**Geographies of Comparison: Ireland and South Africa – response**

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**Abstract**

The academic field of postcolonial studies is founded upon the idea of comparison across nations that experienced colonialism. This cluster of essays raises the question: among the many possible pairings for comparison, what justifies the comparison of Ireland and South Africa as field of study worthy of a special issue? Given the different colonial histories of the two nations, such a project could aim to show that they are not as unconnected as might at first appear, sharpen our understanding of both by showing their distinctive responses to similar conditions, or demonstrate the complexity of global networks of influence and exchange in the sphere of culture. These essays accomplish all these goals, considering, among other topics, the backing given by Irish nationalists to the Boers in the Anglo-Boer War, the strong support for the Irish Anti-Apartheid movement, the significant role of South African figures in Irish political negotiations, and the links between Irish and South African literary works. As is pointed out by Parsons in his Introduction, the asymmetry of the relationship is evident in most of these areas. Taken together, the contributions to this cluster demonstrate the varied ways in which a postcolonial lens can bring into focus connections forged across extended geographical distance and in spite of substantial historical differences.

**Keywords**

postcolonial studies; colonialism; comparison; Ireland; South Africa; asymmetry

As its title indicates, this cluster of essays is deeply concerned with the question of comparison, hardly surprising as a topic in an issue of *Interventions*. The academic enterprise we call “postcolonial studies” is comparative through-and-through; its existence is premised on the assumption that all countries and cultures which have experienced colonization and its aftermath have enough in common to justify the creation of a single discipline. (The project known as “World Literature”, somewhat less plausibly, assumes that *all* the cultures of the globe have enough in common to justify its existence.) It is theoretically possible, therefore, to select any two postcolonial nations and ask what their shared features are, bearing in mind that they are being brought together because of their relation to colonialism. Ireland may be compared to India or Indonesia; South Africa to Sudan or Senegal; the possible combinations are endless. What, then, we need to ask, justifies the comparison of Ireland and South Africa as field of study worthy of a special issue?

It’s not as if this pairing stands out with any special salience among the multiple possibilities of comparison across postcolonial nations. The Irish presence in South Africa has never been very great: the number of Irish place names, for instance, is far exceeded by the number of Scottish place names,[[1]](#endnote-1) a difference that reflects the disparity in numbers of immigrants from these countries. (Canada and Australia, with their dozens of Irish-named locations, present a very different picture – not to speak of the USA.) The indexes of standard histories of South Africa, such as those by Beinart (2001), Thompson (2000), and Davenport and Saunders (2000), contain no entries for Ireland, though Iran, Iraq, and Israel can be found there. Looking in the opposite direction, Ireland received its fair share of South African exiles during the apartheid years – an Irish passport was easier to obtain than, say, a British or an American one – but it doesn’t stand out from a number of other countries on this score. And although both nations went through the experience of being forcibly absorbed into the British Empire, their histories of colonialism are vastly different. Ireland, though nominally part of the United Kingdom from 1801, endured some form of colonial rule from the Anglo-Norman invasions in the twelfth century to the partition of the island and the establishment of the Free State in the south in 1922. South Africa had two colonial masters, the Dutch (beginning with a settlement at the Cape in 1652) and, from the early nineteenth century, the British, becoming a single nation within the British Empire on the establishment of the Union in 1910 and breaking out of the British orbit altogether in 1961. Complicating this picture further, where Dutch rule was over the indigenous inhabitants of the country together with imported slaves, British domination was also exercised over the descendants of the Dutch settlers.

What, then, is the point of comparing two cultures that are geographically distant and have only a loose historical connection? There might be several aims, among them to show that they are not as unconnected as might at first appear; to sharpen our understanding of both by showing their distinctive responses to similar conditions; to demonstrate the complexity of global networks of influence and exchange in the sphere of culture. These essays as a totality accomplish all these goals and more in their examination of Irish-South African relations in a number of areas. At the same time, in their diversity and cautiousness they bear out the important qualifications articulated by Coílín Parsons in his introductory injunction, “[I]t is time for a new, more nuanced set of comparative studies that recognize the profoundly asymmetrical relations between South Africa and Ireland, the potential limits of comparative practice, and yet the gains from bringing together two anomalous postcolonial case studies.”

