Irish Studies in Australia and New Zealand

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Internationally, Irish studies tends to thrive where the Irish diaspora settled: Boston, New York, Liverpool, London, Montreal. Yet one could not say that Irish studies in Australia is especially robust, particularly when looked at comparatively. We will attempt to answer why that is so in this brief survey, addressing institutional and cultural factors and also the historic relationship between Ireland and Australia, which has produced a strange mix of familiarity and distance between the two countries.

While Australia received far fewer Irish migrants than the more proximate Britain and USA, the proportionate Irish influence in Australia is unmatched. In 1901 at the time of the Federation of the separate colonies that made up Australia, one quarter of the white population of 3.8 million were of Irish birth or descent. Among the white European population, the Irish were second only to the English, forming a substantial and important minority. Visiting Irish politicians now refer to this by routinely calling Australia the most ‘most Irish country outside of Ireland’. There is, then, great overlap between the story of the global Irish and that of the development of the Australian nation since European settlement. Australia is far from Ireland geographically, but much closer culturally.

In Australia the majority of the Catholic settlers were Irish, and the majority of Irish Catholic, arriving into a majority Protestant colony. This was different to Canada, which also attracted a significant proportion of Irish Protestant migrants and had a substantial ethnically French Catholic settler population. New Zealand attracted fewer Irish Catholics proportionally than Australia, with substantial and influential Irish Protestant migration schemes. So there are historical differences between Irish settlement in Australia and New Zealand as well as the rest of the British world. Catholics in Australia were overwhelmingly of Irish birth or descent until the post-war migrations from Catholic southern European countries. Therefore, until the 1950s, to be Catholic was to be Irish in Protestant Australia, with all the implications for discrimination this sectarian otherness implied. The Irish in Australia were often suspected of disloyalty, especially at times of national or international crisis, such as the Land Wars and the First World War. Upwardly mobile Irish had to negotiate their bonds to Ireland with the suspicion of British Australia: this impacted how Irish Australia affiliated with the cause of Irish political nationalism. Because of their place within the British Empire and later Commonwealth, Irish Catholics in Australia and New Zealand were less likely to take up radical positions on Irish nationalism and republicanism than their compatriots in the United States. Furthermore, as very few refugees from the Famine settled in Australia or New Zealand, because of the distance and cost involved in the journey, the general degree of grievance against the English for their treatment of the Famine Irish was less overt. Certainly, many Irish and their children in Australasia felt strongly about their connections with Ireland, and were prepared to donate money and attend events supporting Irish causes throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. But they were generally content with their position in Australia or New Zealand as part of the British Empire and this muted their response to the Irish political situation. In general, Irish constitutional nationalism and home rule was favoured. The assertion of autonomy was one thing, but it was not in the interests of Irish Australia to declare its absolute difference from the British establishment. This culture of integration, or limited separateness, had long term implications in how Irish-Australia saw itself and for Irish studies within Australia.
While the sectarianism of the nineteenth century, that had erupted into overt discrimination periodically, simmered away through the first half of the twentieth century, from the late 1980s it was largely suspended alongside the continuing arrival of new and more different migrant groups. So the Irish appeared, by comparison with Italians, Greeks, Vietnamese and Lebanese and later Africans, all in all less different. The distinct story of Irish assimilation, and the tenacious idea of an ‘Anglo-Celtic’ Australia, stymied the idea of Irishness as a distinct, autotelic object of inquiry. It could be one reason why, in Australia, Irish studies remained relatively muted in the academic mainstream.

During the time when Australian and New Zealand universities were expanding in the 1960s, there was little appetite for looking towards Ireland for intellectual inspiration, the direction of the outwards gaze was firmly towards the ivory towers of Oxbridge or the Ivy League, where Irish interests were also usually marginal. Today’s universities are to some extent at least the products of the aspirations and intellectual backgrounds of those who came of age in the 1960s and 70s, often with degrees from English or American universities.

What of the state of Irish studies now? While North America, including Canada, boasts vibrant Irish studies centres offering specialised qualification, there is not a single one in Australia. No university in Australia offers an Irish studies BA minor or an MA. In the whole of Australasia only the University of Otago offers a designated minor in Irish studies. Thanks to the gift of an Irish businessman who made his fortune in New Zealand, the Eamonn Cleary Chair of Irish Studies was endowed at Otago, which subsequently saw the establishment of the Centre for Irish and Scottish Studies. In Australia, there is only one permanent, devoted post, also the product of diasporic philanthropy – the Gerry Higgins Chair in Irish Studies at the University of Melbourne. Yet educational philanthropy is still comparatively undeveloped in Australasia and, these two initiatives apart, Irish studies has no devoted institutional presence in Australia and New Zealand (apart, that is, from Celtic Studies or European Studies). While to some extent this can be explained by the smaller population, with less scope for specialised majors or degrees in many of the topics available in larger countries, Australian and New Zealand universities are moving increasingly to broader degrees with less subject choice as a way of maximising numbers and staffing in an increasingly hostile economic climate. The current climate in the universities, including the funding and legitimacy challenges facing arts and humanities more generally, would not seem to favour Irish studies.

