Hans-Peter Wagner

A History of British, Irish and American Literature

Third revised and enlarged edition

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Preface

This book attempts to render more accessible those parts of the vast jungle called literature which we normally refer to as British, Irish and American. In order to achieve this task it has been arranged by periods and genres in a way that might seem radically simple to some readers. But every literary history must select and establish an order of some kind in the face of diversity.

British and Irish literature are presented here together in the first part of the book because – notwithstanding national differences and the existence of separate histories of Irish literature[1] – the European literature in English is never simply national. To take just two examples: while most British readers will be aware of the fact that James Joyce was an (expatriate) Irishman, they will consider his writings as part of the heritage in English-language literature; and whereas Roddy Doyle is one of contemporary Ireland's literary stars, his books are again appreciated by readers in Wales, Scotland and England alike. Yet unlike Scotland or Wales (which also have their own heritages and histories[2]) Ireland deserves special attention because of cultural, historical and political events (mostly related to Britain) that have had a deep and lasting influence on literature. One might, for instance, refer to the fact that to this very day the British government has stationed troops in Northern Ireland to maintain the enforced political order. Into the 1980s, people died in Ireland and England because of this fact; as late as November 2005 the Belfast dramatist Gary Mitchell had to go into hiding with his family in order to avoid being killed by the Ulster Defence Organization (UDA) who resented his critical views of the brutality of this para-military organization. Meanwhile, the Celtic Irish culture, including Gaelic, although boosted by educational policies in Dublin, is being overpowered by English much like Breton in France, where a similar phenomenon has occurred. To a certain extent, Irish literature can claim the status of postcolonial writing (the New Literatures in English[3]), but even some Irish critics and writers question that status, claiming a role apart. It is because of this in-between status that Irish literature has not been accorded separate chapters here even while its special role – from James Joyce down to Brian Friel – has been taken into account.

If the terms British and Irish pose a problem in the title of this book, so does American, as the word could be taken to refer to North America. The focus of this book is, however, exclusively on the literature of the United States and excludes Canadian literature[4], with the

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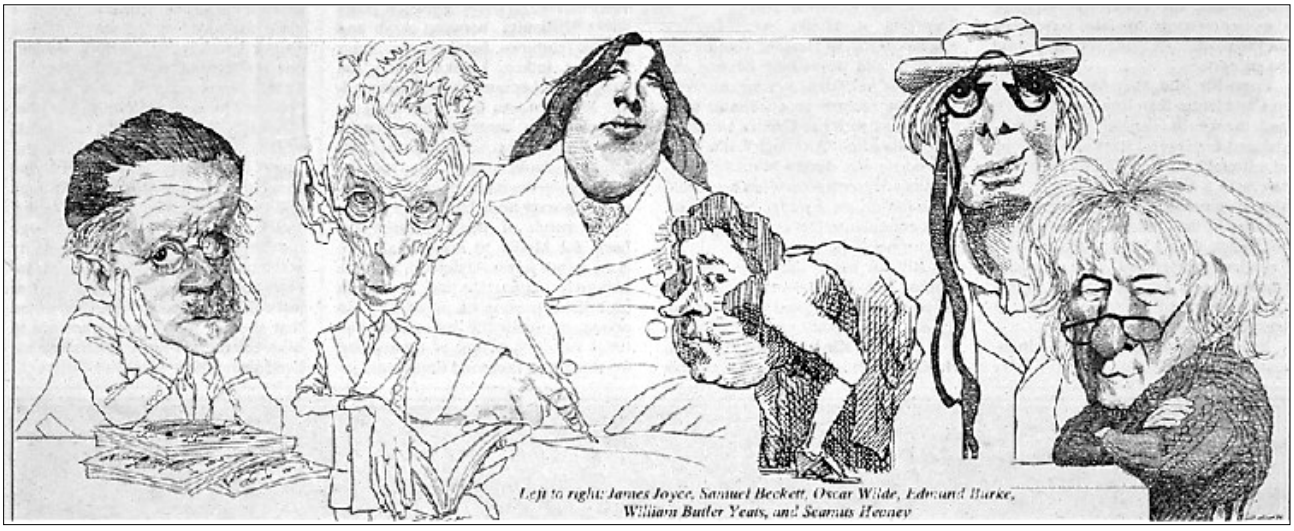
1 See Christina Hunt Mahoney, *Contemporary Irish Literature* (London and New York: St Martin's Press, 1998); Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary, eds. *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature*. 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), and especially Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

