

1922-2022

CONGRÈS SOFEIR

17-18-19 mars 2022
 Université d'Orléans

IRELAND IN
 THE CONCERT
 OF NATIONS



'To the Nations of the World! Greeting.' These are the words to be found at the beginning of the message opening the First Dáil on 21st January 1919, asking the free nations of the world to recognise Ireland's independence and its status as a full-fledged Republic.

With a majority of the Irish people turning to Sinn Féin in the wake of the brutal repression and executions of the leading figures of the 1916 Easter Rising, Sinn Féin, as a relatively new radical nationalist party, won the 1918 general election with an ample lead. After refusing to take its seats in Westminster, it brought its newly elected members together in the First Dáil Éireann in Dublin to proclaim the political sovereignty of the Irish people and to appeal to the free nations. This appeal urged the victors of the First World War to recognise Irish independence officially and to secure for the new State a place within the emerging League of Nations. This was part of the wider international context set on the one hand by US President Wilson's famous Fourteen Points, which called for guarantees of independence and territorial integrity for both large and small states, and on the other hand by the political framework resulting from the Paris Peace Conference, which gave birth to the short-lived League of Nations. While this message was definitely not sufficient to raise awareness in favour of the Irish cause amongst major nations, it was nevertheless part of a resolutely international strategy. While negotiations were taking place in Paris at the Peace Conference, Eamon De Valera flew to the United States to seek the support of the Irish-American community. Shortly afterwards, diplomats and plenipotentiaries, including Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins, left for London to negotiate the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, a slim majority in the Dáil would eventually vote for, which incidentally led to the Irish Civil War. Indeed the Treaty simultaneously organised the partition and retention of six of the nine counties of Ulster within the United Kingdom under the name of Northern Ireland.

1922, a pivotal year for Ireland, saw the independence of over three quarters of the island from the previous colonial power, or at least a form of relative emancipation since the new state still had a dominion status within the British Empire. On 6 December 1922, the Irish Free State was created on the basis of a first Constitution that was initially more liberal and even secular than its recent past may have implied.

A century later, the commemoration of these events, when a divided Ireland was striving to forge a place for itself within the concert of nations, is still a bone of contention, marked by narratives that still seem to be conflictual not to say irreconcilable. Somewhat paradoxically, the same symphony – or conversely the same sense of cacophony – seems to resonate a century later, in the relationship with other European nations as well as in the renewed questioning on the island's partition. Thus Ireland's call to free nations to assert its place within Europe in particular is echoed today as the UK - and thus the six Northern Irish counties - leaves the European Union while Ireland reaffirms its links with it. Similarly, a century after partition, the possibility of Irish reunification has resurfaced as the twists and turns of Brexit have focused all eyes on it. As a result, the Northern Irish conflict has resurfaced. Meanwhile, the two parts of Ireland have followed a number of international influences and world trends, even if they have also resisted them at times, whether in terms of dominant economic policies or secularisation for example.

This SOFEIR Congress wishes to mark the centenary by questioning Ireland's place as an island, as a state and a society or societies within the international context, down the years ever since partition, and also from a contemporary perspective. It will also look at the cultural, social, political and economic developments of the country in a comparative manner, and by including all possible objects of study without omitting literary, artistic or cinematic representations.

The general theme may be discussed from the point of view of international relations, and the status of Ireland within the European Union, including but not limited to the Brexit process. The questions raised might include Irish europhilia (and its recent evolution), the country's fiscal standing within Europe, how its position has evolved since the 2008 recession, the role of Erasmus exchanges (and more broadly the country's culture of emigration and its potential cultural or political effects), or even the peculiarly preventative approach taken to the Covid crisis (which may seem paradoxical in such a deeply neo-liberal country). Another angle might be the diplomatic weight Ireland gets from its diaspora, or the evolution of its relationship with Commonwealth countries - whether based on diplomacy, economy, sports, or culture. Ireland also retains a unique status as a former colony within Europe, resulting in a specific sensitivity to the legacies of imperialism and colonialism. The walls of West Belfast and Derry's Bogside testify to strong local support of the struggles against Apartheid in South Africa and for independence in Catalonia or Palestine. The latter receives specific attention and material as well as moral support, not limited to Northern Ireland or to militant organisations - the latest example being the motion passed by the Oireachtas in May 2021, making it the first Parliament in Europe to officially condemn Israel's "de facto annexation" of Palestinian territory.

Beyond the issue of colonialism, political activism generally has a strong international dimension. The Irish Traveller community has been consistently marginalised since Independence and finally obtained official ethnic minority status in 2017 only. The ongoing activism which led to this acknowledgement includes a dense network of Travellers in Britain and North America, as well as a strong collaboration with other Traveller communities in the EU, in particular the Romani communities. Movements of population from and into Ireland over the past thirty years should also be inscribed within wider international trends and raise new socio-economic as well as cultural questions.

