Wei H. Kao

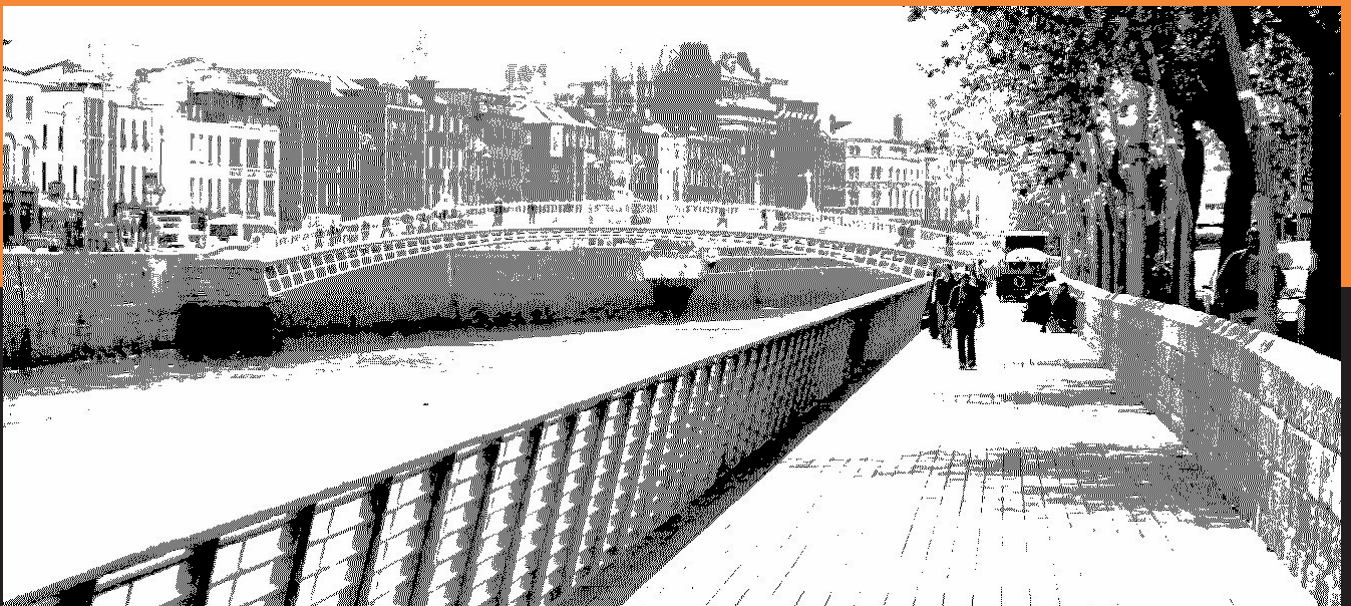# The Formation of an Irish Literary Canon in the Mid-Twentieth Century



*ibidem*

**STUDIES IN ENGLISH LITERATURES**

Herausgegeben von Koray Melikoğlu

Wei H. Kao

# The Formation of an Irish Literary Canon in the Mid-Twentieth Century

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## FORTHCOMING (MANUSCRIPT WORKING TITLES)

Wei H. Kao

# THE FORMATION OF AN IRISH LITERARY CANON IN THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY

Cover illustration (River Liffey, Dublin) by the author.

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# Acknowledgements

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> Think where man's glory most begins and ends
> And say my glory was I had such friends.

# Introduction

A stranger comes to the city and is immediately impressed with its orderliness and efficiency. He is told that the good order of the municipality has much to do with the firing of a cannon from the castle walls at precisely one o'clock every day. He goes to see the cannon and asks the soldier how he can be sure that it is always precisely one o'clock when he fires. 'Ah', says the soldier, 'each day as I come up here to fire the cannon I pass the jeweller's shop. In the window is a chronometer and beside the chronometer is a sign which says, 'This is the most accurate chronometer in the world.' I set my watch by it and then proceed up here to the walls.' The stranger is impressed, and as he walks back down towards the city he passes the jeweller's shop. Sure enough, there are the chronometer and the sign. 'How', he asks the jeweller, 'can you be sure that your chronometer is the most accurate in the world? 'Well', says the jeweller, 'every day a cannon is fired from the walls of the castle at precisely one o'clock. I check my chronometer against it and it is always right.' So it is with the canon of literature.[1]

The sharp satire in this simple parable shows that a so-called classic canon, as a product of sophistry, can be vulnerable, yet secure at the same time. Its vulnerability lies in the fact that the interdependence between the jeweller and the soldier relies greatly on tacit but somehow fragile human trust. If one of them misses checking the time, chaos may arise. People might wonder what would happen if a war broke out, and one of them, or both, were killed: I assume that the jeweller's descendants would continue his job, and the lord of the city would assign new soldiers to keep his city in order. Time can be reset either by firing the cannon again, or by adjusting the chronometer. However, it should be noted that the jeweller's and the lord's unscientific measures set the daily schedule of people who have no choice but to acknowledge the "agreed" accuracy of the clock.

