Modern Irish and Scottish Literature
To Guinevere, Niamh, Clodagh, and Séamus
Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Jacqueline Norton, Karen Raith, Ellie Collins, Emma Varley, Rob Wilkinson, and the rest of the team at Oxford University Press for all their hard work. I would also like to thank the three anonymous scholars who read this for OUP. Taing mhòr to Kate Mathis for reading and commenting on Chapter 2. Go raibh mìle maith agaibh to Anne Marie D’Arcy and Nicholas Allen for reading the manuscript at different stages and for providing valuable advice and suggestions. I would like to thank my friends and colleagues, particularly John McCourt, Willy Maley, Niall Whelehan, Shane Darcy (and the rest of the Darcy family in Limerick and Galway), Katherine Ebury, Paul Fagan, Euan Bain, Steven Archibald, Paul Fraser, Laura Pelaschi, Michelle Witen, Maria-Daniella Dick, Ronan Crowley, Brian Carahe, Lynne and Rob Taplin, Edel Hughes, Javier Santoyo, Chris Trigg, Kate Wakely-Mulroney, Barrie Sherwood, and Tamara Radak. Thanks also to my parents Harry and Judi and my sister Lucy. Thanks to the School of Humanities at Nanyang Technological University for allowing me to take a sabbatical to finish writing this and to Ng Kai for help with the bibliography. My biggest thanks go to my wife Guinevere and my children Séamus, Clodagh, and Niamh.


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Introduction
Ireland, Scotland, and Celticism

In *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922), W.B. Yeats tells of his encounters with the occultist and self-styled Scotsman Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers. Aside from his apparent gifts for prophecy and clairvoyance, Mathers was also an enthusiast for Scottish Highland culture, or certain visions of it. Mathers seems to have been a slightly prickly individual and on one occasion Yeats drew his ire by doubting the authenticity of James Macpherson’s *Ossian* poems:

> Once when I questioned [the authenticity of] Ossian, he got into a rage—what right had I to take sides with the English enemy?—and I found that for him the eighteenth-century controversy still raged. At night he would dress himself in Highland dress, and dance the sword dance, and his mind brooded upon the ramifications of clans and tartans. Yet I have at moments doubted whether he had seen the Highlands….²

Macpherson’s *Ossian*, the subject of the disagreement between the two men, is the basis of literary Celticism. *Ossian* is also a hugely important set of texts in the overall development of Irish and Scottish literature. The publication of Macpherson’s *Ossian*, beginning with *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and Translated from the Galic or Erse Language* in 1760, was a pivotal event in the development of the English-language literatures of Scotland and Ireland. In addition to being the work that

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¹ Mathers, a founder member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, was from London and was assigned the name Samuel Liddell at birth. However, he identified as Scottish and claimed, perhaps spuriously, Highland ancestry. According to Foster, Yeats ‘probably met Mathers in the Reading Room of the British Library after 1887’ (Foster, Yeats I, 104). Yeats and Mathers met on a number of occasions in Paris in the mid-1890s. It is not clear from *The Trembling of the Veil* when exactly the meeting described above took place, but it was probably in February 1894. See Finneran, 543.

² Yeats, *Collected Works III*, 257. The terms ‘Ossian’ and ‘Macpherson’s Ossian’ are used here to denote the totality of Macpherson’s Ossianic output, including *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland and Translated from the Galic or Erse Language* (1760); *Fingal, an Ancient Epic Poem in Six Books, together with Several Other Poems composed by Ossian, the Son of Fingal, translated from the Galic Language* (1761); and *Temora* (1763).
introduced the tone of Romanticism, Macpherson’s poems inspired and influenced countless Irish and Scottish texts over the following centuries (including works that were written as a reaction against them). While the Ossian controversy had largely died down by the nineteenth century—Mathers notwithstanding—literary Celticism has had a very long and varied existence. Mutated forms of Celticism survived beyond the era of Yeats and Mathers and well into the twentieth century. Varieties of Celticism also attracted key figures of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Irish and Scottish culture such as Sydney Owenson, Walter Scott, Augusta Gregory, Fiona Macleod, James Joyce, Hugh MacDiarmid, and Seamus Heaney. This book traces Irish and Scottish literary engagements with Celticism, from the era of Romanticism, through the Celtic Revival(s) and the Irish and Scottish Revivals more broadly, within Modernism, and into the contemporary era. An analysis of Irish and Scottish Celticisms is carried out here as part of a comparative study of the modern literatures of Ireland and Scotland.

