

# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
<i>Map</i>	xiv
<i>Introduction: Migration and Autobiographical Authorship</i>	xv
History, textuality, referentiality	xxi
Themes, motifs, representations	xxx
The personal dimension	xxxvi
<i>Editorial Note</i>	xxxix
1 Mary Davys, <i>The Merry Wanderer</i> (1725)	1
2 Laetitia Pilkington, <i>Memoirs of Mrs Laetitia Pilkington, Wife to the Reverend Mr Matthew Pilkington, Written by Herself</i> (1748)	4
3 John Binns, <i>Recollections of the Life of John Binns: twenty-nine years in Europe and fifty-three in the United States</i> (1854)	10
4 John O'Neill, 'Fifty Years' Experience of an Irish Shoemaker in London' (1869)	15
5 Michael Fagg, <i>The Life and Adventures of a Limb of the Law</i> (1836)	20
6 James Dawson Burn, <i>The Autobiography of a Beggar Boy</i> (1855)	24
7 Jane Jowitt, <i>Memoirs of Jane Jowitt, the Poor Poetess, Aged 74 Years, Written by Herself</i> (1844)	29
8 J. E., 'Life of an Irish Tailor, Written by Himself' (1857)	33
9 Robert Crowe, <i>The Reminiscences of Robert Crowe, the Octogenerian Tailor</i> (1902)	37
10 William Hammond, <i>Recollections of William Hammond, A Glasgow Hand-Loom Weaver</i> (1904)	42
11 Ellen O'Neill, <i>Extraordinary Confessions of a Female Pickpocket</i> (1850)	45
12 Owen Peter Mangan, 'Memoir' (1912)	49
13 Justin McCarthy, <i>The Story of an Irishman</i> (1904)	54

14	Jim Blake, <i>Jim Blake's Tour from Clonave to London</i> (1867)	60
15	Frances Power Cobbe, <i>The Life of Frances Power Cobbe by Herself</i> (1894)	64
16	John Denvir, <i>The Life Story of an Old Rebel</i> (1910)	69
17	Tom Barclay, <i>Memoirs and Medleys: The Autobiography of a Bottle-Washer</i> (1934)	74
18	William Butler Yeats, <i>Reveries over Childhood and Youth</i> (1916)	79
19	Joseph Keating, <i>My Struggle for Life</i> (1916)	83
20	James Mullin, <i>The Story of a Toiler's Life</i> (1921)	88
21	Michael MacGowan, <i>The Hard Road to Klondike</i> (1962)	92
22	Francis Fahy, 'Ireland in London – Reminiscences' (1921)	96
23	John Sweeney, <i>At Scotland Yard: Being the Experiences during Twenty-Seven Years' Service of John Sweeney</i> (1904)	101
24	Walter Hampson, 'Reminiscences of "Casey"' (1931)	106
25	Maureen Hamish, <i>Adventures of an Irish Girl at Home and Abroad</i> (1906)	111
26	Patrick Gallagher, <i>My Story</i> (1945)	115
27	Annie M. P. Smithson, <i>Myself – and Others: An Autobiography</i> (1944)	121
28	Elizabeth Bowen, <i>Pictures and Conversations</i> (1975)	125
29	Alice Foley, <i>A Bolton Childhood</i> (1973)	129
30	Bonar Thompson, <i>Hyde Park Orator</i> (1934)	134
31	Patrick MacGill, <i>Children of the Dead End: The Autobiography of a Navy</i> (1914)	139
32	Jim Phelan, <i>The Name's Phelan: The First Part of the Autobiography of Jim Phelan</i> (1948)	143
33	Patrick McGeown, <i>Heat the Furnace Seven Times More</i> (1967)	149
34	Pat O'Mara, <i>The Autobiography of a Liverpool Irish Slummy</i> (1934)	153
35	Bill Naughton, <i>Saintly Billy: A Catholic Boyhood</i> (1988)	158
36	Margaret McAloren, 'The Wild Freshness of Morning' (1978)	162
37	Robert Collis, <i>The Silver Fleece: An Autobiography</i> (1936)	166

38	Darrell Figgis, <i>A Chronicle of Jails</i> (1917)	170
39	Elizabeth Hamilton, <i>An Irish Childhood</i> (1963)	175
40	Louis MacNeice, <i>The Strings Are False: An Unfinished Autobiography</i> (1965)	180
41	Kevin FitzGerald, <i>With O'Leary in the Grave</i> (1986)	185
42	Sean O'Casey, <i>Rose and Crown</i> (1952)	188
43	Rearden Conner, <i>A Plain Tale from the Bogs</i> (1937)	193
44	Michael Stapleton, <i>The Threshold</i> (1958)	198
45	John Neary, <i>Memories of the Long Distance Kiddies</i> (1994)	202
46	Matt McGinn, 'Autobiography' (1987)	207
47	Peter Donnelly, <i>The Yellow Rock</i> (1950)	212
48	J. S. Collis, <i>An Irishman's England</i> (1937)	216
49	Nesca A. Robb, <i>An Ulsterwoman in England, 1924–1941</i> (1942)	219
50	Mauyen Keane, <i>Hello, Is It All Over?</i> (1984)	224
51	Seán MacStiofáin, <i>Memoirs of a Revolutionary</i> (1975)	229
52	Dónal Foley, <i>Three Villages: An Autobiography</i> (1977)	234
53	Elaine Crowley, <i>Technical Virgins</i> (1998)	239
54	John B. Keane, <i>Self-Portrait</i> (1964)	242
55	Dónall Mac Amhlaigh, <i>An Irish Navy: The Diary of an Exile</i> (1964)	245
56	Richard Power, <i>Apple on the Treetop</i> (1980)	251
57	John Boyle, <i>Galloway Street: Growing Up Irish in Scotland</i> (2001)	255
58	John Healy, <i>The Grass Arena: An Autobiography</i> (1988)	259
59	George O'Brien, <i>Out of Our Minds</i> (1994)	263
60	Bob Geldof with Paul Vallely, <i>Is That It?</i> (1986)	266
61	John Walsh, <i>The Falling Angels: An Irish Romance</i> (1999)	270
62	William Trevor, 'Blockley, Gloucestershire' (1981)	274
63	Desmond Hogan, 'Catford' (1993)	278
	<i>List of Primary Works</i>	282
	<i>Select Bibliography</i>	285
	<i>Index</i>	289

## 1

Mary Davys, *The Merry Wanderer*

From: *The Works of Mrs Davys: Consisting of plays, novels, poems, and familiar letters. Several of which never before publish'd. In two volumes* (London: H. Woodfall, 1725). Vol. 1, viii, 280pp.; pp. 161–3.

