

# THE FUTURE OF IRISH STUDIES



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An event held by the Keough-Naughton Institute of Irish Studies, University of Notre Dame, at the Trinity Long Room Hub, Trinity College, Dublin, on Friday, 25 August 2023.

Rapporteur's report by Prof Emer Nolan (Maynooth University).

## PANEL 1: LITERATURE

11:30 - 1:30



**PROF SARAH  
MCKIBBEN**  
(Moderator,  
Notre Dame)



**PROF DANIEL  
CAREY**  
(University  
of Galway)



**PROF BARRY  
MCCREA**  
(Notre Dame)



**PROF CHRIS  
MORASH**  
(TCD)



**ASST PROF CHANTÉ  
MOUTON KINYON**  
(Notre Dame)



**PROF CLÍONA  
NÍ RÍORDÁIN**  
(Notre Dame)

Prof Patrick Griffin (Notre Dame) and Dr Ciaran O'Neill (TCD) welcomed attendees. Prof Griffin emphasised the history of fruitful

collaboration between Trinity Long Room Hub and the Keough-Naughton Institute for Irish Studies at Notre Dame.

In opening the discussion, Prof McKibben stated that participants would address the question:

““ WHAT IS, OR SHOULD BE, THE FUTURE OF IRISH STUDIES? ””

Prof Morash raised **the issue of periodisation in Irish cultural studies. He proposed 1994 as a key date after which questions which had animated earlier academic debate (such as the Troubles and economic stagnation in the Republic) were no longer so immediately relevant.** In a sense, 1994 (a moment of take-off for the Celtic Tiger and the date of the IRA ceasefire) represents the dawn of the “long twenty-first century” in Ireland. How has Irish Studies responded to these new conditions? Rather than discussing agreed “Big Questions”, scholars have produced an abundance of new work that is more granular in nature. He described this as “a fractal stage of development”. A proliferation of detail has produced an impressive new Irish Studies that is, at the same time, less recognisable as a “map” of a specific field.

Prof Mouton Kinyon **observed that in some ways Irish Studies syllabi have remained consistent for decades, for example in their focus on canonical authors such as Joyce, Beckett and Synge.** However, she cited a recent research trip to Montserrat as providing fascinating insights into an alternative version of Irish culture in the Caribbean. Irish Studies could be renewed by attention to such under-studied sites.

Prof McCrea mentioned **the importance of Riverdance, also in 1994. This brought home to the Irish that their own cultural resources could be consumed and “sold” in new ways globally.** He mentioned the Anglophone bias of Irish Studies to date. In this context, he cautioned against the uncritical importation of categories more relevant to the study of the US or UK. These include the categorisations of generations (X, Z, etc.) where the life experience of their coevals in Ireland is/was radically different. This point—of difference and cultural specificity—is also particularly important for any nuanced understanding of multicultural Ireland. We currently perhaps do not sufficiently appreciate the complexity of Eastern European, Brazilian, Chinese or Nigerian communities in the country. New Irish communities (for example, dominated in one area of Dublin city

by gay and Algerian people) cannot be understood solely by reference to US or UK experience.

**Prof Carey pointed out that Irish Studies within the country is bound to be distinct from Irish Studies internationally. Every country cultivates and promotes its own heritage; Ireland is no different to other European nations in this regard.**

He discussed the outsized contribution of culture to Ireland's identity. The recent international response to the death of Sinéad O'Connor and the large Irish representation among nominees at the Academy Awards in 2023 are both examples of the capacity of Irish artists to reach enormous audiences elsewhere. He stated that the field of Irish Studies is being transformed by issues of demographic and social change and by inward migration. While literary and academic publishing are currently in good health, these should not be taken for granted: this is a sector requiring ongoing support. Ireland's future lies in Europe; but new developments there will also be highly consequential (e.g. the fate of Scotland). Brexit has had a profoundly destabilising effect on Ireland's relationship with the UK; the possibility of re-unification will transform any future Irish Studies also. He pointed to the past significance of comparative criticism, especially in poetry and cultural theory, and for

studies of Ireland in comparison to other partitioned countries. He emphasised Notre Dame Irish Studies' long-standing and important commitment to the Irish language. This remains crucial for a meaningful Irish Studies. Scholars should work towards new, comparative understandings of minority languages in comparable situations (e.g. in Prague or Montreal). Ireland should not be conceived of as a monoglot country; this in turn has significant and positive implications for Irish culture and cultural studies.

**Professor Ní Ríordáin explored the significance of the recent Irish-language novel *Madame Lazare* by Tadhg Mac Dhonnagáin.**

This won a special mention at the EU Prize for Literature in 2022. The layering of several old and new versions of the Irish language (i.e., historical vs. present-day Irish, in various dialects) in a complex tale of Irish and European migration shows us that a new, playful approach to Ireland's situation of linguistic complexity is perhaps now possible. The latter is potentially both artistically and commercially productive and dispels any notion of the Irish language as a "liability".



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Prof McKibben then opened up the discussion among the panel. **She emphasised the need for new work in a number of emerging fields, for example ecocriticism and disability studies.**

Professor Morash asked if the proliferation and diversification of the field had lowered the stakes of academic work. The work of earlier scholars had at times “moved the political needle”. Did current work have the same kind of impact?

