



**Michael Pierson (ed.). *A History of Irish Working-Class Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, ISBN 9781107149687)**

**Liam Harte (ed.). *A History of Irish Autobiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, ISBN 9781107131446).**

**Muireann Leech**

Bodleian Library, University of Oxford

The potential importance of life-writing to Irish Studies has long been recognised, yet paradoxically has also been relatively neglected by scholars. W.B. Yeats, whose overpowering influence on Irish literature cannot be underestimated, was probably one of the first to overtly theorize the political uses of the personal voice in Irish nation building, pointing out that we viscerally encounter history through literature, and autobiographical literature in particular. In a letter to Katharine Tynan on the publication of her memoirs, *Twenty-Five Years: Reminiscences* (1913) Yeats asserts: “I have often felt that the influence of our movement on the generation immediately following us will largely depend on the way in which the personal history is written. It has always been so in Ireland” (586). As Liam Harte points out in his introduction to *Modern Irish Autobiography: Self, Nation and Society* (2007), the long tradition of Irish autobiographical texts, which grew even more extensive in the decades after Independence, has not been met with a commensurate level of academic interest. Yet, as the publication of these two collections attest, critical interest in Irish life-writing is undergoing an upsurge of interest, sparking debate about which voices are seen as representative and which voices are forgotten. The vitality of the various forms of life-writing in Ireland has continued to be assured by the manifold experimental approaches to rendering the self in literature. From James Joyce’s foundational autobiographical novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), to Sean O’Casey’s multi-volume, highly impressionistic semi-fictionalised autobiographies, to Samuel Beckett’s emotionally intense, intimate study of the writing self through eliminating memory and ego in his novels: life-writing has

been central to narratives of literary Ireland. However, this male-centric, modernist canon that scholars are so keen to examine occludes lesser known writers and narrative techniques and is thus only a fraction of the story, one that presents the Irish literary landscape as almost exclusively male, white, middle-class, and more interested in aesthetics over politics, form over content. *A History of Irish Autobiography*, the new collection of essays edited by Harte, and *A History of Irish Working-Class Writing*, edited by Michael Pierson, do much to correct this critical blind spot and add nuance, depth, and, above all, variation to the study of Irish life-writing.

Both collections of essays succeed in their aim of widening the canon, introducing readers to relatively unknown and little explored writings as well as reinvigorating debate and adding scholarly depth to more recognised texts. Roy Foster's argument in *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making it Up in Ireland* (2001) that the "elision of the personal and the national, the way history becomes a kind of scaled-up biography, and biography a microcosmic history, is a particularly Irish phenomenon" is supported by the plethora of Irish autobiographies that use the fight for national independence as a way to explore personal growth (xi). Yet, as Eamonn Hughes has previously pointed out, critical focus on national identity has tended to skew the 'canon' by emphasising sources (from the mainly male middle-class Catholics from the Republic of Ireland) that conform to certain expectations. These two new volumes of essays do much to investigate writing that falls outwith the lens of creating a national identity, whilst at the same time acknowledging that this is the major preoccupation in a vast amount of Irish literature. Both books, as their titles suggest, outline the history of a form of writing in Ireland, and yet both 'histories' use a different approach to exploring their subject. Both cover a dizzying array of texts and writers, at points tending to value quantity, but not necessarily at the expense of quality. This is especially true of the chapters in the *Working-Class Writing*—the breadth of texts is matched by an analytical depth, subtly interweaving sociopolitical and economic appraisals alongside surprisingly fresh literary analysis. This critical rigour is sometimes sacrificed in favour of survey-style chapters that attempt to bring as many autobiographical texts to the reader's attention in *A History of Irish Autobiography*. The Pierson collection tends to focus its attention on the twentieth-century whereas the chapters gathered by Harte cover a much broader period, but at the expense of theoretical and sociological approaches to the material.

As pointed out in Pierson's excellent introduction to the field in the opening chapter of *A History of Irish Working-Class Writing*, working-class writing, like life-writing, challenges easy categorisations of cultural hierarchy and literary genre. This collection of essays puts forward an alternate

way of understanding Irish writing that has often been forgotten or simply examined in isolation and not thought of as forming a tradition. For example, Frank Ferguson's chapter on the Ulster Weaver Poets reverses long held critical assumptions that these writers were all from a certain area and a certain period, finding that this tradition is more diverse both in terms of chronology and of subject matter, suggesting that the continuation of this tradition uncovers a hidden canon of Northern Irish working-class writing. This collection traces working-class expressions, arguing that taken together they represent "a troubling subterranean and repressed element in contemporary literature, theory, and culture" (36). The majority of chapters focus on the twentieth-century and cover a range of different literary genres, with life-writing and drama garnering the most scholarly attention throughout, perhaps indicating that forms of embodied art are the preferred working-class aesthetic. The realities of class divides and economic inequality challenged the earnestness and literary experimentation of early modernism; no genre exemplified this more than autobiography, with its insistence on the embodied reality of the characters portrayed within the narrative.

