A commodious vicus of recirculation: Irish anthologies and literary history

Leerssen, J.T.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (http://dare.uva.nl)
Joep Leerssen

A Commodious Vicus of Recirculation: Irish Anthologies and Literary History

Opleiding Europese Studies, Universiteit van Amsterdam
2010
Joep Leerssen is professor of Modern European Literature at the University of Amsterdam and Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences Professor.

This is the expanded text of the Parnell Lecture delivered at Magdalene College, Cambridge, in January 2009

© the author, 2010

ISSN 1871-1693

Working Papers European Studies Amsterdam is a series of incidental publications by staff members, associates and collaborators of the Department of European Studies at the University of Amsterdam. Printed texts in brochure format can be obtained (free of charge for individuals) from the Secretariat, European Studies, Universiteit van Amsterdam, Spuistraat 134, 1012 VB Amsterdam, Netherlands; e-mail secr.es-fgw@uva.nl
The texts can be downloaded in PDF format from www.hum.uva.nl/europesestudies > Research > Working Papers
A commodious vicus of recirculation:  
Irish anthologies and literary history

Joep Leerssen

The writing of literary history emerged in the course of the eighteenth century. It was based partly on the model of antiquarianism, dealing with vernacular balladry, romance and other remains that stood outside the time-hallowed (and in a sense timeless) canon of Biblical and Classical texts; partly it drew on the genre of poets’ biographies, which in turn followed, ultimately, the template laid down by Vasari. Samuel Johnson’s *Lives of the Poets* is, in a way, a spin-off of Vasari’s *Lives of the Painters*.

These two source traditions determined two deep-seated assumptions in literary historiography: that the development of literary history was part of a process of unfolding modernity, and that this process was driven by the personality of the author. I use ‘modernity’ here, not in a sociological sense, but as the notion, vindicated in the Battle of Ancients and Moderns, that art and civility are not timelessly determined categories fixed by the example of Biblical and Classical antiquity, but that they are developing processes with an intergenerational dynamics and with shifting and developing standards from one century to another. This anti-classicist, dynamic view of art (including literature) as practices predicated, not only on regularity but also on innovation, became dominant in the climate of the Enlightenment, and indeed survived the Enlightenment in that it was also adopted in Romanticism. Vasari’s widely influential celebration of the painters, sculptors and architects of the Italian Renaissance as heroic innovators, each new generation learning from, and surpassing, their predecessors, fed into this innovatory paradigm; that view was further strengthened by the Romantics’ image of the artist and poet as a Promethean, Faustian, questing spirit, always extending the boundaries of received experience.
It is in the context of this outlook that literary historiography emerged in the decades between 1780 and 1840 – between Johnson’s *Lives of the English Poets* (1779-1781) and Warton’s *History of English Poetry* (1774-1781) on the one hand, and Gervinus’s *Geschichte der poetischen National-Literatur der Deutschen* (1835-1842) on the other. Literary history, one might say, emerged on the basis of a fundamental assumption that literature is not timeless, is anything but timeless.¹

Another deep-seated assumption in literary history-writing is that a literary corpus is properly defined by the language of its expression. The idea that language forms the primary category of human culture (and not, for instance, religion, gender, class or race) was, again, a product of the decades between the late Enlightenment and early Romanticism. It had been advanced most notably by Herder, who, in debates on the origin of language, insisted that the most salient quality of human language was its capacity for diversity and diversification. The generation of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Jacob Grimm intensified Herder’s linguistic and cultural relativism into a comparative-anthropological notion that a language constitutes the cognitive operating system of an individual or nation. The ‘native language’ (intergenerationally transmitted in the most intimate parent-child bonding of early infancy) thus establishes language-specificity as a category as fundamental as the distinction between, say, an engine running on electricity, diesel or petrol, or a computer running under Windows, MacOS or Linux.² By extension, literature was seen as deeply and substantially determined by its language, relating to it as the flower does to the root of a plant. In the new university system (as devised around 1810 by Humboldt), *philology* was institutionalized as the joint study of that Siamese twin, Lang and Lit. Literature thus acquired a nationality (linguistically determined) at the same time that it acquired a historicity, and most literary history-writing followed a philological model of national historicism.³


²Pierre Caussat et al. (eds.), *La langue source de la nation. Messianismes séculiers en Europe centrale et orientale (du XVIIIe au XXe siècle)* (Sprimont: Mardaga, 1996).

³This has been discussed more fully in my ‘Literary history, cultural identity, and tradition’, in *Comparative Literature now: Theories and practice / La Litterature comparee a l’heure actuelle. Théories et réalisations*, ed. S. Tótösy de Zepetnek, M.V. Dimic & I. Sywenky (Paris: Champion, 1999), 389-397; ‘Literary Historicism: Romanticism,
In recent decades, the limitations of both the national and the historicist paradigm have been sternly exposed. What, it has been asked, do Chaucer and Pinter have in common, or Boccaccio and D’Annunzio, that should outweigh the links and similarities between Chaucer and Boccaccio? Does the ‘English’ in the phrase ‘English literature’ refer to a language or a country? The question is nugatory for authors who belong to both categories, language and country (Shakespeare, Benson, Hardy), but more troublesome for Walt Whitman, Hugh MacDiarmaid and Seamus Heaney (who belong to one category but reject the other), and most troublesome perhaps for those authors who move between those categories and do not seem to acknowledge their divergence (Walter Scott, Henry James, W.B. Yeats).¹

Irish literature, as a corpus and as a tradition, poses a standing challenge to the national historicism that is so deeply embedded in the craft of literary historiography. Written in three languages (Latin, Gaelic and English) over turbulent centuries of constitutional uncertainty and strife, it has traditionally placed the literary historian into that predicament whimsically phrased in the doggerel verse of William Allingham:

An Englishman has a country
A Scotchman has two
An Irishman has none at all
And doesn’t know what to do.

