

Border Country: Postcolonial Ecocriticism in Ireland

Lisa FitzGerald
Université Rennes 2, France
lisfitz@gmail.com

DOI: [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.37536/ECOZONA.2020.11.2.3504](https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2020.11.2.3504)



Abstract

Ecocriticism in Irish studies, and the spatial turn which preceded it, emerged from the field's concentration on postcolonial discourse and the inequalities inherent in Irish modernity. The focus on place as a means of establishing identity, particularly within the context of colonial and imperialist narratives, led to a dynamic discussion of literary representations of the environment in Irish studies depicting fraught relationships between land and scarcity. And yet, there was resistance to engaging with the key debates in Anglo-American ecocriticism on a systematic level. As Eóin Flannery observed in 2016, "the field of Irish cultural studies has yet to exploit fully the critical and analytical resources of ecological criticism." So far, the discourse around depictions of space has been principally in the service of Irish cultural studies, asking how the relationship with place has made Ireland what it is today. One of the interesting aspects of the incursion of ecocriticism in the field of Irish studies is how environmental considerations have come to be recognised as a part of the identity discourse. As the title suggests, the island of Ireland is also a border country in that it encompasses a contentious border, and two distinct identities, from both Northern Ireland and the Republic. This essay examines the emergence of ecocritical discourse in Irish studies and explores the ongoing dynamic between postcolonialism and environmental criticism with respect to the Irish canon.

Keywords: Irish studies, postcolonialism, border politics.

Resumen

La ecocrítica en los estudios irlandeses, y el giro espacial que le precedió, surgieron de la concentración del campo en el discurso poscolonial y las desigualdades inherentes a la modernidad irlandesa. El enfoque del lugar como forma de establecer la identidad, especialmente en el contexto de las narrativas coloniales e imperialistas, llevó a una discusión dinámica de las representaciones literarias del medio ambiente en los estudios irlandeses que describen las tensas relaciones entre la tierra y la escasez. Y, sin embargo, se resistieron a participar en los debates clave de la ecocrítica angloamericana de forma sistemática. Como observó Eóin Flannery en 2016, "el campo de los estudios culturales irlandeses aún tiene que explotar plenamente los recursos críticos y analíticos de la crítica ecológica." Hasta ahora, el discurso en torno a las representaciones del espacio ha estado principalmente al servicio de los estudios culturales irlandeses, con la pregunta de cómo la relación con el lugar ha convertido a Irlanda en lo que es hoy. Uno de los aspectos interesantes de la incursión de la ecocrítica en el campo de los estudios irlandeses es cómo las consideraciones ambientales han llegado a ser reconocidas como parte del discurso de la identidad. Como sugiere el título, la isla de Irlanda también es un país fronterizo en el sentido de que abarca una frontera conflictiva y dos identidades distintas, tanto de Irlanda del Norte como de la República. Este ensayo examina el surgimiento del discurso ecocrítico en los estudios irlandeses y explora la dinámica actual entre el poscolonialismo y la crítica ambiental con respecto al modelo irlandés.

Palabras clave: Estudios irlandeses postcolonialismo, política fronteriza.

Territorial disputes between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland resurfaced in 2018-2019, as the border (first drawn in 1922) returned to the fore in Brexit negotiations. Border politics seem as if they too are potentially emerging, with the troubling re-shifting of power dynamics. South of that soon-to-be UK/EU border, in the Irish Republic, the uncertainty has immediately created a vacuum where, on both sides, a return to the violence of the past has been raised as a possibility. For those living in the shadow of civil unrest, the decade covered by the time frame of this anniversary issue has ended where it began, in political unrest and suspicion. Identity politics are rewriting boundary walls. Since the Good Friday Agreement (otherwise known as the Belfast agreement) was signed in 1998, there has been a softening of the border separating Northern Ireland from the Irish Republic. Now that the frontier is being redrawn, and potentially reinforced, as an EU boundary (and the most complex EU boundary by far with some 300 potential crossings for both human and other-than-human animals), new questions open up as to how this change will be framed at a cultural, economic, as well as a geographical level.

