



Direction and Directionlessness in Irish Studies

Pádraig Ó Siadhail, Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia

Irish Studies is all over the map -- in the geographical sense, with an academic programme or two in Canada and others in Ireland, the U.S., Britain and Australia, to choose just a few random locations, and with individuals who have an interest in the field of studies scattered far and wide -- but also in the sense that there is little or no direction in the way Irish Studies is moving, and that those of us who make our living from it are making it up and cobbling it together as we go along. Irish Studies needs a direction, one that demonstrates to the traditional disciplines dealing with Ireland that we have something new and different to offer. The good news is that such a direction is there for us to take, but to do so requires leadership and a willingness to be innovative.

These days, only a fool would attempt to define Irishness, or indeed this strange bird called Irish Studies. But beyond definitions or prescriptions, ideally there are three core assumptions in Irish Studies: First, that Irish Studies covers potentially every aspect of the Irish experience at home and abroad; second, that we are dealing with a field of study that emphasizes and champions an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approach; and third, that we are training students to explore the Irish experience in a way different from traditional disciplines.

Straight off, we see the limitations of existing Irish Studies programmes. Irish Studies teaches a narrow range of subjects, largely in the arts and humanities: literature, language, history and geography. Vast swaths of the Irish experience remain untouched by Irish Studies programmes -- economics, science, and recent immigration to Ireland, for example. Secondly, the vast majority of those who teach Irish Studies received their training in traditional disciplines and find themselves attached to Irish Studies informally, without having necessarily bought into any rationale for Irish Studies. Occasionally a scholar from an established discipline will end up in Irish Studies by accident -- just because there was a job going there at the time -- and has to develop, quickly and retroactively, a rationale for their involvement. In general, however, Irish Studies does not impinge on the consciousness of the vast majority of scholars and researchers whose field of study is Ireland. Having spent a research year at the Institute of Irish Studies at Queen's University Belfast years ago, I don't think it would be unfair or inaccurate to state that the majority of my colleagues knew no more and cared not one jot more for Irish Studies when they left than when they first arrived.

There is a wonderful irony about interdisciplinary programmes in general: students love them, but the programmes are usually run on a shoestring budget. If there is one word that links interdisciplinary studies programmes, that word is "vulnerability." Many of our colleagues in traditional departments claim that we sponge off them and that there is no intellectual basis for what we do. We depend on cross-listed courses offered by other departments, yet frequently have little say when it comes time to hire a replacement for a departmental-based lecturer offering a core course, such as modern Irish history, for our programmes. A university may boast of its interdisciplinary offerings yet be unwilling to finance cross-appointments that would secure the future of interdisciplinary studies.

So it is with Irish Studies programmes, and there is little evidence that such vulnerability will ever fully go away. As such, the future of Irish Studies programmes is largely beyond the control of those directly involved. We can coax and cajole, try our best to get colleagues and administrators on side, point to strong enrolment; but it is the nature of the beast that we are always going to be hostages to budget deficits and funding cuts and changing departmental priorities.

A more worrying feature is the failure of those who run Irish Studies programmes to develop a clear rationale for what they do, apart from the fact that offering courses seems to be a good idea or that there is money available under various government schemes -- Ethnic Studies or Diaspora Studies or whatever.

Two points emerge. First, unlike, for example, Women's Studies programmes around the world (certainly in the developed world, where you will find core courses dealing with gender and identity issues, courses that provide an intellectual framework for and underpinning of the field of study), one rarely finds courses in Irish Studies that focus on tradition and identity. Why not? The suspicion is that we can't come up with such an intellectual framework for Irish Studies, beyond a bland and general statement about the heterogeneous nature of the Irish experience.

