

## Challenges to an Irish Eco-Criticism

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### Abstract

*If the term 'Green Studies' is a contemporary synonym for 'eco-criticism' then Ireland would seem a natural habitat (as it were) for the practice of eco-criticism. No country has been more identified with the green world; and had Irish Studies been called from the first 'Green Studies' few would have objected in the days before environmentalism and before other colours in the cultural, if not political, Irish spectrum were admitted. Irish paradigmatic perceptions and representations of the natural world still exert great cultural influence on and in our literature – the aesthetic, the scientific, the economic, the Romantic, the nativist, the religious, the folkloristic. Of these, only the economic and scientific have not been culturally celebrated by many literary critics, while science's productions – from nature-writing to scientific papers and monographs – are largely ignored by critics and anthologists, and by writers who are scientifically unsympathetic, indifferent or not conversant. Yet eco-criticism requires the scientific paradigm, and while a truly environmental literature may not have come into being in Ireland there is nevertheless a great deal of Irish writing can stimulate future ecocritical discussions.*

### Nature-Writing

If the term 'Green Studies' is a contemporary synonym for 'eco-criticism' – as it seems to be when used by Laurence Coupe in his *Green Studies Reader* (2000) – then Ireland would seem a natural habitat (as it were) for the practice of eco-criticism.<sup>1</sup> No country has been more identified with the green world, and had Irish Studies been called from the first 'Green Studies,' few would have objected in the days before environmentalism and before other colours in the cultural, if not political, Irish spectrum were admitted. By 1700, the lesser trefoil and the leaves of the white clover, both doing duty as the shamrock, had become a religious emblem and badge of nationality. And by the end of the eighteenth century, the colour green had itself acquired a political meaning, memorably expressed in the street-ballad, 'The Wearing of the Green,' which W.B. Yeats wove into his poem, 'Easter 1916'. The nostalgic expatriate consoled himself with green thoughts on London's 'pavements grey,' or New York's 'footpaths paved' – in seducing legend – 'with gold-dust,' like the composer of the popular sentimental song, 'The Isle of Innisfree'. The daydream had the benefit of reality: the predominance in Ireland of pasture, arable land, rivers, loughs, bog-land and waste-land, mountains and vestigial forests over relatively scarce human habitation – be it clachan, village or town – and the visible proximity of the green world from almost every human perspective. This predominance increased after the Great Famine, which reduced human competition with plants and

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wildlife. As late as the 1930s, 63% of the Irish population lived in rural areas, while 51% of all working people, male and female, were in agriculture (Arensberg 36). Only latterly has Nature's predominance faltered and been challenged.

That Irish world, famously green from abundant moisture and light, and fertile – sometimes inconveniently fertile in whin and weed – was and is, of course, represented bountifully in Irish novels and short stories. Nature frames the action, and brings nonhuman perspectives to human events, and often represents the site of action itself in Irish narratives. Moreover, Nature in the writing is, typically, not merely a decorative backdrop or setting but represents its own values, which conflict with or complement the novel's human values and meanings that are the true concern of the novelist. In part because of the high historical incidence of emigration, geography in Irish narratives often generates and embodies *topophilia*, the love of (or at least an addiction to) place expressed by author and character, particularly the expatriate. But in part because of the high historical incidence of poverty, geography in Irish narratives of the peasantry – not just of town and city but also of the countryside which indeed is more often the site of penury and hardship – generates and embodies *topophobia*, dislike or fear of the place that ensnares and impoverishes. This is expressed not just by characters but also by occasional authors, such as William Carleton, James Joyce and Patrick Kavanagh, none of whom is seduced by pastoral or Romantic longing.<sup>2</sup> Carleton was the portraitist of a landscape periodically despoiled by famine and strife; Joyce, like his creation, Stephen Dedalus, feared the countryside, especially in darkness; and Kavanagh despised the 'stoney grey soil' of his native county of Monaghan. It is noteworthy that all three authors either remained in, or moved to, the city. In any event, landscapes in Irish novels, be they woodland, bog-land, mountain or demesne, seem more fraught with cultural tension than their counterparts in English novels. The 'countryside' is a more generous, less value-laden term in Irish cultural history than 'the land', which as we all know was, and still is, a contested venue, between individuals, families, classes and ethnicities; it was the locus of power, greed, envy, hunger, the eponym (with its synonym 'agrarian') of wars and outrages, controversial parliamentary Acts and commissions. The Land, so necessary, so desired, so ubiquitous, could nonetheless engender the topophobia I have mentioned, which could in turn even spawn a biophobia (or a carelessness amounting to a temporary or tactical hatred) that we see in the houghing of cattle by night during the land wars. More recently, John B. Keane distilled in his play, *The Field* (1965), the hazardous potency of 'the Land' to its resonant metonymic constituent.

