

*Decolonizing the English Department in Ireland**Joe Cleary*

The university English department in Ireland has a long history, but of that history we have no history. This might appear paradoxical because for much of its existence the English department in Ireland as elsewhere conceived of itself in broadly historicist terms – offering curricula that generally ran from Anglo-Saxon and medieval to modern British literature – and cultivated critical models that can be described as historicist and contextualist in character (North). Nevertheless, while the history of education in Ireland is a well-established field, there are no histories of the formation of English departments in Ireland, of the curricula they offered, the agendas they hoped to serve, or of their reconfigurations in the changing world of the university more generally. In this sense, English departments in Ireland can be said to have little substantial historical memory and without such memory attempts to “decolonize” departments run the risk of being uninformed and unsystematic.

That the modern education system in Ireland generally was colonial and imperial in intent and function seems indisputable. In the period after the Tudor, Stuart, and Cromwellian plantations, the English state dismantled the remaining structures of Gaelic society in Ireland and enacted penal laws designed to consolidate the new Protestant Ascendancy, to limit access to land and the higher professions to Catholics, and to anglicize Irish subjects and culture. In 1695, “An act to restrain foreign education” was legislated to limit contact between Irish Catholics and possible continental allies, to which was added a domestic provision forbidding any “person whatsoever of the popish religion to publicly teach school or instruct youth in learning” (McManus 15). These laws were designed to discourage Catholicism and to encourage Catholics to have their children educated in the available Protestant schools to become loyal subjects of the United Kingdom.

The disenfranchised Catholic population did not readily comply. Instead, Catholic schoolmasters continued to teach surreptitiously in provisional schools often conducted out of doors and in the shelter of

hedges, this giving rise to a “hedge school” system that continued until the end of the penal laws in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Historians of these schools conceive of them as “a kind of guerrilla war in education,” in which teachers were obliged constantly to evade law officers and were often prosecuted, especially in times of social unrest. In her account of the hedge schools, Antonia McManus notes, “a school master who contravened penal laws was liable to three months’ imprisonment and a fine of twenty pounds. He could be banished to the Barbados, and if he returned to Ireland, the death penalty awaited him. A ten pound award was offered for his arrest and a reward of ten pounds for information against anyone harbouring him” (17). Despite such strictures, the hedge schools managed to provide education for students intended for the priesthood, for foreign military service, and for those going into business and trading enterprises domestically and overseas. In an increasingly British-dominated world, English was required for social advancement, and the hedge schools provided English instruction. As instruments of both anticolonial resistance and adaption, they probably prefigured in function the more state-sponsored forms of institutional education later developed in the nineteenth century.

Despite the turmoil created by the plantations and the insurrections protesting the new colonial system, the Irish population had grown to 8 million by the 1840s, at a time when that of the rest of the United Kingdom was approximately 18.5 million. By this time, the poorer Irish had become for many in England a byword for papism and poverty, squalor and sedition. Many had also become a ragged and unskilled migratory labor force pouring into England’s and Scotland’s industrial cities. The United Irish Rebellion of 1798, Daniel O’Connell’s mass campaigns for Catholic Emancipation (achieved in 1828) and then for repeal of the Anglo-Irish Union of 1800, and the prominence of several Irish figures in the Chartist movement in England demonstrated that the Irish could be a formidable force for political unrest and rebellion in the United Kingdom as a whole.

Commentators as diverse as Thomas Carlyle and Marx and Engels observed as much. Mixing Biblical-style fulmination with social analysis, Carlyle’s *Chartism* (1840) deals at length with Irish migration to England and its consequences. Referring mockingly to the Irish migrants as “Sanspotatoes,” an obvious reference to the Parisian “sansculottes,” Carlyle complains that:

Crowds of miserable Irish darken all our towns. The wild Milesian features, looking false ingenuity, restlessness, unreason, misery and mockery, salute

you on all highways and by-ways. . . . He is the sorest evil this country has to strive with. In his rags and laughing savagery, he is there to undertake all work that can be done by mere strength of hand and back; for wages that will purchase him potatoes. . . . The Saxon man if he cannot work on these terms, finds no work. He too may be ignorant; but he has not sunk from decent manhood to squalid apehood; he cannot continue there. American forests lie untilled across the ocean; the uncivilized Irishman, not by his strength but by the opposite of strength, drives out the Saxon native, takes possession in his room. (28)

Here, colonial clichés and stereotypes agglutinate. They include: the dark simian qualities; the sly civility that combines “misery and mockery” or “laughing savagery”; the degenerate Celtic weakness that is nevertheless stealthy enough to expropriate the more manly Saxon and compel him to emigrate to “untilled” American forests while the slovenly migrant usurps “his room” at home.