Given the current political climate prompted by the UK withdrawal from the EU, the environmental humanities can prove valuable in addressing systematic issues of land disenfranchisement. The period of unprecedented economic growth that occurred before the near-collapse of the banking system has perhaps little connection with the environmental concerns inherent in ecocritical and environmental humanities discourse, but the reality of the events of 2008 proved difficult for both the human and the other-than-human world. Political and economic instability and the boom and bust socio-environmental development have undermined the shaky foundations upon which a, perhaps unsurprisingly, anxious relationship to landscape has been evident in Irish studies.

Postcolonialism has remained the theoretical framework used by many Irish Studies scholars. Deforestation, language loss, famine and emigration have all intersected at a point where environmental attachment (or indeed detachment) has become a placeholder for issues of justice, dependence and responsibility. The point where the initially distant fields of ecocriticism and postcolonialism intersected in a potent way was the evidence, or lack thereof, of environmental justice for communities and groups that suffer disproportionately. Rob Nixon argued in 2011 that, "a broad silence has characterized environmentalists' stance towards postcolonial literature and theory while postcolonial critics have typically been no less silent on the subject of environmental literature," but this ignored Huggan and Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2010), and important studies drawing together the two fields of research have since appeared (233).

Although Irish studies arrived late to that sense of the ecocritical importance of thinking about the role of place in cultural representation, it nevertheless had a strong history of interest in nature writing. Early publications such as John Wilson Foster's edited collection, *Nature in Ireland: A Scientific and Cultural History* (1997) foreground the role of nature in Irish literature. Poets, dramatists and novelists, from W.B. Yeats and J.M. Synge through to contemporary writers such as Paula Meehan and Seamus Heaney,

have focused on landscape as a theme. The craft of cultivation and the craft of wordplay became, as is evident in the fiction, poetry and drama, indistinguishable. That is to say, the terminology, imagery and structure in much of the literature reflected the preoccupations of the author. What played out was quite often a metaphorical examination of the trauma of depopulation in the rural areas as much as it was a sensitive rendition of the landscape itself. Irish studies was reluctant to take on board the early pointers of ecocriticism because first-wave ecocritical studies brought with them the fetishization of the landscape as an uncultivated wilderness. Although there has been nostalgia and sentimentality running through much Irish writing, it is often more evident in Irish diasporic literature. Irish Studies initially ignored ecocriticism because of the dichotomies between wilderness and domestic landscape, solitary contemplative individuals and dispossessed rural populations.

In terms of the dissemination of ecocritical principles in the field of literary and cultural studies in Ireland, the last decade has seen many public vehicles for the environmental humanities and ecocriticism in Ireland. Two major conferences on “Ireland and Ecocriticism” were organised by Maureen O’Connor at University College, Cork in 2010 and 2014. The 2018 American Conference for Irish Studies (ACIS) annual conference in University College, Cork focused on the theme of ‘Environments of Irish Studies. The International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR) was due to hold its annual conference of 2020 in the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUI Galway) centred on the theme of “Theatre Ecologies: Environment, Sustainability, and Politics”, before being postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic. Publications have also reflected the growing interest in the environmental humanities in Irish studies: along with the thematic issue on Irish ecocriticism in the *Journal of Ecocriticism* in 2013, a special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* was published on the theme of environmental humanities in 2017 and edited by Maureen O’Connor and Derek Gladwin. Book publications examining Irish literature from an ecocritical perspective began with Christine Cusick’s edited collection, *Out of the Earth: Ecocritical Readings of Irish Texts* (2010), which adopted a multidisciplinary approach to place in Irish literature, with chapters focusing on such writers as Edna O’Brien, Martin McDonagh, and Elisabeth Bowen alongside Eóin Flannery’s examination of post-famine travel writing in “Ireland of the welcomes: colonialism, tourism and the Irish landscape” and Cusick’s concluding interview with author and cartographer, Tim Robinson. Subsequent publications such as Eamon Wall’s *Writing the Irish West: Ecologies and Traditions* (2011), *The Pastoral Tradition in Contemporary Irish Poetry* (2011) by Donna Potts, Robert Brazeau and Derek Gladwin’s edited collection, *Eco-Joyce: The Environmental Imagination of James Joyce* (2014), Eóin Flannery’s *Ireland and Ecocriticism: Literature, History and Environmental Justice* (2016), and Tina Karen-Pusse and Sabine Lenore Müller’s edited collection, *From Ego to Eco: Mapping Shifts from Anthropocentrism to Ecocentrism* (2017) have engaged with mainstream environmental concepts and arguments.