But to say all this merely testifies to Nature's prevalence, even ubiquity, in the Irish literary imagination. Nor has there been a shortage of animal depictions in modern Irish literature, strikingly so perhaps during the Irish Revival, from which poems by James Stephens and Padraic Colum, and stories by Liam O'Flaherty spring to mind. These were the product of the Revival's return to the land in a new way (respectfully, shorn of Anglo-Irish proprietary and condescending humour), including its wild creatures. There is, though, a degree of whimsy in the animal poems of Colum and Stephens, in which the animals are often performing, and a greater particularity and sharper, humbler eye in the post-Revival poetry of Kavanagh who purported to know Nature as often antagonistic. The Blasket Islands autobiographer, Thomas O Crohan (Tomás Ó Criomhthain), too, though 'of the soil,' regarded Nature as an opponent who would kill him if he let down his guard during his necessary engagements with the natural world in order to survive. This closer, hand-to-hand engagement with Nature was and is very different from the Romantic notion of a benign Nature that is restorative rather than dangerous. Indeed, the word 'Nature' itself – like 'landscape' rather than 'the land' – seems too effete and urbane to be recruited in discussions of Kavanagh's verse or O Crohan's autobiography. Nature might be prevalent, even ubiquitous in the Irish literary imagination, but not necessarily as Nature as that word is often defined. Yet Colum at times has a sense of the dismaying otherness of animal energy and personality reminiscent of D.H. Lawrence's creature poems, and which Kavanagh never attempts or achieves, though O'Crohan achieves it by different and more practically engaged means than Colum and Lawrence.<sup>3</sup>

There is, then, Nature a-plenty in modern Irish writing, and literary criticism has engaged with it when comprehension and evaluation of the work require it. Much of the literature cannot, of course, properly be called 'nature-writing' in so far as land, sea and sky, fauna and flora, are not central concerns of the writer, but are settings, frames, metaphors, props, or plot incidentals. Even when Nature *is* a central, even exclusive concern, we might still hesitate to claim the result as nature-writing, except as the loosest of signifiers. O'Flaherty knew his mammals and birds, and was like O Crohan aware of the dangers in Nature, but when he makes them his heroes and villains and gives them human traits, his anthropomorphism disqualifies his fiction as nature-writing.

But what of those poems by Colum in a volume called *Creatures* (1927). The questioning speaker does not intrude himself in, say, Colum's short lyric, 'Bat', in which the behaviour only of birds – linnet, magpie, rook – not of human beings, is offered for illuminating comparison. And yet, the perception of the bat is the poet's not the literary naturalist's, and it envelops the creature in a human translation and understanding. In 'Humming-Bird', Colum is trying to contain and tap this otherworldly bird's energy through an Incan mythic allusion, in a way an ornithologist would rarely dare to attempt but who might concede that the poet had captured something real, if metaphysical, about this unique bird family.

Up from the navel of the world,  
Where Cuzco has her founts of fire,  
The passer of the Gulf he comes. . . .  
  
With glows of suns and seas he comes:  
A life within our shadowed world  
That's bloom, and gem, and kiss of fire!

The biologist would, though, bridle at the anthropocentric and Romantic description of the bird's being 'A life within *our* shadowed world'. It is interesting to set this poem beside Lawrence's better-known poem, 'Humming Bird,' in which the poet even more obviously, while returning the bird in his imagination to its rightful primordial immensity, is 'transforming down' (as the electrical engineer would say) the humming-bird's frightening voltage. Colum's 'Snake' and Lawrence's 'Snake' make another handy and fruitful comparison though in each case the snake is anthropomorphised through the unavoidable Genesis associations, laced, as all four of these poems are, with New World paganism. At their most accomplished, such poetic transactions as these might challenge or stretch rather than defy or amuse the naturalist. In such literary events, 'nature-writing' may be too genteel a term, the way 'nature study' was too genteel a term to withstand the arrival of 'biology' in the nineteenth century. Yet nature-writing cannot be too clever, too literary, too whimsical, too anthropomorphic, too fanciful without risking its own description.

There are debatable Irish cases in prose as well as poetry. Many of the Belfast-born writer, Robert Lynd's essays are about wild creatures; some of these essays are 'nature-writing' only in so far as their declared subject is some natural phenomenon or animal. 'The Hum of Insects' is full of anecdote, recollection and aperçus, and meanders essayistically along, telling us more about us than about insects. Written in the knowledgeable, arch, humorous English essay tradition, of which Lynd was an expert and once celebrated practitioner, though he was at the same time an unapologetic Irish republican, 'The Hum of Insects' is belles-lettres more than an excursion in sound observations (as it were). A stronger case can be made for 'The Nuthatch'. This essay is chiefly a small reluctant

hymn to English woodland on a typical grey and gusty April day, there are no nuthatches in Ireland, alas, but the observations along the way, made by an amateur ornithologist who knows his birds, lead me to describe this as nature-writing. The chiffchaff's song 'is like a song hopped on one foot'; a sedge-warbler is 'precipitating himself in short flights over the surface of the pond'; the nuthatch's call is 'a sort of "Hi, hi, hi! I'm coming," as though all the world were a circus.' Only the competent birdwatcher with his eye and ear on the birds themselves could write these. Another essay, 'The Nightingale Arrives', increases the ratio of observation to whimsy. I can testify to the accuracy of Lynd's version of the whitethroat's song but not of the garden warbler's (no garden warblers in Ireland either, unfortunately, or nightingales), nor to his report of nightjars (another Irish absentee) fleeing into hedges ('like demons'), but I'm prepared to trust them.

