Irish Writers and *The New Yorker* in the Mid-Twentieth Century

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1 A General Survey

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1 A General Survey

In 1950, the American writer Eudora Welty (1909–2001) crossed the Atlantic to visit Elizabeth Bowen (1899–1973) at Bowen's Court, County Cork. The journey was to inspire "The Bride of the Innisfallen" (1 December 1951), Welty's first story in *The New Yorker*. Sharing the news of this publication with Bowen with joy, Welty encouraged her to submit a story to the same magazine. The fee for the story, Welty reported to Bowen, was $2,760: "Isn't that cuckoo? *You must* get money like this" (qtd. in Hepburn 2021, 151). Welty doesn't seem to have known that Bowen was actually no stranger to *The New Yorker* at the time: she had published a story, "Everything's Frightfully Interesting" (11 October 1941), in the magazine 10 years ago.

Welty's letter to Bowen is illuminating in several ways. First, financial rewards were regarded as a crucial factor when professional writers considered their publishing venues. As Anna Teekell has pointed out, the correspondence between Welty and Bowen reveals that they "talk[ed] money all the time" (Teekell 2021, 133). Second, the fact that Welty appears to have been unaware of Bowen's earlier story in *The New Yorker* reminds us of the transient nature of magazines. As new issues appear, old ones are put aside and consigned to oblivion. It is easy for magazine stories to be buried in the stacks of back issues. Bowen was already an established writer when she first published in *The New Yorker*, but her story there did not receive much critical attention. Other stories written for the magazine by lesser-known authors are entirely forgotten today. In fact, Bowen had held *The New Yorker*'s first-reading agreement, which came with substantial bonus payments. However, in 1946, she declined the magazine's offer to renew her contract (Bowen 1946, [n.p.]).[1] Welty, on the other hand, was to enjoy a long relationship with *The New Yorker*: she published seven stories in it between 1951 and 1969 (Angell 2001, 30).

This anecdote offers a vignette of a transatlantic literary friendship, but it also raises questions about authorial relationships with *The New Yorker*. Money was a shared concern, but not every writer found the magazine's contracts agreeable. What were the terms and conditions of *The New Yorker*'s first-reading agreement? How did this type of contract impact the writers' relationships with the magazine? Which Irish writers – established or not – appeared in the

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many issues of this weekly publication? Who among them held the first-reading agreement? Drawing on archival materials, this chapter seeks to answer these questions.

Some caveats are in order before I present an overview of the Irish writers publishing in *The New Yorker* between 1940 and 1980. During the four decades covered in this study, *The New Yorker* published approximately 2,000 issues. Such a large corpus poses difficulties, which are compounded by the fact that the magazine did not have a detailed table of contents until the 22 March 1969 issue. To navigate this vast sea of textual data, I rely on the magazine's digital archive, whose text is fully searchable and accessible to all subscribers. This approach, however, has its limitations. The accuracy of the searches is occasionally marred by human errors. For instance, Norah Hoult's name is misspelt "Nora Hoult" in the digital archive. Entering "Norah Hoult" will not yield any result, even though her name is correctly spelled in the print issue. There are other issues that can potentially impede accurate searches. The digital archive puts Frank O'Connor's last contribution, "Bring in the Whiskey Now, Mary" (12 August 1967, a year after his death), under Michael O'Donovan, the author's real name, but the story is signed Frank O'Connor in the print issue. Elizabeth Cullinan's story "Sleep" (1 June 1968) is credited to her correctly in the digital archive, and the editorial letters in *The New Yorker* records verify that it is her work,[2] but in the print issue, the name attached to the story is "Sharon Moore" – it is unclear why.

The New Yorker records at the New York Public Library – another important source for my survey – offer insights into the Irish writers' contracts, the editorial processes their stories went through, and their correspondence with their editors and literary peers. However, despite the massive number of documents in this archive (2,565 boxes of material), some writers have left behind very few traces here. For instance, it is surprising that Maeve Brennan and Elizabeth Cullinan, who worked for the magazine as staff writer and secretary, respectively, are only mentioned tangentially in other people's letters. Neither has designated boxes in the records. On the other hand, it is perhaps more understandable that few documents here concern those Irish contributors who were less involved with the magazine in the mid-twentieth century. Walter Macken rarely appeared, and the documents related to Padraic Colum, John Godley, and Julia O'Faolain are often mixed with others in general correspondence folders. Seán O'Faoláin submitted over ten stories to *The New Yorker*, none of which was accepted. His rejection letters are in general folders alongside documents concerning other writers whose surnames are also put under "O."

With these caveats in mind, I acknowledge the possibility that there are writers relevant to my study who have escaped my attention and that some of the Irish writers' contracts with *The New Yorker* remain undiscovered. What I present here is the most comprehensive survey to date, compiled by trawling through archival materials and secondary references. The survey fills a

significant gap in existing scholarship on *The New Yorker*'s Irish connections, allowing a clear picture to emerge of this remarkable transatlantic literary network in the mid-century.[3]

The New Yorker "Fat Fee"

In a 1960 letter to Michael McLaverty, John McGahern thanked the older writer for sending him a copy of *The New Yorker*, which contained a story by their fellow Irishman Benedict Kiely. McGahern agrees with McLaverty's assessment that Kiely's story "The Wild Boy" (30 January 1960) is poorly written: the story reads like "[s]omething strung hurriedly together for that fat fee *The New Yorker* pays." McGahern goes on to surmise that the magazine bought Kiely's story only because "he has probably an easy wicket" (Shovlin 2021, 23).[4] Zeroing in on the big check that Kiely supposedly received, McGahern implies that artistic integrity is often compromised by the lure of lucre. Nevertheless, within 3 years, McGahern himself would publish his first *New Yorker* story, "Summer at Strandhill" (21 September 1963). He would continue to write for the magazine's "fat fee" and contribute seven stories in total over a span of two decades.

McGahern's dismissive remarks in the letter quoted above betray two widely held beliefs regarding publishing in *The New Yorker*. First, it was often thought that the magazine paid extremely well – almost obscenely well – to the extent that justified the use of the adjective "fat" to describe their payments. Second, McGahern's phrase "easy wicket" is perhaps a reference to Kiely's "first-reading agreement" with *The New Yorker*. This contract was often seen as a golden ticket to the exclusive club: once a writer won the ticket, publishing in the magazine would be easy, the rewards covetously handsome, irrespective of the quality of the published work.

"Fat" fees were certainly an encouraging factor, if not the main incentive, for Irish writers to publish in *The New Yorker* in the mid-century. The first-reading agreement did bump up the payments significantly. When Brian Friel had his first story published in the magazine's 1 August 1959 issue, he wrote to his editor, Roger Angell: "we can live (my wife, two children and I) for two full months on a New Yorker story!" (Friel 1959, [n.p.]). If the base payment for one single story could sustain Friel's family for two months, the premium rate and bonus that came with the first-reading agreement were sufficient for him to invest his full-time energy in writing. Having been offered the agreement in July 1960, Friel declared in October of the same year that he had quit his teaching job (Friel 1960c, [n.p.]).

Though meant to be derogatory, McGahern's adjective "fat" was not erroneous. Some of *The New Yorker*'s own editors used the same expression to describe their checks, but in a jolly way.[5] Writing to Friel's agent Emilie Jacobson at Curtis Brown, Roger Angell cheekily announced: "Here is a fat check for Brian Friel" (Angell 1964, [n.p.]). When Mary Lavin signed the first-reading

agreement, her editor, Rachel MacKenzie, could not conceal her excitement for the Meath writer: "I am so happy to be the one to send you this nice fat check and the news that another, even fatter, will be along. Money can be such fun, and we *love* having the stories" (MacKenzie 1959a, [n.p.]).

Money could be fun, especially when it was fat, but exactly how fat were *The New Yorker*'s payments? There is no easy answer because several complex factors came into play in the magazine's payment calculations. To begin with, the magazine had two bonus payments – quantity bonus and cost-of-living adjustment – both of which were applied retroactively. This means that, even if we can get hold of financial records of a story's base payment, it is difficult to ascertain its total monetary value because the bonus payments would have come in much later. To unravel the mystery of the fat payments – and thus to understand the magazine's monetary appeal to its Irish authors – it is necessary to establish the contractual status of each writer, examine the terms and conditions of the first-reading agreement, and analyze the extent to which the agreement helped strengthen the ties between the writers and the magazine. Importantly, both the agreement and the payments should be contextualized within the US magazine market at the time.