2 See, for instance, the literary histories concerned with Scotland, by Roderick Watson, *The Literature of Scotland* (London: Macmillan, 1984); and by Brown and Riach (listed in the bibliographical section); and on Wales, by Meic Stephens, ed. *The New Companion to the Literature of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998).

3 On these literatures only discussed in this book as far as the writers live in Britain, see Christa Jansohn, ed. *Companion to the New Literatures in English* (Berlin: Schmidt, 2002).

4 See Konrad Groß et al., eds. *Kanadische Literaturgeschichte* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2005), and Carol Ann Howells and Eva-Marie Kröller, eds. *The Cambridge History of Canadian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

notable exception of a classic novel by Margaret Atwood reacting to the socio-political climate in the USA.



Major Irish Writers as seen by David Levine

This literary history focuses mainly on the modern period and provides analyses of fiction, poetry, drama, and nonfiction; the latter includes literary criticism, theory, travel writing, and outstanding works in historiography and the social sciences. The book contains illustrations for several reasons. Firstly, because from medieval illuminated manuscripts down to recent hypertexts, art has been an essential part of literature, its mute sister as it were. Thus many nineteenth-century novels first appeared in illustrated versions and some contemporary authors (e.g., Alasdair Gray) insist on illustrating their own works. Secondly, the never ending symbiosis between art and writing in any given period is sufficiently important to warrant the inclusion of some pictorial examples that inspired writers to a degree of which they might not even have been aware. Thirdly, the visual material as well as the brief discussions of movements in art at the beginning of each chapter are supposed to encourage the reader to consider the ways the arts feed on or respond to each other – often in most surprising ways that are far from any correspondence.

If the book has a particular focus, it is on contemporary literature. This means that the reader will find discussions here of some genres and developments that have been neglected by other literary histories; important examples are children's literature and the various subdivisions of the popular market – performance art (integrating drama and poetry), television drama, crime fiction, science fiction, fantasy and horror, the Western, comics, and hypertext. Discussing both the great works of highbrow literature and representative writings of the popular canon, the book takes cognizance of what readers (including students) are told to read by the popes defending the literary canon and of what the post-capitalist market offers by way of entertainment in an alternative canon. Both areas are extremely important, and none should be neglected, since they contribute to the creation of postmodern mentalities. To illustrate this as it were with an American example – the novels of Thomas Pynchon and the Superman comics series are both worth studying, not because of any inherent value they might possess but because they contribute to, and reflect to some extent, the establishment of the American mind in our time.

Finally, it is a great pleasure to acknowledge the help of several people in the preparation of this book. Santina Rupp dealt most professionally with parts of the index. Ulrike Lackner

has shown great patience with my exasperating wishes for alterations in preparing the electronic version of the manuscript; Birgit Pretzsch and Jan Hollm were my first and most critical readers who gave me their time and literary judgments when they had more important things to do; Dirk Vanderbeke enlightened me on some popular genres. Odile made it possible for me to write this book and I hope that I shall have enough time left in my life to thank her for this; and Dr Otto proved a daring and understanding publisher by granting me my particular wishes concerning the make-up of this book.

