Introduction I
Why Foremothers?

Ailbhe Darcy and David Wheatley

I

> We can look at the poet or their poem as an influence, or we can understand that their work creates an almost collaborative effect on our current practice.
>
> (Christine Murray)[1]

> ... acts of poetic conjuration are in false faith if they assume the power to appropriate meaning or to restore a sense of completion to a history which is defined by loss and fracture. The reconstruction of a continuous and unbroken Irish female literary tradition would be another such attempt to consolidate and falsify the past.
>
> (Anne Fogarty)[2]

In the millennial year 2000, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin published an essay on the nineteenth-century poet Speranza, claiming her as a foremother. Ní Chuilleanáin asks: 'what use our female predecessors are to us as writers, what is the function of model, teacher, exemplar?'[3] What Irish women poets seek when they conjure foremothers is continuity: a 'women's tradition' that legitimises the writing of their own poetry; influence aside, a sense of 'the woman writer as embodied, creative agent in the process of textual production', to use Jennie Batchelor's phrase.[4] When Ní Chuilleanáin considers Speranza as a foremother, she remarks that Speranza's life has mattered to her as much as her work, and

> if we are to consider the importance of her example for women writers of a later generation, it's partly in that lesson, that it is possible to have a warm and generous character and to look after and remain close to one's children while holding on to the egotism that makes one a writer. It's both as a person and as the kind of writer she is that she functions as exemplar and ancestor.[5]

Women writers of the past are useful to women writers of the present in part because they legitimise the business of writing; we can look to the

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busy women poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and imagine a life and maybe even a livelihood that comprehends the art. It might be less clear why a modern woman writer would need to see Speranza's *work* as exemplary. As Heather Ingman and Clíona Ó Gallchoir note, the 'imperative of national self-determination that dominated Irish political and intellectual life' from the nineteenth century resulted in 'the construction of a "literary tradition" that could not encompass voices that either challenged the national narrative, or whose primary focus simply lay elsewhere'.[6] Women poets, among them Speranza, played a central role in constructing this national literary tradition.[7] Exploiting Young Ireland's gendered imagery of tears and blood,[8] Speranza used her poetry to straddle worlds, 'mediat[ing] a bourgeois nationalism's necessary but problematic separation from the people'[9] and bridging the divide between the 'two Irelands' during the late 1840s. Her famine poems astutely portray the catastrophe as part of a history of British oppression and as potentially capable of inspiring the Irish to rebellion. For Ní Chuilleanáin, Speranza's importance is in the way she manages to negotiate the expectations and limitations placed upon the feminine voice and still write poems that presume to speak important truths about their political and social context. It is in this negotiation that Speranza can be seen as a precursor for the work of twentieth and twenty-first century Irish women poets, including Ní Chuilleanáin, who have taken it as their role to interrogate the conventional narratives of the nation, and who have experimented with the lyric form, adapting and expanding the lyric in order to do so.

In the 1970s, feminist scholars such as Elaine Showalter, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argued against the relevance of the agonistic Bloomian account of influence to women, asserting that women writers have been much more likely to view their foremothers as a valuable inheritance than as a burden to be thrown off. Gilbert and Gubar write that

> the 'anxiety of influence' that a male poet experiences is felt by the female poet as an even more primary 'anxiety of authorship' – a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor', the act of writing will isolate or destroy her.[10]

Gilbert and Gubar see the woman writer as needing to conjure a 'matrilineal' or sisterly heritage as a means of projecting a vision of a literary future that will allow her to write into that future. Given the degree to which women's writing is sidelined in the Irish national canon, Irish

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women writers may need to engage in 'acts of poetic conjuration', to recall our epigraph from Anne Fogarty; may need to dream up a continuous women's tradition if they are to imagine a future for their writing at all. For modern Irish women, treated as second-class citizens in the Constitution of the new Irish state, the problem has been political as much as literary. 'When Yeats writes "to Ireland in the coming times", remarks Ní Chuilleanáin in her essay on Speranza, he is addressing, rather than a literary posterity, a political unit that does not yet exist but which will have its own canon in which he aligns himself with the poets of the *Nation.* Is it plausible for a woman poet at the turn of the twenty-first century to look back and claim a similar succession?'[11] Ní Chuilleanáin's odd formulation – in which Yeats can look forward to a nation in which his poetry will take up its rightful place, but the woman poet must look back from some later time in search of an analogous inheritance – maps Gilbert and Gubar's 'anxiety of authorship' onto the Irish context. If Speranza's prophetic voice proves impossible for women writers coming after – Ní Chuilleanáin perceives a brief stutter of it in Eva Gore-Booth's 1906 collection *The Egyptian Pillar*, then 'silence'[12] – her engagement with contemporary issues as a public intellectual is a distinctive quality of poets across the centuries in this volume. In Ní Chuilleanáin's admiration of Speranza's prophetic voice, and her search for it in the poets that followed Speranza, we can see Ní Chuilleanáin's own negotiation of a public role – an adamant taking-on of the mantle of public intellectual, but also a taking-on of the history of the woman's poetic voice in Ireland, with all the limitations and difficulties that entails.