As it happens, Lynd, like Colum and Lawrence, wrote about the humming-bird. The essay of that title recounts his first sighting – a rufous humming-bird, the common species of southern coastal British Columbia to where he travels, as though on this sole quest. His humming-bird lacks the awesomeness of Colum's and Lawrence's but it is impressive enough: 'a little bird with its throat on fire was stationed in the air'. No doubt, Lynd's travel was in reality on other business, which is the implied whimsy of the essay's pretext. Overtly, though, Lynd claims the humming-bird to be more impressive than either the Pacific itself, thus inverting Keats, or the Canadian Prime Minister, R.B. Bennett, a stroke of humorous bathos. And this biocentricity would please the eco-critics, as I'll make clear in a moment.<sup>4</sup>

We can, quite easily, enlist other Irish nature-writing more, if not entirely, to the eco-critic's liking, and we can do so by legitimately making more flexible what we allow as 'writing' in the term 'nature-writing'. Paragraphs in, say, Edward A. Armstrong's marvellous Northern Irish wartime ornithological memoir, *Birds of the Grey Wind* (1940), are as finely written as those in Lynd's essays, but they more obviously qualify as nature-writing in its most serious and enlightening definition, and they do so because they combine literary stylishness with even greater scientific accuracy than Lynd has at his command or wishes to show. Yet it may be the case that 'nature-writing' suggests that it is correctly a subspecies of fine writing, of literature, even if it is not manifestly required to be. Perhaps this is why Lawrence Buell in his highly thought-of *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) immediately cross-references 'Nature writing' as 'Environmental writing' in his index, redefining it and doing so in a finer-tuned and tendentious way to which I'll come back.<sup>5</sup> In any case, even when demonstrating knowledgeability about earth and life, Nature-writing of the kinds I've mentioned is a fruitful problem for eco-criticism where it is not a problem for literary criticism.

But much of it, scientifically this side of Lynd, surely need not be a problem unless eco-criticism defines itself over *against* literary criticism. Bracketing this off for the moment, we can agree that nature-writing must be accessible to the general reader and amateur naturalist alike. *Too* scientific and the writing changes genre and readership and falls outside the jurisdiction of literary criticism. At the same time, in nature-writing, Nature must be the writer's central or exclusive focus. Also, nature-writing must have a stratum of dependable scientific observation or knowledge, however amateurishly gained or finely expressed. This allows for honest, pardonable ignorance. Even Aristotle and Pliny, as well as many a lesser authority, were sometimes badly in error but were still naturalists and nature-writers. Nature-writers, I think we can say, try to get it right and do not falsify for literary or other effects.

The degree of science permitted in nature-writing is highly variable, which is another way of saying that nature-writing is a richly textured and highly variable form. But in sad fact, Irish nature-writing in any of its variations, has been neglected *qua* Irish writing and is entirely absent from the five volumes of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1991, 2002) – and from most anthologies of Irish writing before 1991. One assumption, I think, is that nature-writing is too light-weight and (paradoxically) belletristic to be *serious* writing and if it *is* serious (i.e. scientifically reliable or

ambitious) it is *not* writing. The resulting omissions are staggering in their injustice and volume. It is not just a case of occasional Nature-writing such as Lynd's or, to cite a contemporary example, the essays of Chris Arthur.<sup>6</sup> It is not just a case even of more focussed and scientific writing such as Armstrong's memoir, or, for that matter, Robert Lloyd Praeger's itinerary, *The Way that I Went* (1937), or Armstrong's differently focussed *The Folklore of Birds* (1958). It is a case of serious but well-written species monographs such as Armstrong's *The Wren* (1955) and his ethological but still accessible study, *Bird Display and Behaviour* (1947). It is a case of such readable and occasionally anecdotal surveys and handbooks as William Thompson's *Natural History of Ireland* (1849-1856), John Tyndall's *The Glaciers of the Alps* (1860) and Richard Ussher's *Birds of Ireland* (1900). It is a case of rich works of biological debate, such as that between the natural theologians, clerical naturalists who subscribed to the Intelligent Design explanation of life, and Darwinists such as Tyndall in the 1870s and beyond.<sup>7</sup> All of these writings are the proper objects of literary and cultural criticism; only field guides might be too practical and strategic to come under productive scrutiny, though I can imagine an illuminating essay in cultural criticism could be written about, say, the famous Peterson field guides.

## Eco-criticism

But are such writings the proper objects of *eco-criticism*? Not always, if we go by the American eco-critics. The proper object of eco-criticism, for them, is 'environmental literature' which is largely in process of becoming, a literature chiefly of the future. Buell refers to the 'environmental text' and prefers the terms 'environmental nonfiction' and 'environmental prose' to 'nature writing' (6-8). Environmental literature ceases to be anthropocentric and is bio-centric, or as Buell says, 'The nonhuman environment is present not only as a framing device but as a presence . . .' (7). And that presence is not only literary but objective: in the real world; this enables eco-criticism – and I am strategically in agreement with it here – to reject the versions of postmodernism that believe just about everything, including Nature, is a cultural construct.