Pierse's collection demonstrates that life-writing holds an important position in working-class writing: from Andrew Carpenter's study of the centrality of the short autobiographical extracts from the gallows in the eighteenth century; to the nineteenth-century broadsides and folk songs explored by John Moulden; to the surprisingly touching testimonies of the British soldiers who fought the rebels during Easter 1916 in James Moran's chapter; to Tony Murray's analysis of the diasporic voices of Irish nurses in Britain, autobiographical vignettes abound in working-class writing. Almost inevitably, this collection starts with James Connolly: the first chapter by David Convery demonstrates the important position biographies of labour activists hold with regards to historicizing working-class writing and movements. The manifold forms of life-writing explored in this collection supports Claire Lynch's assertion in her chapter on working-class biographies that "autobiography might well be described as the pre-eminent form of literary expression for working-class people" (371). Fundamental to the autobiographical urge is the drive to share one's thoughts and memories with a larger public. Incorporated into this urge is the belief that what one has to say is significant and therefore one's perception of the self is as a representative individual. As Emmet O'Connor points out in his chapter on the autobiography of the Irish working class in *A History of Irish Autobiography* "the narrative act of placing oneself at the centre of events is an act of presumption and self-regards. It requires a measure of education, egotism and even arrogance (not to mention contacts with publishers), traits that were traditionally in shorter supply

among the working class than any other groups” (209). So, the use of the autobiographical voice in working-class writing is often accompanied by an ironic awareness of the limits of the efficacy of the mode. Key to working-class writing is its representationality and reflexivity (4). But as Piers warns, reading working-class texts as merely reflecting reality robs them of their subtlety, literary inventiveness, and power. Readers’ assumptions about the gritty realism of working-class writing is undercut by the writers’ subversion of generic expectations and use of meta-fictional narrative strategies: Paul Delaney’s chapter on early twentieth-century working-class fiction, for example, argues that Patrick MacGill’s *Children of the Dead End* (1914) confuses fiction and autobiography by mixing in realist fiction, social documentary, melodrama, life-writing, popular romance, and quest narrative, pointing to the difficulties of self-expression for working-class people. While *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (1914) includes aspects of the novel, pamphlet, working-class autobiography, political tract and prose satire. As this collection as a whole demonstrates, this aesthetic uncertainty is a keystone of much working-class writing. Adding to this uncertainty is the fact that many foundational Irish working-class texts, such as Tressell’s and MacGill’s, were often incorporated into British studies. Perhaps the reason for the importance of the autobiographical mode to working-class expression is because of this marginality and, hence, the exceptionality and unusualness of working-class writing within a mainly middle-class milieu. Indeed, John Brannigan’s argument that *Borstal Boy* (1958) is really the autobiographical story of a working-class boy imitating and re-imagining the literature he encounters in order to gain the cultural capital required to voice his own identity is persuasive.

Generic uncertainty, uncovering different layers of meaning, and literary and para-literary connection also feature strongly in the analysis of life-writing in *A History of Irish Autobiography*. There are several overlaps between the two collections, whilst the construction and emphasis of each is very different. Chapters that most obviously demonstrate these divergences and agreements are Emmet O’Connor’s chapter on ‘The Autobiography of the Irish Working Class’ and Claire Lynch’s contribution to both collections. The overarching presence of Sean O’Casey and Brendan Behan in Irish working-class literature is confirmed by O’Connor’s chapter in Harte and the Piers collection as a whole. An important theme within *A History of Irish Working-Class Literature* and O’Connor’s chapter is that there are different gradations within the Irish working-class, suggesting that there are several levels of economic and cultural impoverishment in Ireland (such as the difference between gombeen men—the unscrupulous middle-man who profited from the very poor through activities such as collecting rent and carrying out evictions—and