Since Macpherson’s Ossian poems can be thought of as ‘belonging’ to both Ireland and Scotland (as Scottish texts but largely based on originally Irish stories), and since they also initiated literary Celticism, it makes sense to think about the development of writing in both countries during the modern period in relation to the central theme of the Celtic, while also considering the processes in which the literature of Scotland has influenced Irish writing and vice versa. This text offers such an examination, within the context of the relatively new field of Irish-Scottish studies. This discipline has developed in recent decades, especially after Scottish devolution and the peace process in the north of Ireland, alongside a devolved approach to the history and culture of the Atlantic archipelago and a movement away from Anglocentrism within historical and cultural studies. The work of historian J.G.A. Pocock, especially his text The Discovery of Islands, has been central to this new approach.

In The Discovery of Islands, Pocock suggests that ‘British history’ has in the past denoted nothing much more than “English history” with occasional transitory additions, adding that ‘there was, and still is, no “British history” in the sense of the self-authenticated history of a self-perpetuating polity or

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4 NB: This text refers to the Celtic Revivals of Ireland and Scotland (and hence uses the terms ‘Irish Celtic Revival’ and ‘Scottish Celtic Revival’ to differentiate between these two phenomena) as well as to the broader cultural revivals of the two nations (i.e. the Irish Revival and the Scottish Revival, with the latter including the ‘Scottish Literary Renaissance’). In both Ireland and Scotland, a Celtic-focused revival formed an initial stage of a larger cultural revival.
5 See Longley, 8.
6 Pocock, 77.
culture. The term must be used to denote a multiplicity of histories, written by or (more probably) written about a multiplicity of kingdoms and other provinces.\textsuperscript{7} Part of Pocock’s multiplicity of histories is his awareness of a ‘Celtic, oceanic and extra-European world’ to the west of England during the period of the consolidation of the Scottish kingdom.\textsuperscript{8} Within this Celtic world, there are particularly strong similarities between Scotland and Ireland, in the present day as in the ancient past. As Ray Ryan has noted,

Scotland and Ireland both have a Gaelic and English linguistic tradition (with Scots a third dimension in Scotland), a Catholic and Protestant sectarian conflict, urbanized centres, and benighted rural hinterlands; and linked to this last point, the creation of a mystique of Irishness and Scottishness traceable to these depopulated zones. In both countries, an Act of Union with the British state still remains contested.\textsuperscript{9}

Following the Roman era of European history, important links between Ireland and Scotland continued to develop in the Medieval period. As Murray Pittock reminds us, ‘until at least the twelfth century, “Scotus” was a term indicative of either Scots or Irish nationality’.\textsuperscript{10} The formation of the Scottish nation began with the crossing of an Irish group known to the Romans as the ‘Scoti’ and their gradual amalgamation with the indigenous Picts. During the Middle Ages, areas of Ireland and Scotland spoke closely related languages (Scottish Gaelic developed out of Old Irish and both are part of the Q-Celtic or Goidelic group of Celtic languages) and shared what we now refer to as early Irish literature, including the Fenian and Ulster Cycles. According to Edna Longley, ‘during the high bardic period (c. 1200–1600), literary