Yet though he fulminates, Carlyle does not wholly blame the Irish for their own condition:

And yet these poor Celtiberian Irish brothers, what can *they* help it? They cannot stay at home and starve. It is just and natural that they come hither as a curse to us. Alas, for them too it is not a luxury. It is not a straight or joyful way of avenging their sore wrongs this; but a most sad circuitous one. Yet a way it is, and an effectual way. The time has come when the Irish population must be improved a little, or else exterminated. Plausible management, adapted to this hollow outcry or that will no longer do: it must be management, grounded on sincerity and fact, to which the truth of things will respond – by an actual beginning of improvement to these wretched brother-men. In a state of perpetual ultra-savage famine, they cannot continue. For that the Saxon British will ever submit to sink along with them to such a state, we assume as impossible. (29–30; italics in the original)

It is the Kurtz-like reference that what cannot be “improved” must be “exterminated” that catches the eye here. When the Great Famine came later in the same decade, the Irish really did become “Sanspotatoes,” 2 million of them dying of hunger, a further 2 million emigrating. Following that catastrophe, the more militant Irish, at home and in the United States, would also think “extermination” and attribute the British government’s weak and often contemptuous response to Irish starvation and disease as state-sanctioned genocide.

Nevertheless, both in the passage cited here, and in the treatise as a whole, Carlyle’s stress falls on “improvement,” not “extermination.” In place of an ad hoc “plausible management” of what Carlyle represents as

a chronic domestic British crisis, what *Chartism* calls for is the “beginning of an improvement” that will confront what will soon be called “the Irish problem” more systematically. When he is done railing on the inadequacies of English parliamentary reform and bourgeois complacency, what Carlyle finally advocates in *Chartism*’s closing chapter as the solution to the social unrest unleashed by the industrial revolution comes down to two Es, or really three Es: Education and Emigration, Empire serving as the bridge that connects the first two Es. Education is advocated for the English workers and slatternly Irish, “who speak a partially intelligible dialect of English” (28), so both constituencies may be disciplined out of their unruliness and into proper respect for order and authority. Emigration is offered as a response to Malthusian doomsayers; it is a valve that will allow this “swelling, simmering, never-resting Europe of ours” that stands “on the verge of an expansion without parallel” to make verdant the whole earth (112).

“Universal Education is the first great thing we mean, general Emigration is the second” (Carlyle 98). Education and emigration, in many cases education for emigration, would remain closely imbricated in Irish life throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but the approaches Carlyle called for in *Chartism* were in many respects already underway before 1840. The Act of Union passed in 1800 abolished Dublin’s Ascendancy parliament and afterward Westminster directly governed Ireland. The shocks caused by the 1798 Rebellion and O’Connell’s mass campaigns together with rapid transformations brought about by the industrial revolution in England forced a dramatic expansion in British state power and social controls, economic *laissez faire* notwithstanding. Experiments that were more difficult to implement in the United Kingdom proper were attempted in colonial Ireland, and by the mid-nineteenth century the smaller island possessed a complex of centrally administered social institutions. These included an extensive network of police stations and gaols, workhouses, hospitals, asylums, and, not least, a national education system.

In 1831, the establishment of the Commission of National Education steered Irish education away from Protestant conversion agendas and led to the formation of a state-centralized national education system. Though the Irish clergy of all denominations were mostly initially hostile to a centralized education system, they were nevertheless encouraged to participate as patrons of the new school system. Thus, as Kevin Loughheed comments, “the national school system quickly established itself in Ireland, such that it was one of the dominant suppliers of education in the country by the onset

of the Famine in 1845, with close to 3500 national schools educating over 430,000 children” (3). By comparison, Lougheed adds, “the state emerged into the English education field much later than in Ireland, only becoming directly involved in education provision from 1870” (4). Though the two countries were officially parts of the same state, then, national education took different courses in Ireland and England. In Ireland, the state developed a centralized system earlier and attempted to attach the various clerical denominations to the state by way of school patronage; in England, state involvement was more gradual and there was ultimately less emphasis on religious involvement (Lougheed 5).

