We are trying to make ourselves heard  
Like the lover who mouths obscenities  
In his passion, like the condemned man  
Who makes a last-minute confession  
Like the child who cries out in the dark.

Michael Longley

1.1 Ends of the Century

Irish history, it has been observed, is often written as a morality tale, with a pre-formulated structure and established patterns of triumph and travail. Written in the aftermath of the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994 and 1997 and revised in the wake of the St Andrews Agreement of 2006, this story of Ireland might easily assume some of the characteristics of its predecessors in the field: a narrative of heroism and villainy with a happy resolution. The quality of the fairy-tale ending may not be fully perceived for some years yet, and the interaction of the book’s themes may not coincide with the typology of other stories of Ireland. Yet the period under consideration here does appear to represent a discreet phase within Irish political history: while the book lacks the robust predestinarianism of earlier stories, it may at least boast a shadowy symmetry.

The book begins and ends with the turn of a century. The book begins with the creation of militant republicanism and militant loyalism in the 1790s – in the essential context both of European revolution and of a great international conflict: ‘the events of 1793–4, in their total effect, marked a turning-point in the history of the protestant ascendancy’, J.C. Beckett has noted; Thomas Bartlett has called the 1790s ‘the crucible of modern Ireland when separatism, republicanism, unionism and Orangeism captured the Irish political agenda for generations to come.’
book closes with, if not the demise, then at least the modification of militant republicanism and militant loyalism in the 1990s and after. Again, the dual context for this development has been European revolution and the apparent resolution of a great international rivalry. America and France fired Irish republican zeal in the early 1790s: the French wars indirectly brought about the militarization of this republican enthusiasm after 1793. The fall of the Soviet empire in the late 1980s and the termination of the ideological and material conflicts between communism and capitalism have affected Ireland no less than the seismic political shifts of the 1790s. Militant republicanism can no longer appeal, even indirectly, to the resources of the eastern bloc; the British government no longer finds a wholly compliant partner in the United States.

Moreover, in both the 1790s and the 1990s social and economic developments broke through their constitutional constraints. The end of the eighteenth century was characterized by the consolidation of the Catholic propertied interest, and by its increasingly vocal opposition to a constitution which recognized property, but not Catholicism. The Irish Protestant constitution (even – especially – when revamped in 1782–3) proved unable to accommodate this newly arisen interest, and was abolished by the British government through the Act of Union (1800). The end of the twentieth century in Northern Ireland has been characterized by the proportionate growth of the Catholic population, and their increasing political and cultural confidence: the Protestant-dominated constitutional arrangements of the period 1920–72 proved unable to accommodate Catholic aspirations, and, after the Second World War, increasing Catholic political and economic strength. The constitutional development of Northern Ireland between 1972 and 1994 has involved a spasmodic retreat from effectively Protestant institutions, as Unionism has splintered and the political and cultural confidence of northern Protestants has waned. There is, however, some scattered evidence to suggest that this process has been temporarily halted. It would seem that 25 years of violence (1969–94) have brought not only some belated Catholic political victories, but at last a more critical self-awareness and reorientation on the part of Ulster Protestants.

This of course broaches the characteristic fin-de-siècle theme of decadence. The late eighteenth century witnessed the first symptoms of the decay of Protestant ascendancy in Ireland, albeit a decay well screened by a luxuriant social and political culture. Whether the late twentieth century has witnessed the decay of Protestant predominance in Northern Ireland (screened again by an exotic political culture) will remain an open question for some decades. Whether the late twentieth century has witnessed the final decay of what has been euphemistically labelled the ‘physical force’ traditions of loyalism and republicanism is similarly uncertain. If there is, arguably, a symmetry in this story of Ireland, then its lines necessarily remain blurred.