Preface to the second edition

In this second edition, errors and typos have been corrected. The major new features, in addition to several new illustrations, are the updapting of the chapters and appendices on the twentieth century and the complementation of the various bibliographies. In fact, the sections on contemporary culture and literature and the chronological tables now extend into the twenty-first century, with a cut-off date at 2010. I wish to express my gratitude to Dr Otto, WVT Trier, for his support all along the way. I wish to thank my most constructive critic over the years, Professor Dr Anja Müller, whose review of the book proved immensely helpful as did her additional suggestions. Without the constant support of Odile over the years, the second edition could not have appeared.

Saarbrücken, January 2010 Peter Wagner

Preface to the third edition

In this third edition, errors and typos have been corrected and author dates have been brought up to 2021. The chronological tables now also have a cut-off date at 2021. The major new feature of this third edition is the integration of two chapters on a vastly successful new form of drama – TV and web series. In the section on postmodern British and Irish literature, an entire chapter deals in depth with the development of TV drama series challenging traditional performances in the theatre. Similarly, the chapter on postmodern American drama has been augmented with an extensive and detailed analysis of contemporary American TV series (up to 2021) that have radically changed the landscape of drama in the United States and around the world.

I wish to thank Dr Thomas Krämer, M.A., for his helpful suggestions and corrections, and Dr Otto at WVT Trier for his constant and continuing support of this publication project.

Saarbrücken, July 2021 Peter Wagner

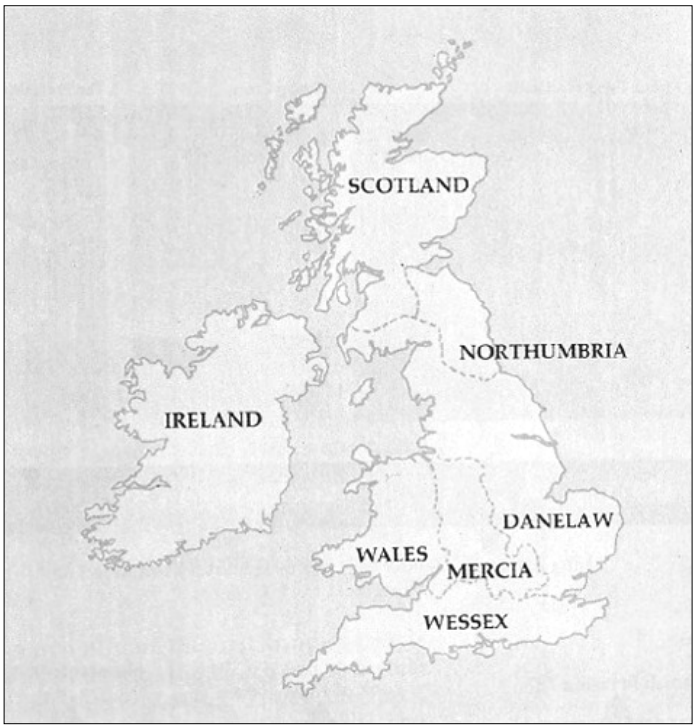
BRITISH AND IRISH LITERATURE

I. The Anglo-Saxon Period (449-1066)

1. General Background

Following the practice of linguistics, literary historians have divided early English literature into the Anglo-Saxon (or Old English) and the Middle English periods. The Anglo-Saxon period began around the year 450 with the invasion of England by Jutes, Angles, and Saxons from Denmark and northern Germany.

Among the earliest inhabitants of Britain were Celtic tribes. Subdued in the first century by the Romans under Julius Caesar and Claudius, they remained under Roman rule until the early fifth century, when the Roman legions were required at home to protect the capital. Traces of the Roman occupation can be found in English geographical names ending in -caster or -chester (Lancaster, Dorchester), which are derived from the Latin "castra" (camp). With the Romans gone, successive waves of Anglo-Saxons gradually conquered the south of England. The Celtic Britons were killed or forced into slavery; many escaped to Cornwall, to the mountains of Wales and Scotland, or across the sea to Brittany. It was during this period when the Celts retreated that the legends of King Arthur and his knights were invented. Celtic languages (Welsh in Wales, and Gaelic in Scotland and Ireland) are still spoken today, but the number of native speakers is steadily decreasing.