Some of the Irish nature-writing I have mentioned meets that requisite. But bio-centricity is not enough for Buell. The 'environmental' presence, and not simply *Nature's* presence, 'begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history' (7). The implication is ethical: 'Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation' (7). The use of the term and concept of 'environment' implies ecology, of which human beings are a part: the biosphere is in ecological interrelationship and humankind is woven into those interrelationships. The Great Chain of Being, the Elizabethan World Picture, Paley's Natural Theology, Milton's cosmology in *Paradise Lost* – even though these posit continuum – clearly will not wash because in these schemata humanity is set apart or is at least special, and often central, and in each case the whole set-up is static and a *fait accompli*. A literature in which depicted Nature demonstrates these older schemes cannot be environmental literature. So nature-writing need not by definition make the cut. For the interrelationships are dynamic: 'Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or given is at least implicit in the text', says Buell (8). For Glen A. Love, the process is explained only by Darwinian evolution: ecology and Darwinism require each other and environmental literature, and the proper method of reading it aright, which is eco-criticism, require both. And because humanity is part of Nature, the eco-critic must accept socio-biology (evolutionary psychology), according to Love in his important book, *Practical Ecocriticism* (2003). Natural Theology or Intelligent Design will not pass muster for their account of earth and life will not help us save the environment through our prior understanding of it (Love 49-64).<sup>8</sup>

Recent evolutionary theory is the spur to Love's eco-criticism. But there are two other spurs, ideas even more recent than evolutionary theory. One: the idea, that would have surprised Charles Darwin, that Nature is fragile, and vulnerable to our depredations and assaults. Even though this can

seem like a failed latter-day version of the Christian notion of our custodianship of, indeed dominion over, a lesser Nature – inadequate custodianship or husbandry, masculine abuse of our dominion – or can seem like a self-interested investment suddenly under threat, we know what Love is getting at. And two: the idea that we are in the midst of an environmental crisis and that Earth's ecosystem is in peril. It would have been hard perhaps for Darwin to have predicted this. The notion of 'crisis' and 'critical' is built into Love's use of *eco-criticism* in a way that it no longer is in the phrase 'literary criticism'. It must clearly, too, be built into the concept of environmental literature, at least from here on in: for Love, the adjective 'environmental' unavoidably carries it as freight.

Love's *eco-criticism* might, in its presuppositions, seem programmatic and even didactic, though perhaps no more than its predecessors: post-colonialism, postmodernism, new historicism, deconstruction, structuralism, new criticism. It certainly reveals an American pragmatism and an urge to fix the real world through critical action. Love claims that 'Teaching and studying the literature without reference to the natural conditions of the world and the basic ecological principles that underlie all life seems increasingly short-sighted, incongruous' (16). Under this mandate, most of the writing we call nature-writing might have to be arraigned for its lack of ecological awareness, as a great deal of literature has been arraigned in the classroom for political naivety or political guilt by post-colonialists and feminists. This seems fair enough, if you wish to practice an instrumentalist, before an explicatory and celebratory, pedagogy. But Love is at least entirely correct in drawing attention to the hitherto neglected significance of Darwinism and its theoretical and disciplinary inflections.

A more moderate, or soft, *eco-criticism* is simply 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment': this is Cheryll Glotfelty, quoted by Scott Slovic in *The Green Studies Reader*, though Slovic's own definition of *eco-criticism* is just a little harder: 'the study of explicit environmental texts by way of any scholarly approach' (p. 160). But Slovic allows *eco-criticism* to scrutinise the 'ecological implications and human-nature relationships in any literary text . . .' (160); clearly nature-writing would be a rich lode for mining in this regard, as much in Ireland as outside. '[E]ven texts that seem, at first glance, oblivious of [sic] the nonhuman world' (which would be a great deal of literature) can be scrutinised ecologically, according to Slovic, which leaves the field wide open (160). Soft *eco-criticism* engages in 'a fresh re-reading of established texts': this is Love, though he consigns this kind of work to the pioneering days of *eco-criticism* which engaged with nature-writing (Love 10).<sup>9</sup> Since we in Ireland are still in the pioneering days of *eco-criticism*, fresh re-readings should be a pleasure to come. A task of Irish *eco-criticism*, then, 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.

Perhaps when we do so, we might re-interpret Irish writers as we could re-interpret certain poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, and we might smuggle him into the Irish syllabus, after all. Hopkins combines Romantic subjectivity with the naturalist's objectivity, aesthetic appreciation with a fieldworker's intense scrutiny. And although he was a believer in his own form of Intelligent Design, or Natural Theology, he might even be regarded as a patron saint of biodiversity (see his poem, 'Glory be to God for dappled things'), of conservation (see his poem 'Binsey Poplars') and of environmentalism, as long as it is underpinned by a respect for the otherness and lowlinesses of nature; as in his poem 'Inversnaid':

What would the world be, once bereft  
Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,  
O let them be left, wildness and wet;

Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.<sup>10</sup>

Should the eco-critic go beyond retrieving Irish nature-writing and identifying a body of hitherto unconnected or neglected work? Were the eco-critic to demonstrate a syllabus, if not tradition, of Irish nature-writing, this would clearly be to the good. Just by doing so, the eco-critic would surely modify the existing literary canon or tradition in that process of re-shuffling T.S. Eliot pictured in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', his famous essay of 1919. No multi-genre literary anthology would, or should thereafter slight or ignore nature-writing.