In a March 1944 letter, *The New Yorker*'s founder, Harold Ross, wrote to the treasurer, R. Hawley Truax, offering a piece of "intelligence" on one of their valued contributors: "Dorothy Parker [1893–1967] is doing a story for the Woman's Home Companion for $2,000" (Ross 1944a, [n.p.]). Ross asked Truax if there was any way they could "make her a decent offer" to get the popular writer to write for *The New Yorker* on a regular basis. In November of the same year, Ross followed this up with another letter. He had dined with Parker and proposed a contract that was agreeable to her: "I'd pay her $3,000 on signing and $2,000 additional bonus if she does eight *acceptable* stories in a year." Describing Parker as "one of the great non-deliverers," Ross came up with these two-stage payments to make sure she would continue to write for *The New Yorker*. The initial payment alone is no small sum: $3,000 in 1944 amounts to approximately $51,000 today.[6] This might seem extremely generous now, but compared with what other American magazines were paying in the mid-century, Ross's proposal was not particularly remarkable. His postscript to the same letter reveals that Parker "has an agreement to do one story for Woman's Home Companion for $2250 and the promise of $2500 for stories of over 3,000 words from Cosmopolitan" (Ross 1944b, [n.p.]). These figures show how vigorously competitive the market was: the big commercial magazines had to outbid each other to recruit popular authors. *The New Yorker*'s "fat fees" did indeed show off its financial power, but the fatness was a necessity, rather than an anomaly, meant to gratify the magazine's contributors and to keep its competitors at bay.

The contract that Ross offered Parker likely became the blueprint for the magazine's famous first-reading agreement in the mid-century.[7] This agreement

was designed to ensure that the metropolitan weekly had plenty of quality submissions for consideration. Of the 19 Irish writers covered in this study, at least 9 held first-reading agreements. In 1945, one year after Parker signed the contract, Elizabeth Bowen was offered the agreement, as mentioned earlier. Frank O'Connor signed the agreement in 1946 and was to hold it until his death in 1966.[8] Joyce Cary obtained the agreement in 1956, which was renewed for 1957–1958, but he died in 1957 (Cary 1956a, [n.p.]). Benedict Kiely joined the club around 1958,[9] followed by Mary Lavin in 1959 (MacKenzie 1959a, [n.p.]), Brian Friel in 1960 (Angell 1960a, [n.p.]), Edna O'Brien in 1962 (MacKenzie 1962b, [n.p.]), and Elizabeth Cullinan in 1963.[10] William Trevor became a member of the esteemed pack much later, around 1980.[11] It is possible that others, too, garnered this type of contract, but no evidence has been preserved in *The New Yorker* records.

The list above shows that the agreement was not a privilege reserved for established writers. Friel, O'Brien, and Cullinan were relatively new to the literary scene when they signed the lucrative deal. In addition to courting well-known writers, the editors were also on the lookout for emerging talents. The "*New Yorker* records" contain files of "potential list," which shows that the editors often read stories that appeared in their competitors' pages, picking out the ones that they liked and actively making contact with the authors to encourage them to submit to *The New Yorker*.[12]

The first-reading agreement should be recognized for its strategic importance, rather than seen as an extra jewel in the crowns of already celebrated authors. It was offered quite generously to a great number of writers. When Roger Angell offered the deal to Brian Friel in 1960, he assured the young writer that the contract did not entail strenuous obligations, adding that "a large percentage of our regular contributors operate under such an agreement" (Angell 1960a, [n.p.]). Other contracted contributors in the mid-century included John Cheever (1912–1982), Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977), Sylvia Plath (1932–1963), Roald Dahl (1916–1990), V. S. Pritchett (1900–1997), and Shirley Jackson (1916–1965), among many others.[13] Their works varied greatly in style and attracted very different readers, showing that the club, prestigious as it may have been, was not sequestered to a small VIP corner: it occupied a rather spacious floor.

The New Yorker also offered its editors and staff writers first-reading agreements to encourage their own creative writing. There were separate first-reading agreements for different kinds of contributions: drawing, verse, and fiction. Fact pieces, on the other hand, operated on a different type of contract, based on quantity rather than first consideration.[14] Poetry editor Howard Moss (1922–1987) had the verse agreement (Moss 1976, [n.p.]). Fiction editor William Maxwell (1908–2000) and long-term staff writer Brendan Gill (1914–1997) both had the fiction agreement (Maxwell 1969; Gill 1973, [n.p.]). In 1952, a note passed between the finance offices read: "Maeve Brennan is to be considered for fiction agreement when we buy the next casual" (Mr. Norman

1952, [n.p.]). No evidence has been discovered to show that this suggestion was acted upon, but judging from the fact that Brennan's short stories appeared almost exclusively in *The New Yorker*, it seems very possible that she held one.

The New Yorker's first-reading agreements did not encompass column pieces and reviews, which were mostly written in-house, with occasional contributions from commissioned writers. This book focuses on the "fiction" agreement, which covers "all fiction, humor, reminiscence and casual essays" (O'Connor 1963, [n.p.]), but it is worth briefly mentioning here two examples from the other departments. The legendary illustrator Rea Irvin (1881–1972), who originated the dandy figure Eustace Tilley for the cover of the inaugural issue of *The New Yorker*, had the agreement for "Idea Drawing and Cover-Design." By signing the contract, he granted the magazine "First refusal of all cover-designs and all other drawings, with the exception of illustrations for the text of stories and drawings for advertisements." And the rate was "$4.00 – $2.65 per square inch for idea drawings | 25% premium | $660 for each cover-design | standard 10% to 50% bonuses | Cola [cost-of-living adjustment]" (Irvin 1955, [n.p.]). Marianne Moore (1887–1972) had the verse agreement, which bound her to give *The New Yorker* "first reading of all poems"; the rate was "$2.75 a line minimum | 25% extra for first reading | COLA" (Moore 1965, [n.p.]). It was possible for a contributor to hold more than one agreement. Vladimir Nabokov held both fiction and verse agreements. His contract for 1965–1966 covered "First reading of all poems, fiction, humor, reminiscence, and casual essays" (Nabokov 1965a, [n.p.]).

While illustrators were paid by the size, poets by the line, fiction writers were paid by the word count. The "fattest" part of the payment, like the other agreements, came from the bonuses, which will be explained in due course. By signing their contracts, the contributors agreed to submit all their writings to *The New Yorker* for first consideration. The magazine reserved the right to reject any piece that they deemed unsuitable for them. If accepted, authors would be remunerated, while the rejected pieces could be submitted to other magazines. Both parties thus benefited from the agreement: *The New Yorker* was assured of sufficient submissions in their bank, while the contracted writers enjoyed a better payment system. Even if the magazine turned down their offerings, they were allowed to send these elsewhere.

The New Yorker's loose definition of "fiction" was confusing to some writers. When Brian Friel was offered the agreement, he wondered if he would be allowed to continue to write for *The Irish Times*. His editor, Roger Angell, replied that this would not be a problem, since Friel's writings for *The Irish Times* did not fall under any of the fiction categories (Friel 1960b, [n.p.]).[15] Again, when Friel was planning to study theater with Tyrone Guthrie in Minneapolis, he double-checked with Angell if he could write for British publications – "*The Observer* or *The Guardian*" – as their "American correspondent." Angell assured Friel that he should feel free to do so (Friel 1963a, [n.p.]). After his *Philadelphia Here I Come!* (1964) gained critical success,

Friel sent parts of *Lovers* to the magazine for consideration. Angell liked the play, but the magazine did not, in principle, print dramatic works (Angell 1967, [n.p.]). Mary Lavin, who held the agreement since 1959, was similarly confused about her contractual obligations. In 1969, she was still uncertain if she would be allowed to submit children's poems to another magazine, *McCall's.* Her editor, Rachel MacKenzie, assured her that her fiction agreement did not cover verse and gave her the green light (MacKenzie 1969b, [n.p.]).