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[1] Fintan O'Toole 24. I include O'Toole's comment on this parable, as, although it is not part of the parable, its cynicism is instructive enough: "A piece of literature is great because it is in the canon of great works. It is in the canon of great works because it is great." The sophistry could have no end since the definition of "great" can be vague, so that the classics last without being questioned, particularly in an ideology-bound but unquestioning cultural environment.

The lord who resides in the castle with the authority of resetting the clock, presumably functioning to maintain social order, may signify here the operator of a literary canon whose formation is inevitably subject to various determinants: aesthetics, politics, economics, education, and so forth. These determinants have varying degrees of impact upon the canon through which the public receives an orthodox impression of society in the past and at present. Although the lord's leading position over the national/social mechanism can be verified through the demonstration of military power, an effective method of showing its authority might be through the promotion of a supporting literary canon. That is, the public, or the ruled, by reading, teaching, and studying the approved canon, might hence internalise the sentiments and perspectives sanctioned by the ruler.

However, canons are not unalterable. A major political upheaval might diversify, or reformulate, a literary canon which was popularised by the former political authority. As John Guillory points out, canons are "the repositories of cultural values." In his view, the canonical values can be decanted, "ritually qualified, subverted, or rejected," alongside the changes of political powers.[2] Bill Readings also claims that canon does not necessarily "contain truth; it makes a demand of exegesis and application, by virtue of its very closure."[3] The "closure" he refers to, on the one hand, defines the canonicity of selected literary texts. On the other hand, it might exclude those texts not readily available for political uses at present. Take "The Irish Mode," for instance, was proposed by Thomas MacDonagh, a 1916 Easter Rising participant, as literature "from, by, of, to and for the Irish people."[4] He proposed it largely to differentiate "Irish literature in English" from British literature with nationalistic sentiments. Although "The Irish Mode" covered widely the literary works written or translated by both Anglo-Irish and Irish writers, only those presenting "the ways of life and the ways of thought of the Irish people" were privileged. Put another way, the "Mode" MacDonagh proposed excluded those Irish-born writers who already had a wide readership overseas but who wrote on topics that were not directly concerned with the affairs of Ireland, such as George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde.[5] The

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[2] Guillory 488.

[3] Readings 168.

[4] MacDonagh xiv.

[5] Although George Bernard Shaw dealt with the Irish problem and the issue of Home Rule in his *John Bull's Other Island* (1904), most of his plays were set in Britain and primarily for English-speaking audiences. Similarly, that Oscar Wilde produced little apprecia-

emergence of "The Irish Mode," though not fully satisfactory to those nationalists who expected an "Irish-Irish" patriotic canon, was still set against the English Classic canon. (The Classic canon had been introduced to Irish pupils via different approaches, such as the English national school system in Ireland.) In general, Ireland in the early twentieth century, owing to political upheaval, had prompted a reformulation not only of a new national identity but also of a literary canon: the former reinforced the making of the latter which served as the supporting discourse for the former. This study will explore how a variety of political, religious and social determinants counterbalanced each other to legitimise a new Irish canon. "Participants" in the making of the Irish canon included members of the Educational Board, university faculties, clerics, textbook editors and anthologists, historians, creative writers, literary critics, politicians, censors, and so on. The different traditions and perspectives they represent complicate the formulation of the canon through which many antagonistic ideologies give shape to the various versions of Irishness.

Arguably, the political turbulence that the Irish people experienced in the early twentieth century was due to the failed quests for a unified national identity, going back for centuries. Militant events, such as the 1916 Easter Rising and the 1919 Anglo-Irish War, reflected the growing impatience of extreme nationalists who expected to put their political aspirations into practice through radical means. The conflicts amongst Irish nationalists themselves, resulting in the Anglo-Irish War, may be seen as the conflicts between different concepts of Irishness. As the sentiments of Irish patriotism had been encouraged through propaganda since the mid-nineteenth century and before, it is understandable that the emergence of a patriotic Irish canon was in view long before the establishment of the Free State. To glorify Irish patriotism, many anthologies – which I will exemplify in this study – had been published in Ireland in increasing numbers since the end of the eighteenth century. In other words, works relating to the independence of Ireland were frequently discussed, reprinted, and anthologised, while other facets of Irish literature, such as romances, travelogues, or creative works written in an experimental method, received much less attention.

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ble Irishness in his works might be the reason why MacDonagh did not include them in his "Irish Mode." As their works did not exactly feature qualities "from, by, of, to *and* for the Irish people," many Irish writers, like Shaw and Wilde, could hardly fit into MacDonagh's "Irish Mode." Wilde's homosexual behaviour was deemed morally wrong, which prompted him to be left out of both British and Irish canons for quite a long time.