The feminist project of constructing a women's literary history set in motion by Showalter, Gilbert, Gubar and their contemporaries was, as Angela Leighton writes, '*of* its time – as all histories are'.[13] For all that it has 'radically shifted the contours of literary studies as a whole', the project has also been roundly critiqued.[14] Margaret Ezell's groundbreaking *Writing Women's Literary History* (1993) perceives the problematic narrative of evolution or progress underlying the feminist project and warns against pressing the past into service to legitimise the present. Rita Felski goes on to note that feminist critics run the risk of reinforcing gender stereotypes if their purpose in reading is to uncover a distinctive 'women's culture'.[15] The ground for reading women's writing of the past, she argues, has to be 'a political commitment to recover the lost voices of women' rather than any epistemological or essentialist claim 'for the necessary truth that is spoken by such voices'.[16] Linda Hutcheon perceives the embrace of literary history by marginalised groups as 'canny political pragmatism'

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which does not, however, erase the contradictions in a criticism that attempts to square 'challenges to the coherent subject' with a political agenda.[17] Whereas Laura Knoppers, in her introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Women's Writing* (2009), separates out studies of women's writing into three consecutive waves, with the first, recovery, replaced by a theorisation of the plurality and instability of the category of 'woman', and this second wave in turn replaced by a grounding of the work in 'historical particulars',[18] the truth is that, contradictions notwithstanding, all three of these activities continue concurrently. In the Irish context, given that the value and importance of Irish women's writing has only been slowly acknowledged in comparison with the revaluing of British and American women's writing, the continuance of all three activities remains essential.

If it has meanwhile seemed evident that a women's literary history 'predicated upon celebratory identification' of women writers of the past is 'simply impossible' in the Irish context,[19] that 'celebratory identification' has nonetheless been repeatedly asserted – by turns quizzically, fiercely, wistfully, and joyfully – by the women writers of the present, in counterpoint to and complementing the prodigious recovery work of feminist scholars over the last several decades. Almost two decades after Ní Chuilleanáin's claiming of Speranza as a meaningful precursor, the chapbook *We Claim* (2017), a collaboration between the Dublin Young Migrant Women's Group and the artist Kathryn Maguire, insists on continuity and positions the women's tradition as pliable, available for re-imagining and enabling for emerging women writers. Taking inspiration from the women's presses of the Revival era, the chapbook collects poems alongside etchings, recipes and miscellaneous writings, the mixing of literary and domestic genres drawing attention to the project's significance as not only a physical text but also a series of gatherings, building networks that will enable further creativity. In the foreword, editor, poet and activist Grace Wilentz declares:

> *We Claim* is a handbook for the modern revolutionary young migrant woman. As a group of young migrant women, we developed the text herein through a series of meetings and collaborations over the course of 2016. In these pages, we reflect on Ireland's present and re-imagine its future. It is also our way of reclaiming our part in the making of modern Ireland, calling attention to the role migrant women have always played in shaping the State.[20]

We Claim is a small-press ephemeral publication, but the modesty of its enterprise is paired with the ambition of its claim. Answering 'the impossible constraints imposed on the migrant woman writer by totalizing

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constructions of an Irish "national culture" or "shared common culture" in academic and, sometimes, literary proscriptions of the space of Irish writing',[21] the poetry in *We Claim* boldly and even joyfully asserts ownership over a tradition, declaring, in the original typeface of the Cuala Press: 'I am your daughter Mother Ireland / Dear future Ireland I believe in you.'[22]

It is the desire for continuity and likeness inherent in the search for precursors that leads Ezell to warn that the very notion of 'foremothers' implies a linear model which is anachronistic and which tends to produce further anachronism, answering the desires of modern feminists more than increasing our understanding of the past. We might see the manifestation of these desires, for instance, in the tenderness with which contemporary Irish poets have rendered the eighteenth-century poet Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill in their own likeness. Ní Chonaill's *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, translated as *The Lament for Art O'Leary*, famously describes her husband's horse arriving home without her husband, her leap onto the horse's back, and her gallop to his side. 'Everyone knows what happened then', says a fictional Ní Chonaill in a recent poem by Doireann Ní Ghríofa: 'I versed it strong / and spoke it often.'[23] What happens then, according to one version of the *Caoineadh*, is that Ní Chonaill drinks her dead husband's blood with both hands:

> Love, your blood was spilling in cascades, and I
> couldn't wipe it away, couldn't clean it up, no, no, my
> palms turned cups and oh, I gulped.
>
> (trans. Doireann Ní Ghríofa, 2020)

> I plunged my two fists
> in your spilled blood
> and sucked from my useless fingers.
>
> (trans. Vona Groarke, 2008)

> Your heart's blood was still flowing;
> I did not stay to wipe it
> But filled my hands and drank it.
>
> (trans. Eilís Dillon, 1971)[24]

As Angela Bourke points out, the most iconic aspects of Ní Chonaill's poem are also the most conventional aspects of it. The stark and shocking contrast between an abundant life and a dead body, the dialogue between two women striving to outdo each other 'and insult each other memorably', and this powerful scene in which the keening wife guzzles the blood of the dead man – these are all conventions of the lament form, which Ní Chonaill inherited from a vast tradition of lamenters.[25] Despite its canonicity, *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* exists outside the mainstream of Irish

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literature, not only because it is by a woman but because its oral composition and strict adherence to convention are alien to the literary practices of our era, as awesomely evoked by Tríona Ní Shíocháin in her Chapter 3 for this volume.