A daring and in many ways triumphant attempt to break through this paralysing uncertainty has been made recently by the *Cambridge History of Irish Literature* (CHIL), which unites chapters on the various languages of Ireland, the literary traditions (oral and written) in those languages, and their interaction. Yet even it follows the implicit assumptions of literary historiography: although the category of nationality is here allowed to accommodate different languages and different constitutional loyalties, it is still seen as the primary one. Joint ‘Irishness’ is the

---

one category that links the various authors and texts together, and the structure of
the volumes chronologically traces the progress of the literary preoccupation with,
or expression of, Irishness across the centuries. CHIL as a whole is a
demonstration that the case of Irish literature can be encompassed within the
assumptions, scope and working principles of literary historiography.¹

Production-oriented Literary History (PLAI) and Irish Perplexities

The traditional mode of literary historiography is, then, a genetic history of literary
production, with language as the main category for the constitution of the text
corpus, authorship as its the main organizing principle, and innovation as the main
driving force. For many literary traditions – French, Danish, Portuguese – these
production-language-authorship-innovation (PLAI) assumptions are
unproblematic to the point of seeming obvious or ‘natural’. This is largely so
because PLAI assumptions are shared by authors and historians alike, or have been
since the Renaissance. The average French, Danish or Portuguese author works
self-consciously in a sense of filiation, with knowledge of his/her forerunners and
traditions, and with a historical sense of the generational dynamics of which he/she
is positioned. That this should be so is in turn linked to the fact that literature, and
print culture in general, form part of what we may call, in Habermas’s sense of the
term, a public sphere. By the same token, however, literary traditions and corpuses
emerging from societies without public sphere (and that includes pre-print
European literature and much of pre-colonial world literature) may not work
within those PLAI assumptions, which as a result may be awkward when applied
to them as an analytical frame.

Indeed, a PLAI perspective proves uncongenial in many respects to the Irish
text corpus at large. Gaelic texts hardly reached the printing press at all until the
end of the nineteenth century, and have reached us through centuries of manuscript
transmission flanked (in the case of verse) by oral transmission, with all the
attendant philological pitfalls this entails: substantial textual variants and
substantial uncertainties as to authorship. Yet it is precisely this corpus, hard to pin
down in terms of authorship, date of origin or textual variant, and understandable
to the vast majority of modern readers only in translation – from Táin Bó Cúailnge
to the Jacobite aisling – which is usually seen as the most authentic embodiment
of true, native Irishness in Irish literature, with none of the categorical cross-over
problems that we encounter in the case of known and datable authors like

¹Margaret Kelleher & Philip O’Leary, eds. The Cambridge History of Irish Literature

This state of affairs presents many perplexities. The corpus of the Táin, accessible only by a via philologica rather than as a text generally present and available for straightforward reading, necessitates ever-renewed efforts at translation, none of these apparently being definitively satisfactory, from Lady Gregory to Ciaran Carson by way of Thomas Kinsella each vying with the other. Again, certain perennial ‘classics’ of the Irish tradition such as the ‘woman’s complaint’ entitled Dónall Óg have no known author, no fixed date of origin, and even in their textual substance are variable: the order of the stanzas, the stanzas’ appurtenance to this or that version or parallel poem: all that differs considerably from MS to MS. Much like the situation of performed art (jazz, folktales) we can at best extrapolate an ideal-type textual template from a shifting praxis of diverging performances. Literature here shades into popular performative praxis, and as a result the classic Dónall Óg has somehow failed to get a mention in CHIL – which is comparable to Wordsworth’s Lucy poems going unmentioned in a history of English literature.

Not only does this illustrate the intractable difficulties of writing a Literary History of a literature that often has no identifiable authors and no precise datability of its texts, and that ran its course before the uncongenial PLAI assumptions of literary historiography were fixed – it also means that to us who have been raised in those assumptions, Irish literature presents itself as a problem: elusive (obscure or anonymous) authors writing in different languages and in a country where one entire linguistic tradition had no access to the theatre, to the printing press or to a book trade or to the sanctuary of libraries. James Joyce’s symbol of the ‘cracked looking-glass of a servant’ is often applied to the bifurcation and discontinuity of Ireland’s literary past: Gaelic and English halves, Ó Rathaille and Swift, that share a frame but somehow do not match up, presenting the onlooker with only a fractured and riven self-image. In recent decades this has become an important principle in the post-colonial approach to Irish literature: the story of colonial self-estrangement and the literary reflections of, and responses to, that condition.

Canonicity

In all this, some important literary genres have been left out of our field of vision: the genre of philological edition and translation on the one hand, and that of the

---

anthology on the other. They form an important part of the Irish literary tradition (as indeed my reference to successive Táin translations already indicated), yet they are often neglected in our way of looking at literary history. That is probably because they do not fit the PLAI perspective: anthologizing and text-editing are instances of literary recycling and re-production rather than of production; the author is here subservient to the editor or compiler; and (as I shall argue in greater detail in what follows) the anthology and philological edition is a genre that can surmount linguistic cleavages, presenting works from one to readers in another language.