These instances suggest that while some writers were anxious about the terms and conditions of their contracts, *The New Yorker*'s editors were quite flexible. Under the fiction agreement, the writers were allowed to write journalistic pieces, plays, and poems for other publications. Additionally, the stories that *The New Yorker* bought were allowed to appear in publications on the other side of the Atlantic "six weeks" after they were first published: "time to allow for slow-boat mail to get copies of the magazine to England and Scotland, and breathing time for reading" (MacKenzie 1970a, [n.p.]). This was to the contributors' advantage, as they could resell their works as "*New Yorker* stories" to magazines or story collections outside the United States for additional income.

The payment system was much more complicated than the contractual obligations. A year after signing the contract, Friel professed to his editor: "I will not pretend to understand your system of payments but they are very generous – almost extravagant by our Irish standards" (Friel 1961b, [n.p.]). The description of the payments as "extravagant" corresponds to the common perception that *The New Yorker*'s checks were beautifully opulent. To take Friel's contract as an example: upon the renewal of his agreement for 1964, he was paid a "contractual consideration" fee of $300. Signing the document, he granted the magazine the right of "first reading of all fiction, humor, reminiscence and casual essays." His rate was "18–9 cents a word minimum," with "25% extra for first reading" and "COLA" (Friel 1963b). The renewed agreements for Benedict Kiely and Edna O'Brien in 1964 had identical terms and conditions (Kiely 1963; O'Brien 1964). The same goes for Mary Lavin's renewed agreement in the same year, except that she received a "contractual consideration" fee of $750 (Lavin 1963).

The payment system was perplexing because it consisted of four parts. (1) The writers were offered a "contractual consideration" fee. The amount could vary drastically from year to year. (2) Under the agreement, the writers enjoyed a premium rate for their contributions. In addition, the agreement came with two bonuses: (3) a quantity bonus, which was offered to both contracted and non-contracted writers; and (4) COLA, which was the magazine's office jargon for "cost-of-living adjustment" payments. Because of this intricate calculation system and the fact that the bonuses were paid retroactively, it is difficult to ascertain the exact amount paid for a particular story. The following section will look at each of these components separately in order to establish how exactly the magazine's renowned fat checks were calculated.

Contractual Consideration Fee

When making an offer of the agreement, *The New Yorker* usually sent an accompanying check of $100. This was a one-off token fee to signal the writer's acceptance of the contract, but the amount varied wildly when the contract was renewed. For instance, Frank O'Connor held the first-reading agreement from 1947 to 1966, throughout which period his contractual consideration fees changed dramatically. In 1952, the fee was the basic $100. It was raised to $500 in 1953, and then to $550 in 1954. In 1955, it dropped to $100 again, only to soar to $1,600 in 1956. The fee then fluctuated between $1,200 in 1957, $1,700 in 1958, and $2,500 in 1959, staying the same at $2,500 in 1960. It went down to $1,000 in 1961 and plummeted again to $200 in 1962 and 1963 (O'Connor "Fiction agreements" [n.d.]).

Mary Lavin's contractual consideration fee for 1964–1965 was $750 (Lavin 1963, [n.p.]), and $800 for 1965–1966 (Lavin 1964, [n.p.]). For 1966–1967, however, the amount dropped to $492.50. In the letter accompanying the check, her editor, Rachel MacKenzie, wrote that she was sad that the check was smaller that year: "The amount is arrived at by some arithmetical computation from what we've bought over the last several years, and when there's been a smaller year the check comes out smaller" (Lavin 1965, [n.p.]). The elusiveness of the phrase "some arithmetical computation" suggests that the calculation was so complicated that even the editors were oblivious of its exact mechanism. In this regard, the contractual consideration fee typifies the complexity of *The New Yorker*'s payment system.

Rate

Fiction was paid by the word count. Those writers with the agreement were paid at a premium rate, with an additional 25% bonus. The rate, however, varied with the writer's standing and perhaps their relationship with the magazine. The South African writer Nadine Gordimer's (1923–2014) rate for 1965–1966 was "22–11 cents a word *minimum*" (Gordimer 1965, [n.p.]). This means that for a piece *The New Yorker* purchased from her, they would pay 22 cents per word minimum for the first 2,000 words, and the rest of the text would be calculated at the rate of 11 cents per word. In comparison, Mary Lavin's rate for the same year was "18–9 cents a word *minimum*" (Lavin 1964, [n.p.]). Gordimer's higher rate was perhaps due to her longer relationship with the magazine. Her first *New Yorker* story appeared in 1951, while Lavin's first was published in 1958. By 1965, the magazine had purchased 17 stories from Gordimer and 12 from Lavin. Perhaps the magazine saw Lavin's potential; the pay gap between the two contributors soon narrowed when Lavin's rate was bumped up to "20–10 cents a word minimum" for 1966–1967 (Lavin 1965, [n.p.]).

Another factor that may have affected the rate was "class." In a July 1959 letter, Roger Angell sent "a small additional payment" for Brian Friel's first

story "The Skelper" (1 August 1959), explaining to Friel's agent that "the story has been moved in class and now appears in the front of the book" (Angell 1959, [n.p.]). In the mid-century, *The New Yorker* usually published three pieces of fiction in each issue. A short piece of humor or casual essay appeared right after the signature column "The Talk of the Town." This would be followed immediately by a more substantial work of fiction, about ten pages long. A third piece of fiction would appear toward the end of the issue, before the theater and book reviews. In the issue where "The Skelper" was published, Friel's story was the first piece of fiction, running to four pages (pages 20–23). It was followed by Nancy Hale's seven-page-long "A Curious Lapse" (pages 24–30). But this issue – which was shorter than usual – did not contain a third piece of fiction.[16] The hierarchical relationship between the works of fiction in each issue is not always clear. Frances Kiernan suggests that there were three tiers of fiction: A for the principal piece, B for humor, and C for reminiscence (Kiernan 1998, 86). These three types, however, did not always appear in the order of A, B, C. One would have assumed that the second piece, as it was usually longer, and as it occupied the central position, was considered the most valuable. But as Angell's letter reveals, it was the first fiction piece – usually short in length and light in tone – that *The New Yorker* put a higher price on.

With the premium rate, contracted writers were guaranteed a generous payment. For instance, Lavin's early story "The Great Wave" (13 June 1959), which ran to ten pages, received a base payment of $2,408 (MacKenzie 1959b, [n.p.]). This was a large sum for one story, but the figure did not include the two bonus payments, which would have been paid retroactively.

Quantity Bonus

To encourage writers to submit on a regular basis, *The New Yorker* offered a quantity bonus when they purchased a certain number of stories in one year. This was not exclusive to first-reading agreements, but contracted writers did have a better chance of meeting the quantity requirements.

When the magazine bought four stories from an author during any 1-year contractual cycle, they paid a quantity bonus of 15% on the base payments of the four stories that they purchased. For example, if a writer had four stories accepted by *The New Yorker*, and each story received a base payment of $1,000, the 15% bonus would entitle them to a bonus payment of $600 ($1,000 × 15% × 4). The quantity bonus jumped from 15% to 35% when a total of six submissions were accepted by *The New Yorker* in 1 year. This means that the first four stories would receive an extra 20% bonus, adding up to a total of 35%, and the fifth and sixth stories would each receive a 35% bonus. To continue with the hypothesis that each story had a base payment of $1,000, the quantity bonus for six stories would amount to a total of $2,100 ($1,000 × 35% × 6).

As mentioned earlier, the first-reading agreement did not guarantee acceptance of submissions. The quantity bonus served as a strong incentive for the

contracted writers to put rejections behind them and keep producing stories in line with *The New Yorker*'s publishing agenda. In doing so, it cemented the ties between the writers and the magazine. Mary Lavin wrote to Rachel MacKenzie, declaring that "I have – or feel I have – a *moral obligation* to *try* for the big bonus" (Lavin 1961, [n.p.]). The financial reward curiously worked in a psychological way, urging the writer to work harder to meet the requirements of the magazine's generous offer.