1.2 Modes and Frameworks of Interpretation

Until recently the most common framework applied to modern Irish history has been that associated with the varieties of Irish nationalism. Work written in this
broad tradition has become much less common given the steady professionalization of Irish history writing since the 1930s, but some of its features live on. The Irish history profession evolved alongside the development, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of the Irish revolution, and there was an inevitable overlap or exchange. In 1886, at the time of the first Home Rule Bill, historians from several traditions debated the achievement of Grattan’s parliament, the assembly abolished in 1800 through the Act of Union: nationalist commentators saw an economic and cultural flowering in Ireland as a result of legislative independence, while unionist commentators stressed the merits of Union. Heroes of the campaign to repeal the Union, such as Thomas Davis, were lauded in celebratory biographies (Charles Gavan Duffy, *Thomas Davis* (1890)). General histories of Ireland (such as that by Mary Hayden) deployed a straightforward morality, emphasizing the benefits of self-rule and the brutality of British imperial government. This work has supplied several starting points even for some contemporary Irish historiography: an emphasis on the nobility of nationalist endeavour, on the suffering of the Irish people under British rule, and on the inevitable success of the national struggle. Such work, in its most direct expression, fell victim to the popularization of a more ‘scientific’ historical methodology with the creation, in 1938, of the influential journal *Irish Historical Studies*; intellectual proponents of an uncritical militant nationalism were also embarrassed by the more bloody aspects of the IRA campaigns after 1969. The paramilitary ceasefires in 1994 and 1997 have, however, permitted the renewal of a nationalist historical perspective on modern Irish history.

An alternative and, since the mid-1960s, a highly influential interpretative approach has been labelled as ‘liberal’. Such work has its origins as a reaction against the most elaborate and unconvincing nationalist rhetoric, and – certainly in the view of critics such as Bradshaw – has substituted a rationalist aridity for nationalist floridity. The characteristics of this work tend to be an intolerance of intolerance – a disdainful attitude towards popular political institutions and culture – combined with a much more sensitive approach to the diversity of modern Ireland than that adopted by the traditionalists. Neo-nationalists tend to see Ireland as an ethnic nation subjugated by a neighbouring imperial power (Britain); ‘liberals’ place greater emphasis on the ‘varieties of Irishness’ and are more wary about the crude application of national labels. ‘Liberals’ tend not to accept that Ireland was bound by a simple colonial relationship with Britain.

The counter-revisionist critics of this dominant tendency within Irish historical scholarship fall into a variety of camps (not all of which are discrete). Counter-revisionism may at once be a reassertion of patriotic certainties: in this sense, counter-revisionism may be seen as an Irish expression of the historiography of the radical right prevalent in the 1980s. By extension, counter-revisionism may be seen as part of the broader ‘greening’ of Irish society, as evidenced by the election of Mary McAleese as President of Ireland, and – in terms of popular culture – by the phenomenal success of Neil Jordan’s film *Michael Collins* and Michael Flatley’s *Riverdance* (Flatley appeared on posters clad in the national colours, and the pounding rhythms of his dancers suggested a militant Celticism to some – friendly – critics). But the
counter-revisionist tendency is as sophisticated as the revisionism which it seeks to subvert; and it is also arguable that counter-revisionism represents a post-modernist assault on the enlightenment verities of mainstream Irish history. In this interpretation revisionism is a liberal construction, and therefore as flawed and as dangerous as other constructionist readings. Indeed, just as some crusading post-modernists have seen the Holocaust as a bloody and perverted expression of the Enlightenment, so some ‘green’ post-modernists have seen ‘enlightened’ revisionists apologizing for what is occasionally described as the Irish holocaust – the Great Famine of 1845–51.6