Yet, if recent poets have risked anachronism in their conjuring of Ní Chonaill and her poetic tradition, it might be said that they have done so fruitfully. Despite the increased interest in scholarly circles in the way in which *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* represents, above all, the culmination of a collaborative, communal, multi-vocal tradition, Vona Groarke, in the introduction to her 2008 translation, insists on the individual voice of 'an identified author' who, she argues, takes 'the tradition of the keen onto a whole new level of personal articulation, moving it much closer to our idea of a one-off, authored poem'.[26] Groarke's version of the *Lament* brings out its passionate evocation of married love, in a poem which has sometimes been more valued in the twentieth century for its association with political oppression. Doireann Ní Ghríofa's work of autofiction, *A Ghost in the Throat* (2020), uses Ní Chonaill to exert a substantial claim for women's poetic lineage and is preoccupied with the female body of the poet as the location of imaginative continuity. Ní Ghríofa's protagonist embarks on a detective hunt for information about the life of Ní Chonaill, a quest which – in Ní Ghríofa's telling – justifies space and time away from the feminine activities of child-bearing, breast-pumping and home-making, but also imagines these as activities that Ní Ghríofa shares with Ní Chonaill. Like a poem, Ní Ghríofa's book has a refrain: '*This is a female text*.' In the final pages of its account of years spent chasing Ní Chonaill's ghost, *A Ghost in the Throat* offers itself to others who may need it:

> These years have shown me an oblique kind of holding – I have held her and held her, only to find that she holds me too, close as ink on paper and steady as a pulse. Only now do I see that I can't continue to grip her like this, in quiet selfishness. If I could find a way to communicate all I have learned of her days, maybe others would discover the clues that eluded me, and I might learn more of her from them.[27]

Ní Ghríofa's is a call, not only for collaborative archival scholarship, but also for a collaborative summoning of the precursor-poet, imagining her, through our own bodies, as an 'embodied, creative agent in the process of textual production';[28] somehow meaningfully continuous with today's writing woman.

For Jennie Batchelor, the 'most compelling (if sometimes bewilderingly capacious)' alternative to the idea of a women's tradition based in ideas of influence and inheritance is the notion of intertextuality, a term coined by

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Julia Kristeva.[29] Kristeva's approach 'removes the author as a site of origin', arguing that since 'any text is the transformation of another', literary criticism should 'focus on the already existing texts and often anonymous or everyday discourses . . . from which literary works are reconstituted'.[30] The idea has clear appeal for feminist scholars wishing to do away with the tyranny of the canon; the problem with theories of intertextuality is that, when they do away with the author, they do away with the woman. As Nancy K. Miller puts it, the embodied subject is 'erased by a model of text production which acts to foreclose the question of agency itself'.[31]

The poetry of Medbh McGuckian is perhaps the body of work in Irish literature which foregrounds these tangled questions most insistently. McGuckian's collection *Marconi's Cottage* (1991) stages an intertextual engagement with the scholarly conversation around matrilineage. Many of the poems in the collection are dedicated to women, often contemporary Irish women writers, and the entire book is dedicated to Anne Ulry Colman, the editor of *A Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Irish Women Poets* (1996), a watershed publication for the feminist recovery project. One poem in McGuckian's collection, 'Journal Intime', collages quotations from Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), while also evoking Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892), a story concerned with the drastic effects of stifling women's creativity.[32] This, then, is a book explicitly concerned with a 'female tradition'.[33] The book's other dedicatee, Barbara Jahrling, was a graduate student of literature whose work located McGuckian's poetry in an Ulster tradition; as Michaela Schrage-Früh has shown, *Marconi's Cottage* seems intent on exploring not only the question of literary foremothers, but also the creation and nurturing of a women's writing community in McGuckian's immediate locality, one in which female authors would 'inspire and fertilise each other', creating the possibility of 'a steadily growing younger generation of Northern Irish women poets'.[34] For Leontia Flynn, herself a poet of that younger generation, McGuckian's work bears out Gilbert and Gubar's theory of authorial anxiety, suggesting the woman poet's need to seek out a long and healthy chain of foremothers – with whom one might feel an identification that goes beyond familial or romantic love ('more than sister, more than wife', in the words of 'Journal Intime'[35]) – and going well beyond the Irish context to achieve it; but McGuckian's writing practice, a surreptitious collaging of texts by other authors, also suggests to Flynn 'the rejection of a representative "speaking for"' others.[36] McGuckian's text persistently underlines the

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incompleteness of its own narrative, to borrow a phrase which Flynn borrows from Diane Elam.[37]

'Journal Intime', like so many of McGuckian's poems, is self-reflexive to a labyrinthine degree; referring repeatedly to 'mirrors' and 'echoes'; repeating the words of other authors, it also mirrors itself, doubling back formally. In its interest in repetition, it draws attention not only to the history of women's poetry as one in which poets constantly double back, looking for their mirror-images in the women poets of the past, but also to the nature of the lyric poem itself, which frequently uses forms of repetition – from rhyme, refrain, and metre to pastiche and intertextuality – to mark out its own time, a time both in and out of history. The poem takes a set of phrases from a book published at a specific point in time – 1979 – and alters them so that they speak from no fixed time, unless perhaps an unending, idealised literary nineteenth century into which McGuckian's persona can step: 'I am a Platonic admirer of her / Flowing, Watteau gowns, the volume / of Petrarch in her lap.'[38] Angela Leighton observes that poetry, particularly lyric poetry, is the 'genre that has been least amenable to history's "straight" time' and that 'has not readily fitted any evolutionary narrative of political feminism'.[39] The lyric poem, she writes, brings together various kinds of time – social and private, but also historical, narrative, metrical, and rhythmical – 'in a force field more tense and complex than that of any other genre', existing at 'the stress point of their meeting'.[40] It is perhaps no surprise, then, that the history of Irish women's poetry turns out to be, among other things, a history of complex engagements with, and challenges to, history itself, intent on showing 'that the quality of the historian's witness depends on him or her seeing the intervening glass, as much as seeing the light that comes through it'.[41] If what Irish women poets seek, when they conjure foremothers, is continuity, they also seek difference: some evidence that the received poetics of the nation is not the inevitable, the necessary, or the only possible poetics.