COLA

COLA was *The New Yorker*'s jargon for "cost-of-living adjustment," described as a "discretionary" payment ("Re 'Cola'" [n.d.]). In a letter to Lavin, Rachel MacKenzie explained that this bonus was usually around 30%. She cautioned that it was "not absolutely guaranteed," but the payments had "a wonderful way of popping up when you've forgotten all about them" (MacKenzie 1959a, [n.d.]). The surprise element of this bonus probably came from the fact that it was paid quarterly, with an additional yearly payment, which made it hard to predict the exact timing. COLA was calculated against the inflation rate in New York, which was much higher than that in smaller cities in the United States and other regions abroad. This meant that Irish writers based at home, where living expenses were lower than in New York, benefited from the calculation system. While MacKenzie put the figure at "around 30%," the actual adjustment rates often reached 40% in the 1950s and 1960s. In the first quarter of 1954, for instance, it was around 43% (Forster 1954, [n.p.]). This was higher than the six-story quantity bonus at 35%.

In a 1961 letter, Roger Angell sent two checks to Brian Friel through his agent at Curtis Brown: one, worth $560, for Friel's story "Upstairs No Downstairs" (24 August 1963), and the other for the cost-of-living adjustment for the last quarter, "which amounted to $1198,02" (Angell 1961, [n.p.]). The story in this case was a short piece, running to only four pages, including a full-page advertisement; its short length explains why the first payment was moderate. The COLA payment – more than twice the amount for the story – shows clearly how much the bonus contributed to the magazine's renowned fat fees.

In January 1964, *The New Yorker* discontinued the quarterly payment of COLA. From then on, COLA was paid "currently" according to the set percentage of 35% on top of the base payment, while the "annual Cola payments" remained in place, but the documents did not reveal the mechanism of the annual payments ("Re 'Cola'" [n.d.]). This change simplified the payment system and capped the fluctuating inflation rate. A check stub for Vladimir Nabokov's story "An Affair of Honor" (3 September 1966) shows how payments were calculated after the reform. The story received a purchase sum of $2,780. With the first-reading agreement, a 25% premium was applied to the base payment, which was an additional $695. The 35% COLA payment, paid currently instead of quarterly, added another $973. Nabokov was therefore paid $4,448 in one go

for this story (Nabokov 1965b). Although this sum did not include the quantity bonus and the yearly COLA payment, the check stub demonstrates how the base payment and bonuses could add up to a big fat fee.

While *The New Yorker* office cautioned that COLA was discretionary, by the 1950s and 1960s it had become a reliable source of income for many staff writers and contracted contributors, who would even ask for advance COLA payments. A financial document dated 1959 shows that John Cheever, a regular contributor, requested $1,000 "as an advance against Colas" (Mr Norman 1959b). The cartoonist Charles Addams (1912–1988) asked the finance office to use all his forthcoming COLA payments to pay his current debit "until that debit has been paid off" (Truax 1957, [n.p.]).

Another example is Maeve Brennan, known for her fashionable lifestyle, unscrupulous spending, and generosity to her friends. According to Brennan's biographer Angela Bourke, by the 1950s "debt was mounting" for the writer (Bourke 2004, 203), a statement corroborated by *The New Yorker*'s financial documents. The year 1954, for instance, was not a financially successful one for Brennan. In February, she asked for 200 dollars "as an advance against Cola" (Mr Norman 1954a). In July, she was again so short of money that she requested her COLA of $810.25 to be paid in cash, "instead of crediting the amount against her debit of one thousand dollars" (Mr Norman 1954b). Throughout the 1950s, similar requests for advance payments were made by Brennan. She asked for a check of "seven hundred and sixty five dollars ($765) as an advance against her colas on writings for 1958" (Mr Norman 1959a). For the last quarter of 1959, a COLA sum of $383.36 was paid to her credit ("In adjustment" 1960). Her then husband, St. Clair McKelway, was an even heavier reliant on the magazine's good faith. The same document shows that a sum of $683.83 (for his fact pieces) and another of $1,551.29 (for his fiction contributions) were paid to his credit ("In adjustment" 1960, 3).

Not only were *The New Yorker*'s checks in the mid-century fat, but they also represented the magazine's characteristic generosity to its valued contributors, who were allowed to apply for advance payments of their future bonuses. How much this helped with the writers' financial difficulties remains open to debate, but *The New Yorker* certainly had its heart in the right place. On its 25th anniversary, the magazine made a special payment to its employees. This was repeated in 1951, because, as an office note explained, "the volume of the magazine's editorial and advertising content has again been extraordinary (equal to that of last year)" ("Office note" 1951, [n.p.]). Documents like these show that the magazine was not slow to share its successes with its staff and contributors.

The analysis of the aforementioned payment system demonstrates that the first-reading agreement was a very generous deal, but having this agreement did not guarantee favorable treatment. Contracted authors were just as likely to receive rejections as anyone else. Brian Friel struggled very hard in the first year after coming on board with the agreement. Setting his sights on the bonus payments, he submitted stories in quick succession. Roger Angell had

to urge him to slow down and polish his stories before submitting them (Friel 1962, [n.p.]). Even Frank O'Connor, who enjoyed a long relationship with the magazine, was greeted by more rejections than positive responses: in 1953, for instance, the magazine turned down four of his stories and bought only one, "Vanity" (18 July 1953) (Steinman 1996, 16).

Renewals were not guaranteed either. Benedict Kiely's agreement lapsed in 1965. As Rachel MacKenzie explained to him, "This happens automatically when three years have passed without our taking a piece" (MacKenzie 1965a, [n.p.]). During that period, Kiely was working on his novel and teaching at numerous universities, which took his mind away from writing short fiction. He submitted a new story in May 1967, upon which his contract was renewed (Kiely 1967, [n.p.]). Edna O'Brien's agreement was also discontinued at one point. Milton Greenstein, the finance officer, sent an office note to Rachel MacKenzie in 1971, stating that they would not renew O'Brien's fiction contract; no specific reason was given (Greenstein 1971, [n.p.]). O'Brien would go on writing for *The New Yorker*, but no archival evidence suggests that her agreement was renewed after 1971.

Of course, not all authors found the first-reading agreement agreeable. Despite Frank O'Connor's good relationship with *The New Yorker*, his American agent Don Congdon complained that these agreements were "restrictive nuisances" (Steinman 1996, 38). Elizabeth Bowen thought of the matter in a similar way. Writing to her agent, Spencer Curtis Brown, to discontinue her agreement, Bowen opined that the contract "creates too many complicated conditions" and that she would like to focus on "the writing of books" (Bowen 1946). Similarly, Elizabeth Bishop (1911–1979) chose not to renew her agreement in 1961 because she wanted to try "some experimental poems and some other kinds of prose," which did not seem right for *The New Yorker* (Bishop 1961, [n.p.]). Like all legal contracts, the first-reading agreement not only promised security but also entailed constraints. However, one indisputable benefit that came with the agreement was that it enabled literary connections across the Atlantic, offering a means by which numerous Irish writers maintained productive ties with *The New Yorker* over decades. The friendships they established with their editors and their fellow contributors in turn changed the contours of their literary careers.

Literary Connections

Through *The New Yorker*, some Irish writers formed connections with their compatriots. Even for Irish immigrants in the United States, Ireland had a special place in their creative imagination, and their social networks also had a distinctively Irish tinge. In "The Eldest Child" (29 June 1968), one of Maeve Brennan's later stories, Delia Bagot remembers her first born, a boy who died only 3 days old. Delia does not want to forget him, but everyone around her seems to prefer that she did. To console herself, she listens to one of Thomas

Moore's famous Irish melodies: "Oft in the stilly night, | Ere slumber's chain has bound me, | Fond memory brings the light | Of other days around me . . ." (Brennan 1968, 31). Using Moore to accentuate Delia's bitter-sweet memory of her dead child, Brennan highlights a sense of a lingering past that refuses to go away. These haunting memories resonate with Brennan's own immigrant identity and testify to the imaginative pull of her home country. Despite her long residence in New York, Brennan never strayed far from Ireland. Allusions to Irish literature abound in her writings for *The New Yorker*.