The making of a new Irish canon with patriotic appeal was certainly not the only proposed literary solution to the Irish Question, given that many critics and writers with diverse political stances were keen to rebuild the (cultural) confidence of the Irish people, while at the same time proposing different kinds of Irishness. The versions of Irishness they formulated, though dissimilar to some extent and perhaps over-idealised, were designed to counteract an unfavourable stereotype conceived by the English towards the Irish. Irish people were either conceived by the English as a feminine race, as Matthew Arnold imputed in his *The Study of Celtic Literature* (1867), or more derogatively as "the missing link between the gorilla and the negro."[6] Some Anglo-Irish cultural nationalists, such as W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, taking upon themselves the responsibilities for redressing the misrepresentation of Irishness and revitalising Celtic culture, endeavoured to collect and rewrite Irish folklore. They and their followers also attempted to circulate a sense of heroism by dramatising mythic figures, such as Cú Chulainn and Cathleen Ni Houlihan. The movement of the Irish language revival – promoted by the Gaelic League – was also a key cultural activity in de-Anglicising Irish culture after 1893, although the movement was gradually politicised by the Leaguers who saw the Irish Revival as a necessary step towards political independence. (The politicisation of the Gaelic League prompted its President, Douglas Hyde, to resign in 1915). These conflicting expectations of Irishness on the one hand enriched the discourse of Irish nationalism, but on the other hand, testified to how cultural nationalists had, as Seamus Deane suggests, rendered Irishness "in the manner of Romantic aesthetics," particularly the Irishness proposed by those of "Yeats' Ascendancy."[7] It could be advised that those radical nationalists had their own romantic, or impossible, imagination of the Irish nation: a state free from English cultural influences. To realise their "dream," many of them opted for a militant approach, regardless of the opposition from other nationalists. Eoin MacNeill, a Gaelic Leaguer and the founder of the Irish Volunteers, had attempted to prevent a

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[6] Quoted in Lebow 40. This study surveys the Irish-related caricatures and cartoons printed in *Punch*.

[7] Deane, *Celtic Revivals* 30. Deane suggests that Yeats' reconstruction of Irish history may not have been persuasive but was nevertheless fascinating, as he approached history "with the fortunes of the Imagination, and therefore, almost indistinguishable from aesthetics." Deane refers to William Black, Samuel Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle, William Morris, and Matthew Arnold, arguing that the Irishness which Yeats romanticised had components similar to the feminine version of Irishness that Arnold characterised in his *The Study of Celtic Literature* (1867).

large-scale insurrection after the Easter Rising, for he thought not only that the Rising would not be successful due to the discovery of the German arms by the British, but also that military action would be "morally wrong" without the prospect of success: "to kill any person in carrying out such a course of action is murder."[8] His advice or warning, however, did not have much effect.

What should also be noted is that as the majority of the population in Southern Ireland were Catholics, the remaking of Irishness at the turn of the twentieth century was understandably embroiled with religious elements. The romantic Irishness, which "Yeats' Ascendancy" was keen to invigorate, was no more influential than "Catholic Irishness." The latter was presumably endorsed by the Irish Catholic Church and was promoted more efficiently, through schools operated by Catholic orders. The making of Catholic Irishness was exemplified by Patrick Pearse, who set up St Enda's School in Rathfarnham in 1908. It was a school known both for its Irish-Irish orientation and the strong Catholic ethos on campus. The short life of St Enda's, which was shut down in 1913 for financial reasons, had a strong influence, however, on the education of Post-Treaty Ireland, as its curriculum was written to inculcate "Catholic Irishness." Notably, the compulsory study of the Irish language at primary and secondary schools, and the special position granted to the Catholic Church in the new 1937 Constitution, illustrate how "Catholic Irishness" was promoted through government institutions. What can be criticised about the preference for Catholic Irishness is due to the fact that the "theme of identity saturates the discursive field, drowning out other social and cultural possibilities."[9] Nevertheless, this particular version of Irishness seemingly dominated Irish society after the Free State was founded. The educational and cultural policies were mostly formulated in line with Catholic moral guidance and for de-Anglicising purposes. One consequence in relation to the making of an Irish canon – to be studied by Irish pupils – was that only those works which were not anti-Catholic and which met with nationalistic expectations would be selected by textbook editors. Literary works which did not conform to public taste, religious constraints, and current political ideologies would be rejected by the editors for their lack of canonical elements. The intentional deselection of those works thus resulted in the negative reviews – mostly by traditionalist Catholic critics – of new writing by Mary

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[8]  Quoted in Boyce 164.
[9]  Lloyd 3.

Lavin and Kate O'Brien. The unconventionalities of the two women writers and the social context which they criticised will be discussed later in this book.

To demonstrate how the formation of the Irish nation had impacts on the making of an Irish canon, this study will discuss relevant issues at institutional and textual levels. The institutional, as the first three chapters will elaborate, will focus on Irish education from primary to tertiary levels. These three chapters will reveal how the teaching of Irish literature might have significantly de-Anglicised Irish pupils, and how it sought to secure an Irish national identity. The discussion of Irish education will begin in Chapter One by comparing the English national school system with Pearse's St Enda's: the former was introduced to Ireland in 1831 in an attempt to make Irish pupils "happy English child[ren]"; the latter aimed to de-Anglicise pupils by permeating the campus with a strong Catholic ethos, making Irish its official language.[10] Both educational experiments were well supported by cultural discourses, but coming from opposing political viewpoints. What should be noted is that the antagonism between the two educational systems was somewhat mediated by foreign Catholic orders, a growing number of which came to Ireland from the end of the eighteenth century. Many of these foreign orders, particularly those with a French origin, catered for the educational interests of the middle class, while their contributions were rarely documented by Irish or English historians. These foreign orders to some extent maintained their non-Irish tradition at their schools, attracting middle-class parents to send their daughters and sons to them. They became more Gaelicised towards the end of the nineteenth century – under the pressure of local nationalist clerics. Some of the convent schools were even ahead of their time in providing job training for girls, and in encouraging them to pursue a higher level of study in university/college.[11] The existence of these foreign orders and their more liberal education significantly facilitated the liberation of Irishwomen. Chapter One will also discuss the potential reproduction of the English "murder machine" during the Free