Second, there is little or no consensus about what Irish Studies *should* be offering. What is available is determined by a plethora of factors, including the different histories of such programmes. In Ireland, Irish Studies is only slowly shrugging off its origins as an offshoot of the Summer School industry, with its connotations of feeding tourists grand dollops of education and entertainment in return for a fistful of American dollars. In contrast, Irish Studies programmes in Canada owe more to the federal government policy of promoting and funding multiculturalism and to the vision of a few individuals than to anything else. Similarly, the scope and location of the programme affects what is offered. The National University of Ireland in Galway can draw on lecturers of a calibre I can only dream about; the other side of that particular coin, however, is that those out in the "colonies" can focus on aspects of the local Irish immigrant community, both past and present, in a way a programme in Ireland would find difficult to match.

Yet beyond these issues of resources and local circumstances, there is still a lack of consensus about how we should be training our students. The question of the role of the Irish language within Irish Studies illustrates my point.

First, an admission. I am the coordinator of a programme that requires that our Majors take two years of Irish language training and our Minors one year. Apart from Celtic Studies, no other academic discipline that relates to Ireland requires that scholars and researchers have a working knowledge of Irish. It is not part of the training of modern Irish historians, to give one example. In an interview with *History Ireland* last year, Peter Hart noted in response to a question about his interest in Irish history that he had focused on Asian history for a long time. "But," he continued, "my underlying interests were revolution, military history and associated subjects, and they ultimately took me into Irish history instead, which, apart from anything else, meant not

having to study Chinese.”¹ This is an admission that apart from a knowledge of English, one does not need to acquire other language skills -- specifically a working knowledge of Irish -- as part of one’s training as a modern Irish historian. In reality, it’s hit or miss (usually miss) as to whether a historian of modern Ireland can handle sources in Irish. One can argue about the merits of that; one can even dodge the issue by claiming (as have various colleagues over the years) that Irish doesn’t come into the work. My standard response to that is that it is up to individuals to justify how they can do their work and read all the relevant literature as it relates to modern Ireland without being able to access material in Irish.

My focus here, though, is on the future direction of Irish Studies. If we are serious about training people to approach the field in an integrated and multidisciplinary way, does it not make sense that we equip them with appropriate language skills not just in their first language, but in a second? Though there are cases where a working knowledge of Latin or French or the Ulster Scots dialect might be more appropriate, for most scholars of Ireland that second language would be Irish. The challenge for us in Irish Studies is to train literary scholars who can handle Éilís Ní Dhuibhne’s full range of writings in both languages, or Michael Hartnett’s poetry in both Irish and English; or historians who can access newspaper sources in both languages; or cultural historians and geographers who can avail themselves of the material in the archives of the old Irish Folklore Commission.

Let us put an end to the dreadful situation that blights modern scholarship -- for example, so-called “in-depth” studies of the modern Irish novel that deal solely with material in English and blithely ignore Irish-language novels, or shoddy articles that treat translations of contemporary Irish-language poetry as if they are the originals. It is time to leave aside prejudices, personal narratives, professional agendas, and inferiority complexes masquerading as superiority complexes (frequently coloured by our own inability to function in more than one language). It is time for an honest, open and sensible discussion about equipping our students with skills in two languages, and the logistics involved in effecting such a change.

This is not about “compulsory Irish,” that bugbear for so many Irish people, or language revival. This is not about whether Ireland is or is not a truly bilingual society, or how many people speak more than the *cúpla focal* (the obligatory “few words” in Irish) frequently associated with politicians and public occasions. It is merely acknowledging that there are historical sources and a contemporary literature in Irish -- material that won’t go away just for our convenience.

Rather than taking the easy route by ignoring this material and writing it out of the narrative -- as has occurred so often in the past, and continues to occur today -- or relying on the happenstance that is translation, the more challenging and productive response would be to engage with this material and incorporate it within the ambit of Irish Studies. To do that, we must set structures in place to encourage and allow Irish Studies students, especially graduate students, to develop their language skills to whatever level will allow them to do their work as professionally and competently as possible.

¹ Peter Hart in conversation with Brian Hanley, “Hart to Hart,” *History Island*, 13, 2 (March/April 2005): 48.

In so doing, we would be making a strong statement that Irish Studies is truly innovative, progressive and cutting-edge and that it represents a new and important direction in the study of the Irish experience.