

Introduction

Travel Writing: Encounters within and through Irish and Latin American spaces

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The premise for this Special Issue of the *Journal of Irish Migration Studies in Latin America* is to explore how the geographical spaces and peoples of Ireland and Latin America are depicted in the narratives by authors, migrants and travellers from both sides of the Atlantic. The shifting borders of what constitutes a migrant or a traveller are reflected in the difficulties in delineating exactly what ‘travel writing’ is. Jan Borm (2004) employs the term travel literature in an attempt to define the parameters of travel writing.¹ He argues that rather than a travel genre as such, there are travelogues, which are predominantly non-fictional and travel literature, which is an overall thematic category that includes both fiction and non-fiction. This division is mirrored in the present publication with articles which demonstrate the role of both the fictive and referential.

The selected texts show how travellers and migrants adjust their understanding of other cultures, peoples and places to new perceptions and learning experiences. Travel-as-displacement and travel-as-freedom are two extremes in the literature scale; narratives of the exotic intertwine with narratives of *authentic* encounters where the imperial rhetoric of superiority is counterpoised by a self-reflective and interrogative discourse, which discloses cultural prejudices on both sides, the traveller’s and those of the peoples they encountered. On the other hand, a less explored subject on the resonances of travelling texts in the foreign land and back at home triggers a new critical perspective that helps to understand the process of configuration of a cultural identity in a diaspora space.

Travels and travelogues have multiplied in contemporary times. Though volumes on the Irish diaspora worldwide, and in Latin America in particular, as well as travel writing about Ireland have become increasingly prevalent in the past fifteen years, criticism on Irish travel or migrant literature, or even textual travels, representing cultural encounters is slower

¹ Jan Borm (2004) ‘Defining travel: On the travel book, travel writing and terminology’, in Glenn Hooper and Tim Youngs (eds), *Perspectives in Travel Writing* (Aldershot: Ashgate), pp. 13-26

to emerge. However, the review of *New perspectives on the Irish Abroad: the silent people?* is in fact a pertinent addition to the existing criticism.²

This Special Issue endeavours to address this gap in the Latin American contact zones focusing more in Argentina and the Caribbean as well as to anticipate not only the function of travelling texts but also the criticism of contemporary narrations of migrant experiences in Ireland by both Irish writers and migrants themselves.

Since the seventeenth century there have been various Irish encounters within Latin American spaces, ranging from: Irish tobacco planters, such as Phillip Purcell, in Brazil in the early 1600s; Irish engagement in the early nineteenth century Wars of Independence in South America; the Irish-led San Patricio battalions involvement in the Mexican-American War of 1846-48; and nineteenth-century Irish settlement in Argentina - one of the major Irish settlements outside of the English-speaking world. While many diasporic subjects did not narrativise their experiences in travel book form, there are many newspaper articles, memoirs, travelling texts and, increasingly, private letters and papers which help to shed light on Irish encounters within Latin American spaces. In the late twentieth century, the nature of these encounters changes from that of travel and migration to travel with the express purpose of exploring the contact zone, Irish authors journey to Latin America and depict different types of encounters. Chile as contact zone is portrayed in accounts by writers such as Dervla Murphy's 1983, *Eight Feet in the Andes* for example, and Brian Keenan's 2000 *Between Extremes: A Journey Beyond Imagination*. Likewise, Cuba is the subject of both Carlo Gebler's 1988 *Driving Through Cuba* and Dervla Murphy's *The Island that Dared: Journeys Through Cuba* from 2010. Latin American encounters within Irish spaces on the other hand, are a relatively recent phenomena, more specifically, centred around the economic boom or so-called Celtic Tiger of the late 1990s and early twenty-first century. Once a nation of emigrants, Ireland has seen an unprecedented in-migration, changing the nature of many of Ireland's small towns and exposing communities to new ideas, languages and cultures.

² See Glenn Hooper's 2000 account, *The Tourist's Gaze: Travellers to Ireland 1800-2000* which contains a full list of other works about travel to Ireland. Cf. *Tourists with Typewriters. Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* by P. Holland and G. Huggan (2000) who examined contemporary travel writings seeking to occupy a middle ground "between travel writing as a more or less elaborate textual performance (Butor) and as an economically sanctioned activity, a circumscribed material practice (Pratt)" (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press). Within the London-Irish diaspora space for example, see Tony Murray's 2012 *London Irish Fictions: Narrative, Diaspora and Identity*. In relation to Latin America, see the *ABEI Journal*; *JIMSLA*; Edmundo Murray's *Devenir irlandés. Narrativas íntimas de la emigración irlandesa a la Argentina (1844-1912)* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2004); Helen Kelly's *Irish "Ingleses". The Irish Immigrant Experience in Argentina. 1840-1920*. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009); Laura Izarra's *Narrativas de la diáspora irlandesa bajo la Cruz del Sur*. (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 2010).