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[10] Quoted in Lyons, *Culture* 9. The idea of making every Irish pupil a "happy English Child" was propounded by the Protestant Archbishop Richard Whately (1787-1863), one of the earliest Commissioners at the English National Board.

[11] However, some foreign orders which catered for male students, such as the Jesuits from Italy and Marist Brothers from France, were deeply Gaelicised, or localised, educating pupils in a way similar to that used at school run by the Christian Brothers of Ireland. Foreign religious orders for Irish girls, on the contrary, were more reluctant to adopt nationalistic or Irish-orientated curricula. I will further elaborate on this point in Chapter One.

State period, in that the educational freedom that Pearse pursued did not seem to be fully put into practice. More specifically, the freedom of teaching and study which Pearse endeavoured to rescue from the English "murder machine" did not seem to have outweighed the social expectation of the rapid stabilisation of the Free State. Students were prompted to prepare mechanically for the Leaving Certificate examination, and their parents were unable to question the authorities involved in the provision of a nationalistically inclined education.

Following discussion of the orientation of the Leaving Certificate examinations and a comparison of Irish education during and after the colonial era, Chapter Two will further examine the English and History curricula that the Department of Education approved for primary and secondary education during the mid-twentieth century. The state curriculum, which was introduced in 1938 by Eamon de Valera as the Minister of Education, was used for nearly three decades with only limited revisions. The curriculum, along with a set state exam and an emphasis on the acquisition of the Irish Language, successfully familiarised students with the Irish cultural heritage, but it was objected to for not encouraging pupils to study a second or third European language. This is a kind of curriculum which undoubtedly produced "Irish-Irish" pupils but probably disqualified them from being future participants in international matters. It is also worth noting that the impact of such a curriculum on the making of the Irish canon was that many of the selected authors were Irish patriots, even though their works included in textbooks were not necessarily on nationalistic themes. To name a few of these writers, textbooks edited by James Carey and H.L. Doak during the 1940s and 1950s included works by Theobald Wolfe Tone, Thomas Davis, John Mitchel, Thomas Francis Meagher, Sir William Francis Butler, Stephen Gwynn, and Joseph O'Neill.

On the other hand, the appreciable impact on the teaching of history was that English history, as my survey of the state-approved reading lists in Chapter Two will reveal, was intentionally put second to Irish *political* history. There were limited references to the history of other European countries alongside that of Ireland, while the strong emphasis on Irish history might have benefited the making of Irish-centred historiography, it may have encouraged pupils to adopt a narrow historical perspective, or become insular in their view of world affairs. The reduction of Irish nationalistic elements in the curriculum could only be achieved gradually rather than radically, since its makers had to conform to social expectations rather than personal interests.

To trace how the state curriculum underwent significant changes, and how those changes were effected in the editing of textbooks over the years, this chapter will look into a series of curricula and textbooks published from the 1940s to the 1960s. It was a period in which (southern) Ireland had found its feet and was about to be more open to the outside world.[12] The survey of relevant textbooks and curricula will reveal the changes of social ethos and how decolonial forces became weaker as time went on. This chapter will show that as the 1960s drew to a close, some editors started attempting to reintroduce the "international" tastes of English literature to pupils, regardless of its potential effects of cultural imperialism.

Chapter Three is a further investigation of the way in which the canons were revised in Irish higher education, when the current political authority was replacing the previous one. By reviewing the English and History examination papers used at two prominent Dublin universities in the 1930s – Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and University College Dublin (UCD) – this chapter will show that the process of remaking canons might be more arduous than the shifts of political power, in that the former was subject to a wider range of aesthetic, historical, religious and social factors, and could not simply be de-Anglicised as a result of a political uprising. More specifically, the exclusion of any literary work from the traditional canon could be objected to by certain members of the faculty, and they might endeavour to keep the English Classic canon intact or to subjugate the emerging Anglo-Irish canon to it. Conflicts amongst faculty members in relation to the reformulation of canons and related historiographies were revealed in the making of English and History syllabi, exam papers, and the selection of textbooks. My survey of these educational products in the 1930s will suggest that the research interests of the chairpersons mattered for the results of canon formation during their terms of office, whereas their successors, particularly those with reservation regarding the Anglo-Irish canon, might amend the syllabi to meet the interests of the traditionalist faculty.[13] These curricular amendments, and

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[12]  J. Hally, J.P. Dunleavy, P.J. Diggin, and James Carey were among the editors who had chaired the editing boards over these decades. I will survey the textbooks under their editorship in this chapter.

