

Conscience as Compass: Creative Encounters between Ireland and Latin America

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Such reminders of our past links are important. They provide a well of potent memories: memories of joint struggles and aspirations, of hopes shared and dreams waiting to be taken up again – a well from which we can draw as we seek to respond to the challenges of our own times. Indeed, I believe that the best part of our past lies in those emancipatory promises whose trajectory was interrupted, but which continue to offer themselves to our present, begging to be realised. The sediment of those possibilities imagined, but yet to be realised, is what remains after the water of memory has been drawn.

(Higgins 2017)

In 2017, more than one hundred years after the Easter Rising, President Michael D. Higgins travelled to Latin America on a state visit. His journey recalled, literally and symbolically, the journeys of the many other Irishmen and women who made a similar crossing over the last two centuries. In his speech, quoted above and included in full in this special issue, President Higgins alludes to the shared memories and joint struggles of the peoples of Ireland and Latin America. This issue of *Irish Migration Studies in Latin America* considers the power of shared memories and the importance of ethical solidarity in the lives and creative work of activists, artists and intellectuals – individuals drawing on the healing potential and emancipatory promise of this “well of potent memories”.

The centenary of the 1916 Rising has provided an opportunity to reflect on the unfulfilled promise of that revolutionary moment and on the trajectory of the Irish state since its foundation. It has encouraged debate about the failures, both imaginative and practical, of the state in treating all its children equally. It has also prompted a reconsideration of Ireland’s place on a global stage and its relationships with other regions, peoples and governments. In the context of

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Latin America, there were many cultural and intellectual interventions and while most are beyond the scope of this short overview, several events are particularly noteworthy.

President Higgins's official visit to Latin America intersected with and highlighted some of the most significant interventions of the centenary period. In the weeks prior to his departure, he opened "The Irish in Latin America" exhibition, curated by Margaret Brehony, in University College Cork. This exhibition focuses on various confluences and commonalities between the two contexts, raising awareness of the contribution of the Irish diaspora in Latin America and of shared histories of colonialism, revolutionary struggle and subsequent independence (DFA 2016). This touring exhibition was first launched in Mexico City (October 2016). Having opened in Havana, Cuba in February 2017, further launches are planned in Guadalajara, Mexico; Bogotá, Colombia; and Lima, Peru.

Another international touring exhibition was attended by the president and by Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, this time in Lima, Peru.³ A series of framed panels of text and supporting photographs interrogated the darker side of global capitalism and modernisation. Under particular scrutiny is the extractive rubber industry that devastated people and communities of the tropical regions of South America and sub-Saharan Africa in the period 1880-1914. This unfathomable tragedy devastated indigenous populations and those communities along the Amazon continue to struggle with the aftermath of this brutal imperialism, and also with its current incarnations. This exhibition also retrieved into view the humanity of Roger Casement and his searing critique of imperialism and savage capitalism. His investigations revealed the violent abuse perpetrated against communities of the Amazon region and his report provides a chilling record of that genocide. The exhibition was complemented by a Brazilian edition of *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement* edited by Angus Mitchell and Laura Izarra, translated by Mariana Bolfarine, and with a preface by President Michael D. Higgins. As is evident from the recent monograph entitled *Colombia's Forgotten Frontier: A Literary Geography of the Putumayo* (Wylie 2013) and the impressive published proceedings from a conference held in Bogotá – *El Paraíso del Diablo: Roger Casement y el informe del Putumayo, un siglo después*, (Sampedro et al. 2014), Casement is now integral to the *Biblioteca Sudamericana*.

The Society for Irish Latin American Studies hosted its most recent conference in Havana. The theme of the conference was *Island Relations: Ireland, Cuba and the Latin World*. President Higgins, on the first state visit by an Irish president to Cuba, delivered a keynote address at the conference at the Colegio Universitario San Gerónimo entitled: "Ireland and Cuba: From a past of complex struggles and solidarities to a future of shared possibilities". Other speakers included the writers Colm Tóibín, Joseph O'Connor, Orsola Casagrande, and Pura López-Colomé. Also in attendance was Michael

³ Before Lima, this exhibition was hosted in Centro Universitário Maria Antonia, São Paulo, 4 May-26 June 2011; Casa de América, Madrid, October-November 2012; Palau Robert, Barcelona, 1-14 October 2013; County Library Tralee, 24-26 October 2013.

McCaughan whose most recent book *Coming Home: One Man's Return to the Irish Language* (2017) fuses his many years reporting from the frontiers of South and Central America with his rediscovered love for the Irish language.