The international connection and the weight of the diaspora are striking with regards to morality issues and the two major referendums of the 2010s regarding civil marriage for same-sex couples and the Repeal of the Eighth Amendment which banned abortion. In both cases, young Irish people went back home *en masse* to vote in favour of these evolutions, and for a few years Ireland was in the paradoxical position of being both the first country in the world to open same-sex marriage by popular vote and one of the last in Europe to maintain a drastically anti-abortion constitution. The political developments of the Repeal Campaign are also rooted within the European context ; there are strong mutual influences between Ireland and Poland (Polish immigration being among the highest in Ireland and Poland going the opposite way with newly-introduced limitations on abortion), and the 2016 Citizens' Assembly and its work on abortion later inspired the Citizens' Assembly on climate change held in France in 2020-2021.

From a literary perspective, representations of the relationship to the Irish nation have always been problematic, even within the literary canon signed by the great names of Ireland's artistic pantheon. From "the sow that eats its farrow" depicted by James Joyce in his *Portrait of the Artist* (1916), to John Banville refusing to do "the Irish thing", Irish writers relate to their own nation and national history in what turns out to be more often than not, complex, ambivalent, either obsessed with the past and its promises – whether they were kept or not–, or keen on building a new sense of belonging.

If satire was quite apt at depicting a supposedly "free" Ireland delivered to the "jackeens" and "gombeen men" according to Flann O'Brien in *Faustus Kelly* (1943), for Colm Tóibín or Anne Enright the treatment of Irish history can now only be post-nationalist, as shown in *The Empty Family* (2010), in line with the analyses set out by Richard Kearney in *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture and Society* (1996).

Although many contemporary works now betray a possible appeased relationship with the question of the Irish nation, questions will still be asked about the resurgence of complex motifs illustrating the birth of the Irish nation, following the long, eventful and tragic 19th century that continues to haunt it, as evidenced by the famine motif in Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea* (2004) or Paul Lynch's *Grace* (2019).

New issues have emerged, linked to globalisation and neo-liberalism, which tend to cross and bypass nations to establish a transnational or even multinational order or to make competition between nations more profitable. Ireland is thus represented in literature today as being at the complex crossroads made up on the one hand by a colonial heritage that is still problematic, *frozen* so to speak by and within the borders inherited from another century, and on the other hand by the transgression or deconstruction of physical, local limits and identities in a world that is increasingly virtualized.

Genre literature has been particularly interested in this Irish nation dissolved in an ultra-financialized, globalized and digitalised economy. Thus the fictions by Alan Glynn (*The Dark Fields* 2001/2011, or *Paradime*, 2016) or by Tana French (*Broken Harbour*, 2012, *The Likeness*, 2008) explore this new Ireland, straddling several past and present traumatic histories, more or less constantly *reinvented* to quote Declan Kiberd, a history that is in turn Celtic, imperial British, even in the problematic garb of the six northern counties so well described by Seamus Deane or Eoin McNamee. This Irish nation seems to be split from within or, on the contrary, to form a block: sometimes European, sometimes diasporic and American, successively nationalist, post-nationalist, when it is not internationalist, haunted by its tragic past and worried about the planet's present and future.

Papers may address the following topics in particular -this list remains open:

- Commemoration of centenaries (Irish War of Independence, Anglo-Irish Treaty, creation of Northern Ireland and creation of the Irish Free State, the Irish Civil War) — confronting narratives vs inclusive commemoration ;
- Anamnesis, oblivion, forgiveness, betrayal in works of art and in collective and official memory (including images of the two Irelands in school history);
- Aesthetics of war, peace, conflict and compromise;
- Ireland a Century Later;
- Partition/Reunification;
- Social, economic, political and cultural developments in their international context;
- Literary, artistic and cinematographic representations of these developments;
- Cultural and artistic expressions (including music) in their international context;
- Representations of the nation and communities in literature, poetry, cinema;
- Symbolic readings of tropes and motifs echoing the cyclical patterns of Irish History in arts etc. from the long 18th century to post-Brexit politics;
- A wide range of themes may be broached through the prism of the question put by the topic of this conference: the sense of belonging or not, the definition of identity(/ies) and the recognition of differences, idealism and pragmatism, individual and collective memories, integration and fragmentation etc.
- Irish and international activist networks and the question of human rights in Ireland;
- Influence of the diaspora;
- Evolution of "crisis emigration" and economic and political immigration in comparative perspective;
- International exchanges and societal developments;
- Immigration and evolutions in Irish music
- Minority languages and relation to the world: *gaelgeoirí* living abroad/non-Irish/speaking multiple languages, multilingual Ireland;
- Outside influences on modern Irish language;
- Irish international relations and their economic and political dimensions; neutrality and neutrality discourse in Ireland since World War 2.

Doctoral students are strongly encouraged to submit proposals.

Proposals (maximum word count 300 to 350), together with a short bio-bibliography, should be sent by **1 December 2021** to elodie.gallet@univ-orleans.fr and thierry.robin@univ-orleans.fr . A reply will be given by 17 December 2021.

Registration : members of the SOFEIR can give a paper. More practical information will be made available along with the final draft of the conference programme in early 2022.

Organising committee:

Karin Fischer, Élodie Gallet, Chloé Lacoste and Thierry Robin