[13]  For example, Robert Donovan, who was a friend of Roger Casement and the chairman of UCD's English department from 1929 to 1936, introduced quite a few nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish writers to students. These writers included Thomas Moore, George Darley, Aubrey de Vere, James Clarence Mangan, Samuel Ferguson, Thomas Davis, Denis MacCarthy, Percy Fitzgerald, William Allingham, Gerald Griffin, William Carleton, and John Mitchel. Arguably, the selection of these writers might be in accor-

resistance to them, were common to the English and History departments of both TCD and UCD, as many of the faculty members had an Oxbridge background and, to varying degrees, came to have English perspectives and historiography. On the one hand, they learnt to adjust the curriculum to meet demands for (educational) de-Anglicisation, but, on the other hand, some insisted on teaching the English Classic canon for its assumed universal merits, managing to open the traditional canon up in a discreet manner. To more properly scrutinise whether or not Irish higher education was decolonised effectively, this chapter will also look into the English and History curricula used at Queen's University in Belfast, in order to see whether Irish literature and history were taught differently in Northern Ireland, which remained part of the United Kingdom.

Chapters One to Three might be read as a postcolonial observation of the emergence of an Irish canon at different levels of education. Chapters Four to Six, following the demonstration of the success and failure of educational de-Anglicisation, will draw attention to literary works *per se*, to see why certain choices of themes would be admitted to, or left out of, the canon, and under what circumstances. To address this issue, Chapter Four will start with a survey of a number of Irish anthologies published since the late eighteenth century. Some anthologies aimed to strengthen the patriotic ethos; some included works ridiculing Englishmen in opposition to "stage Irishmen"; some highlighted stories set in the west of Ireland with nostalgic themes, and some portrayed historical events, such as the Easter Rising and the Northern Troubles. This survey will illustrate the changes in the social ethos during the time when these anthologies were made, and how they contributed to the formulation of Ireland as a nation. It could be contended that these Irish-themed anthologies were also made to deconstruct the authority of the English Classic canon, and to secure an Irish-centred cultural discourse. To give proper shape to the favoured cultural discourse, some works were deselected, and some stories were either cut short or amended by the editors, perhaps without the consent of the authors. These approaches

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dance with (cultural) nationalistic concerns, as they either translated Gaelic poems into English or presented the misery of Irish peasantry; some rewrote Irish myths, and so on. The study of these writers might have benefited the making of an Irish cultural and national identity. There were no Irish women writers introduced on the syllabi he approved. What is noteworthy is that the subsequent chairperson, Jeremiah Hogan, perhaps due to his strong commitment to the traditional English canon, left these Anglo-Irish writers out of the syllabi during his term of office. For more information, see Chapter Three.

to the making of Irish anthologies, and their consequences, will be illuminated in this chapter, along with an investigation of those published in the US by an Irish American, Edward O'Brien, during the 1920s to 1930s. It was a period when the Irish Free State government was finding its feet, but British cultural imperialism was still strong throughout much of the world. Any minor modification in this series of Irish anthologies made overseas might suggest, arguably, how the "keepers" of the English canon learnt to deal with growing decolonial forces and recognise the values of other regional literatures in English.

It might be worth clarifying the reason why the second part of the study focuses on Irish fiction, rather than other genres. It is not because drama and poetry are free from disputable issues relating to canon formation, but because prose writings – which can also produce the same unsettling effects – did not always attract enough attention from readers and critics due to the lack of reprints or wide circulation in Ireland. Some were confiscated by customs officers, if published overseas, before they were dispatched to bookstores. Furthermore, although Irish prose often "represent[s] [. . .] highly diverse and uncooperative" opinions and was considered "to be in a [more] aggressively healthy state," poetry and drama lend themselves better to producing a direct impact on readers and audiences because of the effects of a compact language and form – for being recitable or ideally suitable for political propaganda.[14] In addition, the number of prose writings to be reprinted from editorials, columns, speeches, and letters was always smaller than that of poems, in that the latter could be collected in anthologies and textbooks, and nationalistic drama could be restaged from one theatre to another.[15] The most comprehensive collection of these prose writings might be the *Field Day Anthology*, which was published in 1991, when the twentieth century was almost drawing to its end.

The last two chapters, on Mary Lavin and Kate O'Brien, will demonstrate the way in which Irish women writers were ignored by their male critics, regardless of whether they wrote *seemingly* in support of middle-class values or put the fundamental Catholic teaching into question. Both writers started their writing career in the 1930s, while their works were mostly published outside Ireland and had few reprints in Ireland before the end of the twentieth century. Mary Lavin, whose writing tech-

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[14]  Quoted in Cronin 14-16.