In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon wonders how we can act ethically toward human and biotic communities that “exist beyond our sensory ken”, particularly when immediate corporate and consumer demands are elevated above the consequences of the long-term, slow violence against human health and the earth’s biosphere (2011: 15). He notes that “it is a pervasive condition of empire that they affect great swathes of the planet without the empire's populace being aware of that impact – indeed, without being aware that many of the affected places even exist” (2011: 35). In the early twentieth century, Roger Casement’s investigative reports destabilized this ideological system of denials, apathy and dissembling; no longer could governments or wealthy shareholders say they were unaware of the suffering and exploitation that underpinned their wealth and privilege. Casement’s radical interventions continue to reverberate and inspire; as articulated by President Higgins in his keynote address in Lima, they are “a compass for all of us”. And Casement’s interventions are not the only such touchstones for artists and activists. As is evident from Ronan Sheehan’s contribution below, reflecting on *The Crane Bag* special issue on Ireland and Latin America (1982), individuals such as Paolo Freire, Rigoberta Menchu, Oscar Romero and Pablo Neruda profoundly moved and influenced Irish intellectuals and artists throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. Indeed, this notion of torchbearers traversing time and space, guiding us towards more ethical futures is strikingly realised by each of the contributors to this collection; these essays demonstrate the rich potential of creative encounters for healing trauma, for social and political “conscientization”, for expressing solidarity, and for finding a way to overcome the monumental challenges and injustices that confront contemporary Ireland and Latin America.

Irish intellectuals continue to look to Latin America as a source of critical consciousness and debate regarding issues such as uneven development or the resolution of historical trauma. For example, Joe Cleary’s analysis of Ireland’s social and political challenges in the twentieth century is enabled by the work of Brazilian cultural theorist Roberto Schwarz and his argument that “the experience of incongruity” is what often links colonial societies (2003: 24). Schwarz’s thesis is that the imposition of liberal European ideology on a society experiencing the realities of the slave trade, clientelism, economic dependency and poverty creates an effect of dissonance and distortion. It is this sensation of “incongruity” rather than particular systems or a specific set of practices that link societies that have undergone colonisation. Thus, in the context of Ireland, the task for critically engaged intellectuals is to investigate the “discrepant ways in which Irish political and cultural life, which were obviously shaped and textured by wider European developments, were at the same time over-determined by the country’s dependent socio-economic composition” (Cleary 2003: 24). Certainly, while Ireland often represents itself as globalized, modern and integral to transnational financial markets, the last decade has shown the state’s vulnerability to underlying dependencies and the residual legacies of its colonial status: from the stark images of IMF

representatives arriving in Dublin to the whispered reports of rendition flights passing through Shannon Airport, or in the reluctance to pursue multinational corporations for tax owed while public services creak under the effects of austerity. However, despite commonalities, Cleary insists on the heterogeneity of experiences and imaginaries of indigenous and colonized peoples around the world. David Lloyd also argues for differential analyses that avoid a positivistic catalogue of similarities between diverse contexts; rather he suggests that the similarities between former colonies often manifest themselves in what he terms “the subalternity effect” (1999: 77), and that the agency of the subaltern can emerge and disrupt the dominant historical discourses thereby challenging narratives of progress and enlightenment. From this perspective, it is the very heterogeneity of social imaginaries at work in disparate settings (such as Ireland and Latin America) that is important and that provide opportunities for transnational solidarities and connectivity.

Lloyd argues that the “actual formation of colonial societies takes place precisely within the uneven encounter between a globalizing project founded in and still legitimated by Europe’s delusion of universality and the multiple and different social imaginaries at work in colonized cultures” (1999: 3). Such a position enables his later analysis that draws connections between “national Marxist” thinkers such as the Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui, the Algerian Franz Fanon and Ireland’s James Connolly who resist rather than pass through capitalist modernity (2003: 345). Similarly, connections could be drawn – across time and space – between the radical educational philosophies articulated by Patrick Pearse in *The Murder Machine* (1916), Paulo Freire in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000) and Augusto Boal in *The Theatre of the Oppressed* (1993) as they seek to nurture personal reflexivity and critical thinking in action. All three sought to combat the debilitating effects of educational systems and civic cultures which both encouraged passivity and devalued the distinct social imaginary and cultural milieu of the student, citizen or activist. As our societies confront issues around climate justice, the economics of toxic pollution, war and the resulting mass migrations, growing inequalities and increasing corporate power, all occurring in an era of distractedness and increased surveillance, the need for a critical pedagogy remains urgent. Decrying the short-termism of much political and economic thinking, Mary Robinson recently concluded that “Our future security and prosperity depends not on the strength of our borders or the size of our armies, but on the depth of our education systems and the extent of global access to water, food and electricity” (2017: 5-6).