Educational innovations in Ireland had consequences that reached well beyond Ireland. In the White settler colonies especially, colonial authorities looked to the imperial center for models as to how to develop their own fledgling educational systems, and Ireland often served as a template. Canada and Australia also had settler populations divided by religion and nationality, and the Irish national school system appeared to offer a model by which to overcome such division and to create self-disciplined subjects loyal to the British Empire. Missions by the various churches to tend to the emigrant communities in the settler colonies brought Irish experience and knowledge to these regions, and this in turn further encouraged a tendency to emulate Irish examples. Akenson, Lougheed, and others note that the basic textbooks introduced for instruction in the Irish national schools remained for thirty years after their introduction what Akenson calls “probably the best schoolbooks produced in the British Isles” (229). “It can be said that, from the 1840s,” Lougheed observes, “the textbooks published in Ireland became the standard textbooks throughout the British Empire” (10).

These textbooks did not contain detailed information on the geography, history, or culture of Ireland and instead presented the United Kingdom as a homogenous society and culture with a superior form of governance from which Ireland particularly and the colonies generally benefitted. As Lougheed remarks:

The importance of the British Empire, with Ireland as a key part, and the “civilising mission” of imperialism were highlighted, especially in the geography sections [of the textbooks]. This emphasised the size and importance of the Empire and also served to inform individuals of opportunities for emigration. . . . Throughout the publications, racial and cultural views were constructed which privileged European customs. For example, the description of the geography of Africa states that it was a barren region “both as respects to the nature of the soil, and the moral conditions of the inhabitants.” (8–9)

When a century later Australian, Canadian, Nigerian, Kenyan, or Trinidadian writers would remark that their colonial educations had familiarized them with English landscapes or misty autumns to the exclusion of the ecologies or climates of their own regions, they were probably legatees to an educational and textbook culture initially pioneered in Ireland in the early 1800s.

The emergence of the modern university system and the English department in Ireland must be viewed in these wider national and imperial contexts. Trinity College, which remains Ireland's most internationally prestigious university, was founded in 1592 at the time of the Tudor plantations and would remain well into the twentieth century what David Dickson has called "the 'central fortress' of *ancien regime* values and Anglican power" (187). Protestant dominance of the professions in Ireland was, Dickson notes, at its apogee in the 1850s, and in the mid-nineteenth century Trinity competed strongly with other British universities in terms of securing clerkships in the Indian Civil Service (ICS), coming second only to Oxford in competitions for imperial opportunity. When in the 1850s it was decided that recruitment to the ICS should be by competitive examination, Trinity responded promptly and in 1855 appointed William Wright to the chair of Arabic and in 1859 a lecturer, later in 1862 professor, of Sanskrit, Rudolf Thomas Siegfried. R. B. McDowell and D. A. Webb comment that Trinity "was quick to see that the new category of 'competition-wallah,' even if looked down on at first by old hands nominated by personal influence, provided a new outlet for Dublin graduates seeking an employment that was at once adventurous and commensurate with their abilities and social status." As a result, "Trinity sent a steady stream of graduates to India as long as British rule lasted" (232–34).

Against the opposition of the Catholic episcopacy, secular nondenominational colleges were opened in Belfast, Cork, and Galway in 1845, which commenced teaching as associative members of the Queens University of Ireland in 1849, as the country was devastated by famine. A separate Catholic university was opened in Dublin in 1854, but without a royal charter to endorse its degrees and suffering from serious underfunding it fared poorly with government-sponsored rivals. In 1882, it was reorganized to become University College Dublin (UCD) and became a constituent member of the Royal University of Ireland, a revised version of the Queens University system. If the Famine devastated the poorest classes in Ireland especially and accelerated chronic migration outward for decades to follow, the same epoch also consolidated Irish Catholic middle-class professional

formation. Soon, the new Queens and later Royal colleges were also competing to take advantage of imperial opportunity, turning out graduates to secure ICS clerkships or to work in the Indian medical service or as engineers to meet the demands of Irish and Indian railway booms. S. B. Cook argues that after 1870 Irish competitiveness in ICS exams suffered when Sir Charles Wood and Lord Salisbury reformed the recruitment process to improve the quality of Indian administration. Both men, Cook argues, were sincere in their improving intentions, but nevertheless “they shared the mid-Victorian belief that English gentlemen were the best conceivable imperial guardians. Both men loathed what they regarded as the tradesmen’s instincts and infinite insecurities of youth. But they also doubted the ability of the Irish either to rule themselves or govern others” (514). The reduction in Irish recruitment for Indian positions coincided, then, with a period of increased domestic agitation in Ireland – the Land Wars, the Home Rule crises – and the same universities that contributed to training Irishmen for empire also educated an emergent Irish middle class that would rule the Irish Free State after 1921.