2

To 'introduce' means to lead or pull; an introduction should take a reader courteously by the arm and guide them into the book that follows. Our task here is to bring you to a clear and comfortable vantage point from which you can see how the history of Irish women's poetry coheres. And yet we have felt a contradictory impulse, too, to underline the incompleteness of our own narrative: to point up fragmentation, obscurity, and neglect; to undo the impression of a linear history and show you instead

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'a history which is defined by loss and fracture'. The present volume enters a field that is intensely concerned with debates around canonicity, animated, first, by the extra-poetic interventions of women poets themselves – most famously Eavan Boland's critique of the stifling iconography of Mother Ireland – and then by the landmark publication of the three-volume gender-imbalanced *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1991), followed by its two-volume supplement, *Vols IV & V* (2002). The latter, which undertook exemplary recovery work, has proved decisive in opening up the field of Irish women's poetry for study. The problem is that writing the history of Irish women's poetry inevitably courts the risk of 'consolidating simply an alternative singular history of Irish literature and poetry to the male-dominated history it challenges, albeit now one including women writers'; that a volume like the present one might win 'a certain group of poets a seat at the table of Irish poetry' when it should be 'seeking the destruction of this inherently limiting table'.[42]

The *Field Day Anthology* was, from the outset, conceived as an act of what Linda Hutcheon has termed 'interventionist literary history'.[43] By presenting Irish writing as a coherent body of work developing across time, it sought to mark the moment at which Irish literature took control of its own canonicity. The construction of an Irish literary history would give legitimacy and authority to Irishness itself, the strategic power of the teleological narrative outweighing 'the danger of co-optation'[44] inherent in making use of the very narrative model that had devalued and excluded Irish writing in the first place. If feminist criticism has taught us that the concept of canonicity itself provides the framework for the erasure of women's writing – that to conceive of a literary tradition is 'almost inevitably to marginalise and exclude' – then in Ireland 'the desire to align literary expression with the imagined nation has been a further, persistent obstacle to the recognition of women's literary and cultural production'.[45] The first three *Field Day* volumes were published at a moment when the feminist recovery project was already in full swing; when they drew considerable criticism for 'the absence of women from [the] editorial board, the sparse number of women writers included, and the lack of attention paid to significant events in Irish history which had particular impact on Irish women',[46] the controversy galvanised the production of feminist criticism and literature further. In the two decades since, it has sometimes seemed that the only effective response to an Irish literary history that excludes women's writing, given the power of the teleological narrative, has been to insist on the centrality of women to the canon, by recovering voices and making arguments for their importance that centre

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on traditional notions of literary value and on the filling in of 'gaps' in the story. If that has been the pragmatic approach for writers, publishers, and scholars concerned with the 'mundane' but 'important' issues of 'how to get into print, stay in print, get reviewed, be taken seriously',[47] it has co-existed with a persistent acknowledgement of the costs of complicity in the evolutionary narrative. The editors of *Field Day IV & V* sought to undo the canon of Irish women's writing by underlining its provisionality even as they wrote it.[48] Still, establishing the significance and quality of Irish women's poetry in the context of a literary culture deeply wedded to the idea of a national canon has made it difficult to take the poetry of the past on its own terms, and it has certainly militated against making space in the history of women's poetry for those writers who do not fit the narratives under construction. More work is needed to achieve both of these tasks, even as the dedication with which feminist criticism has complicated and expanded our understanding of Irish poetry deserves celebration in the present volume.

If our decision to undertake this history has been a pragmatic one – a conscious taking-on of a form with the power to contest the mainstream narrative – we have also sought, in putting together this volume, to reflect the anti-canonising activities that have determinedly textured feminist criticism in Irish poetry, as scholars have painstakingly built, not a roll-call of major figures, but a picture of multiplicity and complexity. Following their example, some individual poets whose position would be guaranteed in a history of Irish women *poets*, were such a history to be written – and, arguably, whose position in *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Poets* (2017) *should* have been guaranteed – have not received individual chapters here, in order to broaden our focus. Meanwhile, we follow *Field Day IV & V* by beginning the history of Irish women's poetry in the medieval period to highlight the fact that women's involvement in song-making and poem-making far predates the emergence of the idea of the nation state and 'precludes the reliance on "the nation" as a central structural or conceptual framework'.[49] As John Goodby has written, the very existence of Irish women poets 'challenges perhaps *the* major basis on which much Irish poetry is founded'.[50] He quotes Clair Wills:

> [T]he representation of the Irish land as a woman stolen, raped, possessed by the alien invader is not merely one mythic narrative among many, but, in a literary context, it is *the* myth, its permutations so various and ubiquitous it can be hard to recognise them for what they are.[51]

While here we introduce our volume with a focus on the processes of recovery and reclamation, the chapter by Anne Fogarty acts as a

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complementary introduction, examining the processes by which the works of women poets have been sidelined, critiquing a patriarchal national poetics that has too often elevated symbols of femininity while failing to attend to actual women, and exposing the logics behind the inattention to Irish women poets. We have arranged the chapters of this volume in roughly chronological order for ease of access; however, just as we have doubled up on introductions, many of the chapters overlap or double back, reflecting the impossibility and undesirability of a singular narrative.