Writing under her *New Yorker* alias, "the long-winded lady," Brennan describes a trip to the Eighth Street Bookshop, where she purchased "Benedict Kiely's *Poor Scholar* and a mystery story by Patricia Highsmith" for the bargain price of one dollar: "as I paid for them I wondered at the curious ways of publishers, who let the good stock go out of their warehouses as what are called 'remainders' almost as soon as they have it packed in" (Brennan 1998, 39). Conscious of these curious publishing practices, Brennan took writers she admired under her wing, helping them navigate the publishing world. She tried to help Kiely find a US publisher for his novels, sending a copy of his *The Cards of the Gambler* to Lippincott for consideration, though it was turned down (Richardson 1959, [n.p.]). She went on to enlist Rachel MacKenzie's help on Kiely's behalf (MacKenzie 1959d, [n.p.]). Through MacKenzie, Kiely thanked Brennan and sent his good wishes (Kiely 1959, [n.p.]).

Kiely, for his part, acted as an enabling force for his fellow Irish writers. He suggested that *The New Yorker* run an article on Brendan Behan (1923–1964) if his play "The Hostage" did well on Broadway (Kiely 1960, [n.p.]). In a letter to Kiely, Rachel MacKenzie wrote that she was pleased to see Peter Lennon's (1930–2011) story appear in *The New Yorker*, referring to him as Kiely's "protegé."[17] Lennon was a journalist who had written for, among other publications, *The Irish Press*, where Kiely was the editor. Lennon is perhaps better known today for his documentary *Rocky Road to Dublin* (1967). He published only one story in the magazine, but MacKenzie's letter suggests that it was Kiely who had recommended and even championed the young journalist's work. After Lennon's publication in *The New Yorker*, John McGahern recommended Lennon to Charles Monteith (1921–1995), his editor at Faber & Faber. Introducing Lennon to Monteith as the "Paris Correspondent for the Manchester *Guardian*," McGahern hastened to add that Lennon had also published in *The New Yorker* and *Atlantic Monthly* to boost his literary credentials (Shovlin 2021, 73). Other Irish writers, to a lesser extent, supported each other by praising each other's work. Brian Friel, for instance, wrote to Roger Angell: "I see you have used two Edna O'Brien stories. Have you read her two novels? I think they are *perfect*" (Friel 1963a, [n.p.]).

The New Yorker helped its Irish writers form transatlantic writerly connections, not only with their compatriots but also with an international cohort of authors. In a 1957 letter, J. D. Salinger (1919–2010) wrote to his *New Yorker* fiction editor, William Maxwell, about Mary Lavin, reporting that

the Meath-based writer had asked him "questions about American 'markets.'" Salinger wondered "if she might not be a prospective contributor" (Salinger 1957). At Salinger's suggestion, *The New Yorker* contacted Lavin with these encouraging words: "we'd be delighted to consider any fiction you'd care to send us" (Oliver 1957, [n.p.]). This initiated Lavin's long relationship with the magazine. In the editors' letters, we often see writers sending their admiring words and good wishes to their fellow contributors. Rachel MacKenzie, for instance, reported to Lavin that the Scottish writer "Muriel Spark [1918–2006] is here, and do you know what a great admirer she is of your writing? We speak of you; it is one of our bonds" (MacKenzie 1962a, [n.p.]).

Lavin, in turn, contributed to strengthening the writerly community through her literary salon, which fostered the career of her fellow *New Yorker* contributor, Elizabeth Cullinan. Born in New York in 1933, Cullinan worked at *The New Yorker* in 1955 and became William Maxwell's secretary in 1956 (Steinman 1996, 136–7). Through Maxwell, she met Frank O'Connor, to whom she sent her work to read (Steinman 1996, 187). In 1960, she moved to Dublin to "take a course at the University, and write" (MacKenzie 1960a, [n.p.]); through the introduction of MacKenzie, she met Lavin, and apparently both took to each other (MacKenzie 1960c, [n.p.]). During her stay in Dublin, she also formed a relationship with John McGahern, who described her as "a very beautiful person" (Shovlin 2021, 83). According to Frank Shovlin, the editor of McGahern's letters, it was Cullinan who "first brought McGahern's work to the attention of William Maxwell."[18] McGahern would subsequently publish seven stories in *The New Yorker* over a span of two decades. Reportedly, the young pair went to a party at Frank O'Connor's in 1963, and O'Connor apparently did not share Cullinan's fondness for McGahern. Describing the party to Maxwell, O'Connor dismissively referred to McGahern as Betty's "boy" and suggested that McGahern did not deserve the AE Memorial Award (which he had won in 1962) (Steinman 1996, 192). Recalling the same party much later in a 1999 letter, McGahern admitted that he had said something "unfair" in an interview that irked O'Connor and that he regretted it (Shovlin 2021, 719–20).

Cullinan's novel *A Change of Scene* (1982) draws inspiration from her stay in Ireland from 1960 to 1963. The lead character Ann, an Irish-American woman like the author, goes to Dublin to study at Trinity College. She is gently chided by a friend – allegedly based on Frank O'Connor – for choosing the traditionally Protestant Trinity College Dublin over the Catholic-oriented University College Dublin. Critics have also argued that Ann's friend Oona, a widowed woman, is loosely modeled on Lavin, and the romantic interest, Jim Larkin, has been seen as a fictional version of McGahern (McInerney 2008, 105–6). In the late 1980s, Cullinan also served as a carer for Maeve Brennan when she was destitute, but Brennan turned against Cullinan in the end (Bourke 2004, 268).

The New Yorker's editors were the axis around which these literary connections revolved. In a 1965 letter, William Maxwell reported to Frank O'Connor that "Mary Lavin came to our house to dinner last Thursday night. She was

enchanting" (Maxwell 1965, [n.p.]). Maxwell also wrote to O'Connor about taking care of Maeve Brennan's labrador Bluebell when she was out of town (Steinman 1996, 135). Rachel MacKenzie was another editor who fostered a sense of community among the writers. In a 1962 letter, she reported to Kiely that "Edna O'Brien's been here. She still is. We sang your praises and will again. What a lovely person she is" (MacKenzie 1962, [n.p.]). Based in London then, O'Brien had met Kiely and the Jesuit literary scholar Kevin Sullivan when she visited Ireland (O'Brien 1962, [n.p.]). Through the two *New Yorker* contributors, MacKenzie also met Sullivan when he was in New York, and she referred to O'Brien and Kiely as her "chief point[s] of contact" (MacKenzie 1962b, [n.p.]).

The New Yorker's fiction editors cultivated lasting friendships with their Irish writers. Katharine S. White is often credited with playing the most important role in the establishment of the magazine's fiction department (Yagoda 2000, 78–9; Gill 1975, 289–90). She headed the department until 1938, when she passed the baton to Gus Lobrano, whose writers included Frank O'Connor. Lobrano died of cancer in 1956, and White returned to the post briefly. O'Connor was then handed over to William Maxwell, who became lifelong friends with the Cork writer: their friendship is documented in Michael Steinman's edition of *The Happiness of Getting It Down Right: Letters of Frank O'Connor and William Maxwell 1945–1966* (1996). As Ben Yagoda has pointed out, Maxwell developed intimate editorial relationships with several contributors "who would come to think of him as a true collaborator," including Sylvia Townsend Warner (1893–1978), Eudora Welty, John Cheever, Mavis Gallant (1922–2014), John Updike (1932–2009), and Larry Woiwode (1941–2022) (Yagoda 2000, 161). Slightly later than White and Maxwell came Rachel MacKenzie, who shared her colleagues' friendliness and kindness in dealing with her writers, such as Mary Lavin, Benedict Kiely, and Edna O'Brien. Particularly close to Lavin (whom she called "darling Mary"), MacKenzie was also friendly with O'Brien, who sent her gifts like a pair of gloves as tokens of appreciation (MacKenzie 1968a, [n.p.]). Roger Angell, son of Katharine White, was more business-like.[19] Occasionally blunt in his editorial comments, he nevertheless maintained a good relationship with Brian Friel. Around the 1970s, a new cohort of fiction editors emerged, including Derek Morgan, Charles McGrath, and Frances Kiernan. The last handled the works of Edna O'Brien, John McGahern, and William Trevor in the 1970s and 1980s.

