationalism proper, and even during the run-up to the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence, the meanings of Gaelic Irish identity continue in debate. And so on, past the Treaty and into the partitioned Ireland of the past seventy years. In a culture so marred by identitarian dogma, this foregrounding of discrepancy and difficulty, this methodic hesitation, seems an exemplary departure.

But the ulterior suggestion of the project is less novel – at least as it emerges in the contributions of Luke Gibbons, whose edited sequences on the national canon and its critics, rehearsing *in parvo* a principal theme of the work as a whole, convey more than the usual freight of political implication. The purpose of the earlier sequence (c. 1895–1940) is to confound the hostile stereotype of Irish nationalism as a monolithic, exclusivist or even racist cult of ethnic essence.¹¹ Writers like D. P. Moran, Patrick Pearse and Daniel Corkery sponsored such tendencies, and were countered by the 'radical humanists' around the magazine *Dana*. What is decisive for Gibbons, however, is the presence within the national movement of an unmystified, pluralist current of thought, instanced in the work of Thomas MacDonagh and Aodh de Blacam. The point is well made and must be taken, but we do well not to rush to conclusions. For it is one thing to seek an ample and diversified Irish identity, we discover, quite another to do so in the name of an alternative, non-'national' cultural sovereignty. James Connolly's proletarian humanism is the historic crux here, and Gibbons acts boldly to resolve it. Not content with reiterating the simple truth that Connolly decided, for good or ill, to fall in with the insurrectionary plans of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, Gibbons renders the question more profound, discovering a 'strategic' rejection of 'theory' in favour of 'history' and a coordinate political focus on 'nation' rather than 'state'.¹² It is worth pausing here to recall that Connolly's indifference to the encyclopaedic pursuits of Second International *Kathedersozialisten* did not extend to 'the materialist conception of history' (his own, orthodox phrasing), which he actively promoted as the theoretical key to social understanding, in Ireland as else-

where; and that his last free act was, after all, a set-piece illustration of state-focused revolutionary politics. But to continue so would be literal-minded. This critical farrago is less an offering of knowledge than a defence against cultural anxiety. For 'history' and 'nation', read 'dominant local tradition'; in 'theory' and 'state', mark the presence of those others who resist that tradition and decline its authorised versions of identity.

The others are duly named. Gibbons's second sequence, running from the mid-century to the present, dramatises the struggle between 'canonical' culture and 'revisionism'.¹³ Conor Cruise O'Brien, the academic historian Roy Foster, and Edna Longley are among the representatives of the 'progressive', 'modernising', 'universalist' anti-nationalist intelligentsia that Gibbons here assembles for judgement and dispatch. Their role has been destructive, he explains: the essentialist, racist nationalism they polemicise against

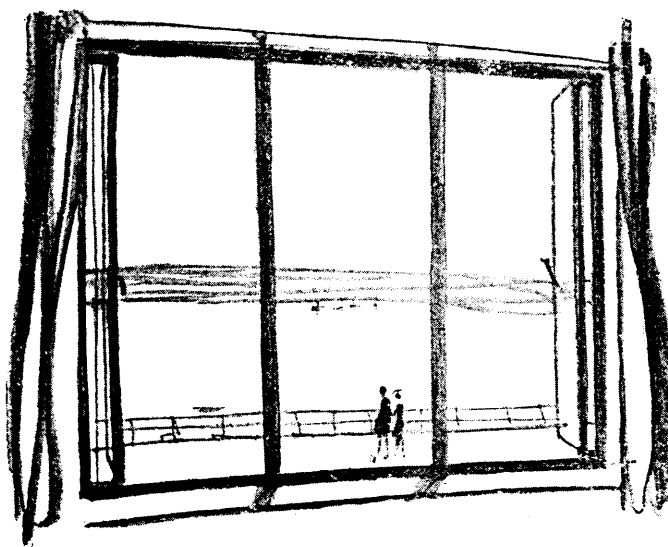
is an ugly stereotype of their own making, ill-founded in the complex history of Irish cultural politics. However, they are now themselves anachronistic. 'The modernisation project has lost its way in Ireland.' Cosmopolitan reality has turned on its votaries, delivering not bourgeois affluence but recession, not a belated Enlightenment but, as we might say, Cultural Studies. 'Exposed to the theoretical voltage of Marxism, psychoanalysis and post-structuralism, [the revisionists] have advocated a new form of intellectual protectionism, thereby emulating the most conservative strands of cultural nationalism of the past. It is not just the rearguard but the avant-garde that threatens their critical composure, the fusion of "Derry with Derrida"...'. And the avant-garde, of whom Gibbons is unmistakably one (and with whom he here associates his general editor), can see, as the masochistic revisionists cannot, that the discomfiture of progressive schemes in the eighties was not the handiwork of benighted peasants: for in 'an international perspective' it can be argued that the recrudescence of Irish clericalism was 'part of a general offensive in Western societies against the social-democratic advances of the post-war years' and that, far from favouring such advances, 'incorporation in the EC' and 'the Anglo-American cultural complex' left the country undefended against the 'backlash'.¹⁴

