



## Academic Event Report

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**Symposium:** Irish Time? Temporalities in Irish Literature and Culture

**Venue:** Trinity College Dublin

**Dates:** 12–14 October 2017

The symposium “Irish Time?” was aptly named with a big question mark. It gathered over thirty established scholars, early career researchers and postgraduate students to explore the theme of ‘time’ in Irish literature and culture. The question of “Irish Time?” also attracted scholars across the globe; contributors came from Ireland, the UK, Germany, the Czech Republic, the US and Taiwan. The symposium took place in the Trinity Long Room Hub Arts and Humanities Research Institute, a modern building surrounded by historical ones, with the medieval Book of Kells a stone’s throw away. This is an aptly-chosen venue in which to interrogate the uneven and layered temporalities in Ireland.

The two convenors, Professor Christopher Morash (Trinity College Dublin) and Professor Martin Middeke (University of Augsburg), drew out the complexities and peculiarities of Irish time in the introduction. Morash, from a historical perspective, outlined the ways in which Irish time was designated as ‘different’. In the travel narratives of the Great Famine, going to the poverty-stricken areas is often compared to time-travelling to a savage time; in the colonial discourse, Ireland is often marked by its ‘primitiveness’, as a place lagged in time; it is not until the 1916 Irish Time Act that Ireland is synchronised by legal force with the Greenwich Mean Time. From a differing perspective, Middeke underlined the philosophical inquiries about the fluid nature of time. Heidegger, William James and Henri Bergson, for instance, all interrogated the discrepancy between the *experience* of time and the *social order* of time. Bearing in mind the cultural specificity of Ireland and the philosophical understanding of time, the symposium invited the contributors to explore the question of an “Irish Time?” over the following two and a half days.

The symposium covered a wide range of topics and cultural texts, from literature and history to music and the fine arts. The papers were neatly divided into seven panels by theme: Observing Time, Political Time, Time and Memory, Dramatic Time, Time and Place,

Fictional Time, and Time and Art. It also included two brilliant keynote speeches by Professor Luke Gibbons and Professor Claire Connolly. Two cultural events—a poetry reading with Gerald Dawe and music appreciation with Roger Doyle—lightened up the evenings. Due to the limited space, it is impossible to mention all the wonderful papers here. In what follows, I will attempt to give a (subjective) report on the highlights of the event.

Luke Gibbons’s talk, “‘Temporal Powers’: Narrative, Foreboding, and Interwar Fiction”, traces the ways in which the idea of ‘foreboding’ is played out in philosophical enquiries and literary productions in the interwar period. Gibbons impressively and effortlessly alludes to a wide range of works that include Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman*, lesser known works such as *An Experiment with Time* by John William Dunne, and novels by Dorothy Macardle whose *The Unforeseen* was reissued by Tramp Press in 2017 with an introduction by Gibbons. In addition to reviving forgotten works, Gibbons’ talk foregrounds the extent to which the ideas of foreboding and future underlie interwar Irish fictions and thereby challenges the popular conception that post-independence Ireland was obsessed with the past.

Claire Connolly’s “Lane-ism: Trollope’s Irish Roads in Time and Space” brings us back to Victorian-era Ireland. Trollope worked in the postal system in Ireland for decades and acquired intimate knowledge of the Irish roads. His novels document the ‘retrograding lane-ism’ of Irish country roads in contrast to the nascent railroad infrastructure that signifies colonial modernity. Connolly aptly demonstrates the extent to which the material history of infrastructure helps us better appreciate the symbolic currency of roads in literary narratives. Attending to the cultural history of Ireland, Connolly indicates a fascinating approach to reading the different roads, lanes and railways in Trollope’s narrative as revealing the ways in which Ireland was incorporated, temporally and spatially, into British colonial modernity.

On the first evening of the symposium, renowned poet Gerald Dawe gave a reading of his works. Specially selected for this occasion, all the poems in the collection are concerned with the issue of time. The cover photo of the collection is an oil painting by Colin Middleton, entitled “Lagan, Annadale, October 1941”. In the interview with Christopher Morash, Dawe explained that he had chosen this cover because of its discrepancy from historical time. The painting depicts an everyday life in south Belfast, with pedestrians strolling on the river bank and boats sailing along the River Lagan. 1941, however, is the year of the Belfast Blitz in which German air forces bombed and destroyed much of the city. The painting thus brings out an intriguing incongruity between historic time and artistic manoeuvre that alters the scene through memory and commemoration.

The music session with composer Roger Doyle on the second evening drew our attention to the ways in which technology captures specific moments of time in music. Entitled “Time Machine”, the pieces incorporate voice messages from Doyle’s parents (now passed away), his son (now a teenager), and a dear friend (who has also passed) into beautiful music. The graininess of the voice recording carries a strong sense of *time past* and registers a great emotive power.

On an unseasonably warm October Saturday afternoon, the symposium concluded with a roundtable discussion in which all the major issues of time were reiterated. The postcolonial context of Ireland, globalisation, economic expansion versus environmentalism, all point to the complicated operation of temporal politics in Irish literature and culture. This well-organised and thought-provoking symposium left me less sure of my understanding of Irish time (and with a long list of books to read). Many intriguing questions and differing perspectives were raised concerning the nature of time in the Irish contexts. But one thing I know for certain is that two and a half days are too short a time to answer the big question of “Irish Time?”.

For more information and abstracts of individual papers, please see the symposium website here: <https://irishtimesymposium.wordpress.com/>.

**Yen-Chi Wu** is a PhD candidate in English at University College Cork. His PhD project on John McGahern and modernity is funded by the Irish Research Council Postgraduate Scholarship. His research interests include Irish Studies, Postcolonial Studies and modernism.