Marxian interpretations of modern Irish history stem from the Irish commentaries of Marx himself, or – more frequently – the work of the socialist James Connolly, especially Labour in Irish History (1910) or The Reconquest of Ireland (1915). This work, predictably enough, is to be differentiated from mainstream nationalist commentary by its emphasis on class, and hostility towards organized Catholicism. It lays emphasis on the revolutionary potential of the Irish working class, seeing capitalism as an imperialist importation, and the middle classes as hopelessly corrupted: ‘the middle class . . . have now also bowed the knee to Baal, and have a thousand economic strings binding them to English capitalism as against every sentimental or historic attachment drawing them towards Irish patriotism’.7 The ineluctable problem which this work continually encounters is that of the Unionist working class in Belfast, a theoretical irritant (like the Tory working man in Victorian England) as well as an apparently practical obstacle to the socialist millennium. Connolly saw the Catholics and Presbyterians of eighteenth-century Ireland as united through their legal disabilities; he saw Presbyterians won to the cause of the Anglican ‘master class’ in the nineteenth century, and bound into an Orange working class whose servility was rooted in marginal superiority over Catholic unskilled labour. The influence of this model of sectarian and political relations in the north of Ireland since the late eighteenth century has been immense. Connolly’s arguments have stimulated a continuous reappraisal, and even though his view of the servile Orange worker and rebel Catholic counterpart has been found to be oversimplistic, his rhetoric and assumptions continue to inform even highly respected contemporary portrayals of the north of Ireland in the nineteenth century.

This volume is not exclusively a part of any of these traditions. It is not neo-nationalist, because while the value of a free-ranging historical sympathy and empathy is warmly embraced here, a historical determinism forms no part of the critical approach. For much the same reasons the volume, though occasionally influenced by some Marxist scholarship on Ulster labour, is neither a socialist text nor a call to arms such as Michael Farrell’s Northern Ireland: The Orange State (1976).8 Similarly, while it shares the inclusivist vision of Irish identity explored in Foster’s Modern Ireland (1988), the book is not a liberal document. It has been the fate of Ireland’s liberal historians – Lecky, Beckett, Lyons – to see their rationalist faith in the power of scholarship smashed by popular political emotion: Beckett’s optimistic projections of the political outlook in his The Making of Modern Ireland (1966) were soon shown to be ill-founded, while the mild, generous, confident nationalism of
F.S.L. Lyons’s *Ireland since the Famine* (1971) was replaced by the bleaker tone of his last work, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland* (1979). Written with this evidence of wrecked aspirations, and after 25 years of a low-grade but vicious civil war in Northern Ireland, this volume could not consciously be imbued with any Whiggish agenda, however subtle or artless.

Nevertheless, if post-modernist writing is a by-product of an age of crisis, then we in Ireland, and especially in Northern Ireland, are all post-modernists now. This book was written against a backdrop of political and social fluidity, with the ostensibly marmoreal political attitudes and institutions of Northern Ireland in flux: the book was begun in a post-Unionist Ulster, pursued in a post-nationalist Ireland, completed in a post-industrial United States and revised in a post-unionist Scotland. In common with much recent historiography, the volume addresses some of the contemporary predicaments of Northern Ireland and the island as a whole; there is no grand narrative, however, no ‘Official Story’, but rather an interest in what Richard Kearney has called an ‘open plurality of stories’.9 The work embodies no blind faith in the canonical ‘facts’ of Irish history. As Peter Novick has argued, the historian – and emphatically the Irish historian – can hope at best for plausibility.10

Readers, then, will not find here a universal narrative history, still less a history designed to serve as a basic introduction, or primer, for the subject. An analysis of Irish political parties, leaders, institutions and movements is sustained; and social, economic and cultural material relevant to the main political thrust is introduced and interwoven. Individual chapters highlight major political issues, and these are generally explored through the mapping of subsidiary themes or hypotheses: the material relevant to a given issue is often arranged thematically or within the context of a wider argument. This makes for a design which is intended to stimulate thought (or, indeed, to invite argument) about sometimes familiar historical issues or personalities: it is a design which (it is intended) will highlight some fresh conjunctions and configurations in the interpretation of modern Irish history. In addition, the design is meant to corral, not just the familiar hobby horses of students, but also some rarer creatures. An attempt has been made to give a place to some sections of Irish society not normally (or, at any rate, not adequately) represented within works such as this. Thus – once again – the volume is not conditioned exclusively by the contours of contemporary Irish life: the ‘losers’ of social and economic and political struggle are characterized as well as the ‘winners’. There are Salieris here as well as Mozarts.