It is hard to say where, in all of this, opportunism sinks into sincere confusion. Marxist 'theory' must yield to Irish 'history', but, given the favouring conditions of economic deconstruction and intellectual slump, will still serve to electrocute modernising liberals. The 'Anglo-American cultural complex' is bad when it propagates old-fashioned

humanist universalism but, presumably, good when it markets textbooks on 'difference'. The public ethos of the fifties and earlier sixties, deprecated by some for its stunted welfarism and unchecked clerical arrogance, is remembered as the abandoned national 'defence' against the 'international' neo-liberal and fundamentalist *revanche* of the eighties. And then there is the category of 'revisionism' itself, through which Gibbons perpetrates his gravest misrepresentation. A liberal current generally termed 'revisionist' has been salient in Irish culture and politics over the past twenty-five years. It is obviously right that the anthology should represent and assess it – and right too, in my own view, that it be assessed stringently. In the career of O'Brien, the critic-turned-censor of Irish public discourse, the democratic pretensions of one kind of liberal have been tested and found wanting; and Longley's commonplace literary utopianism is well epitomised in the

motto she borrows, apparently without irony, from Derek Mahon: 'A good poem is a paradigm of good politics.'¹⁵ Yet, it is tendentious to reduce Irish cultural controversy since the forties to a drama of nationalism and its critics; and it is inexcusable to stereotype the latter in the image of bourgeois liberalism. In this phantasmagoria, nationalism is plural, 'revisionism' monolithic. O'Brien and kindred commentators are offered as a synecdoche for those quite different critics whose language and themes may

be mimicked for radical effect but not granted an autonomous presence. Gibbons is of course aware of socialist and feminist critiques of Ireland's canonical culture. He even volunteers that the nation is, in Benedict Anderson's phrase, an 'imagined community' torn by conflicts of 'class' and 'gender'.¹⁶ But these words echo strangely in the context he has made for them. Just a few volts of psychoanalysis illuminate them as a case of negation, to be interpreted in reverse. Socialist and feminist discourse will inevitably trouble a nationalist cultural canon, because of their shared appeal to some version of 'international' or 'humanist' or 'Enlightenment' values. Yet Gibbons cannot venture the absurd claim that they are merely radical variations on patrician liberalism. Post-structuralist 'heterogeneity' legitimates Gibbons's neo-nationalism, but the rhetoric of nationality insists on closure, on the ultimate sublimation of class and gender antagonisms in the sameness of national 'difference'. And thus socialism must be domesticated and feminism silenced outright, each in its way too radically other to share in the resolution of this strictly-plotted cultural narrative.



'Irishness' and the Merely Irish

Gibbons's position in the anthology is less than official: he cannot be assumed to speak for those editors who abstain from intervention in the large political issues of the anthology, or who, like Bill MacCormack, imply a different sense of social priorities.¹⁷ Yet no one charged with a critical task so central as his can be discounted as a maverick. He is perhaps best viewed as giving unusually intense, and unguarded, expression to a wider tendency. His comment on Thomas MacDonagh is particularly revealing: "'Irishness' for him was not a genetic or racial inheritance: it was something to be achieved as part of a concerted, cultural effort."¹⁸ These words reiterate the familiar theme of 'prospective' nationalism: there never was an Irish nation in any of the canonical senses, but it is possible and necessary to achieve it in the future. Here, if anywhere, is the motivating conviction of the anthology. No other meaning can be attached to Deane's claim that, organising all the literary evidence of contradiction and discontinuity, 'there is a story...'. There is merit in this cultural formula: the normal generosity and frankness of the editors bear witness to it. But there is also grave limitation. The ideal of a common, consenting 'Irishness' is crucially ambiguous: open to the extent of acknowledging historical complexity, yet confining in that it prescribes an order of legitimate cultural initiative. Field Day takes its distance from one after another version of cultural nationalism but holds on to the axiom that founds them all: the proposition that the sovereign cultural concern of the Irish population is its national identity. To a nationalist this is self-evident truth; others, not nationalist at all, may say that in Irish conditions it is, if not perennially valid, at least historically pertinent. But even this down-to-earth consideration can be exaggerated. The assumption that Irish life is centrally the drama of an unresolved national question – that 'Irish writing' is, above all, writing about 'Irishness' – undermines the very sense of cultural projects whose engagement with the country's realities, while taking all due account of a specific situation, follows bearings other than those of national identity. The result is the spontaneous pattern of misrecognition, oversight and exclusion that compromises the marvellous achievement of these volumes.