Professor Mouton Kinyon welcomed the fact that debate has moved beyond the issue of “belonging” and of narrowly conceived “identities”. The presence of many new scholars in the field who do not identify as “Irish” is a welcome departure.

Professor Carey asked if this was simply a question of “loss”. There were new and productive questions in play, although dominant scholarly figures would probably not make such consequential interventions in the future.

Professor McCrea also noted that a certain historical moment had passed, for better or worse. The political ecosystem has evolved in new directions. In relation to the Irish language, he pointed to the parlous condition of the small pool of native speakers left in the country. This situation was grave and of real concern. He noted a “brain drain” of native speakers being diverted into careers in bureaucratic translation in the EU. This is a microcosm of a larger reality: what, in truth, is this Ireland that we study?

Professor Ní Ríordáin pointed to various new areas of growth in the field, including environmental studies, and fresh attention to the culture of minorities, including Travellers. She said the Irish ecosystem, e.g., the cultural diplomacy of the Department of Foreign Affairs, currently has a positive and stimulating effect on the arts, but that this needs to be appreciated and maintained.

Panellists agreed on the cultural importance of RTE and of the continuing support for Humanities education and research in Ireland. The number of languages studied in Ireland continues to grow. Recognition of linguistic and cultural plurality is key to the good health of Irish Studies. Language studies and the Irish language are central to the curriculum at Notre Dame.

“WHAT IN, TRUTH,  
IS THIS IRELAND  
THAT WE STUDY?”

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**Prof Carey** encouraged the audience to pay attention to current debates about Humanities research funding in Ireland. STEM research is emphasised, yet Irish Humanities research has a high profile internationally. There is little political imagination in Ireland about how to highlight and support this. **Prof Morash** emphasised the significance of a new pilot scheme for a guaranteed income for artists; **Prof Mouton Kinyon** referred to the great benefits of Ireland's support for the arts historically.

**Prof McCrea** said that perhaps Ireland can represent a different kind of English-speaking culture in the world. **Prof McKibben** suggested that Irish experience can complicate a certain kind of anodyne globalisation. She herself first heard the Irish language on the recordings of Sinéad O'Connor. The latter were part of an internal critique of Irishness that also had something important to say to the contemporary moment.

**Prof Mouton Kinyon** emphasised that the role of the Irish as colonisers, or as complicit with imperialism, must be appreciated. **Prof Carey** wondered if the decline of Irish-American identity will have an influence on Irish Studies in the US. **Prof Morash** argued that the earlier successes of Irish Studies, and the current expansion of the field,

represent an enormous challenge for younger and emerging scholars looking to make a distinctive contribution.

**Prof McKibben** and **Prof Mouton Kinyon** noted how younger scholars are being lost to the field through casualisation and precarity. This is especially true of earlier fields of study, where long training is essential. This can be in part addressed by post-doctoral funding. Panellists also identified opportunities for networking facilitated by the diversity and reach of professional organisations in Irish Studies, and by new forms of exchange on social media.

The discussion was opened to the floor.

An attendee noted the **lack of diversity** in the seminar room, which was in large measure, she said, due to academic precarity and the inability of younger scholars of colour and/or of working-class background to obtain secure employment.

A speaker brought up the **importance of integrated education in Northern Ireland**. Slow progress on this issue, and the lack of political interest in it, was startling, he said. Some writers of Evangelical and loyalist backgrounds, e.g. Jan Carson, were mentioned in response. Such writers can explore identity in a non-threatening style.

Another attendee mentioned the **importance of RTÉ and especially of its archive**. He also asked if Irish Studies had anything important to say about technology and AI? Humanities researchers surely need, he argued, to engage in more detail with these areas.

An attendee asked if **Irish Studies was in danger of appearing too “respectable”** and at a remove from pressing economic and cultural problems, such as conditions for migrants and

people of colour in Ireland.

Prof Carey responded that **such tensions about “soft power” existed in other countries (e.g. in relation to the British Council) and could not be entirely avoided. Overall, the contribution of the Department of Foreign Affairs, for example, was positive and these tensions could be kept in play in a critical and productive way.**

Prof McKibben brought the seminar to a close.

## PANEL 2: HISTORY

1:30 - 2:30



**PROF JANE OHLMEYER**  
(Moderator, TCD)



**DR CIARAN O'NEILL**  
(TCD)



**PROF TOM BARTLETT**  
(Aberdeen)



**DR SARAH RODDY**  
(Maynooth University)



**DR ANNE DOLAN**  
(TCD)

Professor Colin Barr (Notre Dame) welcomed the participants and opened the discussion. Prof Ohlmeyer invited the panellists to address the question of the future of Irish historical studies.

Dr O'Neill expressed optimism about prospects for the discipline. He stated that **the conflict between "revisionists" and "postcolonialists" that had marked earlier decades has abated**. The Decade of Centenaries has enhanced both popular interest in history and research into the early twentieth-century period. Now is the time to build on these developments. He reflected on his experience as one of the leaders of the Colonial Legacies project in TCD. Irish people need to consider the role of the Irish as both victims and perpetrators of colonialism; this issue should be addressed more critically in Irish Studies.