In a 1992 essay, responding to Boland's critique of the Irish tradition and the picture she draws of patriarchal erasure, Anne Stevenson committed the small but revealing error of misgendering the medieval poet Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe, mistaking him for a woman. Stevenson cites a conversation with John Montague, who reassures her that women are to be found everywhere in the Irish and Irish-language tradition – even if, in words of Montague's quoted by Stevenson, 'psychologically, a female poet has always seemed an absurdity'.[52] One useful side-effect of Stevenson's essay was its inspiring Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill to write her fulminating retort, 'What Foremothers?'. Coming as it did from the leading modern Irish-language poet, Ní Dhomhnaill's essay carried considerable weight. The picture it draws, however, is as devastating as it is eloquent. Ní Dhomhnaill cites the poem of Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe's in which he describes himself as named after St Brigid,[53] and diagnoses a pattern of men (such as John Montague) acknowledging female experience only to appropriate and overwrite it with their own. The canons of Old and Middle Irish, as Ní Dhomhnaill describes them, and as recapitulated here by Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha in Chapter 1, are bleakly lacking in named women poets, though the poems of Gormlaith and the lament of the Hag of Beara (*An Chailleach Bhéarra*) speak tantalisingly, if anonymously, from that world.

Entry into the canon of bardic poetry in the Early Modern period, as shown by Danielle Clarke and Sarah McKibben in Chapter 2, came courtesy of accommodation to severely delimiting male codes of performance. In the early seventeenth century, Cú Chonnacht Óg Mág Uidhir sent a love poem to Brighid, the daughter of the Earl of Kildare. It is a polished lyric in the *deibhidh* metre, composed on his behalf by his court bard Eochaidh Ó hEodhasa. Unusually, the teenaged Brighid replies. Her poem, 'A mhacaoimh dhealbhas an dán' is written in the popular *óglachas* metre and invites Cú Chonnacht to drop his pretence of authorship, given the poem's stamp of bardic scholarship. Brighid apologises for her lack of craft while also taking aim at the edifice of male convention, as when she

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spurns her veiled admirer with 'Is cuma liomsa cia hé / ach nadh deachadh dh'éag dom' ghrádh' ('I do not care whose name it is: / He would not die for my love').[54] This is the last we hear from Brighid Chill Dara. Other female voices from this period speak from their own marginal zones, as in the case of Caitilín Dubh (*fl.* 1620s), author of an elegy for the Protestant loyalist (but Irish-speaking) Donnchadh Ó Briain, commending his memory to James VI and I – emphatically not the behaviour expected of the bardic sons of Erin commemorated in Daniel Corkery's *The Hidden Ireland*. In the Anglophone tradition, poets such as Mary Sidney Herbert, Anne Southwell, and Katherine Philips explore their marginality from their positions as colonial Protestant writers, while still engaging sympathetically with Ireland as setting and subject matter. The network of connections between writers and readers is often complex, but the picture that emerges comprehensively deepens our understanding of Irish poetry from this period.

So piecemeal has the early history of Irish women's poetry been, that it has been easy to present Ní Chonaill's astonishing lament for her murdered husband a century and a half later as a one-off, and indeed it is in just those terms that the poem appears in Thomas Kinsella's *New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (1986), in which it features as the sole poem authored by a woman, albeit in a man's (Kinsella's) translation. But as Tríona Ní Shíocháin shows in Chapter 3, this is to ignore the rich hinterland of 'oral aesthetics' behind the text, an oral tradition which Angela Bourke radically foregrounded in *Field Day IV*, and of which Ní Chonaill's lament is a crowning exemplar. As with the study of oral literature, archipelagic scholarship, intent on rebalancing the 'casual anglocentricity' of much literary criticism,[55] has proven a fruitful means to broaden our understanding of women's contribution to poetry in this period. Sarah Prescott argues in Chapter 4 that 'what we might begin to term "archipelagic feminism" is central to the development of an ongoing and still incomplete recovery project of women's writing', since it enables us to see more clearly and build a more nuanced portrait of writers 'who have been doubly marginalized by gender and geographical context and whose texts have, as a result, been understudied, undervalued, and misunderstood'. Prescott shows women poets of the eighteenth century to be politically engaged and expansive in their work and, by discussing writers not often explored, adds complexity to the project of recovery.

Starting with Claire Connolly in the *Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, scholars have increasingly taken on board the notion of Irish Romanticism as a distinct and meaningful term, and have argued that any

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history of that term would need to account for 'an "Irish" literature that developed both outside and inside Ireland'.[56] In Chapter 5, Catherine Jones examines the engagement of Irish women poets of the Romantic period with the politics of their age, while analysing their relationship to their British and Irish literary predecessors and contemporaries. Offering a sweeping account of the era, her essay moves from the engagement of Henrietta Battier and Mary Leadbeater with the politics of the 1790s, to the post-Union period and the circle of writers associated with two interrelated families, the Sheridans and the Lefanus, in Dublin, before looking north to the work of two Ulster women poets, Mary Balfour and Anne Lutton. The final section considers Louisa Stuart Costello's poetic response to Napoleon's career, her cosmopolitanism, and her work as a translator. Since the publication of Connolly's essay, Mary Tighe's body of work in particular has increasingly come into view. Her influential epic poem, *Psyche, or the Legend of Love* (1805), as well as her technically impressive shorter works, engaged the central issues of the period, often in advance of writers now considered canonical. Stephen Behrendt dedicates Chapter 6 to recounting the vicissitudes of Tighe's career and afterlife as an illuminating instance of how Romantic-era women poets have been devalued and revalued only for Irish women poets to be read, too often, along with their English counterparts without a sufficient understanding of their distinctiveness.

