

## Foreword

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*Joe Cleary*

Driving across Ireland in the summer of 2017 one might be forgiven for asking “Ireland: Crisis? What crisis?” To traverse, let us say, a rough X by taking a route northeastward from Dingle to Belfast and then south-eastward from Donegal to Wexford would be to embark on a journey from rugged coastal mountainscapes and isolated beaches over drumlin country and on through the lakelands and boglands of the midlands into green rolling meadows of grassland and grainland, winding en route through a variety of villages and towns, many steeped in histories stretching back to the Middle Ages. For anyone who grew up here, to take such a drive is to notice how visibly the housing stock improved during the economic boom of the Celtic Tiger years that ran from the 1990s through to the mid-2000s. The rural houses, many new, are larger and more imposing than they were before, and almost every major town and city expanded significantly in that period. Some of these recent rural and urban developments are wretchedly planned, but nevertheless nearly every town, village, or rural parish features a well-maintained Catholic and Protestant church, trim sports grounds, and impressive community halls, not to mention res-

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taurants, cafés, and pubs. These suggest levels of community vitality that the more devastated parts of the world cannot sustain and that many more prosperous capitalist societies might envy.

To travel the island in summer 2017 would be to notice, too, that the tourist coaches are bustling up and down the motorways once again, visitors from the United States, where the neoliberal crisis was triggered, and from Germany, the state in the European Union that has benefited most from that crisis, conspicuous among them. And in the larger coastal cities of Dublin, Galway, and Cork, the ribbons of “To Let” signs, which had spread like an infestation after 2008, have finally begun to recede, and new developments are under way. In these cities, the rebooting of enterprise and employment, housing prices, and general consumption, the supposedly telltale signs of “recovery,” are now most obvious. Ireland, our traveler might conclude, has displayed a robust ability to weather a devastating global crisis and can still claim to be a rather remarkable place in which to live.

Those first impressions would not be delusional, but they would be partial and ultimately misleading. From a high of over 14 percent in 2012, unemployment had fallen to 8 percent by April 2017, a remarkable turn-about however measured. Against this backdrop, the narrative of a people chastened by bitter experience but willing to make the necessary sacrifices to overcome the regrettable disasters of a global economy, disasters locally compounded by the “miscalculations” of developers, bankers, and politicians, has become one of the “just so” stories of official Ireland; it is a tale well burnished by the ruling parties and chorused by large sections of the media and many foreign commentators. What that narrative airbrushes, and what any drive-by view of the island must also surely miss, are the devastating hidden injuries and sometimes jagged wounds of the crisis. The villages, towns, and cities of Ireland look serene in summer sunshine, but the hospital services, which had already been creaking during the boom and have been much more seriously run down since the crash, are now sustained only by ever-more-desperate levels of crisis management. The educational system, once almost entirely public and state-funded, but already becoming steadily more two-tiered and privatized during the boom, has also been bludgeoned: the employment conditions of teachers, newer entrants most especially, have seriously worsened, and class sizes have escalated. Childcare, a provision never developed by the Irish state as it had been in many continental European societies, had crippled many working couples even during the boom; at the start of 2015, Central Statistics Office figures indicated that the number of children in the Republic of Ire-

land living in consistent poverty, meaning experiencing regular deprivation of basic necessities, had risen to 12 percent, up from the already high figure of 6 percent registered in the crash year of 2008. And as housing prices have begun to soar again in the larger cities to reach or even surpass pre-crisis levels, mortgage arrears, household debt, and rent squeeze continue to exact their toll, the most obvious manifestation of which is a prolonged crisis of homelessness. Despite renewed prosperity for some in the Republic, net homeless numbers have climbed consistently in recent years, with 7,680 people numbered as homeless in summer 2017, and approximately 102,711 mortgages in arrears, even though there were also some 180,000 dwellings listed as vacant in the state in the same period.

For their part, the chapels and cathedrals may be well kept, but the Roman Catholic majority church especially had been rocked by a seemingly never-ending saga of scandals during the boom decades. The Catholic clergy's capacity to address those crises, let alone meaningfully to speak to the hardships inflicted by the global capitalist crisis, has been unimpressive. Today, the older faithful generally hang on to religious practice despite the church hierarchy rather than because of its leadership; the young vote with their feet and are increasingly indifferent. However, the young have voted with their feet not only with regard to the church but also to the state and political system: a massive 450,000 people emigrated from Ireland since the crash, most of the departing following routes taken by Irish migrants for over several centuries to England, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Hailed during the boom as intrepid "Young Europeans" or "Tiger Cubs" equipped with high education levels and a social confidence that previous emigrant generations had supposedly lacked, the post-2008 emigrants have little for which to thank their own country or the European Union. Indeed, one of the most remarkable things about the 2008 crash was how quickly the Irish airports became, as once the shipping ports had been, the safety valves for a distressed society. If today those airports are thronged with incoming tourists attracted to Ireland by the weakness of the euro against the dollar and sterling, that footfall has been further quickened by emigrants making hasty visits home when they can or by their parents traveling outward to visit their children in their host societies.

