According to Pascale Casanova, one of the factors behind the success of the Irish Literary Revival was the way in which it created a literary space that spilled beyond the boundaries of Ireland to encompass not just the metropole of London, but also Paris. In this enlarged context, Irish writers were freed from “conformity to the standards of national poetry and submission to English literary norms.” (The World Republic of Letters, trans. M.B. DeBevoise, 318) Samuel Beckett’s famous “au contraire” in response to a journalist who inquired if he was English neatly gestures to these wider horizons. While the focus of France and Ireland in the Public Imagination goes far beyond the Revival period (Moore, Yeats, Synge, Joyce, Beckett and other writers who spent time in France receive little more than ritual nods), it illustrates how France has long held a position in Irish life as an alternative to English criteria in the spheres of culture, art, politics and gastronomy. More specifically, this collection explores discrete episodes from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century to illustrate how France has been construed in the Irish ‘public imagination’. As the editors note in their Introduction, this is a very fluid concept that essentially privileges the significances that have been attributed to aspects of French political, cultural and social life. In other words, how France has been imagined in Ireland is, to a considerable degree, how it has come to be understood.

Such a loose conception of cultural interaction describes an appropriate framework for the study of the ties between Ireland and France as it provides space for the various ambivalences that have characterised this relationship. Many of these were generated by the fact that, for a host of linguistic and political reasons, England played a large role in this dynamic. Pierre Joannon opens up the first section of this volume with an overview of how English and French conflicts over religion and subsequently, in the wake of the French Revolution, political regimes were interpreted in diverse ways by different Irish political and cultural actors. For the Protestant Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, France almost always represented a threat; and if the non-sectarian republican ideals of the Revolution were an inspiration to the late eighteenth-century United Irishmen (many of the leaders of which were Ulster Presbyterians), this breaking of the link between church and state provoked elements in the Irish Catholic Church to oppose its erstwhile ally, France. These ambivalences are further developed by Mary Pierse who, amongst other things, outlines how the increasing Catholic wariness of French societal mores in fin-de-siècle Ireland did not prevent the language functioning as a symbol of achievement for the rising Catholic middle classes: “French was de rigueur in the more prestigious convent schools” (45).

Ernest Renan’s 1856 “The Poetry of the Celtic Races’, a key text in the pan-European fascination with Celticism, links Ireland and Brittany as peripheral sites where alternatives to the modernity fostered by the industrial revolution may be
Anne Goarzin offers another perspective on this relationship in her account of Irish painters who worked in Brittany in the 1880s. She convincingly argues that they ultimately sought in the region an alternative aesthetic space in which to inaugurate styles of painting that might challenge the dominant Victorian artistic norms. Michèle Milan’s contribution keeps us in the nineteenth century, as it resurrects the career of Pierre-Jean de Béranger (1780-1857). While this name has little resonance now, in his lifetime Béranger was not only “hailed as France’s national poet” but “appears to have been the most translated and the most popular French-language poet in Ireland” (79-80). This chapter is a fine piece of literary recovery that carefully unfolds how the social and cultural conditions of Ireland moulded the ways in which Béranger was translated and received.

Milan concludes her essay with an extract from John Thomas Rowland’s 1858 lecture on Béranger at the Drogheda Mechanics’ Institute (one struggles to imagine such an event taking place in a location like that nowadays), in which he declared that the French poet had “taught us [Irish] how to love our country” (cited, 97). Four of the essays in this volume consider the social role of contemporary French and Irish writers. Michel Brunet mines the second volume of John Montague’s memoir, The Pear is Ripe (2001), to uncover how its representation of his time in Paris in May ’68 conforms in large part to media representations of les événements. Reversing the trajectory, Eamon Maher examines a French writer who lived for a period in Ireland: Michel Houellebecq. In the course of offering a synopsis of how Houellebecq has created his public image as l’enfant terrible, Maher pays particular attention to the ways in which the Irish landscape is constructed as an almost mystical, but also endangered, escape from Western materialism in the novel Atomised (2001). A considerably more affable public persona is cut by the Irish poet Brendan Kennelly, the subject of Benjamin Keatinge’s chapter. Recognising that performativity is at the heart of Kennelly’s poetics, Keatinge analyses how Kennelly has performed as a public intellectual. While acknowledging his contribution to Irish public life, Keatinge astutely punctures the manner in which some other critics have positioned Kennelly as a voice for the marginalised by pointing out that, as a Professor at Trinity College Dublin who was a ubiquitous presence on Irish television in the 1970s and ’80s, “Kennelly’s interventions emanate more from the centre than from the periphery.” (179) Another Irish poet whose work relies, to a considerable extent, on being performed for its effect is Paul Durcan, and Conor Farnan provides an exploration of how Chagall, Balthus, Picasso’s minotaur etchings and the Lascaux cave paintings operate in his work. Both this essay (implicitly) and Keatinge’s (more openly) pose interesting questions about whether the quality of poetry suffers the more publicly engaged the poet becomes.

The interpretation of political discourse is examined in two highly contrasting essays by Karine Deslandes and Eugene O’Brien. Deslandes charts the coverage of the career of Ian Paisley in the French press, which would appear to differ hardly at all from the ways in which he was portrayed in the Irish and English media. This is not surprising considering his extreme, sectarian politics, which left little room for misunderstanding his positions. O’Brien takes a very different tack and employs French theory to rethink what constitutes the republic in Ireland in light of the on-going economic crisis, which has laid bare the
implacable and unsustainable operations of capitalism. As O’Brien notes via Lacan, Irish people were offered nothing more than a forced choice by its government, which at this juncture was merely the puppet of the so-called Troika (the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank): either they nationalised, and so assumed, the private debts of the banks or face worse consequences. (159) Citing Žižek, O’Brien concludes by calling for a utopian response to the crisis that is “more internationalist and Universalist than the universality of global capital.” (cited, 167)

The final three chapters deal with French gastronomy. While Brian Murphy samples some of the ways in which the local concept of the terroir is being employed to market French produce globally, Dorothy Cashman and Tara McConnell serve up two fascinating takes on how French food and drink were consumed in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Ireland. Consulting a wide variety of sources including Maria Edgeworth, Cashman illustrates how attitudes to French cuisine in this period were entangled in political considerations. Once again, Ireland’s relationship with France involved negotiating with England; in this instance, the Irish Ascendancy had to acknowledge a rising English culinary nationalism that trumpeted its solid plain fare, while not foregoing the best of French flair. Both these essays contain numerous accounts of visitors to Ireland who barely survived the lavish hospitality they encountered there. In particular, they were stupefied by the amount of claret that was consumed: McConnell shows that before the 1800 Act of Union the Irish imported considerably more of this wine than the British. This was facilitated by the Wild Geese, the Irish Jacobites who emigrated after the Williamite Wars; so many of these ended up in Bordeaux, where they became wine merchants and wine makers, that a historian has dubbed them the winegeese (228).

This volume is published in Peter Lang’s vibrant Reimagining Ireland series, which was founded in 2009 and now lists 72 titles. The series aims to expand and complicate Irish Studies by, amongst other things, opening it up to different disciplines and exposing it to transnational and comparative explorations. Embodying this ambition and these approaches, the essays in France and Ireland in the Public Imagination rewarding realign our understanding of the cultural flows between these two countries.


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Whitney Standlee’s book is a superb overview of a group of key nineteenth century writers, discussing their work’s relationship to Irishness, female experience, and personal experience.