manual labourers, or women who do not have to pawn all their goods—‘hatties’—and those who habitually have to—‘shawlies’). This acute class awareness is not accompanied by a strong class consciousness. The selection of texts is very different within O’Connor’s chapter compared to the whole of the Pierse collection; an illustration of this is that O’Connor includes Brian and Dominic Behan, who are not even given a mention in Pierse’s book: this interesting variation nicely demonstrates that there is no complete ‘canon’. Indicative of the difference in approach between the two volumes is the fact that O’Connor’s chapter is more of a survey than a theoretical or sociological examination of the terms of the title. The advantage of this approach is the fact that more texts are covered, giving the reader a better understanding of the broad, ever-widening field, and the variations within the texts. The disadvantage is that it is difficult to fully appreciate the context in which these texts are produced. For example, O’Connor asserts that the Celtic Tiger Era saw the demise of the working-class as a useful designation; an idea that Eamonn Jordan thoughtfully interrogates and finds reductive in his riveting chapter on Celtic Tiger working-class drama in the Pierse collection.

Claire Lynch’s chapter in *A History of Irish Working-Class Writing* examines workers’ biography and argues that one must give parity of attention to the famous men and the anonymous hordes that make up the majority of working-class lives. This chapter demonstrates the fluidity of genre between biography, life-writing and autobiography, a concept that is repeatedly highlighted in both collections. As demonstrated by the slippery parameters of genre explored in Louise Coolahan’s and Elizabeth Grubgeld’s chapters on early autobiography in Harte’s book: covering petitions, depositions, letters, conversion narratives and autobiographical fragments, oral testimony, autobiographical fiction, travel writing, letters, diaries, court testimonies, military memoirs, private writing such as genealogies, cookbooks and work records. Echoing Pierse’s introduction, Lynch concludes that critics find it difficult to place working-class writers who do not conform to the documentary or testimony genre, citing the example that O’Casey’s autobiographies have garnered criticism for their overt literariness—he is a working-class writer who does not know his place, and thus avoids class voyeurism. Indeed, a major strength of this volume is the social analyses conducted alongside literary readings, showing how reading outside the national framework opens striking new ways of reading the fabric of the nation and literary expression. Lynch’s chapter in *A History of Irish Autobiography*, despite the title ‘Irish Life-Writing in the Digital Era’, is more about emigrant narrative in the digital age. The wise decision to include several chapters on diasporic voices enhances the usefulness of this collection to the student of Irish literature

and autobiography in general. As demonstrated by the Lynch chapter, there is sometimes a disparity between the title of a chapter and its main theme. This disconnect proves distracting in Matthew Kelly's analysis of nationalist writing, rather than, as the chapter title says, political autobiography. But at other points this is instructive, as with the positioning of Eoin O'Malley and Kevin Rafter's chapter on the memoirs of male politicians in Independent Ireland directly before Margaret O'Callaghan's chapter on female politicians. The chapter on male political memoirs covers a conventional array of texts from influential men in political power, whereas O'Callaghan's text selection operates on a totally different set of criteria. The fact that O'Callaghan argues that activists' memoirs are as valid a political text than cabinet members strengthens her case that we must "redefine the political in twentieth-century Ireland" in order to give full voice to a more radical politics (134). The emphasis on feminism and activism in this chapter sits uncomfortably against the previous chapter, challenging the reader to indeed think differently about politics, but it is also in danger of bifurcating genders. Included in O'Callaghan's chapter are little discussed but important women and writings, such as June Levine's literature, alongside nuanced readings of high profile figures, such as Mary Robinson, whose autobiography, O'Callaghan argues, surprisingly reinscribes patriarchal assumptions about Irish women's roles, with Robinson creating her persona as above-all caring for others over the self.

I personally found the penultimate chapter on Irish Celebrity Autobiography by Anthony P. McIntyre and Diane Negra the most illuminating, as it managed to trace the changing cultural landscape of modern Ireland through the perceived throw-away genre of celebrity autobiography. With persuasive and socially relevant readings of the significant metaphors/ meanings of celebrity narratives, this chapter cogently argues that "Irish celebrity autobiographies negotiate cultural boundaries, register social changes and exemplify shifting subjectivities in illuminating ways" (377). Through tracing the trends in Irish celebrity memoirs, McIntyre and Negra record a shift from social interaction and institutions towards a neoliberal, consumerist emphasis on the commodified individual as an entrepreneur.