The true importance of anthologies and editions only becomes visible if we allow literary history to consist of reading as much as writing. Until we do, we shall remember Walter Scott mainly as the author of Marmion and Ivanhoe, and allow his editorship of Thomas the Rymer’s Tristram, or his Border Minstrelsy, to remain overshadowed; or remember Southey (unkindly so) for his own poems rather than for his edition of Malory’s Morte d’Arthur.

In actual practice, reading is a much more important factor in literary history than we allow it to be. It is the very essence of canonicity: for only those works which are enduringly read (and which accordingly, for one reason or another, merit inclusion in a literary history) can be called canonical. Canonicity cannot maintain itself as a static given: no work ever made it into canonical status on the basis of a prestigious first edition followed by a fixed, unchanging spot on the library shelves. Canonicity is a ‘swim or sink’ condition: works must be continuously updated to successfully meet fresh generations and audiences amidst changing circumstances of taste and media technologies. Shakespeare remains a famous author, not only because of the Stratford performances of the Royal Shakespeare society, but also because of film adaptations and spin-off repercussions as far and wide as the debate in the ‘Scylla and Charybdis’ episode in Ulysses, West Side Story, Shakespeare in Love. These are not anomalies or epiphenomena but part of the dynamics of canonicity – for in the deepest sense of the term, canonicity is a dynamic process, not a static condition.1

This means that canonicity as a process is a legitimate and even necessary part of the business of literary historians. And canonicity is always posterior to textual production: texts are not born canonical, they become so after having left their author’s hands. Canonicity is not a mode of textual production, but a mode of textual circulation – specifically: an enduringly successful mode of textual

---

1 Similarly, John Guillory, in Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation (University of Chicago Press, 1993), argues: ‘An individual’s judgment that a work is great does nothing in itself to preserve that work, unless that judgment is made in a certain institutional context, a setting in which it is possible to insure the reproduction of the work, its continual reintroduction to generations of readers’ (p. 28).
circulation. And it is in the difference between textual production and textual circulation that interesting things happen in literary history, and particularly in Irish literary history.

In order to bring these processes into focus, we must look, then, not at a PLAI history of textual production but rather at one of textual \textit{reading, reception} and \textit{recycling}. In order to give a condensed idea of this model I refer the reader to the ‘flowchart of textual production and literary canonicity’ appended at the end of this essay. In such an reception-oriented view of literary history we can take due note of the important role played by literary endeavours such as textual editing and, above all, anthologizing.

\textit{Anthologies}

The genre of the anthology is not often encountered as a topic in literary histories (nor is it, for that matter, in CHIL). But it antedates by many centuries the rise of print culture and the rise of the author.\textsuperscript{1} The genre receives its name from the great prototype, the Greek Anthology (that collection of Greek epigrams and poems made by Meleager in the first century AD, and continuously added to until well into Byzantine times). The Bible itself may be seen as an anthology containing a collection of texts belonging to many different genres. Any medieval codex can be seen as an anthology of sorts, a collection of texts, almost never organized by author but by the preference of the scribe, the needs of the readership or the availability of material. And the anthology is perhaps the pre-print genre that has most successfully survived the Gutenberg revolution. Anthologies are still being published in great numbers, from school collections to the \textit{Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing}.

Anthologizing has remained an important part of literary practice. In

\textsuperscript{1}The notion of authorship has, of course, its own historical dynamics which I only mention in passing. Originally the word ‘author’ was tantamount to ‘authority’ and referred to the texts invoked to bolster an argument. Later on it came to stand specifically for the individual who had written those texts. The ‘authors’ known as individuals were originally philosophers and Church Fathers; they were also the earliest ‘authors’ to be given \textit{opera omnia} editions of their works as somehow forming a coherent corpus held together by the informing personality of their individual mind. The earliest secular and non-philosophical writers to become personally known as authors were the poets of the twelfth and following centuries. It was in the context of print culture that the individual author became the premier marker of a text’s identity; the first secular poet to be given an \textit{opera omnia} edition being Giovanni Pontano. The centuries between Dante and Pontano present the period of the ‘rise of the author’. Cf. generally also Seán Burke (ed.), \textit{Authorship from Plato to the postmodern: A reader} (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995).
particular in the field of poetry we may surmise that the canonicity of certain poems owes more to their being anthologized than to reprintings under the poet’s own authorship. In the canon of English verse, the influence of set anthologies used in school and university courses (Oxford Anthology, Norton Anthology etc.) is one obvious, institutional factor; but even outside educational settings, in the wider literary market-place, collections such as Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury of English Verse* and the *Oxford Book of English Verse* have been formative in shaping tastes and preferences, as well as registering the shifting poetical outlooks, of succeeding generations of readers. Palgrave brought out his original *Golden Treasury* in 4 volumes in 1861, followed by a second series in 1897 and a supplement in 1921. Laurence Binyon added a volume in 1931, C.D. Lewis one in 1954, Christopher Ricks produced a Penguin version in 1994 and a new *Golden Treasury* was published in 6 volumes by Oxford University Press in 1994. That same Oxford University Press had throughout the twentieth century been running the competing *Oxford Book of English Verse*, originally edited by Arthur Quiller-Couch in 1900 and re-edited in 1939, with new editions coming out in 1972 (Helen Vendler), 1990 (John Wain) and 1999 (again Christopher Ricks). Both the frequency and the august editorial roll-call indicate the undemonstrative importance of poetic anthologizing.