The emergence of English literature as a distinct subject of university study coincided with the appointment of Edward Dowden to the post of Chair of English in Trinity College in 1867. As histories of the discipline make clear, this development represented a wider secular and modernizing turn in Western university education, one that would eventually see the previously dominant Classics become in time a relatively minor discipline and which brought the study of national literatures to the fore. Though part of its mission might be to afford a humanist corrective to the competitive individualism of *laissez faire* capitalism, in universities committed to securing British national and imperial greatness the study of English inevitably meant that the new discipline acquired its own ideological cast.¹

Dowden, for example, was a committed Irish unionist and devotee of the British Empire. Franklin Court claims “Dowden was an outspoken political conservative who distrusted and feared democracy as a great class leveler, but in Dublin particularly, the spectre of Paddy with a torch standing on his doorstep could seem real.” Nevertheless, he adds, “Dowden was not alone among late-century English professors in his ethnocentric support for an idealized historical continuum and in his desire to curtail democratic reform efforts. Although the heritage of Burkean conservatism was more evident in Dowden than in other late-century English professors, the mainstream tradition of literary study in England generally had become tacitly more nationalistic and conservative” (154–55).

Dowden had written an authoritative *Life of Shelley* (1886) before his Trinity appointment and would later write *Robert Browning* (1904), but his reputation rests primarily on his many studies of Shakespeare, especially *Shakespeare: His Mind and Art* (1875). Dowden's Shakespeare offers the playwright as an epitome of Protestant manliness, sound business sense, and liberal tolerance, the antithesis to the mercurial Celtic flightiness then popularized in Celtic and Saxon racial discourses. Though receptive to international intellectual currents, Dowden was stubbornly hostile to the later nineteenth-century Irish Literary Revival, viewing with suspicion anything Irish that would distinguish itself from a common Britishness.² He was on friendly terms with William Butler Yeats's family and an admirer of the young Yeats's poems, but refused to write on Irish writers or subjects and refused permission for his own poetry to be published in a "specially Irish anthology" (Longley 30). In his later years, Dowden campaigned for the Irish Unionist Alliance against Irish Home Rule and in 1908 took charge of the Irish branch of the British Empire Shakespeare Society (BESS) that had previously been presided over by John Pentland Mahaffy, the distinguished Trinity classicist and onetime tutor to Oscar Wilde. The importance of the English Renaissance period – then celebrated as the "Golden Age" of empire, Shakespeare, and the Globe Theatre – was reflected also in the works of other early chairs of English (or History and English Literature as several were titled) in Irish universities. Frederick S. Boas, Chair of History and English in Queens University Belfast, published many books on Renaissance drama, and Thomas William Moffitt, who became chair of History and English in Queen's College Galway in 1863, published *Selections from the Works of Lord Bacon* (1847).

James Joyce was born in 1882, the same year that the Catholic university became University College Dublin. He received his early education in Clongowes Wood College, Co. Kildare, a Jesuit private boarding school opened in 1814 and one of Ireland's premier elite Catholic schools modeled on English equivalents such as Eton and Harrow. Clongowes had a strong record in training its students for imperial and missionary service and cultivated an English-style sporting ethos that included cricket, association football, lawn tennis, and cycling. Thanks to his father's improvidence, Joyce's education differed from that of this elite because he had later to transfer to Belvedere College, Dublin, another elite though somewhat less prestigious Jesuit school. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), the young Stephen Dedalus's alienation from Clongowes's muscularly Catholic and imperial ethos is everywhere evident. Stephen is physically

timid and lacks interest in sports; his father has Fenian and Home Rule sympathies; his family fortunes are in decline; he loses his religious faith and becomes sexually dissolute: all these things bring the young Dedalus into intellectual conflict with the Clongowes mission to educate cultivated Irish Catholic “gentlemen” with the social poise and assurance to match their Etonian English counterparts. Joyce’s self-exile from Ireland after 1904 meant that he became an émigré distanced from the Home Rule Catholic elite with which he was educated or from the more militant Sinn Féin nationalist middle class as it assumed state power after the War of Independence and the establishment of the Free State in 1921. Nevertheless, *Ulysses* clearly reflects much of the historical resentment of England and indeed the high ambition of this Catholic bourgeoisie in the era of its radical self-assertion; Joyce worked on that novelistic epic throughout the violent years that led up to the foundation of the Irish Free State.