Even though the university landscape for Irish studies is problematic, Irish studies has long benefitted from the dedication, passion and industry of numerous individual scholars working inside and outside the third level sector. Lone academics with an interest in Irish history or literature, or less commonly, political science, music and archaeology, form trans-institutional clusters and collaborations, some long standing. The Irish Studies Association of Australia and New Zealand (ISAANZ) is the main academic association in the region and was established in 2006. It took under its umbrella the long-standing Irish-Australian conference series which was begun in Canberra in 1980 by Oliver MacDonagh and W.F. Mandle. The proceedings of these conferences were often published as stand-alone volumes, with Val Noone producing important bibliographic essays on the conference series from 1980 until 2007. Bob Reece at Murdoch University in Western Australia established the *Australian Journal of Irish Studies* in 2000, and in 2006 the journal moved to Melbourne and was renamed *Australasian Journal of Irish Studies* to reflect the inclusion of New Zealand Irish studies scholars into ISAANZ. *AJIS* is a peer reviewed academic journal published annually and distributed to university libraries and individuals around the world. It provides
a formal academic platform for Irish studies in Australia and New Zealand, while also keeping activity in the Antipodes connected to international academic Irish studies.

Other avenues for sharing Irish studies scholarship have developed which continue to thrive. As part of a collaboration that includes the Gerry Higgins Chair of Irish Studies, Newman College at the University of Melbourne provides funds for an annual Irish Studies Fellowship based in their library which houses the internationally significant O’Donnell collection based around the library of Australian-born Gaelic scholar Dr Nicholas O’Donnell (1862-1920). This fellowship, offered annually since 2010, has attracted high calibre Irish studies scholars from Australia, Ireland and the United States from a wide range of disciplines including Irish language, music and history. The O’Donnell Fellows share their research findings by giving a seminar in the long running Melbourne Irish Studies Seminar series, organised by a committee of Irish Studies scholars in Melbourne, and publish their findings in *AJIS*. Joyce’s “Bloomsday” is celebrated on 16 June each year in parts of Australia. In Melbourne, for example, since the 1990s a group of enthusiasts led by Frances Devlin-Glass has been organising readings and discussions of Joyce’s work, as well as staging dramatized episodes from *Ulysses*. (Joyce and other major Irish writers are staples of the literary curriculum in Australia, though rarely as part of devoted Irish courses.) Melbourne’s Celtic Club also hosts the annual ‘Brigidfest’ held to coincide with St Brigid’s feast day in February. This popular event hosts a speaker on a topic relevant to Irish or Irish Australian women. In Sydney, study days and conferences associated with Celtic studies usually include Irish material and have been organised first by the late Anders Alqvist and then by Jonathan Wooding, holders of the Chair of Celtic Studies at the University of Sydney as well as independent scholars such as Dr Pamela O’Neill. Sydney is also the home of the Aisling Society, a society that for some 60 years has advanced the study of Irish and Irish-Australian history and culture. The numerous Irish and Celtic clubs around the country also, typically, have a heritage remit as part of their mission. There are other extra-academic organs for Irish interest material, such as *Tinteán*, previously a print and, since 2012, an online magazine published by the Australian Irish heritage network. Language classes and cultural activities thrive all around the country, and there are well attended annual events such as Daonscóil in rural Victoria. The Australian Irish Heritage Association, based in Perth, Western Australia and founded in 1993 by the late Joe O’Sullivan, organises annual lectures, writers’ awards, commemorations and publications. These activities are organised and sustained by dedicated volunteers and signal that there is a healthy appetite for Irish language, literature and history among many Australians and New Zealanders, as well as Irish ex-pats.

So perhaps as a side effect of the relative lack of university support for Irish studies, Irish studies in Australia is notable for often productive synergies between academic and non-academic wings, between professional historians based in universities and scholars with other (or no) institutional allegiances. ISAANZ conferences typically feature a high proportion of papers by local historians, genealogists, journalists or trade writers. Associations, community groups, and Celtic clubs in the major cities have long invested time and resources in cultivating and promoting the study of Irish history, culture, music and language and it is not unusual for Irish studies initiatives and collaborations to emerge from these sites.

Conversely, as these connections might indicate, Irish studies in Australia confronts a local version of a transnational tension. While Australasian Irish studies has forged productive alliances outside the university institution, Irish studies is nonetheless sometimes required to negotiate conflicting images amongst its stakeholders. For example, Irish studies specialists scrutinize, with all requisite critical scepticism, nostalgic or sentimental ideas of Irish identity, to which the wider culture, including the Irish-heritage philanthropists who might
fund it, are often quite attracted. In other words, there are strains as well as possibilities in the extra-academic quality of Irish studies in Australia.