A similar role of ‘canonization by re-selection and recycling’ was played by certain anthologies in Irish literature over the last two centuries. The anthology *Éigse: Duanaire na hArdeistiméarachta* (ed. Breandán Ó Conaire, 1974) was the set anthology for Irish literature courses in secondary school and presented school pupils with the canon of Gaelic literature; a similar use was intended for the three-volume *Nua-Dhuanaire* (ed. Pádraig Dé Brún, Breandán Ó Buachalla & Tomás Ó Concheanainn, 1975 ff.). For the wider English-reading market, there were formative and influential collections such as Hoagland 1947, Donagh Mac Donagh and Lennox Robinson 1948 (given a new profile in Thomas Kinsella 1986), Frank O’Connor 1959, Derek Mahon 1972, Seán Lucy 1973, John Montague 1974, Brendan Kenelly 1981, Paul Muldoon 1986 and Michael Longley 2002. (NB In mentioning examples of Irish anthologies I use editor’s name and year of publication to refer to the checklist appended at the end of this text.)

Again, the frequency is striking, as is the high-prestige nature of the writers involved; any poet of note seems to have been approached by some publisher or other to lend his name to an Irish anthology over the last half-century. Some of these may even have been commercially driven potboilers, aimed at the literary

---

1A point also made by Leah Price in the introduction to her *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel: From Richardson to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)
tourist market at a period (roughly 1960-2000) that ‘Anglo-Irish Literature’ was one of the country’s main export products; and one gets the impression that editing an anthology was an even more efficient marker of canonicity than being merely included in one. W.B. Yeats himself, with his epoch-making edition of the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936) may have acted as a role model. In fact, many succeeding generational shifts in Irish literature and Irish poetry have been signalled, not only by the emergence of new authors, journals and periodicals, but also by way of the anthology as self-presentation. Poets who individually were relatively powerless newcomers in the literary marketplace could make a more forceful entrance on the scene by collectively showing their colours. That practice reaches from the days of the Irish Literary Revival to the feminist assertions of women poets: from W.B. Yeats 1895 to Ailbhe Smyth 1989, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne 1995, and Katie Donovan, Norman Jeffares & Brendan Kennelly 1995, and of course volumes 4 and 5 of the *Field Day Anthology* (2002). Similarly, in the 1970s, the Northern Irish troubles and their literary repercussions gave rise to important anthologies of ‘Ulster poetry’, e.g. Pádraic Fiacc 1974 and Frank Ormsby 1979. Thus, anthologies in their own right can document, not only the recycling of past literature, but also the emergence of new currents. None of these patterns is specifically Irish; they merely serve to highlight the important, albeit under-recognized role played by anthologies in the dynamics of literary history. There are, then, important parallels between Irish and English anthologizing, and, indeed, crossovers, from Yeats’s *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* to Seamus Heaney’s and Ted Hughes’s *The Rattle Bag* (2005). But in addition, anthologies in Ireland also have a specifical function, and a longer and richer history, which I propose to highlight now.

*Irish anthologies: Cultural transfer, cultural memory*

I have earlier referred to the discontinuity syndrome in Irish literature, often symbolized by the ‘cracked looking-glass of a servant’ as coined by James Joyce. Ireland’s history is indeed riven by a fundamental disjunction: the decline and near-extinction of its senior language, Gaelic. While the historical memories of an aboriginally Gaelic Ireland were retrieved and re-appropriated by the majority of the country’s population in the nineteenth century, informing every nationalist movement after Daniel O’Connell, the voices which had expressed that Gaelic tradition had become incomprehensible. The very culture which, in the nationalist view, constituted Ireland’s main title to sovereignty and self-determination, had been locked out of reach into the sealed-off sarcophagus of a strange, dying language. It is no coincidence that the most succesful phase of Irish separatism
should have been triggered by, precisely, a language revival movement; or that
that language revival movement itself should have been triggered by Douglas
Hyde’s lecture with that interestingly-phrased title, ‘The Necessity for De-
Anglicising Ireland’ (1892, presenting Gaelic and English as opposing ends
Ireland’s language-cultural see-saw).

Much of nineteenth-century Irish culture was deeply engrossed in acts of
translation: in the root sense of the word, the relocating of something from one
place to another; in this case: the salvage of Gaelic literature and Gaelic culture
from the wreck of the Gaelic language and helping it to a new lease of life in an
English-speaking social setting. It amounts, almost, to a brain transplant: an entire
personality, character, and life-story is lifted from one body and fitted into a new
one. Even so, the Irish writers at the latter end of that process (who, for all that
they are native speakers of the language of Shakespeare, have de-Anglicized their
sense of affiliation to the extent that they acknowledge Gaelic-language
forerunners such as Aogán Ó Rathaille as ‘us’ while they disavow Milton or
Wordsworth as ‘them’) are uncomfortably aware of the discontinuity within the
Irish tradition, the crack in the servant’s looking-glass.¹ Thus, Thomas Kinsella,
in his essay ‘The Irish Writer’ encounters a ‘great cultural blur’ when he looks for
‘the past in [him]self’: ‘I must exchange one language for another, my native
English for eighteenth-century Irish’. Kinsella sees this bifurcation in his cultural
memory as if he comes, ‘so to speak, from a broken and uprooted family, [in]
being drawn to those who share my origins and finding that we cannot share our
lives’.² John Montague plays on linguistic discontinuity as trauma in ‘A Severed
Head’ (part of the celebrated cycle The Rough Field, 1972): ‘To grow a second
tongue: as harsh a humiliation as twice to be born’; and Brian Friel’s Translations
remains, despite its wilfully counterfactual distortion of cultural change in
nineteenth-century Ireland, widely accepted as a valid ‘poetic’ representation and
interpretation of real-world events: linguistic alienation as a deliberate instrument
of colonial hegemony.³

¹ Cf. Michael Cronin, ‘The Cracked Looking Glass of Servants: Translation and
essays in Maria Tymoczko & Colin A. Ireland (eds.) Language and Tradition in Ireland:
Continuities and Displacements (Boston, MA: University of Massachussetts Press: ACIS,
2003).