In the final section of *Portrait*, as Stephen makes his way toward his university lectures in Earlsfort Terrace, he passes “the grey block of Trinity on his left, set heavily in the city’s ignorance like a great dull stone set in a cumbrous ring” and feels it pull his “mind downward” (Joyce 194). Passing the Trinity entrance, Stephen feels himself “striving this way and that to free his feet from the fetters of the reformed conscience” and observes the “the droll statue of the national poet of Ireland” (194). To Stephen, the monument to Thomas Moore positioned just outside Trinity College is pitiable, but he regards the edifice with more sorrow than anger because “though sloth of the body and the soul crept over it like unseen vermin,” the statue “seemed humbly conscious of its indignity.” As Stephen enters Earlsfort Terrace, site of University College Dublin, he reflects, “it was too late to go upstairs to the French class” (199). This lateness for French conveys his sense of being severed from the European continent, and Stephen sighs that his own poor knowledge of Latin and his nation’s tardiness would always render him “a shy guest at the feast of the world’s culture” (194).

Too late for French instruction, he makes his way to meet the Dean of Studies in one of *Portrait*’s much-cited set pieces. Listening to the English Jesuit dean speak, Stephen reflects:

The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home*, *Christ*, *ale*, *master*, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language so

familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language. (205)

In these passages, Joyce deploys Dublin's topography to illustrate a history of Irish educational and aesthetic formation that has shaped Stephen but which he must overcome if he is to liberate himself as an artist and "to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (276). The "dull grey stone" of Trinity College pulls Stephen's "mind downwards." Protestantism's "reformed conscience" does not represent for him the claims for individual freethinking and tolerance, which it claimed for itself, but merely another foot-fetter on his own people. Moore's statue with its "shuffling feet" and "servile head" symbolizes not some monumental Irish poetic achievement but a subservient sloth. However, because it is "humbly conscious of its indignity," the monument also painfully registers the centuries of oppression that bred this abased condition. If French culture is beyond his reach, English culture, "so familiar and so foreign," Stephen admits only as "an acquired speech," a colonially imposed language his voice "holds at bay" and within which "his soul frets" like a captured thing.

As is now widely recognized, in *Portrait* Joyce expresses a colonial and postcolonial predicament. Others elsewhere – Chinua Achebe in Nigeria, Ngũgĩ wa' Thiong'o in Kenya, C. L. R. James and V. S. Naipaul in Trinidad, Derek Walcott in Saint Lucia, Jamaica Kincaid in Antigua – would describe their own childhood schoolroom encounters with the English language and literature in British-centric education systems. These formative experiences usually nurtured lifelong affections for English literature but also the sense of an early indenture into an inheritance not merely not one's own but that of one's imperial master. The language options open to these writers varied but a sense of the English language and English literature as both franchise and fetter to self-expression pulsates through the works they created.

Still, there is reason not to overplay Foucauldian or Althusserian conceptions of disciplinary technologies or subject interpellations that control subjectivity so completely as to leave little room for resistance. There are distinctions between constriction and complete constructivism. The importance of the national school system and of university education to the anglicization of Ireland and the cultivation of imperialist mentalities cannot be doubted. However, as Joyce's situation illustrates, Irish subjects could obviously bring a critical consciousness to bear on the institutions