Internationally, Irish studies must also confront a more troubling dilemma. Its success is inseparable from circuitries of power that emerge from geopolitical asymmetry. The Irish brand around the world trades off a marketable sense of acceptable alterity. Its attraction to students comes from the sense that, while the Irish might be different, they are not too different. Ireland was sufficiently of the West not to be threatening and not of it to be exotic and alluring. The Irish in Britain, America and Australasia had certainly suffered persecution and oppression. But as the 1980s ceded to the 90s, Irishness and by extension Irish studies, enjoyed a revamped reputation and glimmered with cultural allure, especially as economic success finally arrived in Ireland. An Anglophone culture, with a huge diasporic presence in the major cultural powers in the world, Ireland enjoyed visibility out of proportion to its population. Ireland and Irishness became known through capitalist image making or, more troublingly, with the whiteness and the assimilability of the Irish compared with dumped and disregarded ethnicities around the globe. In that respect at least, though the story of Ireland often seems ill-fated, the story of Irish studies seems blessed, ideally positioned to thrive in the world’s academic and cultural networks.

This feature has, in a sense, been inverted in Australia, where Irish studies has lost ground to areas where difference to the dominant culture is more marked. Irish studies in Australia enjoyed a fillip in Australia during the 1990s, when the Chairs in Otago and Melbourne were founded. During this period, the peace process meant Ireland was not far from international headlines and the booming Celtic Tiger and its cultural analogues meant Ireland had a sheen of Cool Hibernia. But Irish studies in Australia has lost some of its energies since then for a number of reasons, not least because Australian intellectual and academic culture has increasingly sought to address long neglected issues of race, post-war immigration and, perhaps above all, its festering and unresolved Aboriginal question (unlike New Zealand, no treaty currently exists with Australian indigenous people). Australia needed to wake up to its geography rather than its history, to recognise its regional location in south east Asia and address its neighbouring national cultures. In this context, the Irish question seemed less urgent and the Irish less different. To be sure, as Elizbeth Malcolm and Dianne Hall’s recent new history has forcefully reminded us, Australian history has often been marked by sectarian division and discrimination against Irish Catholics. But this division has long subsided and it is easy to group the Irish with the British under the catch-all phrase ‘Anglo-Celt’ or ‘White Australian’, obscuring the history of division in those falsely unifying categories. It has made the Irish less visible to Australian academy, and Irish history and culture more easily assimilable to British courses, which is where much ‘Irish’ politics, literature and history in Australia is studied. This has been exacerbated by the relative neglect of significant relevant Irish Australian scholarship, such as the very important work of the late Patrick O’Farrell, by Australian historians and academics.

One of the challenges ahead for Irish Studies in Australasia is to confront the part that Irish settlers played in the brutal colonial frontiers and the ongoing discrimination of people of colour in Australia and New Zealand. The comfortable popular perception is that because the Irish were oppressed in Ireland and discriminated against in Australia, and New Zealand, then they were kinder, less brutal, to the Indigenous peoples that they encountered when they moved outside to the antipodes. This is certainly the premise behind the Australian movie The Nightingale (2019) in which a young Irish woman is subject to violence by English settlers and forms an alliance with a similarly brutalised Aboriginal man. However as Larissa
Behrendt, an Eualeyai/Kamillaroi lawyer, academic, novelist and film-maker, recently wrote in her review of the film in the *Guardian*, the processes of colonisation involving previously marginalised peoples such as Irish Catholics coming into contact with Indigenous peoples were more complex than this and need much more nuanced analysis and research.\(^{14}\) It is a pity that *The Nightingale* has received greater mainstream attention than the sensitive low budget documentary directed by Paula Keohe, *An Dubh ina Gheal: Assimilation* (2015) which featured interviews with Indigenous Australians of Irish descent as well as Indigenous activists on Irish-Indigenous relations. It is however encouraging that Malcolm and Hall’s *A New History of the Irish in Australia*, with an explicit agenda to begin to tackle some at least of these issues, was not only published by a mainstream Australian publisher with subsequent healthy sales, but was also funded by the main government funding body, the Australian Research Council and has been short-listed for an Australian literary prize. It is also encouraging that scholars such as Malcolm Campbell from New Zealand and Barry McCarron from New York are now researching the complex role of the Irish in the colonisation of the Pacific and Asia.

There are many other opportunities for Irish-Australian studies, which have not yet been tapped. The Australian national imaginary, the ‘larrkin’ figure and rebel perhaps most famously incarnated in the bushranger Ned Kelly, owes much to images of Irishness. This amounts to a common truisum, yet it still awaits theoretically sensitive investigation and careful scholarly genealogy, deploying the latest insights of diaspora studies. What does it mean to speak of Irish-Australian identity and how does it relate to transnational circuitries of Irishness? Can we talk of a discrete tradition of Irish-Australian literature, running from from Frank the Poet, via Joseph Furphy to Vincent Buckley, Tom Kenneally, and Thea Astley? Despite its distance and its occasional invisibility in Ireland, Australia has been blessed by the attentions of some of Ireland’s greatest modern historians, such as Oliver MacDonagh (1924-2002) and David Fitzpatrick (1948-2018). There is a sizeable and growing scholarship about Irish-Australasia. Yet many rich seams across the Irish studies disciplines await investigation.

ENDNOTES

5 Bull and Malcolm, p. 30.

Malcolm, ‘Searching for Irish and Irish Studies in Australia’ has a more comprehensive account of various activities.


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