Should the eco-critic also go beyond re-reading the kinds of writing that are the subjects of the innumerable literary-critical surveys and that make up the *Field Day* and other innumerable anthologies, the so-called extant 'canon'? Even by engaging in these re-readings, the eco-critic might help to re-arrange the existing or orthodox syllabus at the level of the individual writer. I have implied that Colum's creature poems, for example, are worthy of a closer look than anyone has yet given them. And it is likely that Michael Longley would begin to assume a greater significance than he does now as a contemporary poet, since although there is a strong sense of self and of presence in his poetry, his eye for the sovereign beauty and diversity of Nature outside himself is implicated in his excellence as a lyric poet. Already, the American ecocritic Tim Wenzell has wisely devoted some pages to Longley's work in *Emerald Green: An Ecocritical Study of Irish Literature* (2009) and there is a chapter by Donna Potts on Longley in *Out of the Earth: Ecocritical Readings of Irish Texts* (2010), edited by Christine Cusick.<sup>11</sup>

Certainly the eco-critic can, and should, challenge, as Tim Wenzell does, via Neil Murphy, the 'fragile theoretical assumptions and selective reading practices' that characterise the prevailing political and post-colonial readings of Irish literature and by which marginal issues have shouldered aside 'a coherent and dominant tradition in Irish writing', a reference to women's writing but readily referable also to nature-writing, according to Wenzell, and I agree with him (4). But whether – moving outside Wenzell's book - that putative tradition of Irish nature-writing can be tracked back to pre-13<sup>th</sup> century, pre-colonial, monastic perceptions and representations of the natural world is perhaps more dubious. Attitudes to nature being so complicated in Ireland (as elsewhere) it would seem unwise to me, for example, to blame the British exclusively and in blanket-fashion for introducing into Ireland wrong attitudes to Nature. Yet of course, aspects of Nature use and abuse in colonial times might invite regret and disapproval, for example the felling of the forests for military purposes. I can understand the need for eco-critics and environmentalists to seek some ancestral or aboriginal body of thought, feeling and expression to which we should return. The Irish Revivalists felt this need, hence Cuchulain and the sagas and the so-called Celtic view of Nature. In Canada the legends and myths of the First Nations, now offered through scholarly midwifery and creative intervention as written stories, look as if they might play the role of the early Christian Irish hermits and monks in Irish Revivalism. But this critical retroactivity can be its own form of post-colonialism, impute problematic continuities, and simply re-cast the old contestable interpretations: did the English and Scottish invasions and plantations rupture an Irish tradition of connecting with and representing Nature? Were the native Irish attitudes to the natural world superior to the Anglo-Irish? I am not sure we should go there in case we find ourselves back where we started.

## Obstacles to an Irish Eco-criticism

As it is, the obstacles in the way of an Irish eco-criticism as an alternative form of literary and cultural criticism might prove recalcitrant. The eco-critic can, of course, encourage a new environmental literature, an Irish version of what Buell and Love wish to encourage in the United States. The writings of Tim Robinson and Michael Viney are clearly environmental literature in ways that would satisfy these American critics, and if it seems telling that these are writers born and educated in

England, perhaps it is less so when we remember the environmental writings of John Feehan, though the latter's neo-Catholic conservationism might furrow an American brow.<sup>12</sup> But first, the eco-critic has to be able to read, or re-read, Irish literature without subordinating the criticism to existing and competing paradigms of perceiving and representing the natural world. It might be worthwhile to enumerate these paradigms briefly to suggest the scale of difficulty.

In brief, anyone who looks at, studies, or depicts the natural world in Ireland must do so perforce through, or in spite of, thousands of years of human presence and therefore culture. The impact of humanity on Irish nature is of such longevity and density that to refer to the Irish 'countryside' is to imply human presence as North American reference to 'the wilderness' or Australian reference to 'the outback' does not. This qualifies for Ireland Buell's 'nonhuman environment' as a presence and a natural process which environmental literature, and therefore eco-criticism, must honour and foreground. It is much harder in Ireland than in the United States to avoid, diminish, or sequester culture in one's engagements with Nature, and in Ireland we have had to be increasingly modest in choosing what we term 'natural' (or endemic or native) rather than cultural, since culture is not only spatial and geographic but complexly temporal (archaeological) and palimpsestic: plural as a result of serial and overlapping incoming cultures.

It was the most recent cultures to settle or develop in Ireland that initiated the scientific, systematic study of the island's natural history but that also exploited, occasionally plundered, utilized and 'improved' the natural world for human comfort, greed, power, pleasure and profit. This involved wholesale transformation of Irish Nature – felling of the forests, drainage of the land, mining, agriculture (clearing, ploughing, and planting). Descriptions of the exploitation of nature are abundant, so it is almost arbitrary to cite J.A. Froude's graphic picture in his lengthy 'sketch', 'A Fortnight in Kerry' (1870), of the peninsula between Bantry and Kenmare as it no doubt was in the days of the Earl of Desmond in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century ('covered from end to end with forest') and what it became after Sir William Petty set up refining works in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, brought over tin and copper ore and 'in the general havoc' felled trees 'till the last available stick had been cut down to smelt it' and is still, when Froude visits in 1861, still barren.<sup>13</sup> Those were early days in what we would now call development in Ireland and it has continued to the present, often to the detriment or destruction of Nature.