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 75.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 31. This Celtic world is ‘extra-European’ since the Roman empire did not ‘effectively penetrate to all the oceanic or Atlantic regions of the archipelago, and the second-largest island [was] not directly affected by Roman government’ (Ibid., 30).
\textsuperscript{9} Ryan, 10. See also: ‘Even on the most superficial examination, it [is] clear that both countries have been profoundly affected by a similar geography, by a Celtic heritage, and by a history of close political and economic links with England’ (Cullen and Smout, v). However, as Ryan notes, the Republic of Ireland is ‘a state that does not correspond with the historically defined nation’ while Scotland is currently a ‘stateless nation’ (Ryan, 12).
\textsuperscript{10} Pittock, \textit{Celtic Identity}, 15. See also: ‘in 1004…the Irish hero Brian Boru was described as “imperator Scotorum”. The Scots repaid this compliment by deriving their royal line from Irish roots: the Scottish crown’s descent from Irish kings, though less emphasized as the Middle Ages progressed, was an important indicator of difference from England and Wales, and indeed betokened a continuing consciousness of cultural alliance with Ireland: the Scottish kingdom was born of Irish immigration. When Bruce appealed to Irish leaders as representatives of “our common people”, “nostro nacio”, he was simply recognizing the continuing political and cultural significance of this fact’ (Pittock, \textit{Celtic Identity}, 15).
connection was constant: a “supra-national” learned class shared a common literary language and trained in the same schools. By the same token, the collapse of the Irish bardic order “deeply splintered” the Gaelic world.\(^{11}\) In the early modern period, Irish troops served in Scottish armies, powerful families held land in both countries, and large numbers of Irish students attended university at Glasgow and Edinburgh.\(^{12}\) Later, the plantation of Lowland Scots (and English people) into the north of Ireland in the seventeenth century created what Pocock has called a ‘settler nation’ and an ‘anti-nation’ within Ireland.\(^{13}\) In the post-Famine period, large-scale emigration went in the opposite direction, with Irish labourers seeking work in industrial centres such as Glasgow. As R.F. Foster has noted, ‘By 1851, 6.7 per cent of the entire Scottish population was Irish-born, a percentage that rose to over 18 per cent in Dundee and Glasgow’.\(^{14}\) In addition to mass emigration from Ireland, the Great Famine of 1845 to 1852 caused a steep decline in the Irish language. Gaelic faced similar deterioration in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, especially after the clearances of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Given the close historical and cultural links between Ireland and Scotland, it is unsurprising that the literatures of the two nations should be intertwined. As Ryan notes, Ireland and Scotland ‘share an oppressive relation to the English literary tradition which was at least partly responsible for the ideological conviction held by Pearse and Yeats, MacDiarmid and Scott, that a community existed that had to be recovered and restored’.\(^{15}\) Irish-Scottish literary connections have been studied in texts such as Ryan’s *Ireland and Scotland: Literature and Culture, State and Nation, 1966–2000* (2002), McIlvanney and Ryan’s edited collection *Ireland and Scotland: Culture and Society, 1700–2000* (2005), Murray Pittock’s *Scottish and Irish Romanticism* (2008), and Peter Mackay, Edna Longley, and Fran Brearton’s volume *Modern Irish and Scottish Poetry* (2011). As McIlvanney and Ryan comment in the introduction to their text,

Scotland – subject to so many of the same linguistic, religious, political and cultural pressures as Ireland, caught up in its own obsessive engagement with England and Britain, and marked both by a breach with its Gaelic past and a philosophical and economic modernization around

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\(^{11}\) Longley, 10.  
\(^{13}\) Pocock, 33.  
\(^{14}\) Foster, *Modern Ireland*, 368.  
\(^{15}\) Ryan, 10.
metropolitan markets – provides a compelling comparative context for Irish culture and society.\textsuperscript{16}

The literary links explored in the aforementioned texts, and in Irish-Scottish studies more broadly, are too numerous to be mentioned extensively here. However, some of the most important are the relationship between the traditional cultures of the Irish and Scottish Gaelic languages (the shared Fenian stories, for example),\textsuperscript{17} the connections between Irish and Scottish Jacobite poetry, the influence of Maria Edgeworth's regional novels on Walter Scott's historical fiction and national tales, Robert Burns' reception in the north of Ireland, Thomas Carlyle's impact on the development of the Irish Revival, and James Joyce's interest in Scottish history, literature, and philosophy. One of the most important and long-standing interfaces between the literary cultures of Ireland and Scotland is the discourse of Celticism. Since this discourse is important to both literary traditions, this book will study modern Irish and Scottish literature within the context of Celticism.

Within the Atlantic archipelago, there is a persistent idea that Ireland, Scotland, and Wales are qualitatively different to England, that they are inherently and permanently ‘Celtic’ in spite of modern realities, and that nations of the ‘Celtic Fringe’ (a term which places England at the centre and places the ‘Celtic nations’ at the periphery) share some vague spiritual or racial bond.\textsuperscript{18} As Barry Cunliffe writes in \textit{The Ancient Celts}, ‘The Celt as “other” living in the wild extremities of Atlantic Europe is a metaphor still very much alive today’.\textsuperscript{19}

The use of this term as a way to draw Ireland, Scotland, and Wales together happens despite a lack of evidence to suggest a racial link between the modern ‘Celtic nations’. Furthermore, no modern nation could be considered purely or predominantly Celtic in terms of everyday language, let alone