Antoinette Quinn notes that 'feminism's notorious antipathy to nationalism' has meant that 'women who wrote under the sign of ethnicity have rarely benefited from the recuperative feminist literary scholarship of the last two decades of the twentieth century'.[57] Lucy Collins' *Poetry by Women in Ireland: A Critical Anthology 1870–1970* (2012) has been a breakthrough publication in advancing our understanding of the poetry of this era, aided by thoughtful works of scholarship including Karen Steele's *Women, Press and Politics During the Irish Revival* (2007), Catherine Morris' *Alice Milligan and the Irish Cultural Revival* (2012), and Anna Pilz and Whitney Standlee's *Irish Women's Writing 1878–1922: Advancing the Cause of Liberty* (2016), which together amply demonstrate that 'the study of Irish women's literary works within their historical, socio-economic, and political contexts is vital to gaining a fuller understanding of the literary history of Ireland'.[58] In Chapter 7, Collins explores how women poets intervened and participated in masculine constructions of the ideal nation, expanding the view of literary production by Irish poets in the transition towards independence. The career of Dora Sigerson, also known as Dora Sigerson Shorter, moves between the worlds of the

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nineteenth-century nationalist ballad and the Edwardian lyric. Sigerson is a poet who has arguably still to find her audience, but whose work, explored by Matthew Campbell in Chapter 8, has much to tell us about how Irish women's poetry has been read and received over the last century.

Women poets of the modernist period 'belong to a literary past which is even more irrecuperable than that of the supposed lost generation of male poets' despite having established substantial literary reputations in their lifetimes.[59] Feminist Irish critics have seen the need to point out repeatedly that the 'absence of this generation of poets from later anthologies has radically distorted the history, not only of Irish women's writing, but also of modern Irish poetry itself',[60] and the feminist recovery project in Irish poetry has focused on this period with peculiar intensity. Important essays by Anne Fogarty, Alex Davis, Susan Schreibman, Moynagh Sullivan, Kathy D'Arcy and Anne Mulhall have brought the work of mid-century poets to critical attention and uncovered some of the factors leading to their exclusion from Irish literary history.[61] In Chapter 9 Sarah Bennett shows how, critically at odds with both their Revivalist inheritance and modernist alternatives, Irish women poets of this period carved out a space of their own. The figure of Freda Laughton, who published one collection before vanishing from print, has become emblematic of a mid-century Northern modernist moment that failed to achieve traction; but in restoring marginalised voices to the record in Chapter 10, Jaclyn Allen shows that a different picture of Northern Irish poetry in its true diversity is possible. Moynagh Sullivan's Chapter 11 uncovers the work of Carla Lanyon Lanyon, who has been wholly neglected by critical studies until now, and eloquently and convincingly interprets her neglect in the context of her poetry's 'formal resistance to the hyper-individualism that is the ideological claim flag of settler colonialism'.

While archipelagic criticism has widened our understanding of the poetry of the past, reading transnationally reaps lavish rewards in more recent women's poetry, allowing us to see, for instance, that the radical line in American poetry, flowing from Rukeyser and Rich and beyond, and frequently crossing the ocean to influence Irish poets, is itself partly Irish in origin. The poet Siobhán Campbell, pointing to the work of Lola Ridge, writes that, 'at our own perilous moment in time [. . .] we could do with touchstone poets unafraid to burst things asunder'.[62] Ridge's work has been 'recovered' by literary studies several times over; as Terese Svoboda makes clear in a 2016 biography, she is a pivotal figure through whom we can glimpse a range of modernisms – feminist, experimental, immigrant, cosmopolitan, and national. In Chapter 12, Daniel Tobin's consideration

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of Ridge's Irish identity, and how attending to her hybridity challenges the boundaries of national literatures, unsettles any sense of her belonging in a singular canon.

Modern women poets writing in the Irish language occupy a unique place, historically, between the vibrancy of the Irish folk tradition and the frequently encountered sense that they are lonely workers in a dying language. Patricia Coughlan's Chapter 14 explores the figure of Máire Mhac an tSaoi, who, when she emerged as a force in Irish-language poetry in mid-twentieth-century Ireland, combined a distinguished pedigree with a disarming emotional frankness and capacity to transgress the callow gender norms of the day. Her best-known poem, 'Ceathrúintí Mháire Ní Ógáin', blazes with a sensual frankness all the more remarkable for escaping the attentions of the censorship board (no book in Irish was ever banned under the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act). As a young critic, Mhac an tSaoi often intervened trenchantly in post-war debates about what direction Irish-language poetry might move in next. A less than flattering review by her of Seán Ó Ríordáin's *Eireaball Spideoige* (1952) enraged that poet, and he took his revenge in 'Banfhile' ('Woman poet'), in which he notoriously insists that, being poetry, a woman cannot be a poet ('Ní file an bhean ach filíocht').[63] As Daniela Theinová shows in Chapter 13, on Irish-language poetry in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the tension between female agency and imprisoning exemplification was a keenly felt stand-off. Born in the Connemara Gaeltacht, Caitlín Maude was a committed language activist, and has long been represented on the Leaving Certificate syllabus with her poem 'Géibheann' ('Prison'), which ends, 'tagann na céadta daoine / chuile lá // a dhéanfadh rud ar bith / dom / ach mé a ligean amach' ('hundreds of people / come daily // who would do anything / for me / but let me out'.[64] The poem can be read as a cry of Gaelic protest in an inhospitable Anglophone world, but can just as easily be interpreted as the cry of an Irish woman poet against her patriarchal elders.