The apathy of Irish people in the aftermath of the 2008 crash soon became so acute that the international press turned Irish quiescence into a kind of guessing game, wondering why the Irish, in such obvious contrast to the Greeks or the Spanish, were so meekly accepting the austeri-

ties imposed on them by the Troika (comprised of International Monetary Fund, European Central Bank, and European Commission officials) that took charge of the economy of the Republic of Ireland in 2010. That quiescence may have been a godsend for the political establishment in the short term, and some national leaders even made it their boast that they could implement fiscal and other “disciplines” that would never be tolerated in Germany, the Netherlands, or Norway, the states most loudly committed to financially frackling the so-called PIG peripheries (Portugal, Ireland, Greece) of the European Union. But in the longer term, no republic worth the name can make an apathetic and submissive population its boast. The churches, community halls, and sports fields of Ireland’s towns and villages may signify high levels of social vitality and local can-do-ism, but the sullen torpidity that followed the crash bespoke a country in which something had long been rotten in civil society, the trade unions, the media, and in the intellectual and cultural spheres more generally. Matters were not helped by the fact that the Labour Party, which commanded its highest-ever vote (just under 20 percent) in the general elections of 2011, opted not to build an out-of-government coalition with other left-wing or left-leaning parties, whose overall vote had also soared, but decided instead to coalesce in government with Fine Gael, now the most openly neoliberal party in the Irish Republic. As the overwhelming popular endorsement in the Republic of Ireland for the 2015 constitutional referendum to extend marriage rights to same-sex couples indicated, what distinguished Ireland from Greece and Spain and elsewhere was not some hidebound fatalism or innate conservatism but rather the fact that an incipient left-wing surge of national protest was choked off at birth by a Labour Party displaying the same tame adherence to neoliberal “realism” now practiced by social democratic parties everywhere in Europe.

In April 2016, the Irish Republic celebrated the centenary anniversary of Easter 1916: a small and poorly supported insurrection concentrated in Dublin in what appeared back then, too, a beaten country, though one also enjoying an “economic recovery” thanks to the rising prices for agricultural products stimulated by World War I. That rising was put down brutally by a British military not willing to brook insurrection in its own backyard while it was waging war in Europe. Ireland in 1916, of course, was a heavily militarized island because both unionists and nationalists had been arming since April 1914 to show their determination to prevent or insist on Home Rule; when the European war started, their respective volunteer movements vied to outbid each other in demonstrations of loyalty to the British

cause to secure their mutually irreconcilable aims. In 2016, in contrast, the island was much more demilitarized. The 1998 Good Friday Agreement marked the beginning of a consociational power-sharing system in Northern Ireland and was followed by the decommissioning of Provisional Irish Republican Army weapons in 2005 and by that of the loyalist paramilitary organizations more slowly and partially over the following decade. At the time of writing, the country is still marking a “decade of centenaries” commemorating the eventful period between the campaign for Home Rule in 1912 and the foundation of the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland in the years 1920–22. However, in the aftermath of the United Kingdom’s Brexit Referendum of 2016, which provided for Great Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union, the later phases of the “decade of commemorations” in Northern Ireland threaten to summon uneasy specters. Thanks to Brexit and to longer-term changing demographics in Northern Ireland, questions about “national unity” are back on the political agenda again, and now at a time when the established formations of party politics in Ireland, once obdurate and predictable, are fragmenting and realigning. When the United Kingdom leaves the European Union, will the old “hard” border between the Republic and Northern Ireland be restored and, if so, with what consequences? Or will the United Kingdom be convulsed by the exit process, and will Scotland and Northern Ireland be compelled to rethink their relationship to Britain and Europe in that new context?

The articles in this issue were written in 2015, when Ireland was still sunk in the grimmer phases of Celtic Tiger collapse; they will appear in print just as the island marks the completion of the first decade of that crisis and the first centenary of the start of the Irish War of Independence. The concurrence of those two anniversaries will require extended reflection in an island where the whole idea of national sovereignty has been contentious for centuries and in a Republic that has so recently known what it means effectively to cede sovereignty to an unelected Troika of international institutions. Academic publishing is not journalism, and the articles collected here cannot hope to be completely current in any obvious way, especially in a world where everything from the fate of the euro or even that of the European Union are far from clear and when Ireland’s relationships to the United Kingdom, not to mention to a turbulent Trump-era United States, are so uncommonly unsettled. The primary purpose of this collection is not to offer up-to-the minute reports on Ireland today; its object is to convey something of the variegated nature of the long-running neoliberal crisis that is unfolding with such wild economic swings and swerves in recent decades. The

issue does not ignore the directly economic or political causes and consequences of that neoliberal crisis, something Irish cultural criticism too often does to its own detriment. But neither does it conceive of the crisis only in the econometric and narrowly political manner favored by mass media and “experts.” As will be evident in the pages that follow, the crisis of neoliberalism was already acute in the Celtic Tiger boom era, and the spheres of religion, culture, literature, ideas, and civic society were no more immune to its ravages than were those of banking or building. Thus, while the opening articles by Terrence McDonough and Daniel Finn offer critical overviews of the economic and political causes and consequences of what is now called “the crisis,” several articles, especially those by Seamus Deane, Kevin Whelan, and Heather Laird, offer longer-view accounts of Irish republican political and intellectual history: a history of consistent struggle not just against stronger forces and often impossible odds but also against republicanism’s own inherited intellectual shortcomings and ideological limits. The essays by Joe Cleary, Gail McConnell, and Mary McGlynn deal mainly with poetry and the novel and examine how Irish literary production has been reshaped by several decades of neoliberalism. The pieces by Willa Murphy and Michael Cronin evaluate religious and sexual transformations in contemporary Ireland, phenomena that matter as much perhaps to the quality or poverty of everyday Irish life as the fortunes of the euro or the level of the national deficit.

The neoliberal value system that brought about the 2008 crisis has been widely discredited in Ireland and elsewhere, and the attempt to refurbish it in the wake of such desperate collapse as though the whole crisis were only some minor interruption to capitalist business as normal smacks as much of desperation as of resilience. If this volume can play some very small part in the wider intellectual struggle now under way across Europe to assess the damage inflicted by that crisis and to underscore the need in Ireland and beyond to find alternatives to neoliberalism, its authors will have reason to be pleased and to be even more grateful to the editorial collective of *boundary 2*, who encouraged the undertaking and supported its completion.

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