\textsuperscript{16} McIlvanney and Ryan, 13.
\textsuperscript{17} Fenian literature is ‘a versatile and long-lived tradition manifesting in a number of forms over the centuries, from medieval and early modern prose-sagas and poetry down to oral material collected in Ireland and Gaelic Scotland over the last two hundred years’ Williams, Mark, 199).
\textsuperscript{18} Of the nations of the ‘Celtic Fringe’ of the Atlantic archipelago, this book focuses on Ireland and Scotland in order to follow the development of a series of literary exchanges and connections that begins with the publication of Macpherson’s \textit{Ossian}. Also, many of the texts studied here—or sections of those texts—focus specifically on Irish-Scottish links (such as Sydney Owenson’s \textit{The Wild Irish Girl}, Hugh MacDiarmid’s \textit{To Circumjack Cencrastus} and \textit{In Memoriam James Joyce}, Seamus Heaney’s \textit{Sweeney Astray} and \textit{‘Sweeney Redivivus’} or were produced within a loose network of Irish and Scottish writers (such as the texts of Augusta Gregory and Fiona Macleod). Some of these texts include references to Wales (such as \textit{In Memoriam James Joyce}) but these are not as obviously foregrounded in the way that Irish-Scottish connections are.
\textsuperscript{19} Cunliffe, 22. Indeed, claims to Celtic ethnicity and identity also occur beyond Atlantic Europe in places like Italy and the USA and have, in recent years, been linked to far-right politics. See Hague et al.
through what James Joyce called ‘Celtic blood’. Indeed, there was never a single European ‘Celtic’ race even in ancient times. The notion that Ireland, Scotland, and Wales are essentially Celtic, and that they are part of a racial family, has strong connections with the supranational culture of Celticism, ‘a multi-genre, multinational phenomenon’ which dates back to the eighteenth century. George Watson has defined Celticism as an ‘ideological construction’ and ‘an attempt to create, re-create or assert a cultural identity for the people of Ireland, Scotland and Wales which will distinguish them from the majority inhabitants of the British Isles [sic], the English’. Celticism ‘may be generated internally; or imposed from the centre externally, as may be seen to this day in the common and contentious designation of these three nations as “the Celtic Fringe”’. In the ancient world, the first reference to the Celts appears in the work of the Greek geographer Hecataeus of Miletus in the sixth century BCE. In the fourth and third centuries BCE,

the Celtic stereotype was to acquire its familiar form. They were unrestrained, fearless warriors, irrationally brave in the first onslaught but prone to wild despair if the battle turned against them. Unpredictable and unreliable as allies, they could easily be aroused to battle fury but could quickly become too drunk or too paralysed by superstitious fear to fight. And above all they were barbarians: people of alien behaviour, cruel, and prone to such savagery as human sacrifice and even cannibalism.

In the later work of Poseidonius, a slightly different picture emerges. As Cunliffe has noted, in Poseidonius’ Histories the Celts were warlike and ‘impetuous’ but they also lived under the wise rule of the Druids who acted as philosophers and men of science. The term ‘Celt’ has also been used as a blanket term to cover tribes such as the Gauls and Britons mentioned in Roman documents. Eventually the Celts disappear—for a time—from

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20 OCPW, 115. ‘In March 2015, an article titled “The Fine-Scale Genetic Structure of the British Population” [showed that] there was no common genetic link between the supposed Celtic peoples of Britain and Ireland’ (De Barra, 13).
22 Watson, George, ‘Aspects’, 129.
23 Ibid., 129.
24 See Cunliffe, 2.
25 Cunliffe, 6.
26 Ibid., 11.
27 See Leerssen, 1. On the subject of the word ‘Celt’, Cunliffe observes that ‘Classical observers refer to the Continental Celts by a variety of names. The Roman historians writing of the migrations from north of the Alps to the Po valley and beyond called them Galli, and this tradition was followed by Polybius, to whom they were Galatae, a name also commonly used in other Greek sources. Most of the first-century BC writers, however, realized that these names were interchangeable with the Greek Keltoi and Latin Celtae’ (Cunliffe, 3). However, Rachel Pope has argued that ‘Archaeologists trained in the 1960s and 1970s [generalized]. Instead of working to understand texts historically/