Of course, some alterations were necessary and benign in intention, though not always in result, as the Famine proved. I have been unable to corroborate Michael Viney's claim that the Famine caused the native Irish to distrust Nature: 'In the biological treachery of the Famine, nature was disgraced' (58-64.) But if he is right, then such a distrust might have fed into a general native reluctance to engage in natural history and, perhaps, has left a cultural trace that impeded the ground-work for a future ecological (and therefore eco-critical) perception of Nature. However, this is mere speculation that might perhaps be faintly confirmed in recent literature set on the land, such as the poetry of Seamus Heaney. In any case, that anti-Nature sentiment has surely been reversed, though whether it can be detected as a motive for the killing of introduced white-tailed sea-eagles, reinforcing that of farmers' ruthless protection of livestock, I am not sure. Agriculture is often at loggerheads with environmentalism and conservation. In any event, seeing the land and its creatures through the lenses of livelihood and profit is a perception of long standing in Ireland, as elsewhere, and often goes against the ecological grain.

The killing of wildlife has always been a way of exploiting and utilizing Nature, for sustenance and for sport. The tradition of field-sports literature might on the face of it pose a problem for eco-critics, and the naturalist-writer Michael Viney attracted hostility in at least one review for contributing a chapter on the literature of this tradition ("Wild Sports and Stone Guns") to *Nature in Ireland* (1997). But there is a wealth of natural learning as well as lore in such works as Arthur Stringer's *The Experienced Huntsman* (1714), W.H. Maxwell's *Wild Sports of the West* (1832), Ralph Payne-



Gallwey's *The Fowler in Ireland* (1882) and Roger Moran's *The Wildfowler* (1982), and much of their knowledge is incidentally ecological. Eco-criticism must find a way of coming to terms with them, perhaps on grounds of human-wildlife interaction conducted as knowledgeable practice and with a vested interest in preservation, as much as with such early and indispensable naturalist-hunters as John James Audubon and Henry Seebohm, who shot every bird they wanted to paint or identify, and just as conservationists have come to terms with the North American hunting organisation, Ducks Unlimited. For sport and sustenance, pleasure and victualling, have been established ways of seeing, participating in, and recording Nature in Ireland for a very long time.

Froude has some well-written pages on salmon-fishing in 'A Fortnight in Kerry', but he was there chiefly to see the economic lie of the land in 1861. But although his wish was to see 'improvement' in the county, he has a developed aesthetic sense of scenery. One remote scene along the shore – with far-off cries of mackerel fishermen and the overhead whistling and rushing wings of curlews – reminds his companion of a scene in a play and he agrees. The next morning he again 'feels natural beauty with a real intensity' (227-8). The accompaniment of a prevalently practical attitude to the Irish countryside by aesthetic sensibility is even more marked in the bristlingly practical reports by Arthur Young of his tours of Ireland in 1776, 1777 and 1778 in which he allows himself, when recounting his visit to Killarney, an exhilarated reference to 'the wildest and most romantic country I had any where seen; a region of steep rocks and mountains . . . There is something magnificently wild in this stupendous scenery, formed to impress the mind with a species of terror' (440). The central concern of Henry Inglis' social and economic survey, *A Journey Throughout Ireland, During the Spring, Summer, and Autumn of 1834* (published in two volumes in 1835) is 'improvement' (or deterioration), yet he is alive to nature's painterly effects, to its beauties and prospects. The highest aesthetic value is sublimity and his visit to the Giant's Causeway is an occasion for a disquisition on the subject. The caves close to Fair Head come close to sublimity but, though he had expected to find the Causeway itself sublime, he was, like many people, including Dr Johnson, disappointed. It is geologically curious and worth seeing, yes, but sublime it is not (235-6).

William Makepeace Thackeray (writing as M.A. Titmarsh) in *An Irish Sketch Book* (1843) in contrast to Inglis felt 'awe and terror' (the constituents of the sublime) in the vicinity of the Causeway once he had shaken off the hucksters; he saw even amidst poverty, the picturesque and romantic on the banks of Lough Corrib; and between Westport and Leenane he saw 'the most beautiful view I ever saw in the world' (83). Thackeray, Froude and Inglis each has a binocular view of Ireland: the practical and the aesthetic. Thackeray in particular, writing in the 1840s, is a reminder of how tenacious and long-lived was the 'aestheticising' of landscape, beginning in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century with accessible theories of beauty and the sublime and by the end of that century becoming a cult of the picturesque. The language of the picturesque has remained with us as 'touristese' employed by travel agents, but behind it are the language and perceptions of Romanticism developed at a higher cultural elevation in poetry and painting. Romanticism in Ireland may not have revealed itself as pervasively or triumphantly as in England or the United States, but we have all been influenced by Romanticism, which constitutes a paradigm of perception and representation even today that can blur or distract the kind of perceptions and representations eco-critics might wish to cultivate.

Arthur Young's notion that the scenery was formed to impress the human mind is one that Coleridge or the other Romantic poets might have entertained. The Romantic 'subjectivisation' or internalisation of Nature would obviously give trouble to eco-critics for whom the natural environment is an autonomous existence. Despite the Romantic 'return to Nature', biocentricity tends in Romantic literature to be replaced, superseded or transcended by an intense and singular form of anthropocentricity - i.e., ego-centricity (the Romantic 'I' who often speaks the poem) and even when the 'I' is overwhelmed, it is so in the direction of myth, through a mythopoeic relationship with the natural world. We receive from Nature what we give, Coleridge reminded Sara Hutchinson in 'Dejection: An Ode' (1802), 'And in our life alone does Nature live'. The Romantic

paradigm is an immense and pervasive one that seems, on the face of it, to represent a huge impediment to the eco-critic who wishes to shift the centre of gravity away from the poet's feelings towards a more scientific understanding of the workings of Nature that may, or may not, include us.<sup>14</sup>