There are, of course, exceptions. Some writers never warmed to their editors. Uncontracted Irish writers, contributing on an irregular basis, did not have the opportunity to cultivate enduring editorial relationships. In addition, in the mid-twentieth century, *The New Yorker* was notorious for its heavy-handed editorial intervention, a practice that annoyed some contributors (Gill 1975, 12; Yagoda 2000, 200–201). Joyce Cary, for instance, was not an admirer of the magazine's editorial practices. In preparation for the publication of his story "Cromwell House" (3 November 1956), he told his editor

C. M. Newman: "I have accepted most of your editors' suggestions, but some strike me as a trifle academic. It is very easy to make prose stiff and anxious by too much attention to grammar rules out of the book" (Cary 1956b, [n.p.]). While it was not uncommon for writers to be piqued by overscrupulous editing, Cary seems to have been in the minority among his Irish peers in this respect. John McGahern's initial experience with the magazine was also less than ideal. He complained to Charles Monteith that his first *New Yorker* story, "Summer at Strandhill" (21 September 1963), was "much spoiled by editors" (Shovlin 2021, 93). But his relationship with *The New Yorker* took a turn for the better when Frances Kiernan became his editor. The two worked well together, and they met in *The New Yorker*'s office in April 1977.[20] When McGahern visited Kiernan's house in Tuxedo Park, he fell through a trapdoor, suffering a minor strain. He reportedly became "a big social success" because of his survival of the accident (Shovlin 2021, 514). The extant editorial letters in *The New Yorker* records suggest that most Irish writers were on good terms with their editors, with some explicitly acknowledging the benefits of the editing process.

In a heartfelt letter to Rachel MacKenzie, Mary Lavin confessed that she always consciously sent stories which she thought the magazine would not like. In this way, she had to work on them with MacKenzie, "flexing [her] muscles and getting into training." She believed that, in addition to the handsome payments, the magazine's editing process was another major gain for her development as a writer: "I feel that my whole appreaoch [*sic*] to my work has become more proffessional [*sic*]." Lavin ended this letter with hyperbolic praise: "you seem to be the most wonderful people in the world, you specially, and I will never get over the feeling that it is me who should [*sic*] be paying *The New Yorker* – but alas – with what?" (Lavin 1961, [n.p.]). For Lavin, the magazine's notorious fact-checking and "pegging" – Harold Ross's word for editing – is a kind of education to which she was immensely indebted (Yagoda 2000, 204). The editorial work carried out by MacKenzie and her fellow editors helped Lavin craft her stories consciously, improving her writing skills in the process.

MacKenzie also helped expand Lavin's professional circles in the United States. *The New Yorker* editor introduced Lavin to Dorothy de Santillana (1904–1980) at Houghton Mifflin. After their meeting, de Santillana reported back to MacKenzie that she was delighted to find "all the truest charm and freshness of the Irish" in Lavin (de Santillana 1965, [n.p.]). A few years later, when Lavin fell out with her publisher Farrar Strauss, she shifted to Houghton Mifflin, which subsequently brought out three of her collections of short stories in the United States.[21] Knowing that Lavin was constantly worried about money, MacKenzie often passed on fellowship information to her. She and William Maxwell both wrote recommendation letters for Lavin's application to the Rockefeller Foundation (MacKenzie 1974, [n.p.]). MacKenzie also supported Lavin's application for a writing fellowship at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut (MacKenzie 1968b, 1968c).

MacKenzie's helping hand extended beyond Lavin. When Benedict Kiely encountered a visa issue while applying for a fellowship with Colgate University, he asked MacKenzie for help. She replied that *The New Yorker* would be glad to support the application by "attesting to [Kiely's] being an eminent man of letters" (Kiely 1968, [n.p.]). Edna O'Brien, for her part, was not slow to express her affection for MacKenzie: "Your letter was such a pleasure to me. I too think of you and have absolute trust in our friendship" (O'Brien 1965, [n.p.]).

Like MacKenzie, William Maxwell came across as a candid editor in his letters. He and Frank O'Connor worked wonderfully well together, as their affectionate letters tell us. Although, as Steinman suggests, Maxwell was "the more faithful correspondent," it is clear that O'Connor cherished his *New Yorker* editor (Steinman 1996, ix). O'Connor's wife, Harriet, was equally witty in her letters, sometimes writing to Maxwell on her husband's behalf. On a postcard to Maxwell, she reported, with deadpan humor, that O'Connor was mortified to find a grammatical error in his writing: "This is to announce that my husband has disappeared – presumably to Ireland – though the police have been informed on the off chance his body will turn up in the Chesapeake Bay." She ended the note: "He did not wish to be remembered to you" (Steinman 1996, 47).

In a letter providing editorial suggestions on "The Mass Island" (10 January 1959), Maxwell confessed how much he missed working in person with O'Connor, who was residing in Dublin at the time:

> All this makes me [sic] I can't tell you how homesick for you, because it would be such pleasure to be sitting down at my table ironing it out with you and arriving, as we so often have, at one brilliant stroke after another that not only solves the problem but improves the story. How I detest all forms of separation.
>
> (Maxwell 1958, [n.p.])

Harriet O'Donovan Sheehy remembered the two men working together, how their voices – different in tone and register – converged, "creating a harmonious atmosphere." O'Connor, she recalled, "never failed to marvel at Bill's [Maxwell's] skill as an editor – the way changing a word here or rearranging a phrase there would make the meaning which Michael had intended clear."[22] The two men's editorial ties were bilateral. When Maxwell was writing his novel *The Château* (1961), O'Connor read the manuscript and offered his opinions (Steinman 1996, 70).

Unlike MacKenzie and Maxwell, Roger Angell could be ruthlessly blunt in his editorial letters. He wrote to Kingsley Amis's (1922–1995) agent that Amis's "All the Blood Within Me" was "a terrible disappointment": "I'm surprised that he can be as soggy as this" (Angell 1962b, [n.p.]). Similarly, turning down Julia O'Faolain's (1932–2020) "Golden Lads," Angell wrote to her

agent Emilie Jacobson: "She shows a little feeling at the beginning of this story, but matters become less interesting and more preposterous and unpleasant as she goes along. I can't imagine why she thought it all added up to a story" (Angell 1972, [n.p.]). Though these indelicate letters were addressed to the agents, Angell could be equally forthright when he wrote directly to his writers. Rejecting Brian Friel's "The Queen of Troy Close," he wrote: "I don't know whether the trouble is with the story itself or with your manner of telling it, but all of us felt a sense of irritation and confusion after reading this one" (Angell 1965, [n.p.]).

Such bluntness, however, was sometimes gratefully received, especially by younger writers in need of unembellished advice. When Friel signed the first-reading agreement with *The New Yorker* in 1960, he was barely 30 years old. The contract enabled him to quit his teaching job, but he was faced with a series of rejections in 1961 and 1962. One of the reasons, according to Angell, was that Friel appeared to be imitating Frank O'Connor. In 1958, Angell had written to Friel's agent Edith Haggard:

> I kept having the feeling that he was trying very hard to write like Frank O'Connor, and that he just didn't have enough wisdom to achieve the remarkable effects that O'Connor gets with what appear to be simple themes and simple people.
>
> (Angell 1958, [n.p.])

He reiterated this same sentiment in 1960: Friel "may be hurting himself by paralleling so closely the Frank O'Connor first-person narrative technique" (Angell 1960c, [n.p.]). Though stung by Angell's comments, Friel was receptive to the critiques. In his reply, Friel asked for more advice from Angell: "I do want to learn and you can help me. Derry is in the very northern tip of Ireland and I am cut off from the critical assessment that even Dublin could offer" (Friel 1960a, [n.p.]).

During that early period, Angell wrote that he was "a little irritated over the speed with which" Friel reworked and resubmitted his stories, suspecting that Friel was writing "entirely too fast" in a bid to earn the quantity bonus. Warning Friel that this would hurt his career because the stories were not fully developed, Angell urged him to "take the time to brood over each story, to rewrite, and to go a little deeper into complexities" (Friel 1962, [n.p.]). Friel thanked Angell for his honest advice and promised to slow down, and while he took a break from writing as recommended, he invited Angell to visit him in Derry (Friel 1962, [n.p.]). Angell's comments came at the right time for the young writer, who felt isolated from the literary world and was anxious about money. In June 1961, 1 year into their editorial relationship, Angell and Friel were already on first-name terms (Friel 1961a, [n.p.]). They met in New York while Friel was in the United States as an observer at Tyrone Guthrie's theater and apparently enjoyed each other's company. After Friel's

theater career took off, he did not submit any more stories to the magazine, and his correspondence with Angell thinned out. In 1976, their editorial relationship briefly resumed when Friel sent in two accompanying monologues to *The New Yorker*: "Faith Healer" and "Faith Healer's Wife." "Even writing to you on this basis revives an old excitement in me!" exclaimed the by-then-celebrated playwright (Friel 1976, [n.p.]). Although Friel's relationship with *The New Yorker* was comparatively short, it had a lasting impact on his literary career.

Slow Ending

As this chapter has shown, numerous Irish writers came to establish close ties with *The New Yorker* in the middle decades of the twentieth century. These transatlantic connections were enabled by the magazine's financial prowess and its willingness to offer its contributors lucrative deals. But in the 1970s, signs began to emerge that the era was drawing to a close. In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, *The New Yorker* paid well, and the editors knew it. Some of them were happy to be in a position to reward their contributors financially. Knowing that Lavin was often worried about money, Rachel MacKenzie wrote when she offered Lavin the first-reading agreement in 1959: "Isn't it just like 'Cinderella?'" (MacKenzie 1959a, [n.p.]). The writers themselves were equally laudatory of the magazine's payment. Brian Friel, thanking Angell for "the most generous payment" for his story "The Widowhood System" (5 September 1964), exclaimed: "Long live *The New Yorker*!" (Friel 1964, [n.p.]). By the end of the 1970s, however, the gold dust was blowing away, and the hyperbolic cheer took a downturn.

As Trysh Travis's account of *The New Yorker*'s print history has shown, "In 1967, the magazine lost ad revenue for the first time in nearly forty years; it continued to slip throughout the 1970s" (Travis 2000, 278). These changes in the magazine's fortunes became increasingly apparent in the editorial correspondence. The happy tone in which the editors had announced payments in the early letters started to give way to an apologetic mood. Writing to renew Lavin's agreement in 1969, MacKenzie regretted that the check "is much less than I wish it were" (MacKenzie 1969a, [n.p.]). Similarly, in a letter to Benedict Kiely's agent Emilie Jacobson to renew his contract in 1970, MacKenzie mentioned the matter in a cautious way: "I don't know how much less this payment is than the one for last year; I hope not enough to be a disappointment instead of a pleasure" (MacKenzie 1970c, [n.p.]). Around the turn of the 1970s, *The New Yorker*'s fat payments had dwindled. Lavin's contractual consideration fee in 1970 was described as "a small check" by MacKenzie, who continued to say in the same letter: "We all got that rather gloomy note with our year-end checks. Still, I thought, sounding like my mother in my ears, isn't it splendid to have *some*thing!" (MacKenzie 1970b, [n.p.]). This abrupt change of tone – from cheery to conciliatory – harbingered the end of an era for *The New Yorker*.

Changes also came over the writers' references to their checks. In the 1970s, we started to hear them complain about their rates and payments. Edna O'Brien was disappointed with her payment in 1972, writing to her agent:

> I don't know what can have happened but their payment is about one-third of what they used to pay me per word when I wrote for them six and seven years ago, and that is for sure since I have a record of their early payments and the approximate length of the stories. Can you most delicately enquire into this because as it is now I get double the amount from Cosmopolitan for stuff that I can produce with far more less [*sic*] creative strain.
> (O'Brien 1972, [n.p.])

Rachel MacKenzie replied with a list of O'Brien's past payments, which showed that her rate did in fact increase (MacKenzie 1972b, [n.p.]). As mentioned earlier, the "fattest" part of *The New Yorker*'s checks came from the bonuses. O'Brien's first-reading agreement had terminated in 1971, which was probably why she felt the payments were significantly less, despite the fact that her rate had increased. Nevertheless, it was true that without the bonuses, *The New Yorker*'s base purchase rate did not quite match their competitors'. O'Brien's letter tactfully brought up *Cosmopolitan*, which paid her decent money for less intellectually strenuous work. *Cosmopolitan* had been one of the magazines that *The New Yorker* competed with to win the favor of Dorothy Parker back in 1944, as mentioned earlier. O'Brien's letter must have struck a nerve in *The New Yorker*'s office, reminding them that the bidding war was not over. In the 1970s, their competitor had the upper hand.

While it would have been unthinkable in the 1950s and 1960s to hear a contracted writer complain about *The New Yorker*'s payments, in the 1970s Edna O'Brien was not alone in feeling disappointed with her thinning checks. Long-term *New Yorker* contributor Vladimir Nabokov grumbled in a similar way in 1976. When he was made an offer to renew his first-reading agreement, Nabokov replied through his wife that he would only sign the contract on the condition that the magazine increased his rate. Additionally, he required that the agreement be annulled automatically if *The New Yorker* turned down his submissions three times in a row. Although he was persuaded to stay on board, Nabokov expressed his frustration that he "had begun to feel not quite 'wanted' because of the many rejections" (Nabokov 1976, [n.p.]). He was trying to negotiate the terms because he felt that the rejections had deprived him of the bonuses that came with the agreement. Nabokov's complaints reveal another dimension of *The New Yorker*'s changing fortunes in the 1970s: as the space for fiction in the magazine diminished, the rejection rates climbed up.

In the 1950s and 1960s, *The New Yorker*'s rejection letters usually bore one of the following three reasons (or variations on the same): the story was "not right for *The New Yorker*,"[23] the editors voted against it,[24] or simply, the

story did not come through (MacKenzie 1960b, [n.p.]). These were diplomatic expressions – both impersonal and innocuous. But in the 1970s, a more specific reason for rejections emerged, concerning length and the space available for fiction in the magazine. Rejecting a story by Benedict Kiely in 1970, MacKenzie wrote to his agent Emilie Jacobson: "You do know that we aren't buying much these days, don't you?" She hastily added: "Not economy but over-suply [*sic*]" (MacKenzie 1970c, [n.p.]). MacKenzie was downplaying the economic factor, but oversupply was another serious issue that drove up the rejection rates, causing Nabokov to express his frustration and leading to O'Brien's implication that the magazine was demanding too much for too little.

The New Yorker had bought a substantial number of stories in the previous decades, creating a huge backlog that they needed to digest carefully in the 1970s. The congestion was not confined to the fiction department. In 1971, Kiely proposed to write a nonfiction piece on "A Gaelic Christmas." MacKenzie explained why this was turned down: "I understand that Fact pieces are in as great a state of oversupply as are stories. Pretty great, that is" (MacKenzie 1971, [n.p.]). The backlog appears to have been even greater in the poetry department. Seamus Heaney, while lecturing at Berkeley in 1970, sent four poems to *The New Yorker*. Poetry editor Howard Moss replied that he was delighted to see Heaney's submissions, but "because of an enormous backlog" they could take only one poem, "Home" (Heaney 1970a, [n.p.]). The next year, Heaney submitted more poems. Moss accepted one and rejected seven. He repeated the same reason: "our backlog is huge and we're not taking as many poems as we'd like to" (Heaney 1970b, [n.p.]). In fact, the poetry bank was so overstocked that when Moss went on sabbatical, *The New Yorker* ceased to accept new poetry submissions for a whole year, from August 1972 to September 1973.[25] During this period, new poems were returned to the authors unread. The secretary Mary Phelps explained in a letter why Edna O'Brien's poetry submissions were rejected: "Howard Moss is away for a long-wanted sabbatical; and since our bank of accepted poetry will suffice, it seems foolish to read without possibility of buying" (Phelps 1972, [n.p]).