Historical resonances have remained, however. The Irish cultural and literary revival at the turn of the 20th century did much to frame how nature has been seen from a cultural perspective. Poets and artists have sought to portray the Irish relationship with

and experience of nature as something deeper than that with urban areas and profoundly removed from the city. The prevailing opinion has been that the rural experience of nature and a supposedly direct relationship with the land are the true intersection between the Irish psyche and the surrounding natural world, investing them with an esoteric quality. That depth of feeling between rural communities and the parts of Ireland where they lived and that intensity of expression continued through the 60s and 70s. It is only since the collapse of the Celtic Tiger economy that there is an increased realisation that what was a minority or underlying strand of Irish cultural expression was driven by ideological forces elaborating on a supposed return to authenticity. There has been a proliferation of artistic output that has focused on the spatial trauma resulting from the collapse of the economy and the conditions imposed by the International Monetary Fund in their bailout. Ghost estates (unoccupied and abandoned housing estates that have become a visual reminder of the building boom) have served as a motif symbolising disillusionment with the romanticised conception of the Irish connection to the landscape.

In a special edition of *The Journal of Ecocriticism* published in 2013, the literary critic and cultural historian John Wilson Foster argued that “A task of Irish eco-criticism [...] would be a re-reading of Irish literature, established or neglected, to engage with its profiling, privileging, and foregrounding of Nature, or the environment, if we must so call it” (6). There is still a rich vein to mine in the privilege accorded to the West of Ireland in the myth-making venture that is national identity, and in particular to the fraught relationship that allowed, on the one hand, a reverence to be maintained, while on the other, a resentment to emerge as a result of issues such as migration. The tension between the two has put depictions of the Irish landscape at odds with the more straight-forwardly sentimental national imaginaries of other European environmental writing.

Aside from these avenues where ecocritical readings of Irish texts can prove useful, there are other potential connections between Irish studies and the broader field of the environmental humanities. Interdisciplinarity has emerged in the last decade as a key academic aspiration, driven by the realisation that disciplines are better equipped to address environmental challenges when they work together. Irish studies are, like the environmental humanities, an inherently interdisciplinary field, and interdisciplinarity has become embedded across institutions in Irish academia with varying degrees of success. How nature is conceptualised has been enriched by this crossover between the arts, sciences and humanities. The leading centre for environmental history and humanities research, the Trinity Centre for Environmental Humanities, based at Trinity College Dublin, launched an MPhil in environmental history in 2019. The stated purpose of the program is to “train students in methods and themes that are directly relevant to the professional workplace at a time when there is an increased awareness of the need to include competencies and insights of the humanities in understanding and addressing environmental issues, not least climate change” (tcd.ie). Ongoing projects and collaborations of the Trinity Centre include NorFish (a study of the “North Atlantic Fish Revolution” between 1400 and 1700; CONCHA (which examines the construction of early modern global cities and oceanic networks in the Atlantic); and COSUSTAIN (co-designing governance approaches for a sustainable and innovative small-scale fishing and industry

around the island of Ireland). Other environmental humanities projects spearheaded by Claire Connelly, Professor of Modern English at University College, Cork, are Deep Maps Cork, which explored the cultural and environmental history of Loch Hyne, West Cork, and Ports, Past and Present, a trans-national project involving Ireland and Wales, which examines new futures for port towns (Dublin, Holyhead, Fishguard and Pembroke Dock) based on a deeper understanding of their pasts, and incorporates literary and artistic as well as historical research into the connections between the sites. Interdisciplinarity has long been practised in Irish studies, although research in the field has not ventured outside of the humanities and into the sciences as often as the environmental humanities, and seeking solutions to complex geo-political issues has intensified the embrace of the diverse approaches of different disciplines. For example, the border between Northern Ireland and the republic of Ireland has become a matter of literary as well as historical, political and geographical interpretation.