Dr Roddy suggested that **the discipline of Irish History has been unsettled by Brexit in 2015**. This once again focused scholarly and public attention on constitutional questions. However, Irish Studies must evolve in response to the challenges of the present. A more interdisciplinary approach, including the social sciences alongside Literary Studies and History, is demanded by the complexities of the current situation. Dr Dolan stated that, **until recently,**

**the discipline of Irish history was dominated by partisan approaches to the national question. Theory was neglected; the work of the Annales school had left little trace on Irish history.** The absence of much comparative work left a simplistic notion of Irish "exceptionalism" in place for much too long. It must be understood that comparative work in the future will not necessarily prioritise what is "special" or "unique" about Irish experience.

Prof Bartlett said that **it was important to consider the origins of Irish Studies in postwar "Area Studies"**. He traced developments in the **1950s and 1960s, leading to programmes in Boston College, Notre Dame and elsewhere**. He said Ireland had been an important case study in a number of ways, for example shedding light on postcolonial economic development and political conflict elsewhere. He proposed that an ideal Irish Studies curriculum should be multidisciplinary and coherently integrated. The discipline had in the past been boosted by the success of Irish popular culture. Another driver had been the Northern Troubles. In conclusion, he suggested that Ireland "has unique qualities", but is not unique. Its particularities were best illuminated by careful comparative analysis.



Prof Ohlmeyer pointed to **the importance of new exchanges with Irish Studies scholars in the global South, especially in Brazil, Mexico, Argentina and most recently South Africa.** This underlined the importance of academic mobility and international co-operation. She mentioned the work of Irish Studies scholars at the University of São Paulo and underlined the significance of the new Maxeke-Robinson Chair at the University of the Western Cape. She also stressed the importance of digital technology, virtual archives and AI (used for translation and other tasks) in present-day Irish Studies.

Prof Ohlmeyer opened up the discussion among the panellists and attendees.

Prof Bartlett noted the reduction in the number of posts in History Departments in the US and UK. Prof Ohlmeyer commented that the situation was somewhat better in Ireland, but that new proposals about the funding of the Humanities in Ireland had recently been challenged by a petition, signed by many academics, addressed to the Minister for Higher Education. Legislation would be considered on this matter in the Autumn.

An attendee noted **the importance of life-long learning. Irish history was of great interest to a broad public in Ireland.** There was considerable interest in archives, in local and family history,

and widespread respect for the work of professional historians.

Another attendee stated that **different models of decolonial history could be applied to Irish history and institutions, but that some of the “safer” models were to do with university recruitment and suited various managerial purposes. Had there been enough reflection on this issue in Irish historical studies?** She also noted that Irish involvement in Empire has been discussed in Irish Studies for many decades. Dr O’Neill responded that there are indeed many critiques of decolonial scholarly enterprises as being (at worst) branding exercises. Despite these issues, it was important to continue this work in a critical and self-aware spirit. Irish historians had ignored Irish postcolonial studies, he believed, but this was no longer the case.

Panellists agreed on the importance of maintaining wide access to digital resources and hybrid events but commented that this demanded significant funding.

Dr Dolan, in response to Prof Morash in the earlier session, said that she believed the loss of the “Big Questions” in Irish Studies was enabling and welcome. Prof Bartlett reflected on how different his own Irish Studies: A General Introduction in 1988 would be today, especially in

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relation to questions of decolonisation and climate crisis.

It was commented from the floor that **interdisciplinarity was essential to the defence of the Humanities**. The speaker said that dealing adequately with the complexity of the status of the Irish language in international contexts was a vital and significant challenge for Irish Studies. **Prof Carey** responded that perhaps there should be less of a focus on teaching oral competence to PhD students and instead an effort to develop a reading knowledge of Irish. This would at least represent an improvement on the current situation.

A speaker commented that **Irish in UCD is now housed with the Department of Folklore**. This has worked very well and intensive language courses for postgraduate students are popular.

Another attendee commented that, **in many ways, Irish Studies was already a site of interdisciplinary practice, including collaborations with artists and scientists, but that this was not yet reflected in the self-definition of Irish Studies**.

Dr Dolan emphasised that many professional historians also needed to improve their skills in Irish and other languages. She said that one

current danger for historians was being overwhelmed by the extent of newly accessible sources. Nevertheless, the discipline is vital at a time when factual knowledge is often downplayed or disrespected in public debate.

“ THE ADVENT OF IRISH STUDIES HAS BEEN GOOD FOR IRISH HISTORY AS IT HAS HELPED TO COUNTER PAROCHIALISM AND PARTITIONISM. ”

**In conclusion, Dr Roddy said the advent of Irish Studies has been good for Irish History as it has helped to counter parochialism and partitionism.**

Dr O'Neill stated that it is positive that the divisions between History and other strands of Irish studies are more porous than they were even twenty years ago. The Decade of Centenaries, he stated, has also helped to break down divisions between the academy and the broader Irish public.

Prof Ohlmeyer drew the discussion to a close.