² Thomas Kinsella, ‘The Irish Writer’, in Davis, Mangan, Ferguson? Tradition and
the Irish Writer (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1970), 57-70.

³ Martine Pelletier, in her article ‘Translations, the Field Day Debate and the
Re-imagining of Irish Identity’ (in The Cambridge Companion to Brian Friel, ed. Anthony
Roche; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) defends Friel against his own errors
and against his critics with more attitude than argument. For recent studies of the role of the
However, this view of radical disruption and irretrievable loss holds true only in a PLAI-style view of Irish literary and cultural history. The remarkable fact is that in Ireland (in contrast to properly colonial histories, where native languages and the entire cultures contained in them could indeed be subject to utter eradication), salvage operations began almost as soon as the Irish language came under real threat. Keating’s *Foras feasa ar Éirinn* was translated into English as early as 1723. A historiographical tradition based on native sources emerged in the eighteenth century: abbé James Mageoghegan’s *History of Ireland* (Paris, 1758-1762) or Sylvester O’Halloran’s *General History of Ireland* (1778), who in turn informed nationalist historians like A.M. Sullivan and John Mitchel in the nineteenth.\(^1\) Intellectuals versed in the antiquities and philology of the native tradition did much to communicate its riches to metropolitan scholars and academics; a process starting in the eighteenth century and leading from Aodh MacCruitín, Charles O’Conor and Theophilus O’Flanagan to the great nineteenth-century figures of Eugene O’Curry and John O’Donovan.

Against this background of a general process of ‘cultural transfer’, the anthologizing recuperation and appropriation of Gaelic literature in an urban, English-speaking setting takes on added resonance.\(^2\) While the written production of Irish literature languished and stalled, in a slow decline that would lead from Aogán Ó Rathaille (†1728) by way of Micheál Óg Ó Longáin (†1837) into the Famine, the Irish anthology became an increasingly potent vehicle for literary salvage. Charlotte Brooke’s *Reliques of Irish Poetry: Consisting of Heroic Poems, Odes, Elegies, and Songs, Translated into English Verse* (1789) is recognized as a ‘classic’ in Irish cultural history, but usually for other reasons than for what it fundamentally is. It is seen as a manifestation of Grattanite-Patriot appreciation of Gaelic antiquity; as part of the Irish vindication against Macpherson-style Ossianism; as an Irish counterpart to Bishop Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* and, as such, as part of the climate of Irish antiquarianism; as a first benchmark in

---


\(^2\) It is striking, for instance, how many anthologies have been discussed in Bob Welch’s studies of translations: Robert Welch, *A History of Verse Translation from the Irish, 1789-1897* Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 1988). For the idea of ‘cultural transfer’, see the seminal collection by Michel Espagne and Michael Werner, *Transferts. Les relations interculturelles dans l’espace franco-allemand (XVIIIe et IXe siècle)* (Paris 1988).
the history of translations from the Irish; and indeed it is all those things. But first and foremost it is one of the first, and greatest, Irish anthologies. Brooke’s *Reliques* are the prototype of the great showcases retrieving and re-presenting the riches of the native tradition, such as Charles Read’s *Cabinet of Irish Literature* (4 vols., 1880) and Seamus Deane’s *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (3+2 vols., 1991/2002).¹

Even more importantly, perhaps, her collection, in deliberately straddling the Gaelic-English linguistic divide, is the mainspring of similar anthologies which, since then, have formed crucially important stepping-stones in the development of Irish literature as a bilingual system: e.g., Hardiman 1831, O’Daly & Walsh 1844, O’Daly 1849 and 1860, Ferguson 1864, Brooke & Rolleston 1900, Greene & O’Connor 1967, Ó Tuama & Kinsella 1981, Bolger 1986, Kiberd & Fitzmaurice 1991. All of these present texts from one language for readers in another, often giving original and English translation side by side on facing pages – a procedure first devised by Brooke, in an obvious denunciation of Macpherson’s reluctance to produce the originals for his Ossianic ‘translations’, and still followed by Kinsella and Ó Tuama in their highly influential *An Duanaire: Poems of the Dispossessed* of 1981. These anthologies thus in themselves bring two languages together, that of the text and that of the reader, often indeed in their very textual substance and page lay-out, and thus form an almost Hegelian *Aufhebung* of the opposition between Gaelic and English: their polarity is simultaneously enshrined and transcended.