that inculcated such subject formation and many of Joyce's predecessors and contemporaries responded to their colonial situations more militantly than Joyce did. Wolfe Tone and Robert Emmett, founding figures for militant republicanism, Thomas Davis and John Mitchel, leaders of the Young Ireland cultural nationalist movement, and Isaac Butt and John Redmond, leaders of the Home Rule movement, were all Trinity College students. Leading Catholic republican or nationalist figures including James Fintan Lawlor, a radical Young Irlander, James Stephens, a founder of Fenian Brotherhood, Frank Hugh O'Donnell, MP and anti-imperialist, and Patrick Pearse and Thomas McDonagh, leaders of the Easter 1916 insurrection, all attended Catholic-associated private schools or universities. Many of the most prominent figures in Irish political movements had very little formal schooling. Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, a prominent Fenian, spoke Irish only at home, learned English in a local school, saw his father die of fever in the Famine and his mother and siblings emigrate to America, and found early employment in a relative's hardware store. Michael Davitt's Irish-speaking parents were evicted from their Mayo tenant farm in 1850 and then emigrated to Lancashire, where Michael was homeschooled but lost an arm in a factory accident, aged eleven. Born to Irish emigrant parents in a slum district of Edinburgh, James Connolly, founder of the Irish Citizen Army, received minimal formal education at a local Catholic school. He went to work early before joining the British Army, where he may have served in India and did in Ireland, later becoming a trade unionist, socialist, and Irish separatist. Fanny and Anna Parnell, sisters to the charismatic Home Rule leader Charles Stewart Parnell, were born on a landlord's estate in Wicklow and enjoyed a comfortable upbringing but had very little formal education beyond what they obtained from the family library. The struggles against a colonial educational formation of which Joyce writes so searchingly in *Portrait* would speak to many young colonized subjects across the British Empire. However, until the universities became somewhat more accessible to women and the working classes after World War II, the educational experiences described by Joyce in *Portrait* applied only to a tiny percentage of such subjects.

How much did the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1921 do to decolonize the Irish university system or the subject of English more specifically? In the absence of proper departmental histories, the question is impossible to answer in any real detail, though one can hazard broad observations. The partition of Ireland after 1921 meant that the decolonization was partial, and the two new states compounded some of the less

progressive features of the colonial system. In the new Northern Irish state especially, where a majoritarian Protestant unionist establishment took power against the backdrop of a slowly contracting British Empire and the emergence of anticolonial national movements on many continents, the colonial and imperial dimensions of higher education may have hardened rather than softened. In both states, primary and secondary education largely remained divided, as it had in nineteenth-century Ireland, along sectarian Catholic and Protestant lines. In the words of recent scholars, the new Ministry for Education in Northern Ireland sponsored “a very clear determination to create a system which would ensure allegiance to the Empire and protect against dissention (e.g. the explicit promotion of elements of Irish culture, history and language)” (O’Toole, McClelland, Forde, et al. 1030). In a subsection titled “Loyalty,” the Lynn Committee report of 1923 commissioned to establish Northern Irish educational policy stipulated that all state-funded teachers were to take an oath of allegiance to the British Crown and “no books were to be used in the classroom ‘to which reasonable objection might be entertained on political grounds’” (O’Toole, McClelland, Forde, et al. 1030). The report found no justification for any special status for the Irish language and “decided to treat it like any other language, precluding its teaching henceforth below standard five (11 years old) in line with the practice of other ‘foreign’ languages” (1030). In this repressive context, the Catholic church refused in the 1920s to transfer their schools to the authority of the Northern state and retained patronage of them, a decision which, the same authors conclude, “proved crucial in sustaining the identity of a coherent Catholic community through to the present day” (1030).³

South of the border, the Irish Free State deemed schools and schoolchildren crucial to the cultivation and consolidation of a new national identity. By the 1920s, Ireland was a much-anglicized society, and the new government viewed itself as striving to create or restore a strong sense of “Irishness” in the teeth of a far more powerful British culture in an era of wide-reaching media technologies and culture industries. Thus, the new state established the revival of the Irish language and culture as a priority. Southern policy stipulated that schools were to devote a minimum of one hour every day to instruction in Irish, while no time stipulations applied to other subjects. The Catholic church had already secured considerable control over the southern Irish education system in the post-Famine era, and partition further consolidated this. “The State-Church alliance in education was largely a pragmatic and symbiotic relationship, with the Free State benefitting from the financial resources and

reputational legitimacy of the Catholic Church in the provision of educational and other services” (O’Toole, McClelland, Forde, et al. 1023).

Leah O’Toole et al. also note that the national school curriculum devised in 1900, before partition, was clearly gendered and specified that “the average primary schoolgirl, when she assumes the position of housewife” ought to be able to “perform the ordinary culinary and washing operations that may appertain to her position” (1028). The Victorian conception of girls as *miniwives* and *mothers-to-be* persisted after partition. In the 1922 and 1926 curricula in the South, cookery and laundry work were placed center stage for girls only, and every girl was to receive three hours of needlework instruction per week. In the North, too, the 1923 Lynn Report stressed that girls be taught practical skills such as cookery, laundry-work, and household management and that boys learn woodwork (O’Toole, McClelland, Forde, et al. 1028–29).