[15]  O'Leary, *The Prose Literature of the Gaelic Revival, 1881-1921*. With this book, Philip O'Leary attempted to remedy the current deficiency of Irish literary history in which the named types of prose writing were more neglected than attended to by critics.

niques were often criticised for not being as innovative and experimental as those of her Irish male compeers, was in fact a master of literary realism, depicting how Irish women of different social classes strove to survive their patriarchal and hierarchical suppression. She did not write as a feminist but, with a thorough observation of puritanical Ireland, remarked with sympathy upon the weaknesses of both males and females. Her realistic portraits of Irish women's life – observed with feminine sensitivity – should have turned over a new leaf of Irish literary history, but her works were not studied critically in Ireland until the 1970s. Kate O'Brien, whose works were more critical of Irish parochial life, was censored in Ireland for her delineations of homosexual relations. Different from Lavin, she protested more unrelentingly against the insularity of Irish culture, criticising explicitly the cultural policy of the Free State government, as well as the Catholic Church, which had over-dominated Irish society. Writing as a literary critic, she also raised challenging questions relating to the under-representation of women writers in traditional canons, calling for a more serious study of women diarists.

In general, being women writers, Lavin and O'Brien both showed a great concern for the predicaments of Irishwomen in a society strictly dominated by Catholic doctrines. Their attempts to voice the concerns of women in neglected and peripheral communities, such as unmarried mothers, low-paid maids, lesbians, and Irish governesses overseas, understandably contradicted the ideal image that the Church put in place for Irishwomen. What is noteworthy is that Lavin and O'Brien were not necessarily anti-Catholic, but were introducing a more sympathetic and liberal understanding of Catholic teachings. The significance of their intensive portraits of the lives of Irishwomen from the lower to middle classes lies, on the one hand, in their revelation of the hypocrisy of the Irish bourgeois. On the other hand, their works document the facets of women's lives which their male critics might have failed to understand. These reasons directly and indirectly resulted in their being ignored in the traditional male-dominated Irish canon.

Last but not least, I shall admit that, partially owing to limitations of space, I have not been able to elaborate on some factors that have significantly given shape to the Irish canon. One of the factors which should be discussed is media censorship, which was rigorously enacted from 1929 until the 1960s. It was a censorship carried out in line with puritanical Catholic values, deeply influencing the public and private lives of most Irish people. The limited discussion on censorship in this study, however, is not because the author does not recognise its unhealthy effects on Irish society, but

because, when compared with education at different levels, censorship was less important owing to the dichotomy it promoted as a literary standard. That is, in the view of the censors, only two kinds of literature were discernable: decent and indecent, moral and immoral. Education, on the contrary, due to its involvement with parents (of different social classes), examining boards, textbook editors, and faculties of various religious persuasions and political interests, produced more sophisticated effects on the making of canons. Consequently, I have chosen to elaborate more on educational factors than on censorship. The last chapter, on Kate O'Brien, will demonstrate the negative consequences borne by Irish readers – referring to her *Pray for the Wanderer* and *The Land of Spices* in particular; the latter was banned for its homosexual subplot.

It should also be pointed out that some of the novels and short stories which are to be studied in the second half of this study were not published in the first few decades of the twentieth century, although this is the period which the first three chapters cover. By reading those novels published after the 1940s, one might be able to observe how the changes of social ethos could affect writers' choices of perspectives in dealing with Irish historical events. James Plunkett's *Strumpet City*, Iris Murdoch's *The Red and the Green*, and J.G. Farrell's *Troubles* are examples which suggest that how history is perceived by readers does not necessarily lie in events *per se*, but in the ways in which writers, including historians, approach them. The works of Lavin and O'Brien examined in this study will illustrate how they experienced the lingering effects of a nationalistic canon formulated under the supervision of the Free State government and the Catholic Church. More specifically, themes which were not in line with the sentiments of Catholic Irishness would hardly be regarded as politically and morally acceptable, regardless of the time when they were dealt with in post-Treaty Ireland. During their lifetime, Lavin and O'Brien, whose writing careers spanned the mid-twentieth century, bore the consequences of Irish canon formation – largely dominated by male critics, nationalists, and the Church.

Through analyses of selected literary texts and their accompanying social contexts, this study intends to dissect how literary canons have been formulated when political and religious ideologies were more influential than other factors. The achievement of writers was therefore judged by standards that were religious and political rather than aesthetic. Although the establishment of the Free State did contribute to the emergence of an Anglo-Irish canon, the fact that Irish culture was an ethnic, denominational and political medley potentially disqualifies any Irish canon for being unrepre-

sentative. That is to say, as there is no simple version of Irishness that is able to cover the different aspects of multi-cultural Ireland, it is possible that diverse canons would be formulated to give a voice for specific interested social groups, alongside different political and religious anticipations. Having said this, to seek a "neutral and natural" canon might not be impossible, as there are always exclusions and inclusions of literary works in support of a favoured canon. This study will aim to demonstrate how canon formation is a "battlefield" where, to borrow Gayatri Spivak's words, all sorts of sources of "epistemic violence" are exercising their power.[16]

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[16] Spivak 154.

