



# Introduction

TINA O'TOOLE AND JASON KING

In the past twenty years a lively dynamic has emerged in Irish studies that has broadened critical discourse beyond the somewhat static literary-historical categories of the past. As scholars have drawn on critical perspectives from postcolonial, feminist and queer theory, multidisciplinary approaches have been forged to create new understandings of Irish culture. This dynamic has been particularly evident in the area of migration and diaspora studies. At the same time, the fixed points on the map of Irish emigration have been unsettled in the context of the contemporary global environment and by what Diane Negra calls 'transnationalized Irishness'.<sup>1</sup> This troubling of the canon and of the old certainties enables us to interrogate the connections and potential incompatibilities between received forms of national identity on the island and to locate these within a more complex nexus of Irish, European and translocational identities.<sup>2</sup>

This special issue of *The Irish Review* examines the interrelations between memoir, memory and migration in Irish culture in light of the current moment. Contributors explore individual recollections of migrant experience in the memoir as well as expressions of diasporic memory in a range of literary and performative genres. They employ methodologies derived primarily from literary and cultural theory, but also from research specialisms in folklore, oral history and the social sciences, to examine the ways in which both individuals and communities shape their memories of migration, explain their presence and define their place within home and host societies. Particular emphasis is placed here on the gendered, generational and performative aspects of diasporic identity formation in Irish-American, Irish-Canadian and British-Irish cultural contexts, as well as the circulation of individual and collective modes of remembrance between Ireland and its diasporic locations.

We chose the cover image for this special issue, David Creedon's 'American Dress', with these multiple contexts in mind. The image is taken from his 2008–9 exhibition *Ghosts of the Faithful Departed* which focuses on the domestic interiors of abandoned houses in rural Ireland; the photographs in the collection depict the aftermath of mid-century emigration and rural depopulation. However, if the 'American dress' has long operated as a signifier of Irish emigration, then Creedon's image also attests to the incongruity of the migrant's sense of belonging insofar as it is conspicuously out of place. It is a picture of non-assimilation, of repressed memory and experience which is not useful or perhaps even not understood 'back home'. In her latest short story collection, *Saints and Sinners*, Edna O'Brien gestures toward this disjuncture in her depiction of the negotiations migrants engage in with home and adopted cultures in a translocational context. In a recent interview, she described her upbringing and family life in Tuamgraney, County Clare, in which 'the atmosphere was further complicated by her mother, who had been to America and returned with a little "Yank style". In her mother's wardrobe hung a green georgette dress, a mournful reminder of happier times.'<sup>3</sup> Just like that mournful georgette dress, the American dress in Creedon's photograph too is unmoored, isolated from other clothing and hangs on the back of a door where it has clearly been forgotten, retaining its shop tags as surely as it does its outsider status. To some extent, we might say that the image transcends its American-ness *per se* as the subject gaze seems to ask: how will I perform my new self? The photograph thereby raises a number of questions relating to migrant objects connecting costume, performativity and the negotiation of diasporic identity.

When the editors' discussion of a project about migration and memoir began in the spring of 2008 (as an email exchange between Limerick and Montréal) little did we realise how quickly the Irish migration context itself would change. At that point, scholarship in the social sciences relating to Irish migration focused on what Gerardine Meaney describes as the 'dramatic shift from emigration to immigration'; discussions about Irish emigration referred to historical rather than contemporary contexts.<sup>4</sup> However, based on recent Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) figures, there have been predictions that 100,000 people will emigrate from the Republic of Ireland over the next two years.<sup>5</sup> In the absence of precise figures, anecdotal evidence suggests that, as with 1980s emigration, those leaving include large numbers of highly trained and professional people.

If emigration historically has been the default option for large segments of the population, especially the young, who were perceived to be superfluous and expected to leave during periods of economic recession and stagnation, then its recurrence will have profound consequences not only

for would-be migrants but also for the families and communities they leave behind. The resentment and resourcefulness exhibited by their predecessors finds expression in many of the migrant memoirs examined here. More broadly, the socio-economic and political consequences of Irish mass-migration at home and abroad have long been studied, but its cultural implications both for those who left and those who stayed are less well understood. Various generic configurations of memoir, memory and migration in literary and life-narratives register the impact of mass displacement on the individual subject. For instance, Frank McCourt's Pulitzer-winning *Angela's Ashes* (1996) is so well known as to be virtually synonymous with the genre of the Irish memoir in popular culture and has inspired numerous imitators. Less well-known migrant narratives include the hand-stitched account of Irish industrial school survivor Peter Tyrrell, reproduced in part in the Ryan Report (2009) under the pseudonym 'Noah Kitterick', which was finally published only four decades after he had burned himself to death on Hampstead Heath in 1967.<sup>6</sup>

In her work on migration Montréal-based poet Dionne Brand writes: '[in] order to find our way successfully, it is not enough to just have a map. We need a cognitive schema as well as a practical mastery of way-finding.'<sup>7</sup> The essays in this special issue provide a 'cognitive schema' within which we make sense of migrant experiences and continue the process of interrogating the Irish 'we'.

## Notes and References

- 1 Diane Negra, *The Irish in Us? Irishness, Performativity and Popular Culture* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 1.
- 2 Floya Anthias, 'Thinking Through the Lens of Translocational Positionality', *Translocations*, 4:1 (2008), 5–20.
- 3 Rachel Cooke, 'The First Lady of Irish Fiction', *The Observer Review* (Sunday 6 February 2011), p. 11.
- 4 Gerardine Meaney, *Gender, Ireland and Cultural Change: Race, Sex and Nation* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. xv.
- 5 Piaras Mac Éinrí, 'Tribal Migrants, Mother Ships and Others: Discourses of Immigration and Emigration in Ireland', Race, Ethnicity, Conflict Seminar Series, Department of Sociology, Trinity College Dublin, 9 March 2011.
- 6 Peter Tyrrell in Diarmuid Whelan (ed.), *Founded on Fear: Letterfrack Industrial School, War and Exile* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008). Also see the 'Ryan Report', *Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse*, 8.105–8.304, <http://www.childabusecommission.com/rpt/01–08.php> [Accessed 1 May 2011].
- 7 Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Vintage, 2001), p. 16.