

Module Title: Knowing Ourselves?: remembering Ireland in memoir

Dr Stephen O'Neill

oneils56@tcd.ie

10 ECTS

Senior Sophister Option

Hilary Term 2024

Module Description:

'The elision of the personal and the national, the way that history becomes a kind of scaled-up biography and biography a kind of microcosmic history is a particularly Irish phenomenon' wrote the historian R.F. Foster in his 2001 collection of essays *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making it Up in Ireland*. This module explores how memoir has developed as a literary form in Ireland. The claustrophobic relationship between the stories of the nation and the individual has been a commonplace since at least the 1920s, when the Blasket Island autobiographies were at once held up as a model for the new Free State while also recording a way of life that was to quickly vanish. Beginning with an introductory session which establishes how this relationship has developed since then, this module examines the form of the memoir as a way of negotiating the relationship between the individual and society in Ireland, north and south. It will ask students to critically examine the forms and themes by which we are called to remember the past century, and to investigate the contexts in which Irish memoir has been written and received.

Learning Outcomes:

On the completion of this module, students will have:

- LO1:** Considered with nuance the formal conventions of memoir, especially as it contrasts with fiction.
- LO2:** Identified the traditions of autobiographical writing in Ireland, and located the selected texts in relation to these.
- LO3:** Appraised those texts in oral and written presentations, adopting appropriate terminology and criticism.
- LO4:** Demonstrated knowledge of cultural, historical, and theoretical contexts for understanding modern and contemporary memoirs in Ireland.

Learning Aims / Objectives:

This module has been designed to:

- LO1:** Support students to recognize the formal qualities of memoir as a literary genre.
- LO2:** Advance students' understanding of autobiographical writing as a tradition in Irish culture.
- LO3:** Developed students' capacity to communicate their arguments in written and spoken form at an appropriate critical level.
- LO4:** Build students' knowledge of the historical and cultural contexts of memoir in Ireland as well as relevant theories for understanding these.

Assessment: Short essay (2,000 words, 30%); Essay (4,000 words, 70%).

Reading List

1. Excerpts from Tomás Ó Criomthain, *An tOileánach / The Irishman* (1929), Muiris Ó Súilleabháin, *Fiche Bliain ag Fás / Twenty Years a-Growing* (1933), Peig Sayers, *The Autobiography of Peig Sayers of the Great Blasket Island* (1974)
2. Christy Brown, *My Left Foot* (1954)
3. Brendan Behan, *Borstal Boy* (1958)
4. Bernadette Devlin, *The Price of My Soul* (1969)
5. Polly Devlin, *All of Us There* (1983)
6. Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir* (1996)
7. Nuala O'Faoláin, *Are You Somebody?: The Accidental Memoir of a Dublin Woman* (1996)
8. John McGahern, *All Will be Well: A Memoir* (2006)
9. Doireann Ní Ghríofa, *A Ghost in the Throat* (2020)
10. Kenneth Branagh (dir.), *Belfast* (2021)
11. Fintan O'Toole, *We Don't Know Ourselves: A Personal History of Ireland Since 1958* (2021)

Most of these (with the exception of the film *Belfast*) are available in the library, but further instructions and uploaded content will be provided on Blackboard.

Suggested Secondary Reading

- Dougherty, Jane Elizabeth. "Nuala O'Faolain and the Unwritten Irish Girlhood." *New Hibernia Review/Iris Éireannach Nua*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2007, pp. 50-65.
- Flannery, Eóin. "Ecology, Memory, and Speed in John McGahern's Memoir." *Irish University Review*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2012, pp. 273-97.
- Harte, Liam. *A History of Irish Autobiography*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- . *Modern Irish Autobiography: Self, Nation and Society*. Springer, 2007.
- Hopkins, Stephen. "History with a Divided and Complicated Heart? The Uses of Political Memoir, Biography and Autobiography in Contemporary Northern Ireland." *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2001, pp. 74-81.
- . *The Politics of Memoir and the Northern Ireland Conflict*. Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Lynch, Claire. *Irish Autobiography: Stories of Self in the Narrative of a Nation*. vol. 7, Peter Lang, 2009.
- O'Connor, Emmet. "The Autobiography of the Irish Working Class." *A History of Irish Autobiography*, 2018, pp. 209-24.
- Patten, Eve. "'Life Purified and Reprojected': Autobiography and the Modern Irish Novel." *Modern Irish Autobiography: Self, Nation and Society*, Springer, 2007, pp. 51-69.
- Regan, Stephen. "Autobiography and Memoir in Modern Ireland." *Belgrade English Language and Literature Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2009, pp. 151-70.
- Sampson, Denis. "'Voice Itself': The Loss and Recovery of Boyhood in Irish Memoir." *Modern Irish Autobiography: Self, Nation and Society*, Springer, 2007, pp. 197-213.