It is the multiple and different social imaginaries in existence and under siege in Bolivia, Peru and Argentina which so impacted Roger Casement and Ena Dargan whose writings are discussed in this volume. The indigenous worlds they encountered forced them to confront the reality of unequal global power relations and their own understanding of Irish social and political issues. And, as elucidated by Ann Laura Stoler in her concept of “duress”, imperial traces continue to impact upon and determine relations of power and exploitation in the contemporary moment (2016). Past abuses shadow contemporary power dynamics; certainly, the struggles of indigenous peoples mutate but persist during this high age of neoliberalism. According to Global Witness, the

international NGO that investigates links between natural resource exploitation and human rights abuses worldwide, at least 577 environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs) were killed in Latin America between 2010 and 2015 (Birss, 2017). These deaths are the result of ongoing confrontations between EHRDs and the international business interests which seek to appropriate land and exploit natural resources despite the damage to local communities and the environment. Indigenous peoples have been on the frontline of these battles against unrestrained capitalism. Contested notions of development are at the centre of these struggles with EHRDs refusing a definition of progress based on the exploitation and elite control of resources such as gold, oil, wood and water. Many of these conflicts are under-reported, largely due to the representational bias in mainstream media against ecological violence or the brutal realities of resource extraction. Yet these clashes are part of an escalating global confrontation between the environmental justice movement and the apparatuses and force of neoliberal capitalism: consider the Mundurucu tribe protesting a potentially devastating plan to build a network of 49 dams in the Brazilian Amazon, or contemplate the struggle of the Wampis and Awahun people to halt the pollution from the gold mining industry and from the North Peruvian Oil Pipeline which has had a series of toxic leaks in recent years. The indigenous peoples at the centre of these struggles suffer both the long-term consequences of industrial pollution, ecological degradation and forced migration, but also the immediate and shocking violence of intimidation and assassination: for example, in 2016, Berta Cáceres, a Lenca woman and 2015 Goldman Prize Recipient, was murdered for her activism in Honduras (Fig. 1); as the co-founder of the National Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH), she had been to the forefront of a successful movement to prevent the construction of a mega-dam in opposition to (and without consulting) the indigenous people who were to be affected. What these cases demonstrate is the manner by which imperial power dynamics and practices linger and continue to haunt these regions.



Fig. 1. Indigenous Lenca women protest against the murder of Honduran activist Berta Cáceres in 2016. (Photograph: Orlando Sierra/AFP/Getty Images.)

Several of the contributors to this issue engage with the plight of indigenous peoples: David Lilburn in his print ‘Putumayo’, Michael D. Higgins in his keynote address in Lima, and Deirdre Brady in her discussion of Ena Dargan’s account of her travels across Latin America. This latter essay by Deirdre Brady constitutes an important act of cultural retrieval as Dargan’s travel book, *The Road to Cuzco: A Journey from Argentina to Peru*, is relatively little known. A blend of memoir, history and travelogue, the text (published in 1950, but reflecting on a journey undertaken in the 1930s) was introduced by Salvador de Madariaga, the Spanish intellectual and historian, and featured several photographs by Martín Chambi, the Peruvian photographer often compared in terms of his creative instinct to Diane Arbus or Sebastião Salgado (See Fig. 2). Dargan’s text is suggestive of the important political and intellectual connections of its author. For example, Brady notes Dargan’s friendship with Cecilio Guzmán de Rojas, the extraordinary Bolivian painter whose works feature the indigenous peoples of Aymara. The image, *Cristo Aymara* (1939), on the front cover of this special issue of *IMSLA* was chosen as a stunning example of Guzmán de Rojas’ art. It was in the 1930s that Guzmán de Rojas advised Dargan to travel to Oruro for carnival and it was there that she witnessed the performance of the folk play, *The Death of Atahualpa*. Later, they met again in London when Guzmán de Rojas was travelling in Europe. These encounters between Guzmán de Rojas and Dargan reveal something surprising and compelling about Irish and Latin American intersections in the 1930s and 40s. A concern for the plight of the pre-Colombian world and the *pueblos indígenas* is evident in Dargan’s descriptions and in her impressive selection of images. Brady’s retrieval of Dargan’s fascinating text highlights the possibility for further research and projects of cultural retrieval on Irish women in Latin America.

David Lilburn’s print “Putumayo” directly responds to the trail of testimony and reports revealing the atrocious practices of the British-owned Peruvian Amazon company in the early twentieth century. This story destabilized Western sensibilities, the concept of imperial progress and the very notion of imperial civilisation in the years preceding the First World War. Lilburn’s oeuvre is marked by his engaged gaze; his maps are characterised by a series of visual and textual fragments, frequently orientating the spectator and encouraging his audiences to make connections between the extractive economy, the suffering of the poor, the abuse of indigenous peoples, and the comfortable consumer lifestyles of the affluent West. Lilburn layers memories and juxtaposes discrete, but related, images: the resulting temporal and spatial disruptions create crevices where unacknowledged histories can be intuited and partially encountered. Map-making was conventionally deployed by imperialists and venture capitalists to control territory, natural resources and indigenous communities; by shifting the axis of such mapping practices, Lilburn exposes fissures in the epistemology and temporal structures of the neoliberal present.

