

# *The Contemporary Irish Historical Novel, 2000-2016*

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**Abstract:** *My research aims at building a study of the contemporary Irish historical novel, contemplating works published between 2000 and 2016. The corpus consists of novels by celebrated authors such as Joseph O'Connor, Sebastian Barry, Nuala O'Connor, Jamie O'Neill, Mary Morrissy, and Lia Mills. The study aims at demonstrating that contemporary novels have moved away from the Walter Scott's model, representing not only past national struggles but also transnational historical relations between Ireland and the United States. This article will discuss how contemporary Irish historical novels intertwine the past and the present by critically examining past and contemporary social, political, cultural, and literary issues, such as gender, social and racial discrimination, and emigration.*

**Keywords:** *the Irish Historical Novel; Irish History; Literary Theory; Fiction.*

Eve Patten (2006) contends that the historical novel has acquired a relevant position in the Irish canon. This statement seems paradoxical if the lack of critical studies on the genre in Ireland is considered. If on the one hand the genre has become increasingly popular, profound studies on the formal and thematic specificities of the Irish historical novel are scarce. The only book dedicated exclusively to the Irish historical novel is James Cahalan's *Great Hatred, Little Room: the Irish Historical Novel*, published in 1983, which examines works from the nineteenth century to the 1970s. Since then, critics have mentioned the genre in articles and book chapters often as a secondary aspect of Irish contemporary novels. Cahalan's broad research selected works published until 1979 and is already dated. The difficulties in finding theoretical analyses of such a popular literary genre demonstrate the relevance of a new study which contemplates contemporary novels. This research aims at filling this gap. The Irish historical novel has distanced itself from the classical model of Walter Scott, experimenting with form and content. Geórg Lukács (1955; 2011) theorizes that the Scottian historical novel portrays the historical crises of an epoch (15). In his view, the hero of the historical novel is a non-talented "middle" citizen who represents confrontational historical forces. Renowned historical characters are not as important as the hero; this, according to the Hungarian

critic, confirms that Scott sees the common people as the protagonists of history (37-40). Based on Lukács's theory, Cahalan (1983) defines the Irish historical novel as

[a work] dealing with political events in modern Irish history prior to the author's own experience – usually a major upheaval or revolution such as the Jacobite-Williamite War, the Penal Age, the 1789 rising, the Famine, the Land War, the 1913 Dublin Lockout, the Easter Rising of 1916 and the subsequent wars (XIII).

Cahalan's selection of historical novels is guided by the criterion of works in which "the Irish writer returns to a major national crisis prior to his own experience in order to recreate the past and make sense of his own heritage" (Cahalan 1983, XII). In other words, Cahalan's study only selected historical novels whose center was a revolution or a critical historical event distant from the author's experience. He contends that the Irish historical novel initially imitated the Scottian model and maintained most of its characteristics throughout the twentieth century. Thus, for Cahalan the Irish historical novel until the 1970s is essentially the traditional novel of Scott with a few modifications.

We find that Cahalan does not consider transformations in the classical historical novel since the mid-nineteenth century. Elisabeth Wesseling (1990) argues that the Scottian formula gradually lost popularity in the Victorian period (1837-1901), when shifts in fiction and historiography influenced the historical novel. With Scott, the interweaving of literature and history was intended at the construction of the national identity (Anderson 2007. 212-13), but in the Victorian era the debates on the scientific character of history culminated in the separation of history and literature, contributing to the fall in popularity of the historical novel (Wesseling 56-7). In early twentieth-century, modernism complicated the debate over the representation of history, challenging the possibility of portraying reality in an objective way. The twentieth-century "linguistic turn" in historiography took the debate further; Hayden White in *Metahistory* (1973) writes that the literary and the historical discourses are of the same order: they are "[...] verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than with those in the sciences" (White 82). These debates on historiography and literature contributed to the return of the historical novel in different forms: the postmodernist historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon, 1988), the autofiction, the fictional biography, and the historical fantasy, to mention a few.

The Irish historical novel could not have been immune to the changes cited above. In contrast to Cahalan's assertion that the Irish historical novel remained insular, i.e., dealing specifically with Irish themes, and following the Scottian model, this research argues that the contemporary Irish historical novel has distanced itself from Scott, engaging with different aesthetic, formal and thematic trends. Contemporary novels show interest in alternative perspectives on historical events, forgotten characters and transnational relations between Ireland and other destinations of the Irish diaspora.

Following this train of thought, the research suggests a definition of historical novel that comprises the diverse literary approaches to history in Ireland; the historical novel is a fictional narrative written in the present but set in a given historical period, offering a detailed and critical perspective of the period in question. The characters of the contemporary historical novel can be renowned or fictional figures, protagonists or secondary characters, heroes or anti-heroes. This investigation aims to demonstrate how the Irish historical novel is constituted and how it represents the past and its cultural, sociopolitical, and religious nuances. Its main hypothesis is that the relationship between aesthetic and historical elements in fictional narratives performs a critical examination of past and present, and history itself becomes a fictional character.