The theme of this Issue “Travel Writing: Encounters within and through Irish and Latin American spaces” seeks to open up debate around how these encounters are constituted within what Mary Louise Pratt has defined as ‘contact zones’, that is ‘social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination-like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today’.³ What concerns this publication then, are the narratives or artefacts that emerge from the clash of cultures, how the traveller perceives themselves and how they are perceived. The first two articles focus on encounters within late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Argentina in the literary journalism and travel writing of William Bulfin. In a comprehensive overview of the life of Bulfin, Colum Kenny draws upon *The William Bulfin Papers* held in the National Library in Dublin to offer a portrait of a prolific and well-travelled writer. He outlines Bulfin’s journey from Birr, Co Offaly in 1884 and subsequent travels around Argentina and his travel sketches which he had published in *The Southern Cross* newspaper; his becoming editor and owner of it; his return journey to Ireland in 1902 to write the travel book *Rambles in Eirinn* and finally, his trips to New York in 1904 and 1909 to meet publishers and Irish nationalists. The results of Bulfin’s encounters and writing from within multiple contact zones are varied and his writing is often inscribed with a sense of exilic wandering from a lost homeland in keeping with Bulfin’s staunch cultural nationalism. The second article by Sinéad Wall, concentrates on Bulfin’s writing for *The Southern Cross* and examines how he attempts to ‘materialise’ diaspora space within the pages of that publication. Rather than the contact zone as cultural space, she utilizes Avtar Brah’s concept of diaspora space, that is ‘the intersectionality of diaspora, border and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes’ (1996: 188) as a starting point from which to explore how Bulfin’s travel sketches materialise a sense of national imaginings, allegiances and landscapes.⁴

Whilst *The Southern Cross* newspaper served the interest of many of the rural Irish settlers in Buenos Aires province, its rival in the capital itself was *The Standard*, owned and edited by the Dublin-born Mulhall brothers. Michael Mulhall was accompanied in his travels around Latin America by his wife Marion and Mariano Galazzi’s article analyses their travels and in particular, the writing of Marion Mulhall. He explores the readership for her two Latin American travel books, *From Europe to Paraguay and Matto-Grosso* (1877) and *Between the Andes and the Amazon* (1881) as well as her chapter on the Irish in South America for the resoundingly nationalist text, *The Glories of Ireland* (1914).

³ *Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992: 4)

⁴ *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1996: 188)

The concept of travelling texts or textual travels is exemplified in “Translated Irelands Beyond the Seas” where Laura Izarra shows how those texts published in newspapers read by the community, such as *The Southern Cross* and *Fianna*, shaped the diasporic identity of the Irish in Argentina in the beginning of the twentieth century.

In contrast to the travel writing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the second section of this Issue focuses on travel fiction and the literary representations of the Irish in Latin American and Caribbean writing as well as exploration of the Brazilian community in the west of Ireland through ‘story telling’ performances, highlighting the importance of narrative in how we render ourselves and others as subjects. Douglas Glynn’s article analyses how Irish mothers and fathers are depicted in literatures of the Caribbean and Latin America through a range of texts from 1965 to 2004. Aisling McKeown on the other hand, turns the prism to Irish shores and analyses Irish space as a contact zone for Brazilian migrants. Her article on ‘story-telling’ and ‘re-telling’ echoes Avtar Brah’s analysis of the role of narrative in diaporic communities and her assertion that multiple journeys “configure into one journey via a confluence of narratives as it is lived and re-lived, produced, reproduced and transformed through the individual as well as collective memory and rememory [and] is constituted [...] in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively” (1996: 183). McKeown’s article then, explores this element of travelling tales. It is clear that migrant stories of travels and experiences in Ireland are only beginning to be told. To complete the spectrum of cultural encounters on the other side of the Atlantic, the review of Alex Hijmans’ book of photographs and essays, a Dutchman living in Brazil and writing in Irish, closes this issue.

The contemporary experience of distant travel, whether it is labour migration, tourism or travelling texts, becomes a counterpart of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries textual and scientific travels by explorers, adventurers or migrants. Today, large numbers of people and texts are on the move producing a new ethnographic writing which needs to be explored from both the traveller’s and the reader’s perspective. There is a growing awareness of the poetical and political contexts (national and transnational) of the literary travel narrative. This Special Issue is just one step in this journey that hopefully will be taken up by writers and critics elsewhere.