There can be no doubt that the most significant historical link between the two countries in their response to colonialism was the strong support shown by Irish nationalists for the Boers in their struggle against the British army in the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902.[[2]](#endnote-2) McCracken, in his study of the Irish response to this war, observes that “[t]he Irish pro-Boer movement was the first effective example in modern times of a solidarity of one colonially beleaguered people with another”.[[3]](#endnote-3) As Christo Docherty shows in his astute and entertaining article on the Irish Brigade Monument in South Africa, the link was by no means symmetrical: the Brigade – one of the smaller Foreign Volunteer Units – made little difference to the conduct of the war, but in Ireland the gritty struggle of the Boers against the troops of the British Empire provided a powerful propaganda weapon in the nationalist campaign for independence. According to McCracken, such was the passion of the Irish MPs on this question that a link was created in the popular imagination “between the two great Imperial problems of the age”.[[4]](#endnote-4) That the freedom-seeking Boers morphed into the freedom-quenching architects of apartheid should not take away from the justice of their cause as it was perceived in Ireland and elsewhere in the world; one indication of the inhumanity of the British operation in South Africa was the establishment of concentration camps in which some 28,000 Afrikaner civilians, most of them children, as well as over 14,000 black Africans, died of malnutrition and disease.[[5]](#endnote-5) Memories of these events were still strong when white South Africa voted to leave the Commonwealth in 1961, by which time any ties of sympathy between Afrikaner and Irish nationalism were long over. It is thus only an apparent contradiction that there was strong support for the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement’s campaign targeting the Afrikaner government’s policies, as is shown by the strike of the Dunnes stores workers vividly described in this issue by Kylie Thomas: in both cases, an idea of justice motivated large numbers of the Irish population.

Another domain in which South Africa has played a significant part in Ireland’s affairs is diplomacy and negotiation.[[6]](#endnote-6) General Jan Christiaan Smuts, one of South-Africa’s longest-serving Prime Ministers as well as an important military leader, acted as an intermediary between the British government and Irish nationalists in 1921, while a South African judge, Justice Richard Feetham, was appointed head of the Boundary Commission ruling on the division between North and South in the same year. (Feetham’s own sympathies with the Unionist case – a reflection of his place in the South African political establishment – rendered the Commission’s recommendations unacceptable to the representatives of the Irish Free State). Perhaps most significant of all was the part played by South African politicians in the Northern Ireland peace process during the 1990s: trading on the Republicans’ identification of their struggle with that of the African National Congress (with its implicit equation of the Irish Unionists and the Afrikaner nationalists), ANC leaders Mac Maharaj and Cyril Ramaphosa were influential in persuading the IRA to accept the decommissioning of their weapons. During this tense period, the transition to democracy in South Africa was frequently held up as a model for Northern Ireland, and Gerry Adams’s 1995 visit to South Africa to meet Nelson Mandela was widely publicized. As Connal Parr argues convincingly in this issue, one of the difficulties that continue to beset the Northern Ireland political settlement is that there has been no equivalent of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and therefore no public working-through of the violence of the Troubles.

When we turn to literary connections between Ireland and South Africa, we find again that the relationship is highly asymmetrical, but this time in the reverse direction: while Irish writing has had an important influence on South African writing, the opposite is not true. Irish modernism, in particular, had an impact on South African fiction both in English and, as Matthew Eatough points out in his chapter, even more strikingly in Afrikaans. The experimentalism of the group of Afrikaans writers writing in the 1960s and known as the Sestigers took inspiration from modernist writing (French as much as, or perhaps more than, Irish), and, to pick out just one later example, it is hard to imagine the achievement of Marlene van Niekerk’s *Agaat* (2004), one of the great novels of the early twentieth century, without the formal innovations of James Joyce several decades earlier. Joyce’s influence is also visible in many places in English-language writing: for example, Zoë Wicomb refers to *Ulysses* in her novel *David’s Story* (2000) (a link discussed in this issue by Eric Lewis), and J. M. Coetzee imagines a fictional work that develops Molly Bloom’s character in *Elizabeth Costello* (2004). Samuel Beckett’s importance for South African playwrights, from Bartho Smit’s *Putsonderwater* (1962) and Athol Fugard’s *Boesman and Lena* (1969) to Maishe Maponya’s *Gangsters* (1984) and Zakes Mda’s *And the Girls in Their Sunday Dresses* (1993), is indisputable.[[7]](#endnote-7) And Coetzee’s huge debt to Beckett is evident and fully acknowledged by the author himself.[[8]](#endnote-8) A less positive representation of Irishness in South African fiction is the stereotyped figure of Bonaparte Blenkins in Olive Schreiner’s *Story of an African Farm* (1883), a stereotype whose sources are fully explored in this issue by Agata Szczeszak-Brewer.