A Map of the British Isles and Ireland in the Anglo-Saxon Period

The Germanic tribes brought with them a common language called Anglo-Saxon or Old English, although different dialects existed in the various kingdoms into which the country was divided. The more important among these kingdoms were Kent, Northumbria, Mercia, and Wessex. Under the Wessex **King Alfred** (871-899) the West Saxon dialect gained a leading role. Alfred made his capital, Winchester, an intellectual centre in England and forced the Vikings (Danes), who tried to invade the country, to retreat to the northeast.

Roman and Irish missionaries brought England into contact with the Christian-Latin culture. **Saint Augustine** arrived in 597 and made Canterbury an important seat of Latin literature and learning. In Northumbria, Irish monks founded monasteries that became famous throughout Europe. The first religious poets, **Caedmon** and **Cynewulf**, lived in the northern half of England. Anglo-Saxon culture and literature came to an end with the Battle of Hastings (1066), when **King Harold** and his noblemen were defeated by **William the Conqueror**, Duke of Normandy.

2. Poetry

Anglo-Saxon poetry includes short and often witty riddles and magic formulas and the longer epic or elegiac poems telling of heroes and courageous deeds. *Beowulf*, a narrative poem of more than 3,000 lines, is the best known Anglo-Saxon saga. It contains elements of earlier sagas and blends the mythical and supernatural with the real.

> *Beowulf* survives in a manuscript from the tenth century, but it was probably composed during the eighth century. The poem relates the deeds of Beowulf, a Danish hero, who sails from Sweden to Denmark to come to the help of his brother Hrothgar, king of the Danes. Hrothgar's castle and land are ravaged by a monster of human shape called Grendel. Beowulf fights the monster and tears away his arm. Grendel, although mortally wounded, escapes, leaving tracks of blood that lead to a cave in the sea. Hrothgar's court is overjoyed at Beowulf's victory, but Grendel's mother, determined to avenge her son, appears and carries off a Danish knight. Beowulf follows Grendel's mother into the sea-cave, kills her and returns to the court with the head of Grendel he has cut off. At Hrothgar's death, Beowulf is proclaimed king. Many years later, another fight takes place, this time involving an aged Beowulf and a fire-breathing dragon. The old hero slays the dragon but eventually dies of its fiery breath. Beowulf is then burned on a pyre, and his people lament his death.

The poem provides a vivid picture of life and the way of thinking of the Anglo-Saxons. Interwoven with the pagan story are also some Christian elements.

The alliterative power of Old English poetry, which used head-rhymes (end-rhymes were introduced by the Normans after 1066), has had some influence on English and American poets in the modern period (see, for instance, the poetry of **John Donne** and of **Gerard Manley Hopkins**). **Ezra Pound** was considerably impressed by this kind of poetry and employed its techniques in his own verse. Pound translated into modern English the first half of an Old English elegy, *The Seafarer*, trying to preserve the poetic techniques of the original. Here is an excerpt from the poem, together with Pound's translation, providing an impression of Old English verse.

> Bitre breostceare gebiden hæbbe,
> Gecunnad in ceole cearselda fela,
> atol yÞa gewealc, Þæmec oft bigeat
> nearo nihtwaco æt nacan stefnan
> Þonne he be clifum cnossað. Calde geÞrungen
>
> Wæron mine fet, forste gebunden
> caldum clommum, Þær Þa ceare seofedun
> hat' ymb heortan; hungor innan slat
> merewerges mod.
>
> Bitter breast-cares have I abided,
> Known on my keel many a care's hold,
> And dire sea-surge, and there I oft spent
> Narrow nightwatch nigh the ship's head
> While she tossed close to cliffs. Coldly afflicted,
> My feet were by frost benumbed.
> Chill its chains are; chafing sighs
> Hew my heart round and hunger begot
> Mere-weary mood …