# 1. The Decolonisation of a "Murder Machine":
## Education and the Catholic Church in Post-Treaty Ireland[17]

In his preface to *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements*, Gyan Prakash writes that modern colonialism has operated more subtly, through intellectual activities involving native élites educated in western academies, rather than by military means. These élites formed a dominant class as they restructured the postcolonial state. Prakash also observes that their contribution, if any, was the reinstitution of "enduring hierarchies of [colonial] subjects and knowledges"; they came up with limited innovations with regard to the decolonisation of the new-born state.[18] They, to a relative extent, inherited a colonial mindset with which they learnt to conceive the world as "the Occidental and the Oriental, the civilised and the primitive, the scientific and the superstitious, the developed and the undeveloped."[19] With this colonial mindset, the élites were inclined to privilege themselves as the new, more "civilised" authority over the native people. Interestingly, Frantz Fanon describes the re-adoption of the colonial mindset in similar terms in his *The Wretched of the Earth*. He contends: "In its willful narcissism, the national middle class is easily convinced that it can advantageously replace the middle class of the mother country."[20] For both Prakash and Fanon, the new dominant class became another oppressor who did little to liberate the colonised and instead justified his own superior position in relation to those less educated and advantaged indigenous peoples. The members of the new dominant class endeavoured to claim a singular, national consciousness by introducing new constitutions, rules and programmes, while to some extent they mimicked – with a few novel experiments – the administrative, bureaucratic system that the former coloniser had formulated. Their leading position and own interests were strengthened in the process of national formation, but the concerns of po-

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[17] The post-Treaty period is taken here and throughout this study to cover the 1920s to 1940s, during which Ireland gained its political independence in 1921 with the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. The Treaty created an Irish Free State of twenty-six counties, and was defined by its Constitution as a dominion of the British Commonwealth. The political affiliation with the former coloniser ended in December, 1948, when J.A. Costello, the former Prime Minister, declared Ireland to be a Republic and to be leaving the Commonwealth.

[18] Prakash 3.

[19] Prakash 3.

[20] Fanon, *Wretched* 120.

litical dissenters and religious minorities, which had existed long before Ireland became independent, were not resolved. Post-Treaty Ireland, in my opinion, illustrates the problems that Prakash and Fanon have addressed. Take, for instance, the predicament of Unionist senators in the Free State. Although their number was sixteen out of thirty in the new Senate, they were often given "a special position [. . .] to watch the work of the dominant Dáil from close quarters."[21] The Dáil was "deliberately intended to be dominant" not only over the Senate but also over the executive government upon which many Protestant Unionists, including W.B. Yeats, as a senator who was concerned about his Anglo-Irish heritage, could have limited influence.[22] The union of the nationalistic government and the Catholic Church turned into a powerful body that constrained dissenting voices through a variety of measures. National education – which this chapter will dwell upon – was one of the methods that attempted to blur those religious, ethnic, political, and cultural divides, or to assimilate them into the mainstream Catholic ethos.

However, Ireland, as the only colony of the British Empire in western Europe, was rather different from other colonies in pursuit of decolonisation. The complexity of the Irish Question lay in the fact that, firstly, Ireland and England, primarily due to their close geographical distance, had shared a long partnership in commerce and agriculture since 1800 under the Act of Union. Secondly, Ireland had been, by the end of the nineteenth century, transformed in many ways into an Anglicised state under the influences of Victorian England. According to F.S.L. Lyons, not only had the economic interests of industrial England flown across the Irish Sea but also "English Fashions in dress and speech, English journalism and advertising, English books and plays, English music-hall, English concert programmes and concert artists, English painting, English sports and pastimes [. . .] grew and flourished in an Ireland which, in the second half of the century especially, seemed little more than a province in the empire of Victorian taste."[23] Moreover, although Irish was still spoken by many Irishmen, English was the common language amongst the majority of the urban Irish and with English people. Thirdly, in politics, there was a severe split amongst Irish parliamentarians at Westminster arguing for or against Home Rule after the fall of Charles Parnell.[24] The fall of Parnell, in one way or another, incurred deep suspicions

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[21] Lyons, *Ireland* 474.
[22] Lyons, *Ireland* 474.
[23] Lyons, *Culture* 7.
[24] Charles Stewart Parnell was an Irish nationalist parliamentarian at Westminster. He was

between Irish Catholics and Protestants, and between revolutionary nationalists and home rulers. These factors all directly and indirectly confounded the solution to the Irish Question. Nevertheless, before any political agreement was made to solve the Irish Question, militant Irish nationalists, mainly Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army, had triggered the Easter Rising in 1916, facilitating the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922. "[T]he tragic interplay of two emotional forces: nationalism and faith," according to one historian, therefore empowered the new government and the Catholic Church to direct the construction of the Free State in the way they wished.[25] What is noteworthy is that the politicians who were involved with the making of the Free State by and large were members of the élite receiving their education at colonial institutes, or former parliamentarians (at Westminster), or both. They learnt a great deal about English codes and regulations, redefining them in line with their patriotic and Catholic ideals, ignoring the fact that Ireland was a state with a mixture of cultures, denominations, languages, and races. They, to some extent, reproduced a mindset similar to that of the former coloniser in discouraging non-nationalistic interests. Many of the Protestant minority had therefore criticised the imposition of Catholic values upon them through various governmental policies.[26]

It is true to say that the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 came with the emergence of a privileged ruling class which could decide by themselves how the country should be (re-)built, according to their nationalistic aspirations. Although Unionists, whether Catholic, Protestant, or Anglo-Irish, could express their opinions in the Senate and other public meetings, they could not always have a decisive impact on the matters that concerned them due to their being a minority in the Executive Council (of the Free State). These native élites, mostly Catholic nationalists, hence contributed to "the only integral Catholic State in the world," legitimising the joint rule of the Church and the government.[27] On the one hand, the élite – who stood by Irish nationalism – reconstructed what Fanon called the "hierarchy of cultures": to

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elected leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party whose object was Home Rule and the establishment of a separate Irish parliament in Dublin. In 1890, the party split as a result of Parnell's scandal with Katie O'Shea, the wife of Captain William O'Shea who was one of Parnell's party aides.

[25]  Blanshard 14.

[26]  Johnson 6. The media censorship, for instance, was severely criticised by some Catholic intellectuals and Protestants, but it was not less rigorously enacted until the 1960s.

[27]  Quoted in Blanshard 4. It was contended by Dr. James Devane, one of Dublin's noted champions of the Church.

maintain not only the security of the nation but their leading position.[28] On the other hand, they reversed the order of the hierarchy by placing the Gaelic culture, which used to be under the suppression of the English coloniser, at a more dominant level. The strong preference for "Irish Irishness" can be seen from the insistence of the Ministry of Education, though not without criticism, on making the learning of the Gaelic language an obligatory course in primary and secondary education; and the revision of textbooks on literature, history and geography to include more lessons about Ireland or Irish authors.

Although Fanon's concept of a "hierarchy of cultures" initially referred to the *white* coloniser's attempt at making the indigenous culture inferior, it could be argued that Irish cultural nationalists in the ruling class possessed a similar attitude in privileging "Irish Irish" rather than the English version. Nevertheless, the project of re-Gaelicising Ireland could not be deemed entirely successful, as the consequences of Anglicisation had been very far-reaching and could hardly be removed. Specifically, by the 1970s, "[o]utside school, English was [still] the language [students] heard and spoke; it was the language their parents spoke; and the language of newspapers, books and radio." [29] Although the Ministry of Education did try to re-Gaelicise Ireland through education by similar means to those that the English had used to impose Anglicisation, the results were not always as satisfactory as patriotic educationalists expected, in that there were always non-educational factors that hindered "the decolonisation of the mind" – a phrase coined by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o.[30] The movement of de-Anglicising Ireland, as this chapter will discuss, cannot be claimed as a definite success.

This chapter will focus on the ways in which education was used as a method to promote privileged cultural and political ideologies before and after the establishment of the Free State. What was similar between the English colonisers and the Irish nationalistic educationalists was that they both thought highly of schooling and its influences on future generations; both structured national education systematically and introduced a common curriculum. The marked difference, however, was the extent to

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[28]  Fanon, "Algeria Unveiled" 41.

[29]  Durcan 157.

[30]  In Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's opinion, the complete decolonisation of the mind is unlikely to happen, as children for centuries have been imbued with Eurocentric perspectives by the coloniser, which makes the decolonising process at the mental level difficult. For details, see his *Decolonising the Mind*.

which denominational schools were encouraged by the colonial and nationalistic governments; the former provided very limited public funds to them, while the latter were more generous. I will examine in particular the Catholic convent schools run by foreign teaching orders, some of which managed to maintain a non-Irish-nationalistic and non-Anglican education for pupils from the middle class, and were not as deeply Gaelicised as those run by the Irish Christian Brothers. The contributions of these foreign orders to Irish education have often been ignored. I will also compare St Enda's School, which was founded by Patrick Pearse, with the schools under the English national school system and the Catholic system before and after Irish independence. In addition, I will discuss how the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate examinations affected the ways in which knowledge was taught and received, and their contribution to the joint rule of the Church and the government over the Free State. In short, how education was conducted significantly underpinned the formation of a nationalistic canon, since such a canon might incorporate various social and political interests, including aesthetic ones.

## 1.1. Two Failed Educational Ambitions: the English National School System versus St Enda's Revivalism

Education has always remained an important and effective channel for any political authority to promote favoured ideologies, based on the widely received premise that it is easier to influence young pupils' ideas than adults who have already formed their opinions. Education could also be a method to assimilate those whose religious, political, and cultural backgrounds remained heterodox, as a method to keep the colonial sovereignty integrated. It could be argued that the education that the English colonisers promoted in Ireland since the eighteenth century involved two purposes at least – to resolve the Irish Question and to assimilate the Irish-speaking population. As the passing of the Union of Act in 1800 had legalised English rights over Ireland, education became an essential means to promote a culturally, religiously, and linguistically unified British Empire. Nevertheless, the English national school system, introduced in 1831, never fully succeed in assimilating the Irish-speaking public.

Before this chapter moves on to discuss how post-Treaty education would serve as an instrument in Gaelicising pupils, it is first necessary to understand the political agenda behind the English national school system, and how this system was received in both Ireland and England. This consideration will underpin my later elaboration of the reasons why Irish education in the post-colonial period would be, on the one hand,