The problem may be stated topographically. The anthology is largely a Dublin production – most of the editors teach there, and half of them are present or past members of Deane's own faculty in University College. But its spiritual centre is Derry, birthplace of Field Day. Dublin is the capital of an independent – and, by the emerging standards of the late twentieth century, relatively old – nation state. But Derry is the symbolic capital of the northern crisis, and it is from there that all of Ireland is effectively seen. In this imaginary present – Dublin as Derry – southern society is rendered marginal to itself. The data of its specific politico-cultural history are centred or marginalised, lit up or shadowed, cued or cut according to a vicarious monocular 'northern' scheme. The intensified capitalist development of the past thirty years has generated antagonisms in every

area of southern life, and again and again the most formidable conservative actor has been the Catholic church. The northern crisis has of course exerted a constant pressure in southern politics, but the recurring issue has been that unbroken confessional ascendancy. Irish feminists have been the exposed vanguard in a prolonged struggle to end clerical usurpation of women's reproductive rights, and thus to open the way to a fully secular public domain. But this tempestuous history is all but erased from the cultural record. The 'forces of conservatism and reaction' and their opponents are noted as figures in the landscape, but neither is adequately represented. The prolific literary output of Irish clericalism – newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, pastoral letters, edifying fictions and prized legal statutes – goes unsampled; the culture of the opposition is ignored or declared non-existent. The fiercely contested abortion and divorce referenda of the early eighties receive passing note as moments in a thwarted liberal crusade to make a constitution fit for (northern) Protestants. It is as if the south must be forever the old Free State, caught in the terms of an unended colonial past; recent history, where not made across the border, is so much luckless modernisation.¹⁹ (In Heaney's manly metaphor, '... the South /'s been made a cuckold', and an 'impotent' one.)²⁰ Once 'Dublin' is overwritten as 'Derry', much latter-day Irish culture becomes hard to imagine. 'Revisionism' and 'the Anglo-American cultural complex' are the sour tropes by which alone it is possible to acknowledge critical cultural trends that do not privilege nationality as a value, that see fit to be Irish without 'being Irish'.

Field Day's proposition is that a process of critical cultural exploration can assist a new political settlement in Ireland. In so far as this goes beyond truism – after all, there is no politics without culture – it passes into question. Attempts to define an autonomous political role for culture are normally circular. High humanism and post-structuralism, the two most likely sponsors of such attempts, are indifferently prone to deny that culture gives to politics little more than it borrows to begin with (for evidence, see, respectively, Longley and Gibbons), and this because politics, in one of its defining functions, is always already a practice *in* culture. Field Day's intervention, as this anthology illustrates it, is adapted in advance to an unexamined hierarchy of values in which the crux of Ireland-as-unfulfilled-nation is paramount, with the consequence that culture neither civilises nor deconstructs the national question but essentialises it as an Irish fate. This variety of cultural nationalism appears less exclusive, more sceptical and probing, precisely because it assumes *enhanced* powers of cultural validation: all are welcome to participate, on the tacit condition that their guiding theme is nationality.

An unresolved national question encourages nation-centred cultural tendencies, yet principled, democratic response towards the one does not entail indulgence towards the other: certainly not in the south, where the valorisation of Irishness as the main collective identity is more often than not repressive, and not even in the stalemated north, where the colonial aftermath has fashioned a society and a

pattern of interests and identities more complex than tradition willingly acknowledges. Eamon McCann's analysis of the passage from civil rights agitation to renewed armed struggle is worth having; but his memories of the politico-cultural hierarchy of Catholic Derry in the fifties, recorded elsewhere in the book excerpted here, tell an equally important and rarer story.²¹ James Simmons features only as a poet; the polemics he wrote as founding editor of *The Honest Ulsterman*, an eclectic 'handbook for a revolution' that quickened northern literary culture in the tantalising climate of the mid-sixties, go unremembered. And Van Morrison (not polite, granted, and an icon of the Anglo-American cultural complex, what's more) furnishes the missing evidence that Ulster Protestants know more than one way of singing about Belfast. McCann registers the high tide of political class-consciousness in the Catholic north. Simmons's editorial effort, resisting all religious puritanism in the name of a moralised sexual frankness, reminds us, the more strongly because of its period quality, that 'the British presence in Northern Ireland' has been more than a matter of repression and hereditary dole. Morrison's song-writing is scarcely 'national', but anyone who thinks *Madame George* indifferently mid-Atlantic has forgotten to turn on the hi-fi. And here too, with apologies to none, are elements of actually existing Irish culture.

'A Nation, Yet Again...'

A decade ago, in an early Field Day pamphlet, Seamus Deane wrote: 'It is about time we put aside the idea of essence – that hungry Hegelian ghost looking for a stereotype to live in. As Irishness or as Northernness [it] stimulates the provincial unhappiness we create and fly from, becoming virtuoso metropolitans to the exact degree that we have created an idea of Ireland as provincialism incarnate. These are worn oppositions. They used to be the parentheses in which the Irish destiny was isolated. That is no longer the case. Everything, including our politics and our literature, has to be rewritten – i.e. re-read. That will enable new writing, new politics, unblemished by Irishness, but securely Irish.'²² The crux of this bold and necessary prospectus lay in its last two phrases. Everything would turn on the determination with which the distinction registered there was observed and made actual. *The Field Day Anthology* is the mixed result – in most respects a *tour de force* of critical reconstruction, but in others a further attempt to discover an appropriate ending for the long story of the nation (and, in the hands of its more 'avant-garde' contributors, an exercise in the current mid-Atlantic routines of identity politics). Politics concerns states and the social relations they secure. The peoples of Ireland face a political agenda as long and difficult as any. But nationality need not be its decisive term, and – arguably – cannot be. Deane notes that Ireland illustrates the final embarrassment of canon-making, but is then inclined to act as if believing that a super-canon may yet lift the curse of incompleteness. His undischarged assumption is that 'Irish' is a qualifier in need of a substantive 'nation'. Yet it may be that the moment of Irish self-identity,

such as it could plausibly be, has already passed. Unable to make good its claims upon its putative citizens in the north or to staunch the flow of those who really were its own to every corner of the English-speaking world, confined in an autarkic economy with the Church for wisdom and the Gaelic Athletic Association for exercise, De Valera's Republic was, nevertheless, the fulfilling moment of cultural nationhood. Sovereignty remained as its great achievement, but the unravelling of the associated social-cultural formula meant, in effect, the obsolescence of 'the Irish nation' as a sustainable cardinal value – and not only the dismal narcissism of De Valera's vision but cultural nationalism *as such*. Irish culture since that time has been, in a risky phrase, 'post-national': in important respects 'Anglo-American', increasingly 'European' (whatever that may turn out to mean), still deeply and variously 'traditional'. These are the heterogeneous scripts, none of them internally coherent, in which a diverse society, torn by class, gender and other conflicts, reads its situation and prospects. The 'story' now in process is not 'national' in any sense that would satisfy the adepts of origin and destiny; nor is it simply 'international' in the schematic terms of liberal utopianism or traditionalist phobia. Irish culture, like so many late-twentieth-century cultures, is an unprogrammed hybrid, the shifting repertoire of social initiative and resistance in the island. Both Irish populations show a growing readiness to tackle old and disabling certainties.²³ It would be a pity if their critical intelligentsia, scanning a society but dwelling mainly on the elements of a nation, failed to keep pace.

