

MATTHEW CAMPBELL, ed., *Irish Literature in Transition, 1830–1880*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. xiv + 326. \$126.

This collection on Irish literature in the middle nineteenth century is part of a six-volume series overseen by Claire Connolly (University College Cork) and Marjorie Howes (Boston College). While organized historically, the series looks to revise previous schemes of periodization, which it cautions have tended to cram literary production into “the narrow channels of political history” (p. xi). Volume 3 of the series, edited by Matthew Campbell (University of York), covers the years 1830 to 1880; per the design of the series as a whole, its choice of period boundaries throws down a significant challenge to previous ways of drawing literary timelines. While the volume gives due weight to the Great Famine (1845–50), its period markers implicitly downplay the disaster as a literary historical marker, as well as conventional ideas of a “Victorian” or “Nineteenth-Century” epoch in Irish literature. Connolly and Howes in their “Series Preface” explain why they see the need to rethink all this. While it has become a truism for scholarship on Ireland to talk about a “close relationship between literature and history,” they argue that “the field has yet to develop a sufficiently dynamic sense of that relationship” (p. xi). This is a bracing challenge, asking us to revisit basic theoretical and methodological premises in a way that resonates with a broad range of critical movements in the past decade. *Irish Literature in Transition, 1830–1880* does not take up this challenge in any systematic way, and so it does not really justify its boundary dates nor make clear what it means to think of Irish literature as an object “in transition.” Many of its chapters are well worth the attention of researchers and students, but they will need to navigate past the book’s significant limitations to get there.

Campbell’s introduction (for some reason it’s just called “Chapter 1”) tries to lay out the critical problem that the volume is seeking to address, at one point referring to “the difficulty for Irish studies of thinking about Ireland as a participant in the story of the Victorian United Kingdom or the expanding British Empire” (p. 5). So far so good. One can debate the claim that Irish Studies has had “difficulty” with these topics, given that lots of work is oriented toward them, but the problem as Campbell sees it is clear. At this point, though, he does not take us into the problem, does not analyze what is wrong with these rubrics, nor offer an alternative framing for Ireland in the mid-nineteenth-century world. Leaving the matter here,

with this tentative nod toward a complex critical literature, makes the book's aims and its organizing principles somewhat unstable. Readers who bridled at the glancing mention of empire above will find themselves further discomforted by a serious misreading of Frantz Fanon on the next page (p. 7). There is a kind of "handle with tongs" attitude toward the colonialism question in these passages, and this might suggest that the book's purpose is to usher Irish literature into the era of post-critique, to bend the arc of Irish Studies toward the reparative turn. But that doesn't describe the subsequent chapters in any consistent way. And in a more basic sense as well, the book's intended purpose is hard to pin down. Its chapters are more detailed than what you would expect in a handbook for general readers, but most lack the bibliographical markers that would make them useful to graduate students or others looking for a guide to the critical literature.

For all these reasons the book is likely to puzzle scholars of nineteenth-century literature, maybe especially those working in the North American context. In the Trump and Covid eras, in the period of a racial reckoning and a violent backlash against it, critics have more and more embraced the call to "undiscipline" their work, to rethink the civilizational rhetorics that shaped our received ideas of the literary and the human (see Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong, "Undisciplining Victorian Studies," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 10 July 2020). While Campbell's volume points toward the need to question period and national boundaries, it mostly treats these deeper conceptual categories as unproblematic or irrelevant. All this is unfortunate, since it puts this volume—one aimed toward a major theoretical reappraisal—at cross purposes with the current movement to reassess the discipline of literary studies itself.

None of this changes the fact that the book's chapters at their best offer approachable and at the same time provocative snapshots of major figures, genres, and trends. Many provide new takes by experts on specific areas of nineteenth-century Irish writing and publishing. One of the volume's strengths is its attention in many places to poetry, and Norman Vance's flagship chapter deals as sensitively with meter, music, and intertext as it does with audience and sociological context. Also excellent is Nicholas Wolf's chapter on writing in the Irish language. If most of the pieces here lack the bibliographical depth to function as guides to a scholarly field, Wolf's is an exception, describing how different generations of scholars have approached this body of texts and how the current view is changing. These

chapters by Vance and Wolf are essentially surveys of broad areas, but the book also features much more tightly focused studies. C oil n Parsons’s chapter on the Ordnance Survey of 1824–42 makes a case for the cultural significance of this cartographical project. Colin Barr’s chapter, “Newman’s Irish University,” moves to recenter John Henry Newman’s thinking on post-secondary education within the Irish and Catholic context that gave rise to it. Parsons and Barr have both published recent books on these subjects, and so their chapters make sharp points supported by their research.

Other chapters are satisfying and useful in a different way, offering perspectives from accomplished scholars surveying adjacent or overlapping fields. Melissa Fegan, who has published widely on literature and the Great Famine, looks at Young Ireland, a seminal movement of cultural nationalism in the 1840s whose influence relied on a network of reading rooms across the country. John McCourt, author of well-known studies of both James Joyce and Anthony Trollope, reflects on Irish matters in the work of Matthew Arnold, Trollope, and William Makepeace Thackeray. Peter D. O’Neill, author of the important *Famine Irish and the American Racial State* (New York: Routledge, 2017), turns here to the Irish American novel, emphasizing both its defensive counters to American anti-Catholicism as well as its broader role in “US nation-building” (p. 181).

I cannot detail all the useful chapters in *Irish Literature in Transition, 1830–1880*, but one of its strongest is Rapha el Ingelbien’s on fiction. The Irish novel in this period has perhaps received more attention from recent critics than other genres or types, but the result has been contentious and noisy, with scholars who aim at recovery, recuperation, and canon building taking often invidious aim at those focused on questions of colonialism, race, and power. Ingelbien perceives the signal through the noise, quoting deftly from scholars whose names one rarely finds cited on the same page. The result is a careful reassessment of the prominent Gothic features of the period’s fiction in connection with the issue of realism. At a moment when realism as a concept and a disciplinary formation is undergoing a significant critical overhaul, it is a productive contribution to the debate and an emblem of what these chapters offer.

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