European Romanticism had, as a cultural strand, a connection to the soil, to the local, to the ethnic and racial, a strand that we might call 'nativism'. Interestingly, the poet and historian of natural history Sean Lysaght has detected nativism at work in Seamus Heaney, and Lysaght calls this nativism a 'broadly nationalist, atavistic attitude' when Heaney, now notoriously perhaps, characterised the distinguished Irish naturalist Robert Lloyd Praeger's relationship to the Irish landscape as one regulated by aesthetic and scientific laws but not (Heaney borrows Wordsworth here) by laws of feeling or the primary laws of our nature. Lysaght rebuts Heaney's take on Praeger (444).<sup>15</sup> But what interests me is the complex coding at work in the characterization and the rebuttal. Heaney's bridling at a scientific attitude is resonant if we remember that the science of natural history was developed in Ireland – chiefly, but not exclusively – by the English, later Anglo-Irish, the same population that developed and applied science in their colonialist re-shaping of the island. It was the Enlightenment that helped to sponsor science, and the role of Ireland in the Enlightenment is complicated and problematic. Moreover, it was chiefly writers from the same population who developed or applied the island versions of the philosophies of beauty, the sublime, and the picturesque – Edmund Burke, of course, was an Irish exception – and it may well be that Heaney has this kind of schematic aesthetic in mind when he demotes it in Praeger. Out of the cultural alliance of the scientific and philosophical-aesthetic came a whole raft of topographical poems, one of the most striking and ambitious of which was *The Giant's Causeway* (1811) by William Hamilton Drummond.

Further, it would be unsurprising if Heaney were not acutely aware that Praeger's scientific training and career differed from the poet's education in Art and Humanities. Since eco-critics require in their writers at least a rudimentary scientific knowledge and sympathy that extend at least to evolution and conservation theory and practice, Praeger the all-round scientific naturalist would presumably be seen as an ally in their project whereas Heaney's Romantic relationship to nature, as Lysaght sees it, with its ethnicising and folklorising of the natural world, might pose a difficulty.<sup>16</sup> Another strand of Romanticism was an expressive and even revolutionary nativism that could become a species of nationalism and there is in Heaney a broadly patriotic connection to the land, most famously to bog-land but also to rivers, and to wildlife. Nature=nativeness=nation is a rich equation of sorts that was operative in the nineteenth century, and is a substratum of thought, feeling and imagery in Heaney today.<sup>17</sup> It would be going too far to detect the politicising of the natural world in Heaney as arguably we can see it in those who wore the green, with whom I started, and, in a different direction, in Inglis, Thackeray and Froude - but perhaps not outrageously far.

Lastly, Heaney would have been aware that Praeger's cultural Protestantism differed from the poet's own cultural Catholicism. Of course, the historical Christian attitude to Nature, that of dominion and superiority more than of custodianship and stewardship, is shared by Catholic and Protestant. For its part, however, Protestantism fed into the Enlightenment, into science generally, into the fieldwork and cabinets of natural history, and along the way into evolution. Tyndall, for example, was a Carlow-born Protestant who became one of Darwin's bulldogs. But other Irish Protestants, especially those clergymen who were naturalists, reacted to Darwinism with a very particular dismay and hurt: they could accept evolution but not Darwinism. The evolution they could accept had to be seen working as a theistic process according to their flexible Natural Theology: flexible, that is, except when it came to human evolution and the question of the soul.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps Heaney, believer in miracles, myths and mysteries, would find Natural Theology more sympathetic than Darwinism. Yet, and what I say is relevant only if we see Heaney as a residual Catholic, Catholicism in Ireland has not been as exercised by Darwinism as Protestantism and there may be at work in Heaney that division

of realms – revelation and the material world - that enabled Cardinal Newman and other prominent Catholic theologians to co-exist peacefully with Darwinists. But in his attitude to Praeger, Heaney seems to wish to reject or diminish rather than co-exist, and one senses that perhaps he thinks that Praeger's attitude to Nature is not truly Irish.

I have tried to enumerate Irish paradigmatic perceptions and representations of the natural world that still exert great cultural influence on and in our literature – the aesthetic, the scientific, the economic, the Romantic, the nativist, the religious, the folkloristic. Of these, only the economic and scientific have not been culturally celebrated by many literary critics, while science's productions – from nature-writing to scientific papers and monographs – are largely ignored by critics and anthologists, and by writers who are scientifically unsympathetic, indifferent or unconversant. Yet eco-criticism requires the scientific paradigm, and while a truly environmental literature may not have come into being in Ireland – should that be wholly desirable – there is a great deal of Irish writing to be retrieving and reading, and to stimulate seminars, conferences, articles and books to come.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See the editor's General Introduction to Laurence Coupe, ed., *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> These aspects of place in Irish literature are explored in John Wilson Foster, 'The Geography of Irish Fiction', in Patrick Rafter and Maurice Harmon, eds., *The Irish Novel In Our Time* (Lille: Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Irlandaises de l'Université de Lille, 1976), pp. 89-102.