And that, too, was their function, certainly in the nineteenth century-process of rediscovering Ireland’s Gaelic past. The work of Hardiman, O’Daly, Ferguson and Sigerson is generally recognized as being of cardinal importance in this process, yet hardly thematized as forming part of a concerted praxis and tradition; yet without their anthologizing, the poetic rise of Mangan, or the boom of patriotic verse by the poets of *The Nation* (themselves largely disseminated by canonical and oft-reprinted anthologies like *The Spirit of the Nation*, 1843, and its spin-offs), would have been unthinkable. The process is known as ‘productive reception’: the fresh production of Irish texts in the English language taking themes, topics, inspirations and settings from the Gaelic cultural inheritance – in short: an entire Gaelic cultural memory – retrieved and appropriatied in a reception process.²

---


Anthology, Philology, Manuscript Tradition

That reception and retrieval process was carried by philologists and anthologists jointly, throughout the nineteenth century. The source-referencing notes to Thomas Moore’s Irish Melodies – an early instance of productive reception – feature antiquaries like O’Halloran and anthologists like Brooke; Thomas Davis’s mid-century verse and critical essays are replete with similar references to antiquarian, historical and anthologized literary sources; and philological text editions like those of Standish O’Grady as well as anthologies like Douglas Hyde’s Love Songs of Connacht and Religious Songs of Connacht (1893 and 1906) inform the drama and verse of the Irish Literary Revival.

Indeed, in order to place the activities of anthologists, from Charlotte Brooke to Charles Read, in their proper and congenial context, we should consider them, not just as an adjunct to the production of fresh literature, but alongside the rise of the philological text edition. Text editions, too, are a form of retrieval and recycling; they, too, often bridge the gap between the language of the text and the language of the reading audience; they, too, had the dual role of bringing a receding, no-longer-active cultural tradition back from oblivion and re-integrating it into the literary imagination of a different (urban, modern, English-speaking) society. And they rose almost conjointly with the Irish anthology. Indeed, with her Reliques, Charlotte Brooke stands godmother over the philological-editorial tradition as much as over that of the anthology. The first great editorial works were undertaken around the mid-nineteenth century under the aegis of the Royal Irish Academy and its spin-off, the Irish Archaeological Society (later merged with O’Daly’s Ossianic Society),¹ the high points being undoubtedly John O’Donovan’s edition of the Annals of the Fours Masters,² and the edition of the Brehon laws by W.N. Hancock and others, made on the basis of preparatory work by O’Curry and O’Donovan. From these beginnings rose the discipline of the Celtic philology; and in many cases its early achievements (certainly when non-authored verse or imaginative-fictional texts like legends or myths were assembled thematically, edited and translated) were almost indistinguishable from the anthologizing tradition highlighted here – e.g., Montgomery 1846, O’Grady 1892, Sigerson 1897, Meyer 1901, Hull 1912. After independence, T.F. O’Rahilly (1925/26),

¹Damien Murray, Romanticism, Nationalism and Irish Antiquarian Societies, 1840-80 (National University of Ireland Maynooth: Department of Old and Middle Irish, 2000).

Osborn Bergin (1970) and Seán Ó Tuama (1981) have continued this editing/anthologizing outreach from the academic into the wider literary field.

A further comment is in order here. Older Gaelic literature rarely fits the PLAI paradigm, and as a result the Irish materials edited by Celtic philologists rarely come in a cut-and-dried author-organized form. Text editions of individual authors certainly do exist: the works of Aogán Ó Rathaille as edited by Dinneen and O’Donoghue, of Dáibhi Ó Bruadair as edited by MacErlean, and of Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn, as edited by Elanor Knott come to mind (all of them in the publication series of the Irish Texts Society, in 1909, 1910-17 and 1920 respectively); or post-1945 author-based work editions coming out of the Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies. But these collections had to be assembled, and to be arranged around an individual author, from a disparate MS tradition, and as an editorial-pholological endeavour they are heavily overshadowed by editions that are in themselves selections – indeed, philological anthologies. Seen in this light, the editions of poetic materials by Lambert McKenna (also the compiler of the standard English-Irish dictionary *Foclóir Béarla agus Gaedhilge* of 1935) stand out as being of immense value and importance. His collections of 1938, 1939, 1947 and 1951 mark him as one of the unsung giants of the Irish literary tradition.

What is more, often the anthologizing nature of such editions is not just the result of editorial selection from amongst diverse MS sources, but a reflection of the anthological nature of the edited MS itself. McKenna’s edition of the ‘Contention of the Bards’, *Iomarbhágh na bhFileadh* (1917) is a case in point: a corpus always transcribed and transmitted as multi-party controversy between altercating poets. In other cases, what is edited is in fact itself a *duanaire* or poem-book, with texts by different poets organized around the addressee: the patron, or family, to whom such poems were addressed and dedicated, and by whom the collection was kept. Ó Donnchadha 1931, Carney 1945 and 1950, McKenna 1947 and 1951 (poem-books for the Clannaboy O’Neills, Butlers, O’Reillys, Magaurans and O’Haras) are examples in point.

Two patterns emerge from this. One is that early-independence Ireland, for all that it is often perceived as stagnated and unproductive, in fact achieved an immense amount in making literary material from pre-1600 Gaelic literature available for circulation and recirculation in twentieth-century print culture. The other is that this modern anthologizing tradition in Ireland reconnected with a pattern of non-authorial text organization which was in fact a long-standing feature of Gaelic literature itself.

The Gaelic term *duanaire* – signifying ‘aggregate of poems’ – may already alert us to this. The MS transmission of Gaelic literature rarely proceeded authorially; the usual organization of any MS being in itself a type of scribal
anthology. The most important Gaelic codices from the eleventh to the sixteenth century (Leabhar na hUidre, and the Books of Glendalough, Leinster, Ballymote, Lecan and Fermoy, listed at the head of the appended Checklist, and all of them printed between 1875 and 1937) were, as hinted earlier on, anthologies themselves. After the catastrophic defeat of the Ulster Earls, an anthology-in-exile was produced on the continent around 1630, Duanaire Finn – and this collection may stand as a ’missing link’ between a retrieval and recycling effort from within the stricken Gaelic tradition itself and the later retrievals heralded by Charlotte Brooke and by the 1795 collection entitled, again with a native phrase, Bolg an tSolair (‘The Provider’s Bag’, connoting a cornucopia of miscellaneous ‘goodies’).