Finding a way to process and heal the trauma of growing up in Belfast during a period of protracted conflict is the theme of Lorna Shaughnessy’s essay *Migrating Myths: From Greece to Nicaragua, Mexico and Ireland*. It was while on sabbatical in Nicaragua in 1993 that Shaughnessy, through her engagement with literature written by women in the context of the Central American

revolutions of the 1970s and 1980s, began to creatively work through her personal experience of childhood during the Irish Troubles. In particular, the political engagement and poetry of Michèle Najlis was influential. Shaughnessy's essay here considers the way that classical mythology enables contemporary poets – including both herself and Najlis – to write about public, social subjects such as political violence, the displacement of peoples, the betrayal of revolutionary ideals, and the suffering of the innocent. Identifying the imaginative bonds of empathy which connect women poets from these diverse contexts, Shaughnessy concludes by highlighting the need to acknowledge, communicate and transform the traumatic past so as to prevent its reoccurrence.



Fig. 2. Quechua woman breastfeeding her infant. Photograph by the celebrated Martín Chambi, another leading artist in the Indigenous Movement, and included as an illustration in Ena Dargan's book *The Road to Cusco: A Journey from Argentina to Peru* (London: Andrew Melrose, 1950).

The importance of Latin America as an emancipatory intellectual and emotional space for Irish activists and artists is also evident in Ronan Sheehan's reflection on *The Crane Bag* special issue on Ireland and Latin America that he edited in 1982. This special issue was a manifestation of Irish intellectuals' engagement with developments in Liberation Theology, with Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and with the artistic achievements of writers such as Mario Vargas Llosa, Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges. In Ireland, this was a complicated and dark period of economic, social and

political unrest; Sheehan's special issue must be considered within this context. The Irish contributors reveal a profound emotional and scholarly connection with Latin America. Their collective engagement demonstrates the potential of the "shared sediment of possibilities" (Higgins 2017); it also reveals the deep transnational empathy and solidarity that emerges and becomes possible when activists and writers connect across spatial and temporal boundaries.

In "Only Connect: Irish Women's Voices, Latin America and the Irish Women's Writing Network", Kathryn Laing presents a critical overview of recent scholarship on Irish women and the literary interfaces between Ireland and Latin America at the turn of the twentieth century. Situating this scholarly field in the context of broader developments in the study of Irish women writers and in new methodologies and platforms that enable this research, Laing identifies several areas for further investigation and her contribution here initiates a conversation about the potential for contemporary collaborations and scholarly exchange. As co-founder of the new *Irish Women Writers Network 1880-1910*, Laing is particularly well placed to introduce this platform for sharing information, finding collaborators, identifying relevant archives and resources, and highlighting research opportunities. Surely such nascent connections will be tremendously enabling for a new generation of scholars researching women travel writers, immigrant or diasporic artists and activists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Michael D. Higgins's keynote address in Lima in 2017, the transcript of which concludes this collection of essays, foregrounds the "manifold bonds of solidarity between our peoples – both experienced and imagined". Decrying anaesthetised cultures of political apathy and insatiable consumption, President Higgins highlights the immense challenges to be faced in addressing climate change, untempered capitalism and human rights violations. Echoing several of the other contributors to this volume, he emphasises the importance of engaged activism and transnational solidarity; he highlights the role of ethical witnesses, transcending temporal and spatial boundaries, revealing our interdependency and our common concerns. Concluding, he returns to the theme of memory, to its role in repairing grief and in imagining and creating a different future. This speech reflects many of the concerns and themes of his presidency, as articulated in his recent book *Why Ideas Matter: Speeches for an Ethical Republic* (2016) and in the President of Ireland's Ethics Initiative (2014-15).

The special issue celebrates the role of conscience and ethical awareness in guiding Irish engagement in and with Latin America; such interactions are both practical and imaginative. The exchanges, described here, transverse geographical, historical and artistic categories in liberating and transformative ways. What is evident from the contributors to this volume is the role that Latin America itself has played in providing a compass for Irish artists and intellectuals: from the investigations undertaken by Roger Casement to Ena Dargan's descriptions of the Quechua people; from the women poets of Central America such as Michèle Najlis to the short stories of Jorge Luis Borges; from the proponents of "conscientization" and critical pedagogies to

the practitioners of a theology of liberation; from the peoples' movements of the 1960s and 70s to the contemporary activism of indigenous groups and Environmental Human Rights Defenders. These creative encounters provide a blueprint for relating ethically to each other and to our natural environment, an alternative map for helping us journey onward.

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