



A Backward Glance: Radharc ar gCúl

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Mercier's *Irish Comic Tradition*
as a Touchstone of Irish Studies

It does not seem accidental that Vivian Mercier's classic book *The Irish Comic Tradition* was published by Oxford University Press in hardback in 1962, the

Mercier to succeed him at Northwestern; instead, this peripatetic Irishman journeyed in 1965 to te

generally, because they shared the same kind of sensibility: as Kiberd puts it about Mercier, the sensibility of “the Protestant gentleman and Trinity graduate who took an equal pleasure in the learned and the obscene.”⁹

Mercier was not content to remain only an Anglo-Irishman and Francophile. He had emigrated to New York because Trinity had offered him no job (nor to Conor Cruise O’Brien, who had to settle for the civil service). When Mercier got a sabbatical from CCNY in the 1950

Mercier built his whole book on the thesis that “an unbroken comic tradition may be traced in Irish literature from approximately the ninth century down to the present day.” (*ICT* v)

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not any narrowly chauvinistic “united-Ireland” endeavor, but, rather, a brilliantly international one, in the spirit of his hero, Beckett.

Bilingualism, Cultural Studies, theory—Mercier was immersed decades ago in all of these bywords of current Irish Studies. It is instructive to think of various chief thinkers and main developments in our field since *The Irish Comic Tradition*, and then to ask if these would exist as we now know them if Mercier had not come onto the scene. In addition to Declan Kiberd, how about Seamus Deane and *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, that epic, controversial attempt to merge Gaelic, English, and all kinds of other texts? Might we find Mercier's fingerprints not only on critical texts and collections, but even on creative, primary ones—the wonderful Gaelic poems of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, for example, recomposed in English on facing pages by such fellow poets as Paul Muldoon and Michael Hartnett? Our habit is to move from literary, “primary” sources to critical, “secondary” sources, but *The Irish Comic Tradition* is a critical book that marked not only the scholarly, but also the creative Irish writing that came after it. It is thus a “secondary” book that became primary. *The Irish Comic Tradition* was more than historically significant. Vivian Mercier remains, still today, key to our undertakings. As Kiberd puts it, “we are all still learning how to be his contemporaries.”¹⁷

Among those contemporaries are the three distinguished authors whose essays I am pleased to introduce. The poet Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, the daughter of Eilís Dillon and the stepdaughter of Vivian Mercier, offers here a lovely and perceptive tribute to Mercier and his work, emphasizing his distinctive insights, personality, and attachment to books. Anthony Roche, Mercier's student in Santa Barbara and now an important literary scholar in Dublin, likewise attests memorably to the character and impact of his mentor, underscoring his unique combination of challenging scholarly rigor and supportive personal attention. Patrick O'Sullivan, scholar and authority on the Irish diaspora, vividly recounts how, when he came across it in the Liverpool public library soon after its first publication, *The Irish Comic Tradition* helped make it possible for him not only to see what Irish Studies could be, but also to maintain in a foreign place his own Irish identity in a deep, freshly nuanced way. These three authors draw from their own particular experiences, bringing Mercier and his classic book back to life for us. At the same time, they speak for the great many of us who are still working under Mercier's considerable shadow.

17. Kiberd, “Introduction,” p. vii.