One of the more famous school poems of the era, William Butler Yeats’s “Among School Children,” opens with the poetic persona ruminatively visiting a Catholic girls’ school and ruefully pondering the children’s youth, his own aging, and the mysteries of beauty:

I walk through the long schoolroom questioning;
A kind old nun in a white hood replies;
The children learn to cipher and to sing,
To study reading books and history,
To cut and sew, be neat in everything
In the best modern way – the children’s eyes
In momentary wonder stare upon
A sixty-year-old public smiling man.

(Yeats 122)

Yeats may ponder whether “the best modern way” can produce the natural beauty of the aristocratic Maud Gonne, and he self-deprecatingly presents his own senatorial role in the Free State as he imagines the children might view him. However, the poem’s detached patrician voice contemplating the idea of beauty among nuns and schoolgirls – described in passing as lower class “paddlers” to Maud Gonne’s “swan” (122) – probably reflects something also of the wider *hauteur* of the new elites in both Irish states with regard to the children of the poorer sort and their education. In other words, the Yeats figure in “Among School Children” is much more preoccupied with his own memoirs and cultural ideals than with the actualities of the schoolgirls’ lives or aspirations. The Irish Free State, later Republic, might be accused of a like form of detached idealism, one

that prioritized education as nation-building at the expense of any real consideration of the realities of the poor, most destined for manual labor at home or the emigrant boat to Britain or the United States.

Himself deemed only a moderate student in his schooldays, and someone who never attended university, Yeats's "Among School Children" was written after the poet-senator's visit in 1926 to St. Otteran's in Waterford City, a Sisters of Mercy convent founded only a few years earlier in 1920. The school practiced Montessori methods that stress a unity of intellectual and practical activities and creative self-expression. Yeats's poem conveys a like ideal when it rounds off with a final swerve stanza that favors an organicist mode of cultivation where: "The body is not bruised to pleasure soul, / Nor beauty born out of its own despair, / Nor bleary-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil" (123). These are admirable sentiments, but the realities of Irish education at all levels were mostly remarkably different. For much of the twentieth century, in both the more religious and secular schools, discipline, especially for the lower classes, was harsh or openly violent, educational achievement was determined by rigid exam systems, class and gender stratifications were institutionalized, and university remained restricted, until the 1970s and 1980s, to small minorities. In recent years, commissions to investigate the "industrial schools," a euphemism for reformatory institutions for juveniles, have attested to an extraordinary history of physical, mental, and sexual abuse of minors. Yeats's views on education may have been more enlightened than those of many of his contemporaries, but his views on modern democracy, gender, class, and elite rule were mostly, like those of the new elites more widely, very nineteenth-century.⁴ The more authoritarian, eugenicist, and fascistic notes sounded in his social and poetical works from the 1930s onward caution against any simple notion of linear social or educational progress as modern Ireland transitioned from Dowden's world of Victorian Ascendancy domination into the turbulence of the mid-twentieth century.

The brief history of the English department's place in the wider colonial history of Irish education roughly sketched here can in some respects be considered typical. In all regions of the British Empire, the teaching of English literature cultivated a sense of "Britishness" that was always classed, racialized, and gendered. In Ireland, as elsewhere, that process produced mixed results, and the state education systems that emerged out of the anti-imperial independence struggles retained many assumptions and features that had informed the colonial-era system even if they "decolonized" others. It would be interesting to know in more detail to what extent and in what ways university English departments in Ireland, north and south,

changed – in terms of ambitions, personnel, curriculum, and modes of teaching – in the decades after the 1920s but, as remarked at the outset of this essay, there are few studies that document such changes.

Nevertheless, if the Irish experience resembles that of other regions of the British Empire in some general respects, in others it is clearly different. The racial, religious, political, and economic histories of particular colonies, and the different types of nationalist movements that assumed power in the aftermath of independence, suggest that the fortunes and dispositions of the English department will differ considerably from one country to another in the era after empire. University English departments in Ireland, Britain, the United States, India, South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Egypt, Trinidad, or Canada may all look rather alike in appearance, and their faculties may have broadly similar histories of professionalization and credentialing. Nevertheless, those departments clearly operate in quite distinctive circumstances and there are reasons, then, not to assume that the metropolitan histories of the English department in the United States or Britain, about which we have more extensive studies than of their counterparts elsewhere, can serve as standard models for English departments everywhere. By extension, the “decolonization of English” in Oxford or Cambridge, Harvard or Yale, will inevitably mean something quite different to what it might mean in Dublin or Delhi, Mumbai or Melbourne, Seoul or Singapore.