Mary Davys (1674–1732) is one of those enigmatic writers about whom nothing is known, not even her maiden name, prior to her marriage to Peter Davys, a Dublin Church of Ireland clergyman and schoolmaster who was a friend and correspondent of Jonathan Swift. Even her place of birth cannot be definitely identified. Although Siobhán Kilfeather describes her as ‘the first known Irish woman writing in English to explore national and sexual identities’,<sup>1</sup> Martha Bowden draws attention to the significant contradiction between Davys’s suggestion in *The Fugitive; Or, The Country Ramble* (1705) that she was born in England and her unequivocal claim to Irish birth in *The Merry Wanderer* (1725), a reworking of *The Fugitive* in which she records her travels through provincial England and Wales.<sup>2</sup> We do know that Davys was widowed in Dublin in 1698, shortly after which she settled in York, where she began her writing career. The commercial success of her social comedy, *The Northern Heiress; Or, The Humours of York* (1715), marked a career turning-point, not only in being the first publication to bear her name, but also by providing her with the financial and psychological resources to continue writing into her fifties, at a time when there was much social opprobrium attached to the category of professional woman writer. The income Davys derived from the play’s London production also enabled her to open a coffee-house in Cambridge, where she spent the rest of her life and where she was buried in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre on 3 July 1732. The fact that her clothes were posthumously valued at less than five pounds suggests that she died in penury.<sup>3</sup> If, then, we accept Davys as an Anglo-Irish writer, she is almost certainly the first of her kind to dramatise the potent cultural encounter between Irish immigrant and English

<sup>1</sup> Kilfeather, ‘Beyond the Pale’, pp. 14–15.

<sup>2</sup> Martha F. Bowden, ‘Mary Davys: Self-presentation and the woman writer’s reputation in the early eighteenth century’, *Women’s Writing*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1996), pp. 17–33.

<sup>3</sup> Martha F. Bowden, ‘Silences, Contradictions, and the Urge to Fiction: Reflections on Writing about Mary Davys’, *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, vol. 36, no. 2 (Fall 2003), p. 139.

2 *The Literature of the Irish in Britain*

native, as evidenced by the opening section of *The Merry Wanderer*, extracted here. Her encounter with an Englishman named Hodge, who is curious to see some of the 'wild Irish' in the flesh, sets the scene for a witty canard in which Davys exploits anti-Irish stereotypes in order to gull her credulous inquisitor with consummate brio.

As Ignorance is the Mother of Devotion, and Necessity of Invention; so may Travelling be properly enough call'd the Mother of Observation: And tho' the petty Journeys I have taken, will hardly intitle me to the Name of a Traveller, because I have never been in *France* for new Fashions, nor at *Rome* for Religion, or a Song; yet I hope *England* is not so barren of Diversion, but one may pick up some things in it worthy of Note. To tell the Reader I was born in *Ireland* is to bespeak a general Dislike to all I write, and he will, likely, be surprized, if every Paragraph does not end with a Bull: but a Potato's a fine light Root, and makes the Eater brisk and alert; while Beef and Pudding, that gross heavy Food, dulls a Man's Brain as bad as too much Sleep. And I am going to say a bold Word in defence of my own Country; The very brightest Genius in the King's Dominion<sup>4</sup> drew his first Breath in that Nation: and so much for the Honour of *Ireland*, of which I am just going to take a final Leave. When I had made a Stride from *Ringsend* to *Hollyhead* in *Wales*, a Gentleman in the Ship advised every body to take the Provisions they had aboard with them ashore; for he told us a smoaky House and no Food would be our best Entertainment, and so we found it. But a few Hours remov'd us from thence, and after sixty very bad Miles riding, we got into *England*; and while we were at Supper in a very good Inn, we heard a great Noise, and the People very merry: at last one of the Maids came grinning in, and told us there was a Man without, who heard there was some of the wild *Irish* there, and offer'd her a Shilling to help him to the sight, for he had never seen any of them in his Life. She happening to have a little more Wit than he, came in with the Jest, to see how far we would encourage it; for my part, I was mightily pleas'd with the fancy, and bid the Wench earn the Shilling, and bring him in. Now, said I to my Company, does this Fellow fancy we have Horns and Hoofs, and imagine Humanity alters as oft as his own dull Fancy? Pray let us humour his opinion, and see how far it will go. The rest consented, and the Man (half afraid to come near the Monsters) enter'd with Eyes staring, and Ears and Mouth wide open, big with Expectation of seeing and hearing something

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<sup>4</sup> The genius in question was probably Swift, whose patronage Davys unsuccessfully courted through public appeals and private begging letters, though her allusion to him here seems to be motivated as much by a desire to vindicate her nation and class as to promote herself. Margaret Anne Doody's observation is apposite in this context: 'Praise of Swift was praise of the national literary identity. [. . .] Swift redeems a group at apparent disadvantage; he proves the potential excellence of those traditionally judged by (imposed and alien) authority to be dull and inferior' ('Swift Among the Women', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 18 (1988), p. 70).

very extraordinary. Come Friend, *said I*, you have, I hear, a mind to see some of the wild *Irish*. Yes, Forsooth, *said he*, an yo pleasen, but pray yo where are they? Why, *said I*, I am one of them. Noa, noa, *said he*, yo looken laik one of us; but those Foke, that I mean, are Foke wi' long Tails, that have no Clothes on, but are cover'd laik my brown Caw a whom with their own Hair. Come, *said I*, sit you down, and I'll tell you all; when I was three Years old I was just such a thing as you speak of, and going one day a little farther than I should have done, I was catch'd in a Net with some other Vermin, which the *English* had set on purpose for us; and when they had me, they cut off my Tail, and scalded me like a Pig, till all my Hair came off; and ever since I have been such another as you. Well, Forsooth, *said he*, yo tellen me Wonders, but pray yo, cou'd yo speak? Speak, *said I*, no I could only make a gaping inarticulate Noise, as the rest of my Fellow-Beasts did, and went upon my hands as well as Feet, in imitation of them; but for any other Knowledge, I had it not till I got into *English* hands. Well, *said poor Hodge*, yo may bless the Day that ever yo met with that same Net: By'r Lady, I have often head of the wild *Irish*, but never saw any of 'em before. One Word more, Forsooth, and I have done: Could you not let a Body see the Mark of that same Tail of yours, where it was cutten off? No, Friend, *said I*, that may not be so very decent; I find you are a Man of much Curiosity, but must beg you would take my Word for once without ocular Demonstration. Mercy on me, *said the Fellow*, what's that? Why that, *return'd I*, is, without staying any longer, to make haste home, and tell your Wife and Neighbours what you have heard and seen. By my Troth and so I will, *said he*, but first methinks I have a good mind to give you a Share of a Mug of Beer. No thank you, *said I*, we never drink in *Ireland*, but on *Easter* Sunday Morning, and then we all get drunk and dance with the Sun. By the Makins, *said he*, you're merry Foke, and so good by to ye. Thus we got rid of our inquisitive Companion, who left us as full of Mirth, as he was of Wonder and Folly.