The editorial decision to slyly position some chapters close to each other, allowing them to argue against each other and let critical difference stand, suggest that the collection is in a debate with itself as to how to position, categorise and include texts. Michael Cronin's chapter on travels outside Ireland, which explores the changing relationship Irish people have to their sense of national identity, is suggestive of the current lacunas that exist within Irish Studies. Although it is strange that Cronin

places Dervla Murphy's *A Place Apart* (1978) within this chapter, essentially envisaging Northern Ireland as 'abroad', a position that is questioned throughout the rest of the collection. Cronin's point that there could be "a danger in Irish cultural criticism whereby only certain forms of movement are privileged in analysis" is well made, and ironically demonstrated by the two chapters immediately following, by Laura P.Z. Izarra and James Silas Rogers, and Patrick Buckridge and Liam Harte, which privilege the very forms of movement—permanent emigration to Anglophone countries such as Britain, Australia, New Zealand and America—that Cronin warns against (313). Another interpretative difference that emerges across chapters is the disputed value of *The Autobiography of Maud Gonne: A Servant of the Queen* (1938). Matthew Kelly dismisses this text as demonstrating 'egomaniacal' traits, yet the male authors he examines escape this harsh judgment completely. This critical mistreatment is corrected by Nicholas Allen in his excellent chapter on the importance of life-writing to the Irish literary revival. Allen positions Gonne's text as an essential revivalist text, reading it to be as much about agency as it is about Ireland, thus uncovering Gonne's subtle feminist underpinnings.

The fact that these chapters separate often similar texts and bring together quite disparate texts suggests that the substrata of division are artificially chosen, sometimes occluding, sometimes making visible, the complex pattern of literary influence. Categorising autobiographies under one rubric seems naïve at best; some writings appear across several chapters, which leads one to conclude that it is difficult for the authors of individual chapters to keep within the narrow confines of their categorisations, although some categories are intentionally generous (autobiographical novel, rural life, Northern Irish autobiography, orality and life-writing). Having said that, the often surprising recasting and contrasting of texts—such as George O'Brien's reading of *Bowen's Court* (1929) as a 'memoir of Irish rural life', and Christina Hunt Mahony's pairing of writing by Irish travellers alongside Irish language life-writing and more traditionally 'literary' autobiographies—shows the multifaceted nature of these texts. Bríona Nic Dhiarmada voices a major concern of this collection when she argues that "while there is a certain critical usefulness in dividing life-writing into thematic subgenres, this can be undermined if we forget the porousness of the boundaries between them and the inevitability that some works will fit more than one category" (227). This collection acknowledges these nuances, and at times obliquely engages with them and the differing definitions of Irishness as well as life-writing. Although sometimes breaking these chapters into overarching thematic connections is unhelpful; surely oral stories, travellers' narratives, Irish language memoirs, working-class writing, and military testimonies are



integral to, and integrated with each other. Nevertheless, the different iterations of texts across chapters adds layers and depth to the texts and to the understanding of how life-writing operates across categories.

As stated by Harte in his introduction the aims of this book are five-fold: 1) to provide an evaluative historical guide; 2) to raise awareness of the diversity of texts; 3) to expand the canon; 4) to elucidate the main social, economic, political, religious and intellectual contexts; and 5) to provide authoritative assessments of individual autobiographer's achievements. This volume excels at the first four aims but struggles, through sheer diversity of texts discussed, to fully succeed in the fifth aim. The great strength of this collection is the sheer breadth of texts covered, but this could also potentially be perceived as a weakness, as the diversity and number of texts sacrifices any in-depth, rewarding analysis of individual authors or autobiographies. The survey approach to the field that this volume exemplifies would be particularly attractive to scholars wanting to get an overview of Irish life-writing, with a helpful select chronology, and further reading lists at the end of each chapter proving especially useful. Whereas *A History of Irish Working-Class Writing* provides more depth of theory and analysis with regard to socio-cultural contexts and the texts themselves. The aim of both collections is to open up possibilities of reading and initiate further exploration of a field of study that "is ripe for enrichment and development" (Harte 22). Both volumes offer a thoughtful and timely contemplation of how past histories are silenced and what kinds of voices are included in national narratives. Glen Hooper's argument in *A History of Irish Autobiography* that "like the memoir and the travelogue, this shifting entity [of a newly independent Ireland] required considerable readerly resource, not to mention imagination and patience, for it to cohere. Indeed, it might be argued that paraliterary forms such as memoir, autobiography and travel writing were ideally suited to the task of capturing the inconsistencies and disparities inherent in notions of self and nation" is given validity by these two essential volumes (293).

#### WORKS CITED

- Foster, R. F. *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making it Up in Ireland*. London: Allen Lane, 2001.
- Harte, Liam (ed.). *Modern Irish Autobiography: Self, Nation and Society*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Yeats, W. B. *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*. Ed. Allan Wade. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954.