In all these respects, the anthology transcends divisions. It remains a constant in textual (re-) production from the Gaelic scribal tradition to the modern academic and commercial press; it reaches across different literary fields from academic philology to patriotic propaganda verse; and most importantly, it rivets together the two different and competing literary languages of Ireland. In the last two centuries Irish anthologies have truly created, and embodied within their pages, the unity of Irish literature that they often strove to achieve or facilitate. That the lack of such a unity and continuity could at the same time be deplored in other quarters only shows how undervalued and unnoticed the anthologizing tradition has been. If there is, at the beginning of the present century, a sense that despite historical discontinuities and linguistic differences there is such a things as an ‘Irish Literature’, then the credit is in no small part due to Ireland’s anthologizing tradition.
Appendix 1

A THOUSAND YEARS OF IRISH ANTHOLOGIES
(A CHECKLIST OF SOME REPRESENTATIVE TITLES)

pre-1600:
Leabhar na hUidre, XId, RIA 1844, transcript facs 1870, Best/Bergin ed. 1929
Book of Glendalough, XIIb, BL, facs. ed. Kuno Meyer 1909
Book of Leinster, XII, Killiney/TCD, transcript facs ed. 1880
Book of Ballymote, XIVd, RIA 1875
Book of Lecan, XIVd-XVa, TCD>RIA, facs. ed. Kathleen Mulchrone 1937
Yellow Book of Lecan, XIVd-XVd, TCD, facs ed. 1896
Leabhar Breac, XVa, RIA 1789-1844, transcript facs. ed. 1872-76
Book of Fermoy, XIVd-XVI, incl Roche duanaire, RIA/BL XIXb

1600-1800
Book of the O’Conor Don, XVIIb, private.
Duanaire Finn, XVIIb, MacNeill/Murphy ed. 1907-53
1789 Charlotte Brooke, Reliques of Ancient Irish Poetry
1795 Bolg an tSolair

1800-1920
1831 James Hardiman, Irish Minstrelsy, or Bardic Remains of Ireland
1839 Thomas Crofton Croker, Popular Songs of Ireland
1843 The Spirit of the Nation
1844 John O’Daly & Edward Walsh, Reliques of Jacobite Poetry
1845 M.J. Barry, The Songs of Ireland
1845 Charles Gavan Duffy, The Ballad Poetry of Ireland
1846 H.R. Montgomery, Specimens of the Early Native Poetry of Ireland
1846 Denis Florence MacCarthy, The Book of Irish Ballads
1847 Edward Walsh, Irish Popular Songs
1849 John O’Daly, The Poets and Poetry of Munster (with Mangan versions)
1852 William Hamilton Drummond, Ancient Irish Minstrelsy
1860 John O’Daly, The Poets and Poetry of Munster, 2nd ser. (with Sigerson versions)
1864 Samuel Ferguson, Lays of the Western Gael
1880 Charles Read, The Cabinet of Irish Literature (4 vols)
1892 Standish Hayes O’Grady, Silva gadelica
1892 D.O Crowley, Irish Poets and Novelists
1893 Douglas Hyde, Love Songs of Connacht
1894 Martin MacDermott, The New Spirit of the Nation
1894 Poetry and Legendary Ballads of the South of Ireland
1895 W.B. Yeats, A Book of Irish Verse
1897 George Sigerson, Bards of the Gael and Gall
1900 Justin McCarthy et al., Irish Literature (10 vols)
1900 Stopford Brooke & T.W. Rolleston, A Treasury of Irish Poetry in the English Tongue
1901 Kuno Meyer, Selections from Ancient Irish Poetry
1906 Douglas Hyde, Religious Songs of Connacht
1909 John Cook, The Dublin Book of Irish Verse
1912 Eleanor Hull, Poem-Book of the Gael
1912 Mary J. Brown, Historical Ballad Poetry of Ireland
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>L. D'O Walters</td>
<td><em>Irish Poets of To-day: An Anthology</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>Lambert McKenna</td>
<td><em>Dán Dé</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>Lennox Robinson</td>
<td><em>A Golden Treasury of Irish Verse</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>T.F. O’Rahilly</td>
<td><em>Dánta Grádha</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>T.F. O’Rahilly</td>
<td><em>Measgra Dánta</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>Tadhg Ó Donnchadhá</td>
<td><em>Leabhar Cloinne Aodha Buidhe</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>Lambert McKenna</td>
<td><em>Dioghluim Dána</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>Lambert McKenna</td>
<td><em>Aithdioghluim Dána</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>Colm Ó Lochlainn</td>
<td><em>Irish Street Ballads</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>James Carney</td>
<td><em>Poems on the Butlers, 1400-1650</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>Kathleen Hoagland</td>
<td><em>1000 Years of Irish Poetry</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>Lambert McKenna</td>
<td><em>Leabhar Meig Shamhradháin</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>Donagh MacDonagh &amp; Lennox Robinson</td>
<td><em>The Oxford Book of Irish Verse</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>James Carney</td>
<td><em>Poems on the O'Reillys</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>Lambert McKenna</td>
<td><em>Leabhar Í Eadhra</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Colm Ó Lochlainn</td>
<td><em>More Irish Street Ballads</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Pádraig Ó Canainn</td>
<td><em>Filíocht na nGael</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Frank O’Connor</td>
<td><em>Kings Lords &amp; Commons: An Anthology from the Irish</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>David Greene &amp; Frank O’Connor</td>
<td><em>A Golden Treasury of Irish Poetry</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Seán Lucy</td>
<td><em>Love Poems of the Irish</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Georges-Denis Zimmermann</td>
<td><em>Songs of Irish Rebellion</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Frank O’Brien</td>
<td><em>Duanaire Nuadhfiliochta</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>John Montague</td>
<td><em>The Faber Book of Irish Verse</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Derek Mahon</td>
<td><em>Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Seán O Tuama &amp; Thomas Kinsella</td>
<td><em>An Duanaire: Poems of the Dispossessed</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Brendan Kenelly</td>
<td><em>Penguin Book of Irish Verse</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Seán Dunne</td>
<td><em>The Poets of Munster</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Thomas Kinsella</td>
<td><em>New Oxford Book of Irish Verse</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Dermot Bolger</td>
<td><em>The Bright Wave: An tonn gheal</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Paul Muldoon</td>
<td><em>The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>A.A. Kelly</td>
<td><em>Pillars of the House: An Anthology of Verse by Irish Women</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>John Montague</td>
<td><em>Bitter Harvest</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Ailbhe Smyth</td>
<td><em>Wildish Things: An Anthology of New Irish Women's Writing</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Declan Kiberd &amp; Gabriel Fitzmaurice</td>
<td><em>Crann faoi bláth / The Flowering Tree</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Eilís Ni Dhuibhne</td>
<td><em>Voices on the Wind: Women Poets of the Celtic Twilight</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Patrick Crotty</td>
<td><em>Modern Irish Poetry</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Theo Dorgan</td>
<td><em>Irish Poetry since Kavanagh</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Seán Dunne</td>
<td><em>The Ireland Anthology</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Andrew Carpenter</td>
<td><em>Verse in English from Eighteenth-Century Ireland</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Theo Dorgan &amp; Noel Duffy</td>
<td><em>Watching the River Flow</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Seán McMahon</td>
<td><em>1000 Years of Poetry: A Millennial Anthology</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Gréagóir Ó Dúill</td>
<td><em>Fearann Pinn: Filiocht 1900-1999</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Colm Tóibín</td>
<td><em>The Irish Times Book of Favourite Irish Poems</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>W.J. McCormack</td>
<td><em>Ferocious Humanism</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Michael Longley</td>
<td><em>20th-century Irish Poems</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Andrew Carpenter</td>
<td><em>Verse In English From Tudor And Stuart Ireland</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Stephen Regan</td>
<td><em>Irish Writing: An Anthology of Irish Literature in English 1789-1939</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2
A FLOWCHART MODEL OF TEXTUAL PRODUCTION AND LITERARY CANONICITY

