

# *Reply to “‘Oh This Division of Allegiance!’ Being Both Irish and British?”*

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**Abstract:** *The author responds to Elizabeth Malcolm’s critique to the book The Literature of the Irish in Britain: Autobiography and Memoir, 1725-2001. Harte reflects upon the process of making an anthology and points out the challenging aspects of his research considering the constitutive complexity of autobiographical works when they are taken as historical sources.*

**Keywords:** *the Irish in Britain; autobiography; memoir.*

The act of putting together any anthology is both daunting and invigorating. It brings with it a host of expectations and limitations and the end products frequently provoke combative responses that sometimes escalate into all-out critical warfare. Irish literary scholars know this only too well. The publication in 1991 of the three-volume *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, under the general editorship of Seamus Deane, polarized the world of Irish letters to an unprecedented extent. Feminist critics attacked it for its serious under-representation of female authors, whereas revisionist-minded critics resented its conscription of Northern Irish Protestant writing into an expanded Irish literary canon, which they read as evidence of Deane’s republican irredentism. In the ensuing mêlée, many lost sight of the superb scholarship that underpinned the *Anthology’s* recuperative and reintegrative mission. As debates about the work’s merits and blind spots continued to be rehearsed in various fora, two additional volumes were commissioned, each collectively edited by Ireland’s foremost female scholars and historians. Published in 2002, they were exclusively devoted to Irish women’s writings and traditions and set a new bar for anthological excellence, though this did not prevent some fault-finding reviewers still having their say (see Thompson for a useful overview of the *Anthology’s* reception).

Needless to say, my own anthological gesture is much more modest in scale and ambition than that of Deane and his distinguished co-editors, and yet we do have one central motive in common: the desire to fill a critical vacancy in scholarship. In some ways, the challenges that faced me when I embarked on the research for *The Literature*

*of the Irish in Britain* were starker than those that confronted the Field Day editors, since, as Deane acknowledges in his General Introduction to the first volume of the *Anthology*, they did at least have an existing literary canon to dismantle and rebuild. I, by contrast, encountered blankness when I first cast around for a critical model or bibliographical guide to the literary history of Irish migrants in Britain. Not only was the terrain unmapped, but there appeared to be a settled consensus that the Irish in Britain were not the writing type. It was as if Harry Carney had spoken for all migrants when he muttered, “None of us is goin’ writing books of memories later” in *A Whistle in the Dark* (1961), Tom Murphy’s electrifying play about an uprooted Mayo family in 1950s Coventry. This was evidently a view shared by novelist Joseph O’Connor, spokesman for the so-called “Ryanair generation” of Irish writers in 1990s London, whose observation that “At the heart of the Irish emigrant experience there is a caution, a refusal to speak, a fear of the word,” was one of the factors that spurred me to investigate further.

And so my fitful quest for material began, though it was hardly systematic. In my introduction to my book I use the Deanean analogy of reading in the dark to explain the intertwined feelings of excitement and anxiety the search for sources provoked in me, and the lingering worry that I had overlooked an obscure gem. Reading Elizabeth Malcolm’s review of *The Literature of the Irish in Britain* revived such anxieties, especially when I read her criticism of my coverage of the 1700s and her list of eighteenth-century authors whose work is omitted from my book. The primary reason for the non-appearance of writers such as Swift, Steele and Goldsmith is quite simply that they did not produce a non-fiction account of their life’s events in England, though that shouldn’t necessarily surprise us, since the word “autobiography” did not enter the English language until 1797. But even if they had done so, it may not have met one of my key selection criteria, since to be considered for inclusion it was not enough for an Irish man or woman in England, Scotland or Wales, however eminent or esteemed, to have written an autobiographical narrative of whatever length or form. What piqued my interest were those migrants who produced experientially rich autobiographical accounts of what it *felt* like to be an Irish person in Britain in a certain time and place, those who managed to express their individual ipseity through an intimate form of social and personal life writing. Raymond Williams claimed that the most difficult thing to grasp when studying any historical epoch is the “felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time: a sense of the ways in which particular activities combined into a way of thinking and living.” It is this “felt sense” that I was continually drawn to as I sifted through the works I read, and I readily concede that this made it more likely from the start that works from the post-1800 period would outnumber those from the 1700s, and so it proved.

As for authors such as Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Lady Morgan and Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa, all three made it on to my longlist but, like many of the Fenian memoirists Elizabeth Malcolm mentions (whose work constitutes a subgenre in its own right), their omission from the final list of contents ultimately came down to matters of aesthetic taste and interest and to considerations of compromise and balance. No

anthologist can hope to please all readers on these counts, though it has been gratifying to read the generous assessments of my book by reviewers such as Roy Foster, Fintan O'Toole, Enda Delaney and Mary Kenny, and to hear President Michael D. Higgins single out *The Literature of the Irish in Britain* as an example of how social scientists in particular might “use the narratives that have been given to us by the participants in migration [...] so that we may construct such an ethical version of our Irishness in the present time as is moral and authentic to our people and their lives as lived, suffered, and celebrated.” Like Patrick Crotty, compiler of the mammoth *Penguin Book of Irish Poetry* (2010), my editorial selections constitute “an attempt to represent rather than reproduce” the contents of a literary tradition, though I am not convinced that the autobiographical writings of the Irish in Britain amount to a discrete, unified tradition. The more of them I read, the more I realized that what I was dealing with was a series of individual responses to the experience and effects of migration by writers of very varied talents, agendas and *mentalités*, few of whom displayed any awareness of literary lineage or cultural continuity *as migrant writers*.