As English departments in North America and the United Kingdom institutionalized what we now call “postcolonial literatures” or “studies” from the late 1980s or 1990s onward, many academics and administrators in Ireland, north and south, regarded such developments nervously. In the context of the long-running conflict in Northern Ireland euphemistically known as “The Troubles,” postcolonial readings of Irish literature seemed to some a reanimation of militant nationalist conceptions of Irish history and literature, or a subordination of literature to political ideology, or an unwarranted conflation of Irish history with that of the colonies proper. This hostility was not confined to conservatives; many liberals shared such views. They held that as Ireland was becoming increasingly integrated into the European Union, Irish culture might better be regarded in “European” rather than in “Third World” terms. Postcolonial studies, some liberal feminists argued, was too closely attached to national paradigms of oppression that attended too much to issues of British imperialism, too little to those of Irish Catholicism or nationalism, or to sexual and gender oppressions. These are simplifications of what were sometimes more complex positions, but they describe the broader contours of the debates that shaped the reception and tentative institutionalization of postcolonial studies in Ireland.

Even as these contentions over “postcolonial studies” animated English studies in Ireland, the transformation of Irish society continued apace. With the economic boom commonly described as the “Celtic Tiger” era, the Republic of Ireland especially underwent one of the most rapid demographic changes in Western Europe and in the island’s modern history. Between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Ireland’s population had increased dramatically, rising from fewer than 3 million in 1700 to over 8 million by the 1841 census. A decade later, as the great Famine was ending in 1851, that population had dropped to 6.5 million. Thanks to chronic rural poverty and the huge diasporic outmigration that continued for decades after the Famine, that figure had dropped to 5 million by 1891 and by 1931 to over 4 million. The island’s population did not rise again until the 1960s. In 2021, the Republic of Ireland’s population topped 5 million for the first time since the 1851 census. However, the economic boom that commenced in the 1990s and lasted until the international banking crisis of 2008 transformed the Republic from a state with a chronic history of outward migration into a country that started to receive a steady flow of immigration. Today, it is estimated that over 17 percent of the population of the Republic of Ireland is foreign born, certainly one of the most dramatic transformations in the society’s history since independence.

Given the size and speed of this transformation, and the fact that some of the new population hails from other former regions of the British Empire or Global South, and much of it thanks to European Union enlargement, from “Eastern Europe,” where the word “colonization” may semaphore the Soviet Union or contemporary Russia rather than Great Britain, the usage “decolonization” will almost certainly be at least as contested and controversial as was the usage “postcolonial” from the 1980s onward. In the current moment, these rapid demographic changes have not yet significantly changed the literary or intellectual fields in Ireland, and the changing composition of the larger population is for now much more evident in the student cohorts taking “English” as a subject than in the teaching cohorts offering such study. This, too, will surely change in time. Though recent migrant populations often veer more toward STEM than to humanities subjects, the literary disciplines will see major changes also.

In the context of this complex colonial history, what might it mean to “decolonize” the English department in Ireland in the second quarter of the twenty-first century? Recent discussions of such matters typically proffer ready proposals such as diversification of teaching curricula and

faculty, critiques of eurocentrism, critical histories of the discipline (of a kind, as mentioned at the outset, lacking in Ireland), and greater attention to matters of racial and other oppressions. In an era of rampant neoliberalism that has witnessed the creation of widening cleavages of wealth across classes and the privatization of all sorts of public goods, including education, one wonders whether such strategies, valuable though they be, can be adequate to meet the general challenge. Moreover, in a time when the humanities disciplines especially feel increasingly marginalized by governments and university authorities, some will argue that English literary studies can ill afford analyses of its grimmer historical entanglements and that scholars should articulate positive agendas for the future rather than raking over the past. It does seem imperative that English departments must discover new visions and new institutional structures that would support such visions, but some fuller reckoning with the past seems not so much an impediment as an essential first step toward the discovery and realization of such future visions.

Notes

1. On this history of English departments, see Baldick; Doyle; Court; Miller.
2. On Dowden's career generally, see Ludwigson.
3. The view cited here is that of Michael McGrath's *The Catholic Church and Catholic Schools in Northern Ireland: The Price of Faith*.
4. See *Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2009* and the widespread media coverage of these and related Magdalen Laundry scandals. For an authoritative study that deals with these institutional histories and their social and cultural contexts, see Smith.

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