Reading the chart from top to bottom, we can trace its processes as follows: New writing adds continuously to the available reservoir of reading supply. Owing to complex mechanisms (taste, marketing and critical response, prestige of the author or endorsing critic) here subsumed under the notion appeal, some of this reading material meets with failure and drops into a disregarded, largely unread category here called non-canon. There it remains as long as it fails to obtain appeal, relegated to oblivion.

Other portions of reading supply, however, meet with a positive response (success) and as a result enter a category here called canon (which is, in fact, a
diverse array of different ‘canons’ current in different parts of the reading market-at-large, with all sorts of crossovers, overlaps and transfers between them). A text’s position in that category is, however, subject to constant reappraisal: as long as it continues to obtain appeal, its endurance in the canon is ensured; once that fails, however, it falls, by way of obsolescence, into the category of non-canonical texts.

With the exception of a few works of perennially enduring canonicity (the Bible, Homer, Dante, Shakespeare), a gravitational downward pull seems to draw most texts towards the limbo of non-canonical (unread or unappreciated) texts. The speed and trajectory of that process is unpredictable and depends on recurring and complex ‘appeal’ moments.

There is, however, an escape from non-canonicity: texts may, after longer or shorter periods of obscolescence or oblivion, gain fresh appeal and re-enter the reservoir of available reading supply by means of rediscovery. Form that moment onwards, the cycle begins afresh: the rediscovery may be more or less lasting or successful, depending, once again, on the complexities of what constitutes, among different readers and in different generations, literary appeal.

The flowchart illustrates three things.

[1] Endurance of canonicity and Rediscovery (the thick, dotted arrows) work in the opposite direction (upward in this chart) from the processes of success, failure or obsolescence (downward in this chart). These latter processes are the ones usually foregrounded in PLAI-oriented literary histories; conversely, endurance and rediscovery come to the fore in the history of reading, reception and recycling rather than of literary production.

[2] It is in these recycling processes of Endurance and Rediscovery that anthologies play their specific role.

[3] The three sections of the flowchart gathered in grey rectangles are each of them, in principle, monolingual and contain processes within a reading public united by a shared language. The process of success may cross a linguistic frontier (translations), as well as the processes of obsolescence and failure (unread works being unread in any language; and obsolescence possibly occurring as a result of language death). Crucially, the process of Rediscovery can cross linguistic borders and ensure texts’ passage from one language towards a different-language audience. (The same holds for the Endurance process: canonicity can spread or radiate from one language into another, as the cases of Flann O’Brien and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill show.) This seems particularly suggestive for multi-language literary systems like Ireland.
published titles:
