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Writing Modern Ireland

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As a refrain, “Ireland is changing Mother” drives Galway poet Rita Ann Higgins’s poem of the same title, published digitally in 2008. That speaker asks, “And where have all the Nelly’s gone / and all the missus Kelly’s gone / you might have had the cleanest step on your street / but so what mother, / nowadays it not the step but the mile that matters.” The speaker laments that what Ireland was has been replaced by a much more complex and globalized picture. Goodbye to recognizably Irish names. Customs that used to matter no longer matter. A national identity that—while contested—could survive for a time is threatened. A nation whose economic situation led to mass emigrations now finds itself full of immigrants seeking benefit from Ireland’s rapid economic growth: Ireland’s transformation from one of Europe’s poorest nations into one of its wealthiest brought benefits, but also the inevitable strains of modernization.

Higgins’s poem presents this change in terms of mothers and sons, warning: “your sons are shrinking mother.” This mother who may also be a motherland has borne sons who emblemize the Ireland the speaker knows. And although their mother doubtless loves them, these sons are—face it—not that impressive. The third stanza opens, “Before this they were gods of that powerful thing / gods of the apron string. / They could eat a horse and often did, / with your help mother.” These men’s strength grew entirely from their relationship to the mother, giving them power but keeping them tied to home. And because of the Ireland’s isolation, these men could be mediocre but self-assured.

Now that position is threatened, and the speaker describes a football match, where the “local yokels” are challenged by players who “breeze onto the pitch like some Namibian Gods,” much to the delight of “the local girls” who “wet themselves” and “say in a hurry, o-ma-god, o-ma-god!” The speaker cautions: “Not good for your sons mother / who claim to have invented everything / from the earwig to the slíothar.” Never mind that earwigs have existed for over 200 million years, and that knowledge of a slíothar—while used in such Gaelic games as hurling and camogie—is of little use on the football pitch. The sons’ fallacious claims pale compared with the physical beauty and prowess of the “Namibian Gods.” And in addition to “bringing the local yokels / to their menacing senses,” these newcomers are “scoring more goals than Cú Chúllainn!” The girls’ reaction to these “Namibian Gods” exceeds any attention they would bestow on “gods of the apron string,” such that Ireland’s change will impact generations to come. Still: despite how obvious these changes are to the speaker, her family remains surprisingly oblivious, and she concludes by repeating, “Ireland is changing mother,” adding: “tell yourself, tell your sons.”

But the forces of modernization that threaten Ireland in Higgins’s poem have long been at work. The poem’s old Ireland seems stable only because of its familiarity. The speaker, her mother, and the poor sons ignore earlier changes that had made their Ireland. (And indeed, the sons of local girls and Namibian gods will likely someday have forgotten these changes, as they bemoan the arrival of the new.) As long as there have been forces of modernization, they have been feared, and as the essays of this volume demonstrate, “modern Ireland” has a quite wide temporal scope. Each moment sees change, and whether a writer chooses to grip the familiar more tightly or celebrate its exit, national identity is an ever-fluctuating blend of iden-
tifiable traits and fantasy. Tradition, too, embraces both long-revered cultural practices and recently invented marketing schemes, so that questions of authenticity seem inappropriate or even impossible to answer. But like the mother and sons of Higgins’s poem, though sometimes lacking their obliviousness, Irishness has about it a desire to maintain tradition. For this reason, the negotiation between tradition and modernity offers a space for writers to examine both Irishness and the modernization the nation has undergone over the last centuries.

This issue takes up the questions of what it means to write modern Ireland, and of what “modern Ireland” even means. Shall we imagine Ireland as a nation, or as an island for which the issue of nationhood has been contentious at least, and perhaps even traumatic? By referring to “Ireland” in this issue’s title, I hope to evoke the many resonances that that name and the place(s) associated with it carry: a mythic place, a land controlled from elsewhere, a nation hoped for and achieved, a nation denied and resisted, an island divided, an idea soaked in fantasies and dreams, a homeland abandoned in searches for brighter futures, a land of opportunity, a people who are many people. And most of all, it is a place defined and expanded by writers, whose literary imaginings give it power and simultaneously challenge it. The idea of Irishness for early twentieth-century writers has been much discussed, and whether we think of Ireland as a net beyond which an aspiring artist must fly, as a nation whose founding can be aided by the collection of folk tales, or as a cultural identity to which artists and presses can contribute, the act of writing Ireland has been a long preoccupation.

As the speaker of Higgins’s poem does, the essays in this issue examine the complexity of Irish identity so that we must think of Irish identities. These identities—sexual, racial, regional, gendered, able-bodied and disabled, traumatized and in the process of healing—demonstrate that Higgins’s speaker is not as alone as she may feel. Indeed, if the sons of Higgins’s poem are comfortable with the myths of their own creation and the safety of their position, few others are. Identity, like literary texts, is in a constant process of making and remaking, revision and publication. And similarly, individual writers’ negotiation of new genres and their confrontations with such topics as the end of life offer insight into the complexity of identity, even in a single person. Examining relationships between Irishness and other literatures, whether through comparison or translation, further probes what it means to write modern Ireland. I am especially pleased to include here previously unpublished works of poetry by Allan Gillis, Leontia Flynn, Gary Allen, and Joseph Allen, and translations of old Irish songs by Patrick Crotty. That this volume’s contents move easily among questions of literary creation and (nationalized) identity shows how crucial are the relationships between these two forms of making, and how literature’s technologies of creation and publishing can take the reality of experience and from it forge the uncreated conscience of a people.

Although “modern” can mean many things, this issue spans the turn of the twentieth century to the present. W. B. Yeats looms large, as he does in modern Irish writing. Indeed, to borrow from the language of Higgins’s poem, he is a kind of god whom modern writers must decide to worship or topple—or perhaps a bit of both. Yeats is both an overshadowing lyric giant and a voice whose language no longer represents modern Ireland. Indeed, as Higgins’s speaker examines how Ireland is changing, she must also have heard somewhere in her mind Yeats’s earlier insistence that Ireland had “changed, changed utterly.” Her own change in tense from past to present continuous can hardly be a coincidence.

Work Cited