Maude's early death meant her promise was largely unrealised, but the emergence of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill in the 1980s galvanised modern Irish women's poetry like few events before or since. The narrative of decline that stalks so much modern writing in Irish is a secondary consideration amid the overwhelming sensual treasures of Ní Dhomhnaill's work from *An Dealg Droighin* (1981) and *Féar Suaithinseach* (1984) onwards. Supremely hospitable to translation by a range of Irish poets including Michael Hartnett, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Medbh McGuckian, and Paul Muldoon, Ní Dhomhnaill is most often encountered in the hybrid or

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mermaid form (she has written at length of these mythical beasts) of the dual-text edition. In Chapter 16, Kenneth Keating explores how existing between two languages has allowed bilingual Irish poetry stereophonic and transgressive qualities not available on the monoglot plane, as permeability and slipping across boundaries becomes an enabling aesthetic. In striking contrast is the work of Biddy Jenkinson, who prohibits the translation of her work into English, calling her stand 'a small rude gesture to those who think that everything can be harvested and stored without loss in an English-speaking Ireland'. Attempts to set up her as the purist foil to the more linguistically promiscuous Ní Dhomhnaill are doomed to failure, however. As David Wheatley shows in Chapter 15, her work too rampages transgressively through the patriarchal tradition, and is full of unruly female presences (for example the monstrous cannibal Mis) and slangy encounters with modernity.

Younger poets Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh, Aifric Mac Aodha, and Caitríona Ní Chléirchín share this inheritance while taking the Irish-language tradition in their own directions. In 'Deireadh na Feide', Ní Ghearbhuigh describes a whistling language used by shepherds in the Pyrenees, its ultra-minority status surprisingly casting Irish for once in the position of the majoritarian language. In her 'Gabháil Syrinx', Mac Aodha writes of Syrinx's flight from the pursuing Pan and transformation into a reed. The resulting poem is reed-like in its frailty, but trembles with shockwaves of sexual and mythical energy: 'Anáil mhná, ní scaoileann / ach eadarghlór ar tinneall: / i láthair na gabhála, / ceiliúrann sí is critheann' ('A woman won't breathe / unless ready, between words: / at the site of ambush / she sways, transformed').[65] Defying all odds, the Irish-language tradition joyously continues its generational metamorphosis.

The role of the Catholic Church in women's poetry is as paradoxical as it is central. Decades of its disproportionate influence on legislation took a baleful toll on generations of Irish women, yet the structures and rhythms of women's lived experience in twentieth-century Ireland have been shaped by the Church as by few, if any, other institutions. The deep ambivalences towards its role in Irish life are reflected in the diversity of responses it has produced in Irish women's poetry. Catriona Clutterbuck examines how women poets have interrogated the central role of the Church in Irish history in Chapter 17, looking at how Irish women poets register the damage associated with Catholicism, especially for women, as well as how women poets configure the creative potential of this faith tradition as a key to broader socio-cultural renewal. The 1970s and 80s were a time of intense culture wars in Ireland, as the feminist movement

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did battle with the forces of conservatism over a host of high-profile constitutional issues. It was also a period of feminist awakening in Irish poetry, surveyed by Kit Fryatt in Chapter 18.

The gapped nature of Irish poetic tradition has been, in distinctive ways, a central theme in the poetries of Eavan Boland, Paula Meehan, and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin. In Chapter 19, Maria Johnston examines Ní Chuilleanáin's complex, secretive art, in which the poet probes and reinvents received ideas of the woman poet in the Irish tradition. Ní Chuilleanáin's frequent ekphrastic poems and recourse to metaphors of framing are also ways of rephrasing the central question of what a poem is, and how to approach lyric form afresh. Guinn Batten's Chapter 20 does justice to Boland's incomparable influence on modern Irish women's poetry by addressing her work through the prism not just of Irish nationalist historiography but the European Romantic tradition, from Hegel to Wordsworth and Keats. Among the dramas Boland confronts is personal testimony versus positions of exemplarity, in which the poem speaks for and from absences in the historical record. This often places Boland in conflict with the mythic imperatives of Irish poetry, a dissonance registered by the poet in the jagged surfaces of her texts. Over many decades, the poetry of Paula Meehan has given a voice to urban (Dublin) working class experience, and in doing so, to paraphrase Yeats on Synge, expressed a life that had never before found expression in poetry. Class consciousness is an intrinsic aspect of Meehan's artistic vision, rather than a thematic add-on, and critical engagement with her work requires a decisive reorientation of conventional aesthetic categories, which Kathryn Kirkpatrick achieves in Chapter 21.