The popularity of the historical novel in Ireland today may reflect the “simultaneous temporalities” which David Lloyd discusses in his book *Irish Times* (2008). Writing on the allegedly anachronism in the Irish landscape, where modern buildings coexist with ancient ruins, Lloyd states that in Ireland modernity has not erased past traditions, but rather maintained practices which are incongruous with the capitalism. However, the past and present do not live in harmony in Ireland, causing memories to obstinately remain in the Irish psyche:

Both the invention of social formations and imaginaries that project temporal horizons and ethical frames that are out of kilter with modernity and in the displaced structures of memory that refuse to succumb to forgetting and moving on post-Famine Irish culture secretes a resistance to the obliterative tendencies of modernization. It does so, however, not by remaining fixed in the past, but by inhabiting a temporal dimension composed simultaneously of multiple and often incommensurable temporalities for which the terms “tradition” and “modernity” are only partial and certainly inadequate designations. Irish memory is at once the memory of modernity and its catastrophes and that of living otherwise (Lloyd 6).

Consequently, we contend that the contemporary historical novels are literary manifestations of the refusal to give in to modernity and moving on. The Irish historical novel in the twenty-first century displays a tendency to return to the past as an attempt to understand the present. The works studied in this project reveal that many past issues addressed in the novels, such as colonization, social inequality and racial, ethnic and gender violence remain unresolved in contemporary Ireland. All the novels selected for this study show the simultaneous temporalities at play.

The work is structured into two main thematic parts: the Irish Great Famine and diaspora and War and revolution. The first part approaches novels concerned with the literary representation of the Great Famine (1845-1852) and the Irish diaspora to the United States in the nineteenth-century: *Star of the Sea* (2002) and *Redemption Falls* (2007), by Joseph O’Connor (b. 1963); *Days Without End* (2016), by Sebastian Barry (b. 1955); and *Miss Emily* (2015), by Nuala Ní Chonchúir (b. 1970). The novels studied

in the second part are implicated in the representation of the 1916 Easter Rising and World War I: *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001), by Jamie O'Neill; *A Long Long Way* (2005), by Sebastian Barry; *The Rising of Bella Casey* (2013), by Mary Morrissy (b. 1957); and *Fallen* (2014), by Lia Mills. The choice of some of these novels was based on a survey conducted during my secondment at Trinity College, Dublin, as part of the SPeCTReSS (Social Performances of Cultural Trauma and the Rebuilding of Solid Sovereignties) project in 2014-2015; other titles have been added recently, given their thematic and formal relations which proved relevant to this research.

The literary works studied in this research explore issues of memory, cultural trauma, gender, and discourses of the nation. The first part will analyze the representation of the Famine in O'Connor's *Star of the Sea* as cultural trauma. The polyphonic and dialogic aspects of the novel, I argue, aim at offering diverse perspectives and establishing transnational and literary relations. The great wave of emigration during and after the Famine is the subject of the other three novels approached in the first part. The Irish participation in the Indian Wars and in the American Civil War (1861-1865) is the main theme of Barry's *Days Without End* and O'Connor's *Redemption Falls*. Here, I aim at exploring the Irish experience in the war as traumatic, given the representation of the Irish as perpetrators of violence against fellow Irishmen and the native peoples of the United States. Finally, Ní Chonchúir's *Miss Emily* explores the lives of the North-American poet Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) and her fictional Irish maid Ada Concannon. In this novel the issues of women and immigrant discourses are the main concern; the adaptation and assimilation of the Irish in the United States is shown as a complex process in which questions of gender, race, and religion play an important role.

The novels examined in the second part reveal different and often forgotten individual representations of national and continental conflicts. The Easter Rising interweaves with the Great War in two of the works studied: Barry's *A Long Long Way* and Mills' *Fallen*. Both works show how historical events affect the individual and how cultural memory plays a part in the contemporary assessments of the past. The protagonist of Barry's novel, William Dunne, joins the British Army in World War I and is caught up in Dublin during the Easter Rising. War and revolution also affect the life of the protagonist of *Fallen*, Katie Crilly, whose twin brother enlists in the British Army to fight for Ireland's freedom. *At Swim, Two Boys* intertwines the journey of self-discovery of two young men and the Easter Rising; Ireland in the novel is where the question of gender and national, political, and ideological affiliations affect all classes in the early twentieth-century. Lastly, Morrissy's *The Rising of Bella Casey* explores the forgotten life of the playwright Sean O'Casey's (1880-1964) sister Isabella; her metaphorical rising coincides with the Easter Rising, but unlike the famous revolution, Bella's life is forgotten by history books and by her own brother (who wrote that she died two years before the real date).

This Ph.D. research is challenging due to the vast corpus and different authors, forms, techniques, themes, and approaches to the relationship between literature and

history seen in the selected novels. Yet, such an effort of studying a critically neglected genre in Ireland may offer new insights on contemporary Irish fiction as a whole. By selecting four of the main Irish historical events, namely the Famine, the diaspora and the wars and revolution, this study aims at exploring how different discourses and narratives intertwine, thus discussing possible tendencies in Irish literature. We hope that the results of this research may shed light on the Irish historical novel and further studies may explore other themes and trends which are not contemplated in this project.

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