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Contents

	<i>Editor's Preface</i>	ix
	<i>Introduction</i>	1
1	<i>The complex tradition</i>	
	I Irish and Norman	5
	II Early writings	9
2	<i>Colonial and Ascendancy</i>	
	I The early eighteenth century	18
	II The later eighteenth century	52
3	<i>The nineteenth century</i>	
	I From the Act of Union to the fall of Parnell 1800—91	80
	II The first quarter	83
	III The second quarter	113
	IV After the Famine	132
	V Ends and beginnings	139
4	<i>Modern poetry</i>	
	I Twilight to twentieth century	143
	II William Butler Yeats	148
	III The Celtic Twilight	160
	IV Douglas Hyde and AE	164
	V A new generation	172
	VI Ancient and modern	186
5	<i>Modern fiction</i>	
	I From George Moore to Brian Moore	202
	II George Moore	204
	III Ireland seen through different attitudes	211
	IV James Joyce	219
	V Lesser talents	224

vi CONTENTS

VI	A middle state	226
VII	Irish-centred fiction	231
VIII	Idiosyncratic innovators	243
IX	Forties to eighties	245

6 *Modern drama*

I	Shaw to Beckett	252
II	George Bernard Shaw	257
III	The earlier Abbey dramatists	261
IV	O'Casey and the twenties	276
V	The thirties onwards	281
VI	Samuel Beckett	285

<i>Appendix 1</i>	<i>Books for children</i>	289
-------------------	---------------------------	-----

<i>Appendix 2</i>	<i>Criticism and scholarship</i>	291
-------------------	----------------------------------	-----

<i>Select bibliography</i>	295
----------------------------	-----

<i>Chronological table</i>	300
----------------------------	-----

<i>Index</i>	338
--------------	-----

List of plates

1. *The Marriage of Princess Aoife* [Eva, daughter of Dermot MacMurrough, King of Leinster] and *Strongbow*, by Daniel Maclise
2. Frontispiece from Faulkner's edition of Swift's *Works*, vol. II, Dublin, 1735
- 3a. *The Irish House of Commons*, by Francis Wheatley
- 3b. *The Dublin Volunteers meeting on College Green*, by Francis Wheatley
4. *The Custom House, Dublin*, by James Malton
5. *The Wake*, by Nathaniel Grogan
6. *The Patron* [pattern], or *Festival of St Kevin at the Seven Churches, Glendalough*, by Joseph Peacock
7. Tyrone Power as Connor O'Gorman in *The Groves of Blarney*, by Nicholas Crowley
8. *The Ejectment*, an impression of the eviction of an Irish peasant family in the *Illustrated London News*, 16 December 1848
- 9a. *George Bernard Shaw*, by Gerald Karsh
- 9b. W. B. Yeats and George Russell, a cartoon by Mac [Isa MacNíe]
10. The first page of the MS of W. B. Yeats's 'Byzantium'
11. A page from a draft of J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*
Men and horses: east and west
12. *The Castletown Hunt with Tom Conolly 1768*, by Robert Healy
13. *The Finish of the Race*, by Jack B. Yeats
- 14a. Coole Park, Lady Gregory's house in County Galway
- 14b. A rehearsal in the old Abbey Theatre, Dublin
- 15a. James Joyce in 1902
- 15b. College Green (c. 1900)
- 16a. Westmoreland Street, Dublin
- 16b. A Dublin slum street

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Editor's Preface

THE study of literature requires knowledge of contexts as well as of texts. What kind of person wrote the poem, the play, the novel, the essay? What forces acted upon them as they wrote? What was the historical, the political, the philosophical, the economic, the cultural background? Was the writer accepting or rejecting the literary conventions of the time, or developing them, or creating entirely new kinds of literary expression? Are there interactions between literature and the art, music or architecture of its period? Was the writer affected by contemporaries or isolated?

Such questions stress the need for students to go beyond the reading of set texts, to extend their knowledge by developing a sense of chronology, of action and reaction, and of the varying relationships between writers and society.

Histories of literature can encourage students to make comparisons, can aid in understanding the purposes of individual authors and in assessing the totality of their achievements. Their development can be better understood and appreciated with some knowledge of the background of their time. And histories of literature, apart from their valuable function as reference books, can demonstrate the great wealth of writing in English that is there to be enjoyed. They can guide the reader who wishes to explore it more fully and to gain in the process deeper insights into the rich diversity not only of literature but of human life itself.

A. NORMAN JEFFARES

TO JEANNE, BO AND MASARU