## Index

- A
- Abbey Theatre, 188
- Aberdeen, xxxvii, 24
- Achill Island, County Mayo, 255, 256, 258
- Act of Union (1800), xxvii–xxviii
- Aga Khan III, 107n
- agricultural labour, xxxvii, 139, 216
- Ahearne, Andy, 264
- Aiséirí*, 247
- Albert, Prince, 47
- Alboni, Marietta, 58
- Aldington, Richard, 195
- Alfred the Great, 76
- Allen, William, 52, 76n
- American Civil War, 51
- Anderson, Adam, 60n
- Anderson, Benedict, 69n
- Anglo-Celt*, 264
- Anglo-Irish, xxx–xxxii, 1–2, 29, 170
- dislocation of, 125, 175–6
- Anglo-Irish Treaty (1921), 185
- Anglo-Saxons, xxix, 159, 160
- anglophobia, xxiv, xxxv
- anti-vivisectionism, 64
- Antrim, County, 33
- Aran Islands, 251
- Arlen, Michael, 195
- Armada, West Lothian, 93–4
- Armagh, County, 149, 212
- Armstrong, Andrew, 60n, 62
- Armstrong, Neil, 269
- Arnold, Arthur, 65–6, 68
- Arnold, Matthew, xxix, 159
- Arran, Lord, 271
- artist's model, 60–3
- Athenry, County Galway, 224
- Australia, 98n
- autobiography, xix–xx, xvii, 188
- didactic, xxi, xxvi
- as documentary, xxii–xxiv
- interpretive issues, xxii–xxvii
- motivations, xxi
- social history in, xxv–xxvi
- subjectivity in, xxiv–xxv
- themes and motifs, xxx–xxxvi
- Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), 239–41
- Aylmer, Barry, 71, 72
- B
- Baird, John Logie, 195
- Baird Company, 93
- Balfe, Michael, 72
- Ballinasloe, County Galway, 278, 279, 281
- Balliol College, Oxford, 216
- Ballyhaunis, County Mayo, xxxiv, 158
- Baltimore, 153
- Banim, John, 71
- Banim, Michael, 71n
- Banyard, James, 97n
- Barclay, Tom, xxvi–xxvii, 74–8, 79, 153
- Barrie, J. M., 217
- Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, 212–15
- Barry, Kevin, 237
- Battersea, London, 270, 272
- Beardsley, Aubrey, 190
- Behan, Brendan, 170, 232n
- Belfast, 25, 26, 33–4, 98, 150, 219, 221, 230, 236
- Bell, Desmond, 92
- Bellingham, Greater London, 279
- Bellingham, Northumberland, 26
- Bevan, Ada, 191n
- Binns, Benjamin, 10
- Binns, John, 10–14
- Birmingham, 10, 13, 35–6, 180, 237, 271n
- and Richard Power, 251–4
- Black and Tans, 200, 272
- Black Hat, The*, 134
- Blackburn fair, 47
- Blake, Jim, 60–3
- Blanc, Louis, 42
- Blatchford, Robert, 106
- Blockley, Gloucestershire, 275–7

- Boer War, 144  
 Boland, Eavan, xxxvii  
 Bolton, xxxiv, 36, 160–1, 177  
   and Alice Foley, 129–33  
 Bolton and District Weavers' and  
   Winders' Association, 129  
 Bolton Trades' Council, 129  
 Bonar, Dan, 119  
 Boot, Jesse, 194n  
 Boots' Booklovers' Library, 194  
 Boots' Chemists, 242  
 Bow, Clara, 194  
 Bowden, Martha, 1  
 Bowen, Elizabeth, xv, xxxv, 125–8,  
   176, 274  
 Bowen's Court, County Cork, 125  
 Boyle, John, 255–8  
 Boyle, Mick, 256  
 Bradley, Jimmy, 256, 257  
 Bramham, Yorkshire, 32  
 Brennan, Frank, 52  
 Brennan, Stephen, 247  
 Brett, Sergeant, 52  
 Brian, Paddy, 18  
 Bridgeton Rambling Club, 42  
 Brien, Matthew, 19  
 Brighton, 239  
 Bristol, 20–3, 64  
 British army, 146, 175  
 British Broadcasting Corporation  
   (BBC), 180  
 British Empire, 159  
 British Railways, 236  
 Brixton prison, 237n  
 Broad Campden, Gloucestershire, 276  
 Brown, Christy, 166  
 Brown, Spencer Curtis, 125  
 Brush, Micky, 163  
 Bryant, Mrs Sophie, 98  
 Buckstone, John, 58  
 Budleigh Salterton, Devon, 277  
 Burn, James Dawson, 24–8  
 Burnett, John, xxii  
 Burns, Helen, 37  
 Bury, Lancashire, 177  
 Bushmills, County Antrim, 69  
 Byrne, Father James, 78n  
 Byron, Lady, 279  
 Byron, Lord George, 279
- C  
 Calcraft, William, 40  
 Calcutta, 170  
 Callan, County Kilkenny, 248n  
 Calmady-Hamlyn, Sylvia, 187  
 Calton District Hand-Loom Weavers'  
   Trades Union, 44  
 Cambridge, 1  
 Cambridge University, 166  
 Camden, London, 237  
 Campbell, Richard, 72  
 Campbell, Sean, 74n  
 Campbell, Thomas, 42  
 Canada, 185  
 Carbery, Ethna, 235n  
 Cardiff, 88–91  
 Carlyle, Thomas, xxix, xxviii, 106  
 Carneary, County Antrim, 134  
 Carrick-on-Suir, County Tipperary,  
   15, 19  
 Carrickfergus, County Antrim, 180, 181  
 Carson, Sir Edward, 183  
 Castlebar, County Mayo, 173, 174  
 Catford, Greater London, 279–81  
 Catholic Church, 111, 139, 274  
   conversion to, 121, 175  
   in England, 77, 133, 187, 245–6  
   in Liverpool, 153–4, 157  
   prejudice against, xxviii, xxx–xxxii,  
     xxxii–xxxiii, 91  
   in Scotland, 150, 208, 209–11  
   in Wales, 87  
 Catholic Institute, 70n  
*Catholic Times*, 69  
 Catholic Young Men's Association, 99  
 Cavan, County, 225  
 Celts, xxix, 159, 160  
 census returns, xxviii  
 Chartism, 24, 37, 38–41, 44  
 Chelsea Hospital for Women, 121–4  
 Cheshire, 109–10, 239, 274  
 Chesterfield, Derbyshire, 35  
 Childers, Erskine, 170  
 chimney-sweeping, 106–10  
 Chipping Camden, Gloucestershire, 275  
 Cibber, Colley, 4, 5, 7, 8  
 Cibber, Theophilus, 5  
 Cinque Ports, 127  
 Clan-na-Gael, 102, 104  
 Clarke, John, 72

- Clarke, Thomas, J. 123  
 Clay, Reverend John, 45  
 Cleendra, County Donegal, 115, 116,  
 117–18  
 Clerkenwell prison, 76  
 Climbing Boys Act, 1840, 106  
 Cloghaneely, County Donegal, 92  
 Clonave, County Westmeath, 60  
 Clonmel, County Tipperary, 17  
 co-operativism, 115  
 Coatbridge, Lanarkshire, 93, 94–5  
 Cobbe, Frances Power, xvii, xxi, **64–8**  
 Cobbett, William, 77, 216  
 Coigley, Father James, 10  
 Collis, John Stewart, xxxiv, 166,  
 216–18  
 Collis, Robert, **166–9**, 216  
 colonialism, xxvii–xxix, xxx–xxxii  
*Commonwealth, The*, 33  
 communism, 35  
*Connaught Tribune*, 264  
 Connemara, County Galway, 250  
 Conner, Rearden, **193–7**  
 Connolly, James, 106, 231  
 Cookstown, County Tyrone, 88, 111  
 Cooper Settlement, New York, 37  
 C oras Iompair  ireann (CI ), 249  
 Corcoran, Neil, 125  
 Cork, 19, 20, 56, 144, 193, 229, 231,  
 237, 244  
 Cork, County, 204, 275  
*Cork Examiner*, 55  
 Corn Laws, 31n, 44  
 Cornwall, 130  
 Costain construction firm, 204  
 Cotswolds, 275–7  
 Cotterill, Reverend Thomas, 29–30  
 Coventry, 237  
 Cowie Square Wanderers Football Club,  
 151  
 Cowley, Ultan, 202n, 235n  
 Cowper, John, 183n  
 Coyle, Sean, 260  
 Craigneuk, North Lanarkshire, 149–52  
 Crewe, Cheshire, 237–8  
 Crilly, Dan, 97  
 Cromwell, Oliver, 76, 154  
 Crossmaglen, County Armagh, 152  
 Crowe, Robert, xv, **37–41**  
 Crowley, Elaine, xxxvi, **239–41**
- Cruelty to Animals Act, 1876, 64  
 Crystal Palace exhibition, 57  
 Cumberland, 214  
 Curragh Camp, County Kildare, 72  
 Curtis, Peter, 50
- D
- Dagenham, Greater London, 204–5  
 D ail  ireann, 164n, 170  
*Daily Express*, 139, 195n  
*Daily News*, 45, 65  
*Daily Sketch*, 275  
 Dalton, Canon John, 139  
 Dartmoor, Devon, 277  
 Dartmoor Pony Society, 187n  
 Daventry, Northamptonshire, 248  
 Davis, Chaplain, 40  
 Davis, Eugene, 98  
 Davis, Graham, 74n  
 Davis, Thomas, 39n, 70  
 Davitt, Michael, 89, 103n  
 Davys, Mary, xxx, 1–3  
 Davys, Peter, 1  
 de Candia, Giovanni Matteo (Mario), 58  
 de Cateforde, John, 280  
 de Valera, Eamon, 230, 236, 239  
 Deasy, Captain Timothy, 52  
 Defoe, Daniel, 222  
 Dekker, Thomas, xxix  
*Democratic Press*, 10  
 Dent & Sons, 170  
 Denvir, John, **69–73**, 96  
 Derby, 47  
 Derbyshire, 277  
 Dermody, Thomas, 279–80  
 Derry/Londonderry, 93, 150  
 Devon, 188, 274  
 Devonshire, 185–7  
 diaries, xxi, xxxv  
 Dickens, Charles, 5, 57, 58, 106, 185  
 Dillon, John Blake, 39n  
 Dodds, Eric, 180  
 Dolan, Joe, 280  
 domestic service, xvi, xxi, 111–14  
 Donabate, County Dublin, 64  
 Donaghadee, County Down, 26  
 Doncaster, 29, 31  
 Donegal, County, 78, 115, 139, 256,  
 257, 258  
 Donnelly, Peter, **212–15**

Doody, Margaret Anne, 2n  
 Doris, Patrick J., 171n  
 Doris, William, 171n  
 Dormer, Lord, 187  
 Dorset, 216  
 Douglas, James, 195  
 Dover, Kent, 29  
 Down, County, 121  
 Downey, Edmond, 97  
 Downey, Richard J., Archbishop of  
 Liverpool, 157  
 Drogheda, County Louth, 49  
 Dublin, xxxvi, 10, 37, 81, 106, 121, 125,  
 170, 180, 193, 216, 239, 242–3  
 and Bob Geldof, 266–9  
 and Donal Foley, 238  
 and Dónall Mac Amhlaigh, 246–7  
 and Elizabeth Hamilton, 176  
 and Jane Jowitt, 29  
 and J.E., 36  
 and Jim Phelan, 143, 144  
 and Laetitia Pilkington, 4  
 mailboat from, 234–8, 242–3, 249–50  
 and Mary Davys, 1  
 and Sean O’Casey, 188, 190  
 and Second World War, 221n  
 and William Butler Yeats, 79  
 Duke of York’s Theatre, London, 191  
 Dumfries, 24, 26–7, 28  
 Dún Laoghaire mailboat, 234–8, 242–3,  
 246, 249–50  
 Dungarvan, County Waterford, 198–201  
 Dungloe, County Donegal, 117–18, 120  
 Durham, 212

## E

E., J., 33–6  
 Eakin, Paul John, xxvii  
 East India Company, 17, 50, 63n  
 Easter Rising, 121, 123n, 162, 166–7,  
 171n, 193, 231n  
*Echo, The*, 64, 65–8  
 ecological movement, 216  
 Edinburgh, 121, 122  
 Edward Ebley Theatrical Company, 85  
 Edwardes-Ker, Lt. Colonel D. R., 185–7  
 Edwards, Owen Dudley, 140n  
 Egypt, 51, 239  
 Elias, A. C., 4  
 Eliot, T. S., 177n

Elizabeth I, Queen, 63, 76, 279  
 Ellis, William Webb, 168  
 Ellman, Maud, 125  
 Emerald Minstrels, 69–73  
 Emerald Staff Agency, 263–5  
 emigrant boat, 234–8, 242–3, 246,  
 249–50  
 Escouflaire, Rodolphe, 232n  
 Essex, 204, 205  
 Euston Station, London, 190–1,  
 238  
*Evening Standard*, 271, 272  
*Examiner*, 65

## F

Fagan, James Bernard, xxxii,  
 191–2  
 Fagg, Michael, 20–3  
 Fahy, Francis, 96–100, 104n  
 Falconer, Edmund, 71  
 farm labour, xxxviii, 139, 216  
 Faucit, Helen, 58  
 Felski, Rita, xxv  
 Fenianism, xxviii, xxxi, 49, 69, 89,  
 104n, 123, 129; *see also*  
 Manchester Martyrs  
*Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*,  
*The*, xl  
 Figgis, Darrell, xxxv, 170–4  
 Figgis, Millie, 170  
 First World War, xxxvii, 83, 133,  
 134, 139, 153, 162, 166–9, 177–8,  
 209, 216  
 FitzGerald, Kevin, xxxii, 185–7  
 Fitzpatrick, David, xxxix  
 Fitzwilliam, Countess Mary, 31n  
 Fitzwilliam, Earl, 31  
 Flaherty, Horse, 250  
 Flannery, Thomas, 99  
 Florida, 175  
 Foley, Alice, 129–33, 149  
 Foley, Cait, 238  
 Foley, Cissy, 129–30  
 Foley, Dónal, xxxv, 234–8, 242  
 Foley, Sheila, 235  
 folk singing, 207  
 Foot, Michael, 134  
 Forbes-Robertson, Jean, 191  
 Forbes-Robertson, Sir Johnston,  
 191n

- Ford, Henry, 204  
 Ford, Johnny, 154–7  
 Ford factory, Dagenham, 204–5  
 Fortune Theatre, London, 191  
*Forward*, 106  
 Foster, Roy, xxin, xxv, 79–80, 125  
 Franklin, Benjamin, 33n  
 Freind, John, 8n  
 Freind, Reverend William, 8  
 French Revolution, 10, 11–12  
 Frost, John, 38–9  
 Furnese, Henry, 7  
 Fussell, John, 40
- G
- Gaelic League, 162, 163–4, 188  
 Gaeltacht, 92–3  
 Gallagher, James, Bishop of Raphoe, 78  
 Gallagher, Patrick, xxvi, 115–20  
 Gallagher, Sally, 116–20  
 Galway, 245  
 Galway, County, 246n, 250n  
 Garbo, Greta, 194  
 Garibaldi, Giuseppe, 42  
 Gartsherrie Iron Works, 93  
 Gavan Duffy, Charles, 39n, 98  
 Gaynor, Janet, 194  
 Geldof, Bob, xxxvi, 266–9  
 Georgetown University, 263  
 Georgia, 37  
 Germany, 154, 155, 167, 224, 232, 239  
 Gibbons, Margaret, 139  
 Gilmour, Deacon, 44  
 Glasgow, xxxi, 24, 33, 121, 150, 237, 241  
   and Matt McGinn, 207–11  
   and Michael MacGowan, 93  
   and William Hammond, 42–4  
 Glasgow Campbell Club, 42  
 Glasgow Celtic, 151, 208, 209  
 Glasgow Rangers, 151  
 Glasgow University, 42  
 Glenties, County Donegal, 139  
 Globe Hotel, Dublin, 235  
 Gloucestershire, 47, 275–7  
 Godolphin School, 79, 80–2  
 Gosling, Bob, 109  
 Gramsci, Antonio, xix, xxii  
 Graves, Alfred Perceval, 105  
 Greacen, Robert, 134  
 Great Central Railway, 134  
 Great Eastern Railway, 24  
 Great Famine, xxviii, 20, 39, 74  
 Greenacre, James, 40  
 Grey, Mary, 191  
 Griffith, D. W., 194  
 Grimsby, 48  
 Grisi, Giulia, 58  
 Gusdorf, Georges, xxiii
- H
- Hackett, Nan, xxvi  
 Halifax, Yorkshire, xxxvii  
 Hall, Henry, 275  
 Hall, Stan and Gladys, 232  
 Hamilton, Elizabeth, xxxiv, 175–9, 180  
 Hamilton, James, Viscount Clandeboye, 176  
 Hamish, Maureen, xxi, 111–14  
 Hamlyn Group, 198  
 Hammond, William, xxxi, 42–4  
 Hampshire, 248  
 Hampson, Walter, 106–10  
 Hardie, Keir, 135  
 Harte, Liam, xxxvi–xxxviii, 270n  
 Harte, Willie, xxxvii  
 Haweis, Reverend Hugh, 65  
 Hawthornden Prize, 188  
 Healy, John, xxvi, 259–62  
 Healy, Metre, 18  
 Heaton, Ted, 155  
 Heenan, John C., 75  
 Heeney, Andy, 50  
 Heeney, Patrick, 232n  
 Henderson, Bill, 225  
 Henry VIII, King, 76  
 Hertfordshire, 185  
 Hess, Rudolf, 220  
 Hexham, Northumberland, 24  
 hiring fairs, xxxvii, 202  
 Hitler, Adolf, 182, 220n, 238  
 Hobhouse, Henry, 103  
 Hogan, Desmond, 278–81  
 Hogan, J. F., 98  
 Hogerzeil, Han, 166  
 Hogg, Billy, 151  
 Holocaust, 166  
 Holyhead, 237  
 Home Rule Association, 96

- Home Rule Confederation of Great Britain, 69
- Home Rule movement, 54, 65n, 69, 88–9, 91, 101, 183
- homecoming, 246–50
- Hot Gospellers, 130–1
- House of Commons, 54, 55, 59, 83, 103, 135, 164n
- Hull, 47–8
- Hungary, 42
- Hunter, Aaron, 53
- Hurley, Jim, 163
- Hutchinson Group, 198
- Hutton, Clare, 96
- Huxley, T. H., 106
- Hyde Park, London, 57, 100, 122, 134, 136–8
- I
- Illustrated Irish Penny Library*, 69
- Ince, Angela, 271
- Indian Mutiny, 51
- Inniu*, 247
- Inquirer*, 65
- Iowa, 251
- Iremonger, Valentin, 245
- Irish army, 245
- Irish Citizen Army, 231n
- Irish Constitution (1922), 170
- Irish Exhibition, Olympia, 1888, 99
- Irish Fireside*, 99
- Irish in Britain, attitudes towards, xviii, xxvii–xxix, 76, 79–82, 186, 230
- Irish Independent*, 263
- Irish language, xxxi, 38, 92–3, 188, 205, 245, 251, 260
- decline of, 248–9
- revival movement, 89–90, 99–100, 104, 163
- Irish Literary Revival, 70, 96–100
- Irish Literary Society, 79, 96–7, 105n
- Irish National League, 89–90
- Irish News Agency, 234
- Irish Party, 54
- Irish Press*, 234
- Irish Republican Army (IRA), 164, 229, 230, 231, 233, 237n, 271–3
- Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), 76n, 231n
- Irish Studies Review*, xviii
- Irish Times*, 234
- Irish Volunteers, 163, 170
- Isle of Man, 158, 177, 178
- Israel, 176
- Italy, 181
- J
- Jackson, Raymond (Jak), 271
- jail journals, xxxv, 170–4
- Jamaica, 229
- James VI, King of Scotland, 176
- Jarvis, Sir John, 40
- Jersey, German occupation of, 224–8
- Johnny Noakes's theatre, 85
- Johnson, Samuel, 58
- Jones, Ernest Charles, 40
- Jones, John Gale, 13
- Jones, William, 38–9
- journalism
- and Dónal Foley, 234
- and Frances Power Cobbe, 64–8
- and John Denvir, 69–73
- Jowitt, Jane, xv, xxxi, 29–32
- Joyce, James, xviii, 83, 251
- 'July barbers', xxxvii; *see also* migratory harvesters
- K
- Kay, James Phillips, xxviii
- Keane, Eamonn, 242–3
- Keane, John B., xxxv, xxxvi, 140, 242–4, 245, 263
- Keane, Mauyen, 224–8
- Kearney, Peadar, 232n
- Keating, Joseph, xxii–xxiii, xxxiii, 83–7, 153, 255
- Keats, John, 181
- Keeley, Mary Ann, 58
- Keeley, Robert, 58
- Kelly, Colonel Thomas J., 52
- Kelly, Tommy, 152
- Kelmscott Press, 98n
- Kendal, Cumbria, 214
- Kenmare, County Kerry, 20
- Kenneally, Michael, 189
- Kennedy, President John F., 139
- Kenny, Kevin, xx
- Kent, 126–8
- Kentish Town, Greater London, 259

- Kermodé, Frank, xxiv  
*Kerryman*, 264  
 Kidderminster, Worcestershire, 47  
 Kilburn, London, 237  
 Kilcoo, County Cavan, 49  
 Kilfeather, Siobhán, xxxn, 1  
 Kilkenny, 235, 245, 247–50  
*Kilkenny People*, 264  
 Killiney, County Dublin, 166  
 Killorglin, County Kerry, 280, 281  
 Killyleagh, County Down, 25  
 Kilmainham Jail, 123n  
 Kilmallock, County Limerick, 264  
 Kiltimagh, County Mayo, xxxvii, 205n  
 Kilvert, Francis, 216  
 Kinlochleven waterworks, 139, 140–2  
 Kinvara, County Galway, 96  
 kip houses, xxxvii  
 Klondike gold rush, 92  
 Knott Mill Fair, 46  
 Kossuth, Lajos, 42
- L
- Lablache, Luigi, 58  
 labour movement. *see* trade unions  
 Labour Party, British, 135n, 168n, 271n  
 Lamb, Charles, 58  
 Lanarkshire, 115  
 Lancashire, 109, 159  
 Land League, 82, 102, 103  
 Landseer, Sir Edwin, 63  
 Lane Fox, Lady Charlotte, 32  
 Lane Fox, George, 32  
 Larkin, Michael, 52, 76n  
 Lawless, Tom, 50  
 Lawson, George Anderson, 61n  
 Lee, Joe, xxiii  
 Leeds, 47, 237  
 Lees, Lynn, 74n  
 Lefanu, Joseph Sheridan, 72  
 Leicester, xxxiii, 74–8  
 Leicester, Robert Dudley, Earl of, 63  
 Lemass, Sean, 236  
 Letterkenny, County Donegal, 115  
 Limerick, 77, 212  
 Lincoln's Inn, London, 20  
 Lincolnshire, xxxvii, 267  
 'linguistic turn', xxiii  
 Lismore, County Waterford, xxxiv, 263  
 Listowel, County Kerry, 242, 243
- literacy, xx–xxi  
 Lithuania, 150  
 Live Aid, Wembley Stadium, 266  
 Liverpool, xxxi, 20, 29, 33, 56, 70n, 143, 177  
     boat to, 20, 50, 53  
     and J.E., 34–6  
     and Jim Blake, 61, 62  
     and John Denvir, 69–73  
     and John O'Neill, 15  
     and Justin McCarthy, 54  
     and Pat O'Mara, 153–7  
 Lloyd, Mary, 64  
 Locke, John, 67  
 Logan, Charlie, 210  
 London, xviii, xxxiii, xxxvii, 24, 29, 74, 125, 170, 180, 185, 198, 243, 246, 248, 274  
     and Annie M. P. Smithson, 121–4  
     and Bill Naughton, 158  
     and Bonar Thompson, 134–8  
     and Chartism, 39–40  
     and Desmond Hogan, 279–81  
     and Dónal Foley, 234, 238  
     and Elizabeth Hamilton, 177, 178  
     and fogs, 218  
     and Frances Power Cobbe, 64–8  
     and Francis Fahy, 96–100  
     and George O'Brien, 263–5  
     and Jim Blake, 60–3  
     and Jim Phelan, 143–4  
     and John Binns, 10  
     and John Healy, 259, 260, 262  
     and John Neary, 202–6  
     and John O'Neill, 15  
     and John Stewart Collis, 217–18  
     and John Sweeney, 101–5  
     and John Walsh, 270–3  
     and Justin McCarthy, xxix, 55–9  
     and Laetitia Pilkington, xxxi, 4–5  
     and Margaret McAloren, 162  
     and Michael Fagg, 20  
     and Nesca Robb, 220–3  
     and Peter Donnelly, 214–15  
     and Rearden Conner, 193–7  
     and Robert Collis, 166  
     and Seán MacStiofáin, 229–33  
     and Sean O'Casey, 189–92  
     and William Butler Yeats, 79–82

- London Corresponding Society, 10, 11, 12  
*London Evening News*, 158  
 London Gaelic League, 96  
 London Irish Rifles, 139  
 London Metropolitan Police, 101  
 London Oratory School, 187n  
 London University, 175  
 Loughran, Mary, 111  
 Lover, Samuel, 71, 72, 73  
 Luddy, Maria, xxxix  
 Lugton, Thomas, 42  
 Luton, xxxi–xxxii  
 Lyme Hall, Cheshire, 109–10  
 Lyme Regis, Dorset, 277
- M
- Mac Amhlaigh, Dónall, xviii, xx–xxi, xxxiii, xxvi, xxxiv, xxxv, 140, 202, 245–50, 263  
 McAloren, Margaret, 162–5  
 McAloren, Nell, 163  
 McArdle, James, 72  
 McArdle, John Francis, 70, 71, 72  
 MacBride, Maud Gonne, 164  
 McCallum, Tommy, 208  
 McCann, Michael Joseph, 71  
 McCarthy, Charlotte, 55n  
 McCarthy, Justin, xxix, 54–9, 98  
 McConnell, Colin, 210  
 MacCool, Finn, 248  
 McCourt, Frank, 153  
 McCrum, Robert, 278  
 MacCutcheon, James Lister, 136  
 MacDermott, John, 221n  
 McDonagh, Michael, 98  
 MacDonald, Ramsay, 168  
 McGahern, John, 272  
 McGeown, Patrick, 139n, 140, 149–52  
 McGill, Patrick, xviii, xxiii, xxvi, 139–42, 149, 202, 274, 278  
 McGinn, Gus, 210–11  
 McGinn, Matt, 207–11  
 MacGowan, Michael, xxvi, 92–5, 115, 274  
 McGuinness, Tommy, 152  
 McNally, Harry, 152  
 MacLean, John, 207  
 Macmillan, Harold, 234  
 McNamee, William, 24  
 MacNeice, Louis, 125, 180–4  
 MacNeice, Willie, 181  
 MacRaid, Donald, xxviii, xxix  
 Macready, William Charles, 58  
 MacStiofáin, Seán, xxxiii, 229–33  
 MacSweeney, Tim, 99  
 MacSwiney, Terence, 164–5, 237n  
 Maidment, Brian, xxxix  
 Manassi, Joe, 154–7  
 Manchester, 35, 36, 45, 46, 48, 134, 135, 136n, 149, 177  
 Manchester Martyrs, 40n, 52, 76; *see also* Fenianism  
 Mander-Mitchenson collection, 280–1  
 Mangan, Johnny, 154–7  
 Mangan, Owen Peter, xxix, xxxi, 49–53  
 Manton, James, 121  
 Markievicz, Countess, 164  
 Marlborough College, Wiltshire, 180, 183, 184  
 Marseilles, 144  
 Marshalsea prison, xxxi, 5, 29  
 Marx, Karl, 182  
 Marxism, 229, 266  
 Massachusetts, 49  
 Mathew, Father Theobald, 37  
 Mathews, Charles, 58  
 Matrimonial Causes Act, 1878, 64  
 Matthews, William, 20n  
 May, Harold, 154–7  
 May, Robert, 98  
 Maynooth, County Kildare, 49, 51  
 Mayo, County, xxxvi–xxxvii, 99, 236, 246n  
*Mayo News, The*, 171n  
 Mazzini, Giuseppe, 181  
 Meade, Sir John, 6n  
 Meade, Dr Richard, 6  
 medical profession, xxxi–xxxii, 88–91, 166, 224–8  
 Mee, John, 77  
 Merthyr, Wales, 90  
 Mew, Joe, 18  
 migratory harvesters, xxxvii, 139  
 millworkers, 129–33  
 Mitchel, John, 170  
 Mitchelstown, County Cork, 274  
 modernism, xxv–xxvi  
 Molloy, Barney, 257, 258  
 Montana, 92

- Moody, Dwight, 130–1  
 Moore, Thomas, 56n, 71, 162  
 More, Sir Thomas, 77  
 Moreton-in-Marsh, Gloucestershire, 276  
*Morning Chronicle*, 20  
*Morning Star*, 54  
 Morris, William, 98n, 106  
 Morrison, Danny, 170  
 Morton, Sanny, 151  
 Mountain Ash, Wales, 83–7  
 Mountbatten, Lord Louis, 273  
 Mountjoy prison, 229  
 Mulhern, Patrick, 119  
 Mullaghmore, County Sligo, 273n  
 Mullen, Francis, 49, 50  
 Mullin, James, xxxi, xxxiv, **88–91**, 101  
 Murchu, Jonnie, 118  
 Murphy, Paddy, 151–2
- N**  
*Nation, The*, 71n, 72n  
 National Children's Hospital, Dublin, 166  
 nationalism, xxxii–xxxiii, xxxiv, 69, 153, 162, 188, 200–1, 274  
   and Annie M. P. Smithson, 121–4  
   and James Mullin, 88–91  
   and prisoners, 170–4  
*Nationalist*, 69  
 Naughton, Bill, xxxiii, xxxiv, **158–61**, 165, 212  
 Navan, County Meath, 229  
 navvying, 245, 251  
   and John Neary, 202–6  
   and Patrick MacGill, 139–42  
 Neary, John, 202–6  
 Neill, Tom, 18  
 neutrality, 221, 230, 233, 235–6  
 New Authors, 198  
 New Orleans, 144  
*New Statesman*, 149  
 New York, 24, 37, 58, 71, 153  
 Newcastle-on-Tyne, 204  
 Newgate prison, 40, 41, 67–8  
 Newport, Wales, 38–9, 90  
 Nicol, Erskine, 20, 60, 61, 62–3  
 Noble, Matthew, 63n  
 Norfolk, Duke of, 187
- Normanton, Yorkshire, xxxvii  
 Norris, Jim 'Black', 235  
 North, Rita, 170  
 Northampton, xxxvi, 147, 245, 248  
*Northern Daily Times*, 54  
 Northumberland, 24, 26  
 Norton's theatre, 85  
 Nugent, Father James, 70  
 nursing, xvi, 224–8
- O**  
 Ó Conluain, Prionsias, 92  
 Ó Gaora, Colm, 170  
 Ó Háinle, Cathal, 92  
 Ó hEochaidh, Seán, 92, 93  
 Ó Nualláin, Ciaráin, 247n  
 Oats, Johnny, 50  
 O'Boyle, Paddy, 93, 94–5  
 O'Brien, Edna, xviii  
 O'Brien, Flann, 247n  
 O'Brien, George, xxxiv, xxxvi, 263–5  
 O'Brien, James, 46  
 O'Brien, Michael, 52, 76n  
 O'Casey, Eileen, 188  
 O'Casey, Sean, xxi, xxxii–xxxiii, **188–92**  
 Ockley, Joe, 145  
 O'Connell, Daniel, 37–8, 39, 69n  
 O'Connor, Arthur, 10  
 O'Connor, Fergus, 38  
 O'Connor, Frank, xxxvi, xxxviii  
 O'Connor, Joseph, xviii, 278  
 Oddfellows movement, 24  
 O'Donnell, Peadar, 115  
 O'Donovan Rossa, Jeremiah, 170  
 O'Faolain, Sean, 251, 272  
 Old Bailey, 40–1  
 Oldham, Jackie, 154–7  
 Oldham, Lancashire, 177  
 O'Leary, Paul, 83n  
 O'Mara, Pat, xxxiii, 153–7, 255  
 O'Neill, Ellen, 45–8  
 O'Neill, John, 15–19  
 O'Neill, Terence, 236  
 oral tradition, xxvi, 115–16  
 Orange Order, 150, 155–7, 210  
 O'Rourke, Edmund, 71n  
 O'Shea, John Augustus, 97  
 O'Sullivan, Humphrey, 248  
 Outram, Sir James, 63  
 Oxford, 180

Oxford University, 219  
Oxford University Press, 198

## P

Paine, Tom, 10  
Paisley, Renfrewshire, 150, 255–8  
Paisley, Reverend Ian, 272  
*Pall Mall Gazette*, 65n  
Palmer, Susannah, 67–8  
Parker, Hugh, 31  
Parnell, Charles Stewart, 54, 89, 103n  
Parnell, Fanny, 235  
Parry, J. Humphrey, 40  
Patrick, Adam, 18  
pea-canning, 267–8  
Pearse, Patrick, 89  
Peculiar People, 97  
Peel, Sir Robert, 44n  
Pelham, Emily, 20  
Peterborough, 267  
Petter & Galpin, Messrs., 65  
Phelan, Jim, xxiv, 140, 143–8  
Phelps, Samuel, 58  
Philadelphia, xxxi, 10, 49, 52, 266  
Phillips, 'Lepsey', 154–7  
Phoenix Park murders, xxxii, 89  
pickpocketing, 45–8  
Pierce, David, xxxix–xl  
Pilkington, Laetitia, xxxi, 4–9  
Pilkington, Reverend Matthew, 4, 8  
Platt, Judge Baron, 40  
Pope, Alexander, 78  
Port Talbot, Wales, 239  
Portchester Castle, 11–12  
Portnuck pit, 117, 119  
Portpatrick, Stranraer, 26  
Portsmouth, xxxvii, 10, 11–12  
poststructuralism, xxii, xxiii–xxiv, xxv  
Powell, Enoch, 271  
Power, Richard, 251–4  
Power, Victor, 251  
Powys, Littleton, 183  
Preston, xxix, xxxi, 35, 49, 106, 177  
  jail, 45  
  market, 48  
  and Owen Mangan, 50–3  
Priestley, J.B., xxix  
prisoner experiences, 170–4  
prostitution, 45, 58  
Provisional IRA, 229, 272–3

public speaking, 134–8  
Puck Fair, 280, 281  
*Punch*, 41, 271

## Q

Queen Victoria's Jubilee Institute, 122  
Queen's College Galway, 88  
Queen's Theatre, 191n

## R

racism, xxxvi, 76, 79–82, 231  
radicalism, 10, 42, 74, 103  
Radio Éireann, 232, 242  
Raftery, Anthony, 246  
Ralph, Ben, 18  
Ramsgate, Kent, 277, 280  
Rasputin, Grigori, 186–7  
*Reader*, 65  
Reading, Berkshire, 237  
Red Cross, 166  
Redmond, John, 171n  
Regan, Stephen, xl  
Repeal movement, 37–8  
republicanism, xxxv, 10, 229–33, 272  
Richardson, Samuel, 4  
Richmond Barracks, 173  
Ring, County Waterford, 234  
Robb, Nesca A., 219–23, 236n  
Rochdale, Lancashire, 177  
Roche, Bernard, 154–7  
Roche, Henry, 154–7  
Rogers, John, 99  
Romford, Greater London, 203  
Rooney, Brendan, 61n  
Rosalie, Laura, 67n  
Rose, Jonathan, 129n  
Rosslare, County Waterford, 244  
Rotherham Statute fair, 47  
Roxburghshire, 115  
Royal Air Force (RAF), 229, 235, 268  
Royal Irish Academy (RIA), 60  
Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC), 193  
Royal Theatre, London, 191  
Royalty Theatre, London, 191  
Roza, Frankie, 154–7  
Rugby School, 166–9, 216  
Rush, Mick, 212–13, 215  
Ruskin College, Oxford, 207, 263  
Russell, Henry, 73  
Ryan, Mick, 200