Another key factor in the emergence of the environmental humanities in the last decade is the concern with injustice that is currently (and rightly) pervading environmental debates. Globally, the intersection between environmental pollution and its impacts on the body and issues of social inequality has led to a movement (theorised by Rob Nixon and Stacy Alaimo) examining the impacts of the climate crisis on those that are most vulnerable to it. Ireland may seem relatively protected from the wildfires, heatwaves and crop devastation that has become the daily occurrence in much of the Global South, but it is vulnerable as a small, island nation emerging from a postcolonial history. The detrimental impact of the recent neoliberal networks of capital can be countered somewhat by postcolonial ecocriticism. However, as Eóin Flannery notes, “If the temporal logic of capitalist imperialism has proceeded in a destructive linear vector [...] then postcolonial ecocriticism must orient itself so as to contradict and confound such spatial and temporal disambiguation” (104). Out of the ashes of the collapse of the Irish economy and the IMF bailout in 2008 there may perhaps eventually emerge a renewed sense of the dangers of succumbing to the temptations of neo-capitalism, and an understanding that postcolonial nations may not have the same facilities with which to process the boom before the crash inevitably takes place. In the meantime, the most tangible result has been the apparent shift in moral values reflected by the legalisation of same-sex marriage by referendum in 2015 and the repeal of the Eighth Amendment to the constitution in the aftermath of which reproductive rights for Irish women finally came to the Republic of Ireland. There is, however, still resistance to environmental justice, driven in part by traditions of farming which run counter to sustainable and good conservation practices.

In his foreword to the most recent publication in Irish ecocriticism, Tim Wenzell’s anthology of Irish nature literature, *Woven Shades of Green* (2019), John Wilson Foster remarks that ecocriticism has “helped clear nature literature from any lingering charges of being marginal or being mere belle lettres and at the same time substitutes the needs of the local and the global for the needs of the nation” (xv). Framing nature literature within a national context has its ideological dangers, but as may become apparent in this special issue examining culture-specific iterations of the genre, it can also inspire, as

Foster points out, “the vigilant activism that conservation and sustainability require” (xv). An example of a more concrete methodology for exploring the cultural implications of geographical unrest is a cross-border research project currently underway in the northwest of Ireland, led by the Department of Landscape Architecture at the Harvard School of Design. The task (as indicated in its title, “Atlas for a City-Region: Imagining Post-Brexit Landscapes of the Irish Northwest”) is to explore the repercussions of the potential restrictions, if not closure, of the 300 crossing-strong, 310-mile border across the island. As Garrett Carr, author of the insightful *The Rule of the Land: Walking Ireland’s Border*, has pointed out, “There was a degree of emotional discomfort to crossing the border, and it was an experience that could provoke a question that had no easy answers: Where do you think you belong?” (<https://www.gsd.harvard.edu>). Imposed restrictions, and the porosity with which the border operates now, call into question its purpose in the shaping of identities on both sides of the territorial divide. Identity is geographically aligned as much as it is culturally, and yet, the fluidity with which unfamiliar, alien soil can become common ground is indicative of the distance that the Irish expression of territorial identity has come.

Submission received 1 January 2020

Revised version accepted 1 October 2020

Works Cited

- Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana University Press, 2010.
- Allen, Nicholas. Nick Groom, and Jos Smith, editors. *Coastal Works, Cultures of the Atlantic Edge*. Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Brazeau, Robert and Derek Gladwin, editors. *Eco-Joyce: The Environmental Imagination of James Joyce*. Cork University Press, 2014.
- Carr, Garrett. *The Rule of the Land: Walking Ireland’s Border*. Faber and Faber, 2017.
- Cusick, Christine, editor. *Out of the Earth: Ecocritical Readings of Irish Texts*. Cork University Press, 2010.
- Flannery, Eóin. *Ireland and Ecocriticism: Literature, History, and Environmental Justice*. Routledge, 2016.
- Gladwin, Derek and Maureen O’Connor, editors. *Irish Environmental Humanities. The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, vol. 40, 2017.
- Huggan, Graham and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge, 2010.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Potts, Donna. *The Pastoral Tradition in Contemporary Irish Poetry*. University of Missouri Press, 2011.
- Putte, Tina-Karen, and Sabine Lenore Müller, editors. *From Ego to Eco: Mapping Shifts from Anthropocentrism to Ecocentrism*. Rodopi/Brill, 2017.

Wall, Eamonn. *Writing the Irish West: Ecologies and Traditions*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2011.

Wenzell, Tim, editor. *Woven Shades of Green: An Anthology of Irish Nature Literature*. Bucknell University Press, 2019.

Wilson Foster, John, editor. *Nature in Ireland: A Scientific and Cultural History*. The Lilliput Press, 1997.

---. "Challenges to an Irish Eco-Criticism." *The Journal of Ecocriticism: Special Issue on Ireland*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2013, pp. 1-13.