A host of other gaps and deficiencies also revealed themselves as my research developed, from the relative paucity of works by female and Protestant migrants to the marked disparities in literary quality that the assembled materials laid bare. If I could do little about the former, I could – and did – give space to migrant voices that had long ago been lost in the fogs of history. As a consequence, authors one might reasonably expect to find in the book – Oscar Wilde, say, or Brendan Behan – were in the end edged out by what I considered to be the more beguiling testimonies of obscure figures such as Tom Barclay, Maureen Hamish and William Hammond, about whom nothing is known apart from what they themselves chose to reveal in their self-narratives. Throughout, I had to be mindful of the fact that I was, by definition, dealing with the first-person accounts of an exceptional minority of migrants, those who had the desire, the determination, the resources and the ability to leave a written record of their experiences and impressions. The temptation to use this slender seam of literature as a basis for generalizations about “the Irish migrant experience” had to be resisted as much as possible, therefore, even when the writers themselves claimed to be speaking on behalf of a silent majority.

But perhaps the most challenging aspect of my research was the task of reconciling the tension between my desire to illustrate the multi-layered social realities and changing self-perceptions of Irish migrants in Britain across many generations with the need to acknowledge and respect the inherent limitations of autobiography as a documentary form – limitations that are of course attractions from a literary historian’s perspective. This is a tension that Elizabeth Malcolm is alert to in her assessment of my book, as evidenced by her references to the anthology being composed of “exercises in memory” and “exercises in imagination,” even though many of my subjects issue categorical truth claims in their works. The status of autobiographical works as historical sources has long troubled historians of a certain stripe, since autobiography is a subjective rather than an empirical form in which autobiographical truth and historical fact uneasily

cohabit. Every autobiography, even one that professes unwavering fidelity to the world of biographical reference beyond the text, sustains an intricate interplay of factual and fictive elements. The process of autobiographical recall is endlessly complex and memory's protean qualities make the boundary between recollection and imagination indeterminate and unpoliceable. And yet, as G. Thomas Courser points out in his recent study of the memoir genre, for a piece of life writing to engage us fully, it needs to have some degree of veracity, however compromised by the selectivity and fallibility of memory. The truth of Mary Warnock's observation – "To create a story, both memory and imagination must be deployed, and autobiography is the place where, more than any other, their functions overlap" – is borne out by many of the autobiographers in my book, including W. B. Yeats, who prefaced his *Reveries Over Childhood and Youth* (1916) with a disclaimer that reminds us of how closely memory and forgetting are intertwined: "I have changed nothing to my knowledge; and yet it must be that I have changed many things without my knowledge; for I am writing after many years and have consulted neither friend, not letter, nor old newspaper, and describe what comes oftenest into my memory."

Yeats is an instructive guide to the complex and changing relationship between memory and subjectivity in the migrant imagination, which is, I think, one of the governing themes of my book. Yeats's autobiographical writings not only offer insights into how the process of writing mediates, and thereby alters, remembered experience. They also require the reader to keep time with a double chronology – the reanimated past and the temporal present – since Yeats continually manipulates his past experiences to create a coherent present self, the durability of which is forever in doubt. Yeats is not alone in his shuffling of temporally different layers of experience to forge a "presentable" self, though his self-reflexivity makes him a particularly compelling example. The past inextricably mingles with the present in so many of the works I came across in my research that they collectively call into question the very idea of "ordering" them according to any chronology. Nevertheless, a choice had to be made and Elizabeth Malcolm puts forward a valid case for making a different one. Yet in deciding to order my extracts in the way that I did, I was ever mindful of the tension between my desire for historical anchorage and the need to respect what Walter Benjamin calls "the mysterious work of remembrance – which is really the capacity for endless interpolations into what has been." This dialectic greatly preoccupied me throughout my research and seems to me to be as central to the conversation that takes place between history and autobiography as the interplay of fact and fiction.

That this is not a conversation that can ever be brought to a satisfactory close need not dishearten us. The rewards of reading any collection of autobiographical texts are manifold and include not only the satisfaction that comes from "being allowed *inside* the experience of another person who really lived and who tells about experiences which did in fact occur," as Jill Ker Conway puts it, but also the satisfaction of deepening our understanding of the partial and mediated nature of autobiographers' representation of

their experience. The truth is that every autobiography embodies *a* truth rather than *the* truth. That is perhaps why the genre continues to hold such fascination for so many of us.

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