Notes

- 1 See Field Day Theatre Company, ed., *Ireland's Field Day*, Hutchinson, London, 1985, reprinting six pamphlets: Paulin, *A New Look at the Language Question*; Heaney, *An Open Letter*; Deane, *Civilians and Barbarians* and *Heroic Styles*; Richard Kearney, *Myth and Motherland*; Declan Kiberd, *Anglo-Irish Attitudes*. See also Eagleton, *Nationalism: Irony and Commitment*; Jameson, *Modernism and Imperialism*; and Said, *Yeats and Decolonisation*, Field Day Pamphlets 13, 14 and 15 respectively, Derry, 1988 (now included in Deane, ed., *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature*, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 1990).
- 2 Deane, ed., *Field Day Publications*, Derry, 1991. Distributed by Faber & Faber, London. 3 vols. £150.00. The work is cited here by volume and page number, thus: III, 107.
- 3 I, xx, xxii, xx, xix, xxi, xx.
- 4 I, xix.
- 5 I, xxvi.
- 6 See, for example, Siobhan Kilfeather, 'The Whole Bustle', *London Review of Books*, 9 January 1992, and, in the same issue, Edna Longley, 'Belfast Diary'; Nell McCafferty, 'Written Out of History', *Everywoman*, February 1992. British Channel 4's *Rear Window* series devoted a programme to the anthology and its critics (*Bright Through the Tears*, July 1992); the discussion, chaired by Tariq Ali, included Tom Paulin, Eavan Boland, Siobhan Kilfeather, Nell McCafferty and myself.
- 7 'Written Out of History'.
- 8 III, 1316.
- 9 Cit. McCafferty.
- 10 See Kilfeather.

- 11 'Constructing the Canon: Versions of National Identity', II, 950-1020.
- 12 II, 953.
- 13 'Challenging the Canon: Revisionism and Cultural Criticism', III, 561-680.
- 14 III, 567.
- 15 'Poetry in the Wars' (1986), III, 648.
- 16 III, 568.
- 17 See his introduction to 'Language, Class and Genre (1780-1830)', I, 1070-1172.
- 18 III, 563.
- 19 As the novelist Colm Toibin wrote, reviewing the anthology in the Dublin *Sunday Independent*: 'Unreconstructed Irish nationalists have always had real difficulty with the 26 Counties ... [which] are limbo, they believe, waiting for the day when our island will be united and the British will leave. This leaves out any idea that Southern Ireland has been forming its own habits and going its own way' (cit. Longley, 'Belfast Diary'). Although inattentive as a characterisation of Field Day's project (which is precisely not an *unreconstructed* nationalism) and rather blithe in its phrasing of southern ways and days, Toibin's protest has undeniable force.
- 20 'Open Letter', *Ireland's Field Day*, p. 27.
- 21 *War and an Irish Town*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1974.
- 22 'Heroic Styles', *Ireland's Field Day*, p. 58. (The sub-heading above, repeating my main title, is borrowed from a poem by Tom Paulin, who bears no responsibility for my use of it. The poem appears in III, 1408.)
- 23 The second southern referendum on abortion, in December 1992, was signal evidence of this: clear majorities affirmed Irish women's constitutional right to information and freedom of travel, while rejecting a highly restrictive abortion protocol designed to appease Catholic extremism and absolve the legislature from further responsibility in the matter. Only the pro-choice coalition called for this combination of votes. (See Ann Rossiter, 'Crossing the Rubicon', *Women Against Fundamentalism Journal*, 4, winter 1992-93, pp. 6-8). Across the border, inertia has come to seem uncheckable. Social justice has not been won, and the terms of the political crisis have hardly budged. It is all the more interesting, then, that there should now be attempts to re-imagine a northern settlement in the perspective of approaching European confederation.

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The Centre for Critical Theory,
University of Bristol

Tuesday 11th January 1994
10.00am - 6.30pm

Tickets: £10 waged £5 unwaged

This conference will look at the ways in which empire is inscribed in cultural production. The focus will be threefold: an exploration of the ways in which cultural production has been, and continues to be, shaped by colonial histories; an exploration of the role culture itself plays in shaping both colonised and coloniser; and the strategies with which 'post-colonial' cultures attempt to deal with this colonial past. The debate is set in the context of recent work in this area, most notably Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*.

Speakers include:

Bhikhu Parekh, Benita Parry, Homi Bhabha,
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Enquires about the conference, and proposals for papers, in the form of abstracts of no more than 200 words, should be sent to Andrew Barry or Vikki Bell at: Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths' College, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW (Telephone: 081 692 7171 Fax: 81 694 1062)