

A Backward Glance: Radharc ar gCúl

James M. Cahalan 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 same year that ACIS, the American Committee (now Conference) for Irish

im during 1987–88 at the University of Californiaier fell ill. Indeed, Kiberd can now been seen as in Irish Studies, as well as a central leading light in ts on Mercier shed significant light on his predecesn general.

n teaching in New York City was, in fact, known to critics who linked up to found the ACIS in that same cier (who died in 1989) lectured as late as 1985 at the in Washington State, where he spoke on Shaw. His when, as a mere schoolboy, he struck up a corre-Prize winner.

² As for the international phenomenon of IASIL, Mercier was—in the words of his author's blurb on his 1964 sequel to *The Irish Comic Tradition*, the Dell anthology *Great Irish Short Stories*—an "Irishman with a French name who teaches English to Americans at the City College of the City University of New York." Later, Richard Ellmann wanted

- 1. Declan Kiberd, "Introduction," in *Modern Irish Literature: Sources and Founders*, by Vivian Mercier, ed. Eilís Dillon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. x.
- 2. Kiberd, "Introduction," p. viii.
- Vivian Mercier, Great Irish Short Stories (New York: Dell, 1964). I call Great Irish Short Stories a sequel to The Irish Comic Tradition because it continues Mercier's bilingual agenda: rather than sim-

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."

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," (ICTv

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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.

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