When Irish writing reflects South Africa it is usually not the latter’s cultural productions but its eventful history that is found significant. Parsons, in his introduction, mentions the prominent references to the Anglo-Boer War in Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), a topic that has interested many Joyce scholars.[[9]](#endnote-9) The novel is set in 1904, when memories of the war, and of its impact on the Irish public, would have been fresh in Dublin. Joyce would have been well aware that John MacBride, who raised the Irish Transvaal Brigade, was to be executed by the British twelve years later for his part in the Easter Rising. (That MacBride married Maud Gonne, Yeats’s muse, provides another indirect link between Irish literature and South Africa.) Two characters in George Moore’s collection of stories, *The Untilled Field* (1903), announce their imminent departure to fight with the Boers. However, these and other examples of occasional mentions don’t constitute any major engagement with South Africa on the part of Irish writers.

If one were to name the most influential South African work of literature in Ireland, it would probably have to be the one singled out in 2015 by the Irish Times literary correspondent as “the most famous and enduring South African narrative to emerge on the world stage”, Alan Paton’s *Cry the Beloved Country*, published in 1948.[[10]](#endnote-10) And the influence of this novel was not on Irish literary production but on general attitudes toward the policies of the South African government, and thus an important factor in the success of the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement. Although Eatough gives a compelling account of the construction of a modernist canon in the USA, a canon in which Irish writers figured prominently, the South African fiction that had the greatest impact on American writers largely followed in the footsteps of Paton rather than flying the modernist flag. André Brink’s *A Dry White Season*, Nadine Gordimer’s *Burger’s Daughter*, Coetzee’s *Disgrace*: these novels, with their unsparing depiction of the trials faced by well-meaning white South Africans, were widely read by Americans, while few outside specialized college courses encountered the more experimental works of the Sestigers.

It could be said that what this collection of essays demonstrates is that national cultural formations are so diverse and complex that putting any two postcolonial cultures together is bound to throw up some illuminating parallels and connections, as well as significant contrasts. To make this observation, however, is not to detract from the value of examining this particular conjunction: the close scrutiny these essays give to particular moments in the uncertain relationship between Ireland’s and South Africa’s cultural histories provides not only details interesting in themselves but fruitful examples of the many and varied ways in which a postcolonial lens can bring into focus connections forged across extended geographical distance and in spite of substantial historical differences.

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1. *Wikipedia* lists over fifty Scottish place names in South Africa, but only five with Irish origins (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Locations_in_South_Africa_with_a_Scottish_name>; <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Irish_place_names_in_other_countries#Africa>) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Lowry 1992 provides a detailed account of the Irish response to the Anglo-Boer War, and also usefully discusses later examples of Irish-South African relations. He points out that many Irish soldiers, from generals to the rank-and-file, fought on the imperial side (106). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. McCracken 2003, xiii. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., xiv. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Thompson 2000, 143. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See Guelke 2000. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See Kruger 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. These two Irish authors’ connection to South Africa could have been closer: Joyce investigated the possibility of emigrating to the country in 1907 (Ellmann 1982, 262), and in 1937 Beckett applied for a Lectureship in Italian at the University of Cape Town, which he failed to get (Knowlson 1996, 263). (J. M. Coetzee has penned an engaging “what if” piece, imagining himself as a student of Beckett’s; Coetzee 2006.) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See, for instance, Brown 1999. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Battersby 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)