

Études irlandaises

Appels en cours

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Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.
Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes*¹

Children and the Youth in Ireland

The history of childhood and what Anglo-Saxons call “childhood studies” is still a relatively unexplored area within Irish studies. For instance, the *Routledge International Handbook of Irish Studies*, published in 2021, contains no chapter dealing with the issue of childhood or youth and to our knowledge no French or international conference on Irish studies has been devoted to it, apart from associations specialising in child psychology and development, or in children’s literature.

The only recent history of childhood in Ireland is the collective work edited by Maria Luddy and James Smith, *Children, Childhood and Irish Society, 1500 to the Present*,² most chapters of which were initially published in a 2009 special issue of the journal *Éire-Ireland*.³ In the introduction to the volume, Luddy and Smith point out, however, that the many “child sex scandals” which have come to light since the end of the 20th century, as well as the debates regarding the responsibility of Church and state as well as families for the ill-treatment inflicted on children, have brought childhood and its place in Irish society to the centre of public attention.

The emphasis on childhood is particularly visible in culture and in the arts, especially, in literature, as Luddy and Smith remark in their introduction: “the last two decades alone witnessed the publication of dozens of Irish childhood memoirs and autobiographies, constituting a literary subgenre all of its own”.

However valuable Luddy and Smith’s contribution, most of the chapters in their edited volume concentrate on a period extending from 1800 to 1950, as some authors of reviews of the book have noted, leaving open a good number of research questions regarding previous or following periods of time.

What can be said for instance of the representation of childhood and youth in Celtic mythology, which was rewritten during the Celtic Revival? One may think of Cúchulain’s early years, or of the legend children taken by the fairies (Sidhe), and so on.

What was the place of children in Irish society until the 19th century depending on whether they belonged to the Catholic peasantry or the Protestant Anglo-Irish landowning class? A case in point would be the education received by Maria Edgeworth, which prompted her to write *Castle Rackrent* at the age of twenty-one, and the education she gave to her many brothers and sisters, as illustrated by the conduct books she published later.

After 1800, we can also look at the parallel system of education provided by the hedge schools, or at the institution of the national schools, which replaced them; or at the pictorial representation of the child victims of the Famine of 1845 and the influence it may have had on the public, or at their literary representation in the Gothic novels published in Ireland by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu or William Carleton.

An interesting line of research would consist in interrogating the link between childhood and nationalism. Before independence, the Irish were infantilised by the English and described as having remained at the *infans* stage, the infant who has not yet been endowed with reason and has not yet access to speech. But we may also speak of the childhood or youth of the Irish nation, a parallel often used in literature, an example of which is the allegory of the old woman transformed into a young girl in William Butler Yeats' play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*.

Once independence was achieved, the young nation seemed to betray the promise made in the Easter 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic to "cherish all of the children of the nation equally". The 1937 Constitution makes little reference to the rights of children or to the duties of the state towards them, likening them to those of the family in general, to the extent that in 2012 it was deemed necessary to add a special amendment spelling out the rights of children, particularly the right to be protected by the state and by the family.

This amendment was devised in the aftermath of the revelations concerning the abuse and mistreatment of children in institutions run by the Catholic Church with the support of the Irish state, such as the infamous mother and baby homes and the industrial schools which have been the subject of several reports: Ryan, Ferns, Murphy (Dublin), Cloyne Reports. The abuse suffered by children in post-independence Ireland also includes corporal punishment in schools, abuse and inter-family incest.

The history of school and education in Ireland is also an indication of the way the state has regarded the child solely as a future citizen in need of being educated in the common values of the Republic, without taking any account of their well-being or personal development. The place and role of religion in education remains problematic today, whether in the Republic or Northern Ireland.

Ireland's economic difficulties which lasted until the late 20th century and struck again after the 2008 "Bust", had serious consequences for Irish youth, who were faced with a lack of prospects at home and had to contemplate the necessity of emigration, as was illustrated by John McGahern's short story "Korea" and more recently, in Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn*. One may wonder to what extent Irish youth benefited from the evolution of sexual attitudes and were involved in any of the protest movements which spread in other Western countries in the 1960s, such as the hippie movement in the United States, the May 1968 student movement in France, and, later, the punk movement in Great Britain.

Fiction writers did not wait for the publication of the above-mentioned official reports to denounce and condemn child abuse in post-independence Ireland, and the part played by the Catholic Church in its widespread enforcement and by nationalist ideology, complicit in concealing the crimes committed within institutions or families. One may list such classic novels as those by John McGahern (*The Dark*), Edna O'Brien (*Down by the River*), Patrick McCabe (*The Butcher Boy*), Anne Enright (*The Gathering*). But more recently a new wave of narratives centred on child abuse has appeared, including, among others, Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, Sebastian Barry's *Old God's Time*, Emer Martin's *The Cruelty Men*, Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These*, to name only a few. More generally, writers have invited their readers to reflect on the place of the child in the Irish family and society: Roddy Doyle

in *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, winner of the 1993 Booker Prize, Claire Keegan in *Foster* or *Small Things Like These*, while critics remind us that it was James Joyce who laid the foundations of the Irish Bildungsroman in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In the North, writers have insisted on the devastating consequences engendered by the Troubles on children: whether they are describing a Protestant childhood as in Glenn Patterson's *Burning Your Own*, or a Catholic one as in Anna Burns's *No Bones*, there is a fear that children might inherit the stigma of decades of violence and sectarianism from their parents, as if it were a genetic disease, as Jan Carson has put to the fore in *The Fire Starters*.

Can the history and culture of a nation be judged by the way it treats its children and young people? Is there a childhood and youth culture proper to Ireland? What is the current state of research on childhood and youth in Ireland? What role has Irish youth played in the history of the nation in the past and more recently? These are some of the questions that this special issue of *Études irlandaises* invites contributors to consider.

Proposals for articles may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- the figure of the child and adolescent in Irish literature, in the past and nowadays;
- Ireland's school system, in the past and nowadays;
- institutions for children and young people;
- investigative reports on child abuse in Ireland;
- the physical and mental health of children in Ireland, past and present;
- the history of Irish students;
- youth movements in Ireland;
- youth and protest;
- children and young adults literature in Ireland;
- representations of childhood and youth in the visual arts, cinema and animated films;
- children's rights in Ireland;
- the role of young people in Northern Ireland during and after the Troubles.

Terms of submission

Articles should be between 30,000 and 36,000 characters long (including spaces and footnotes), with an abstract in English and French (maximum 1,000 characters for each), keywords in English and French and a presentation of the author (maximum 800 characters, including spaces).

They should be sent to Sylvie Mikowski (sylvie.mikowski@univ-reims.fr) **and** Anne Goarzin (anne.goarzin@univ-rennes2.fr) **by 1 June 2025**.

Notes

1 Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes*, New York, Scribner, 1996.

2 *Children, Childhood and Irish Society, 1500 to the Present*, Maria Luddy, James Smith (eds.), Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2014.

3 *Éire-Ireland*, vol. 44, no. 1-2, spring-summer 2009, *Children, Childhood, and Irish Society*.