<sup>3</sup> What Kavanagh attempts instead, and often achieves, is a riskily gentle romanticism that counter-balances his view of nature as obstructive, refractory and thwarting: 'Bluebells for Love' is a beautiful poem in which Nature (while figurative for the speaker) is enthralling in the most desirable sense. In this poem, the flowers are not meant to be looked at directly, but sidelong. The wistful coyness is a kind of embarrassment that the countryman, amidst 'Nature', consciously shares with the lover. The poem says much of what I need to know about Kavanagh.

<sup>4</sup> 'The Hum of Insects' can be found in Robert Lynd, *Selected Essays* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1923); 'The Nuthatch' and 'The Nightingale Arrives' in Robert Lynd, *The Blue Lion and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1923); 'The Humming-Bird' in Robert Lynd, *In Defence of Pink* (London: J.M. Dent, 1937).

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> See several of the essays in Chris Arthur, *Words of the Grey Wind: Family and Epiphany in Ulster* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> For an account of this debate and its literature, see David Livingstone, 'Darwin in Belfast: The Evolution Debate', in *Nature in Ireland: A Scientific and Cultural History*, eds. John Wilson Foster and Helena C.G. Chesney (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1997) and Foster, 'Darwin in Ireland: John Tyndall and the Irish Churches' in *Recoveries: Neglected Episodes in Irish Cultural History 1860-1912* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> See also Love's contribution, 'Ecocriticism, Theory, and Darwin' to a forthcoming forum on ecocritical theory in the journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, 17.4 (2010), pp. 773-5. Love's title is a nod to I.A. Richards' epoch-making *Practical Criticism* which, though published in 1929, was still a classroom force until the early 1960s and which Love would have known as a college English teacher. Love intends his title, however, not just to suggest means and ends when encountering a text, but also to suggest a practice that can translate itself beyond book-covers into the real and natural world.

<sup>9</sup> At the same time, Love exemplifies the kind of ambition that eco-criticism can entertain when he cites Joseph W. Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (1974) which Love says radically re-reads literary genres, especially tragedy and comedy, from an ecological viewpoint.

<sup>10</sup> The felling of the Binsey poplars near Oxford in 1879 went unopposed. Hopkins' poem is a protest after the fact and it has been suggested that the mood of the poem was caught from Gerard's father Manley Hopkins's poem, 'The Old Trees' (1879), a poem that reinforced the public protest when Wells Charity Commissioners made the decision to fell the lime trees in Well Walk, Hampstead. This poem helped save the limes when the Commissioners rescinded their decision. Manley Hopkins passed on to his son Gerard the interest in botany and zoology that his poetry exhibits – and ecology. In the words of Jude V. Nixon, 'For both father and son, a delicate ecological balance – "equipoise" is Gerard's word – is compromised when we destroy natural landscapes': see 'Missing Landmarks', *Times Literary Supplement*, 3 September 2010, pp. 14-15.

<sup>11</sup> *Emerald Green: An Ecocritical Study of Irish Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp. 126-133; *Out of the Earth: Ecocritical Readings of Irish Texts* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2010). Donna Potts, like her editor, Christine Cusick and the bulk of the eleven contributors, are American; ecocriticism has yet to make a deep impression on Irish literary and cultural criticism.

<sup>12</sup> See John Feehan, 'Threat and Conservation: Attitudes to Nature in Ireland' in *Nature in Ireland*, eds. Foster and Chesney, pp. 573-596.

<sup>13</sup> 'A Fortnight in Kerry', Parts I and II, appears in James Anthony Froude, *Short Studies on Great Subjects* (London: Longmans, Green, 1881), pp. 217-307.

<sup>14</sup> I am aware that Jonathan Bate, breaking with the notion of the Romantics as exponents of the imagination over nature and with the notion of the Romantics as essentially revolutionary figures, attempts to reinstate Wordsworth and the other Romantics as indeed poets of Nature and establishing 'a tradition of environmental consciousness': *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 9. Glen Love regards this as an important eco-critical text. But has Bate convincingly made his case? Is Romanticism the root-system of environmental literature and eco-criticism? Or is it a translation, sublimation and diversion from the environment and therefore the wrong ideology for environmental literature?

<sup>15</sup> Lysaght identifies this as something of a lapse in Heaney, since the poet 'is usually alert to the ambiguities of a situation where the special circumstances of Irish experience, including its depleted landscape and wildlife, provide an English-speaking literary tradition with distinct subject-matter' (p. 444). Bate calls Heaney 'the most truly Wordsworthian of living poets' (p.88).

<sup>16</sup> Juan Ráez Padilla has recently recruited Heaney as an eminent subject for eco-criticism by focusing on the play of elements in the poetry (what the critic calls Heaney's 'ecopoetics'), which expresses, symbolises and manages the religious, national, sexual, and linguistic tensions and oppositions, and in doing so shaping an 'elemental ecoweb' that might – though this is not entirely clear – contribute to the solution of our environmental predicament: 'Seamus Heaney's Elemental Ecopoetics: Earth, Water, Air and Fire', *Journal of Ecocriticism* 1 (2009), pp. 21-30.

<sup>17</sup> See John Wilson Foster, 'Nature and Nation in the Nineteenth Century,' in *Nature in Ireland*, eds. Foster and Chesney, pp. 409-439.

<sup>18</sup> See David Livingstone, 'Darwin in Belfast: The Evolution Debate' in *Nature in Ireland*, eds. Foster and Chesney, pp. 387-408.

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