The women poets who came of age at the turn of the twenty-first century, including Sinéad Morrissey, Leontia Flynn, and Caitríona O'Reilly, are sometimes associated with a formalist turn in Irish poetry at the time, but, as Tara McEvoy ably shows in Chapter 22, in their embrace of form as in much else besides they are remarkably heterogeneous. All are distinguished by an international perspective, in their influences as much as their subject matter, and an attention to questions of form as embodiment, as well as a focus on the body itself. In their relationships with important precursors including Marianne Moore, Plath, and McGuckian, they enact generational debates through their dialogues with form, from the ghazal and sestina to the chatty intimacies of the verse letter, vindicating the short lyric as a continuing space of freedom and resistance. Responses to experimental writing by Irish women poets, meanwhile, have tended to be framed in terms of the American

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tradition. This has served to obscure the distinctiveness of these poets, both as a strand of the Irish tradition and among themselves, in the highly individual bodies of work produced by Susan Howe, Maggie O'Sullivan, and Catherine Walsh, explored by Nerys Williams in Chapter 23.

Whereas canonical versions of literary history tend to overvalue the figure of the individual author working in isolation, Anne Mulhall has shown through her work on migrant women writers that 'isolation curtails rather than extends' the work of the writer 'who is "out of place" in the space of the nation'.[66] Writers groups, feminist presses, reading series, and other forms of collaboration and co-operation, as well as (eventually) the development of an academic discipline called 'creative writing', have been some of the ways that Irish women have participated in enabling the poetry, its dissemination and its valuing. Such activities are as much an essential part of the story of Irish women's poetry today as they have ever been. Anne Mulhall's closing Chapter 24 surveys the diversity of the present scene and the tenacity with which today's Irish women poets use audacious poetic forms to challenge dominant narratives, enabled by the flourishing of new routes to making and encountering poetry, from the bespoke zine scene to the globalised online performance.

3

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poem 'Translation' is subtitled 'for the reburial of the Magdalenes'.[67] It has its origin in the cremation and reburial in Glasnevin Cemetery in 1993 of the remains of 154 women exhumed from the High Park Convent laundry in Drumcondra, on the sale of that property by the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity. The women in question, the 'Magdalenes' of Ní Chuilleanáin's subtitle, endured forced labour in the convent over decades, having been sequestered there for offences against post-independence Ireland's unforgiving moral code. The cruelty inflicted by the Church has been the subject of passionate denunciation, but Ní Chuilleanáin strikes an eerily calm note, describing the daily work of the laundry and not dwelling on individual tales of abuse. As the poem progresses, however, 'one voice [. . .] sharp as an infant's cry' makes itself heard above the bustle of the laundry. 'Every pocket in her skull blared with the note', Ní Chuilleanáin writes, suggesting this is a mentally formulated but unexpressed response to life in the laundry. 'Allow us now to hear it', the poem continues, before indenting and separating this stanza from the rest of the text:

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Washed clean of idiom • the baked crust
Of words that made my temporary name •
A parasite that grew in me • that spell
Lifted • I lie in earth sifted to dust
Let the bunched keys I bore slacken and fall •
I rise and forget • a cloud over my time.[68]

With her given, inmate's name, the speaker has internalised the language of subservience and shame, as in the reference to her child as a 'parasite', and to her own shadowy presence as 'a cloud over my time'. Chillingly, the poem ends on a note of forgetting as the speaker gives up the struggle, assuming the battle is lost and unaware of the poetic memorialisation in which her words are preserved. It is a powerful gesture by Ní Chuilleanáin, reminding us that the anger we feel at these testimonies was not accompanied, for the women themselves, by agency or autonomy of a kind that could open their prison doors or overturn the stigmas that governed their lives.

Readers sometimes have the impression that 'Translation' was commissioned to be read aloud at a reburial ceremony for the women who were incarcerated at the High Park Convent laundry. This misconception is repeated in crib notes for the Irish state examinations; students and teachers ask Ní Chuilleanáin about the ceremony when she visits schools.[69] It is an attractive misconception, allowing us to imagine that 'Translation' formed part of a ritual with national significance. It is comforting to think that this poem's words might have been spoken at such a moment on our collective behalf, as a performative act of ethical memory. Such a performance would have borne witness to the injustices of involuntary anonymity, indentured labour and criminal neglect by an entire culture, but would also have publicly acknowledged – given the care with which Ní Chuilleanáin places erasure and anonymity at the heart of her poem – that the injustices and erasures of the past are unfinished business. As Emilie Pine insists, such an acknowledgement is an urgent imperative in an Irish culture at risk of fixating on the traumas of the past without adequately thinking through, and taking responsibility for, their implications in the present and future.[70] As it turns out, Ní Chuilleanáin's poem was written for the ceremony to which, like the families of the dead and the living survivors of the laundry, it was not invited. It speaks from the margins, but it is central: it speaks to and on behalf of an entire nation.

Women poets have always done crucial work in our culture's imaginary; their visions and revisions of who we have been, and who we might be, are our essential inheritance as readers, and we lose out when we do not let

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them speak to who we are. In the second introductory chapter of this volume, Anne Fogarty concludes that 'it is imperative for us to replace the disengaged, biased, and negative ethos that has regularly prevailed in academic criticism with a new quest for a relational ontology by which we passionately cross-connect with and attune ourselves to [these] literary texts'. Essays in this volume labour to offer some of the 'more prolonged and in-depth engagement with the work of female poets' for which Fogarty calls. It has been a labour of love. Our contributors have worked through births, bereavements, and major illnesses, not to mention the fallout of the covid-19 pandemic; this, too – the relentless interruption of the work by life – is part of the history of Irish women's poetry. We have been powered by a sense of collaboration not only with the scholars collected or cited here, but also with the women poets who, with ever-increasing volubility, conjure their own poetic tradition, conceived in their hands as pliable, permeable, and enabling of further poetry.

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