- S
- Sadler's Wells Opera, 198
- St Alban's, Hertfordshire, 146, 147
- St George's Players, 280–1
- St Helier, Jersey, 224–8
- St Michael's School, Liverpool, 154, 155
- St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, 122
- St Patrick's Day, xxxii, 90, 116, 123–4, 150, 155–6, 209, 234
- St Peter's School, Liverpool, 153–7
- St Crispin: A Magazine for the Leather Trades*, 15
- St Giles in the Fields, London, 17–19
- St Helens, 51
- Salford, 65
- Salt, Sarah, 195
- Salvation Army, 210
- Sanchez, Jackie, 154–7
- Sankey, Ira, 130–1
- Sarsfield, Patrick, 77
- Sayers, Tom, 75
- Scotland, xix, xvi, xxviii, 24, 26–8, 92–5, 111, 115, 139–42, 149–52, 204, 220, 255
- immigration from, 42
- Scotland Yard, 101–5
- Scullion, Peter, 152
- Seale Hayne College, Devonshire, 185–7
- second-generation Irish, xxxiii–xxxiv, 74–8, 129–33, 149–52, 153–7, 180, 255–8, 259–62
- Second World War, xxxv, xxxvi, 166, 181, 202
- Irish in, 198, 239–41, 271
- and Jersey, 224–8
- and London, 220–3
- and neutrality, 230, 235–6, 271
- Seegar, Freddie, 154–7
- Selby, Yorkshire, 48, 202
- self-dramatisation, xxi, xxvi–xxvii
- self-representation, xxiv–xxv
- Shakespeare, William, 58, 152, 170
- Shannon Free Airport Development Company, 212
- Shaw, George Bernard, 74, 176, 216
- Sheffield, 29, 31, 47, 48
- Sheppard, Jack, 40
- Sherborne, Dorset, 180, 181–4
- Shipston-on-Stour, Warwickshire, 276
- shoemakers, 15–19
- Sidmouth, Devon, 277
- Silvertown, North Woolwich, 162–5
- Simmons, Pimple, 145
- Sinn Féin, 170, 231, 271
- Sitwell, Edith, 198
- Skibbereen, County Cork, 275
- Skipton hiring fair, 202
- slavery, 37
- Sligo, County, 79, 81, 259–62, 272
- Slough, 237
- Smith, Holt, & Co., 30–1
- Smith, Sidonie, xxiii–xxiv
- Smithson, Annie M. P., xxxii, xxiii, 121–4
- socialism, xxvi, 74, 98, 186–7, 188
- and Alice Foley, 129
- and Bonar Thompson, 134
- and 'Casey', 106
- and Matt McGinn, 207
- Socialist Party of Ireland, 106
- 'Soldier's Song, The', 232
- South Devon Herd Book Society, 187
- Southcott, Joanna, 276, 277
- Southwark Irish Literary Club, 96–100
- Southwell, Viscount, 187
- Sparling, Henry Halliday, 98
- Special Branch, 101–5
- Spectator, The*, 65, 105
- Spenser, Edmund, xxx
- Stafford, xxxv
- Stafford Jail, 172–4
- Staigue, County Kerry, 101
- Standard, The*, 64
- Stapleton, Michael, 198–201
- Stapleton, Richard, 199, 200
- Steel, Sir Richard, 7
- steel industry, 149–52
- Stephens, James, 76, 234
- stereotypes, xx, xxviii–xxix, xxx–xxxii
- Stevenson, William, 135n
- Stewartstown, County Tyrone, 42
- Stockport, Cheshire, 46, 48, 106, 108
- Stow-on-the-Wold, Gloucestershire, 276
- street singers, 217–18
- Strindberg, August, 216
- subjectivity, xvii, xxiv–xxv, xxxiii–xxxiv
- Sue, Eugène, 108
- suffragette movement, 129
- Sullivan, Maggie, 163
- Sussex, 216, 248

- Suttle, Jemmy, 145–6  
 Sutton, John, 109  
 Swansea, 239  
 Sweeney, John, 101–5  
 Swift, Jonathan, 1, 2n, 4  
 Swift, Roger, xxii  
 Swinford, County Mayo, 202
- T
- tailors, 37–41  
 Tailors' Club, 33, 34–5  
 Tauchnitz publishers, 66  
 temperance movement, 15, 37  
 Templecrone Co-operative Society, 115  
 Tennyson, Alfred Lord, 277  
 Thackeray, William M., 58, 106  
 Thompson, Bonar, 134–8  
*Times, The*, 39  
 Tipperary, County, 185, 201, 225, 278  
 Toaster Dick, 144–5  
 Tobin, Kip, 264  
 Todhunter, John, 98  
 Tolstoy, Leo, 216  
 Torquay, Devon, 188  
 Totnes, Devon, 188  
 Towcester, Northamptonshire, 147  
 Townend, Paul, 54  
 trade unions, 19, 24, 37, 42, 83, 129, 188  
 tramping, 24–8, 143–8  
 Transport Act, 1944, 249n  
 Tressell, Robert, xviii  
 Trevor, William, 274–7  
 Trinity College Dublin, 176  
 'Troubles', 270  
 Turpin, Dick, 280  
 Twelfth of July, 150, 156–7, 183, 209–10  
 Tynan, Katharine, 98  
 Tyrone, County, 140n, 173
- U
- Ulster, 24, 183, 221, 225, 236, 270  
 Underhill, Edward, 131n  
 United Irish rebellion, 19, 29  
*United Irishman*, 69  
 United Irishmen, 10, 72n  
 United States of America, 10, 37, 42, 44,  
 49, 55, 92, 153, 181, 242, 255  
 Ushaw College, Durham, 212  
 Ussher, James, Archbishop of Armagh,  
 176
- V
- Valley, Paul, 266  
 van Lewen, Laetitia, 4  
 Vanguard Press, 153  
 Victoria, Queen, 58n, 101, 123
- W
- Wakefield, Yorkshire, 48  
 Wales, xix, xxxiii, 38–9, 83–7, 88–91,  
 184, 189, 204, 239  
 Wallace, Edgar, 195  
 Walsh, John, xxxiii–xxxiv, 270–3  
 Walsh, Oonagh, 121  
 War of Independence, 185, 193, 200,  
 231, 272  
 Ward, Joseph, 72  
 Warrington, Cheshire, 121, 147  
 Warwick, 13–14  
 Warwick University, 263  
 Waterford, 15, 19, 97, 144, 235, 238  
 Watling Street, 144, 147  
 Waugh, Evelyn, 195  
 weavers and weaving, 42–4, 49–53,  
 129–33  
 Webster, Benjamin, 58  
 Wellington, Duke of, 39  
 Westgate-on-Sea, Kent, 55n  
 Westminster House of Correction, 40, 41  
 Whiteman, Paul, 194  
 Whittingham Asylum, Preston, 106  
 Wicklow, County, 175, 199, 237, 250,  
 273  
 Wild, Jonathan, 40  
 Wilde, Lady, 98  
 Wilde, Oscar, 98, 171  
 William IV, King, 37  
 William of Orange, King, 76, 77, 183,  
 219  
 Williams, Zephaniah, 38–9  
 Wilson, A. N., 216  
 Wimpey construction firm, 235  
 Windsor Castle, 139  
 Winthrop, William, 42  
 Wise, George, 156  
 Women's Employment Federation, 219  
 Woolwich, Greater London, 162  
 Worcester, 47  
 Workers' Educational Association,  
 129, 149

Working Boy's Home, Liverpool, 155,  
156

Wormwood Scrubs prison, 164

## Y

Yeats, John Butler, 79

Yeats, William, 81, 82

Yeats, William Butler, xv, xxi, 79–82,  
97–8, 164n, 188

York, 1, 47

Yorkshire, xxxvii, 109, 202

Youghal, County Cork, 275

Young, Jimmy, 256

Young, Margaret, 256

Young Irelanders, 39, 70

Young's Company, 119

## Z

Zinn-Collis, Zoltan, 166