If oversupply in the 1970s was a main reason for the increase in rejections, economy was certainly another contributing factor to the end of fiction's heyday in *The New Yorker*. Sending galley proofs of "Tom" (20 January 1973), which would turn out to be Lavin's penultimate story in the magazine, MacKenzie complained that "We aren't permitted the intermediate 'Working Proof' that we used to have (economy), and I miss it" (MacKenzie 1972, [n.p.]). Her unabashed admission in parentheses speaks volumes. While trying to economize by reducing the number of proofs may not seem to be a radical change, the real impact of the magazine's diminishing financial power came to the fore in its reevaluation of the place of fiction in its pages.

Other fiction editors at *The New Yorker* were more explicit in their rejection letters about the dwindling space for fiction. Roger Angell, returning a manuscript to Marc Connelly (1890–1980) in 1973, explained to the prolific contributor:

> In the past, we would have taken this instantly and with gratitude. Now, because of enormous demands on our space and because of our sense of responsibility to so many current issues and goings-on, we must risk offending old friends by sending back submissions like this.
>
> (Angell 1973, [n.p.])

Angell's carefully worded explanation reveals that *The New Yorker* was giving more space to journalistic reports on current affairs. Another fiction editor, Charles McGrath, suggested that this change in editorial directions had detrimental effects on the fiction department. In a rejection letter to Benedict Kiely in 1976, McGrath wrote that Kiely's "Proxopera" was "a very fine and moving story" but that its length made it unacceptable: "As the magazine's factual pieces get longer and longer, the space Mr. Shawn allots to fiction gets smaller and smaller" (McGrath 1976, [n.p.]).

The editor-in-chief William Shawn's (1907–1992) decision to allocate more space to factual pieces was by no means peculiar. In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, the magazine market dwindled, as the TV industry attracted a larger and larger share of the advertising revenues. As more and more readers turned to TV, one way for magazines to retain their attention was to increase space for reports on topical events and fashionable issues. Fiction, in this regard, had to surrender some space to journalism. General-interest magazines as a whole did not publish as much fiction in the 1970s as they had done in the previous decades. *Esquire*, for example, also "dial[ed] back on its publication on fiction" in the 1970s and 1980s (Congdon 2018, 5). In the 1980s, the number of fiction pieces in an issue of *The New Yorker* dropped to two, with some exceptions. One work of fiction per issue became standard in the 1990s and has remained so to this day.

The sense that the 1970s sounded the death knell for an era was intensified by personnel changes in *The New Yorker*'s fiction department. The old guards were retiring. Heavy workload and health issues compelled Rachel MacKenzie to give some of her writers to younger editors. In November 1972, she wrote to Emilie Jacobson, announcing that Derek Morgan (who had worked for *The Reporter*) would take over as corresponding editor for Benedict Kiely (MacKenzie 1972d, [n.p.]). In 1974, MacKenzie told Mary Lavin that she would take a year off in 1975 to write her novel (MacKenzie 1974, [n.p.]). During MacKenzie's absence, Morgan took over Lavin as well. Later in 1977, Charles McGrath became the main corresponding editor for Lavin. In 1975, while MacKenzie was on leave, Robert Henderson handled Edna O'Brien's works briefly before handing her on to Frances Kiernan (Henderson 1975, [n.p.]). In 1976, due to changes in *The New Yorker*'s retirement policies, William Maxwell and Robert Henderson, both of whom had been working for the magazine since the 1930s, bowed out of the editorial office.[26]

In the 1950s, *The New Yorker*'s Irish writers contributed a total of 74 pieces of fiction. In the 1960s, they published 78 pieces. The number dropped to 49 in the 1970s. Some of the Irish writers, such as Edna O'Brien, John McGahern,

and William Trevor, continued to publish in *The New Yorker* in the 1980s, but the strong Irish presence in the magazine waned as the golden era of *New Yorker* fiction faded into the distance.

This chapter has presented a survey of the Irish writers publishing in *The New Yorker* from 1940 to 1980. I have elucidated the contractual arrangements and payments that enabled and sustained their transatlantic literary connections. As I have shown, the Irish writers successfully carved out a vital place in the metropolitan weekly in the mid-century. What kinds of stories did they publish in *The New Yorker*? How did they reimagine Ireland for the magazine's primary US readership? The next chapter will offer fresh readings of the Irish stories by placing them within the publishing contexts of *The New Yorker* and, more specifically, its middlebrow brand of sophistication.

Notes

1 I am grateful to Sinéad Moynihan for sharing this archival finding.
2 Cullinan's editor, William Maxwell, sent her a proof copy of the story to read before publication. See Maxwell 1968.
3 For a comprehensive survey in digital data form, see Wu 2023.
4 Frank Shovlin identifies the story as Benedict Kiely's "The Wild Boy," which was published in *The New Yorker* on 30 January 1960. See Shovlin 2021, 23.
5 See, for instance, Kiernan 1998, 82.
6 I used two websites to calculate the sum. They generated similar results: https://fxtop.com/ and www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm. [accessed 10 October 2024]
7 Ben Yagoda credits the implementation of the first-reading agreement to Gus Lobrano, who took over the fiction department from Katharine White in 1938 and ran it until his death in 1956. But Yagoda does not point out specific dates. See Yagoda 2000, 161. For his brief account of the terms and conditions of the agreement, see 218. Brendan Gill, in his memoir, mentions in passing that the first-reading agreement came about "in the early post-war years" (1975, 275).
8 Michael Steinman, editor of O'Connor's letters to William Maxwell, suggests that the Cork writer held the agreement from 1945 till 1964 (1996, 16), but the extant documents in *The New Yorker* records show that he obtained the agreement in 1946, which was renewed annually until his passing in 1966. See the contractual documents in O'Connor, [n.d.].
9 As Rachel MacKenzie renewed Kiely's first-reading agreement in 1959, it can be posited that Kiely held the contract in 1958, if not earlier. See MacKenzie 1959c.
10 William Maxwell sent the agreement to Cullinan in 1963, but it is unclear whether this was a renewal. See Maxwell 1963, [n.p.].
11 See Deitch 1980, [n.p.]. Trevor's first *New Yorker* story appeared in 1977. It is unclear from this letter whether this was his first time signing the agreement.

12 For instance, Katharine White added James Plunkett and Benedict Kiely to the potential list in 1957. While Kiely became a *New Yorker* regular, Plunkett did not publish in the magazine. See White 1957, [n.p.].
13 For John Cheever's contract, see Maxwell 1956, [n.p.]. For Vladimir Nabokov's, see Maxwell 1961, [n.p.]. For Sylvia Plath's, see Moss 1961, [n.p.]. For Roald Dahl's, see Angell 1962c, [n.p.]. For V. S. Pritchett's, see Pritchett 1964. For Shirley Jackson's, see Truax 1947, [n.p.].
14 See, for instance, Robert M. Coates's contract in Coates 1966, [n.p.].
15 For a discussion of Friel's brief stint in journalism, see Boltwood 2014.
16 *The New Yorker*, 1 August 1959. This issue has 68 pages. The average length exceeds 100 pages.
17 See MacKenzie 1961. Lennon's story "Adult Company" appeared in *The New Yorker*, 12 May 1962.
18 See the editor's note number 57, Shovlin 2021, 75.
19 Roger Angell is Katharine S. White's son from her first marriage. She later married E. B. White, a fellow staff writer at *The New Yorker*.
20 See the editor's note number 15, Shovlin 2021, 432.
21 *Happiness and Other Stories* (1970), *Collected Stories* (1971), and *A Memory and Other Stories* (1973). See Kosok 1979, 292. See also Lavin 1969.
22 Frank O'Connor's real name was Michael O'Donovan. His family and close friends called him Michael. See Harriet O'Donovan Sheehy's essay in Steinman 1996, 257–8.
23 See, for instance, Robert Hemenway's letter to Candida Donaldio, rejecting a story by Thomas Pynchon (Hemenway 1960, [n.p.]), and Hemenway's letter to Elizabeth Otis, rejecting three stories by Doris Lessing (Hemenway 1962, [n.p.]).
24 See, for instance, Angell's letter to Edith Haggard, rejecting Brian Friel's "My Famous Grandfather" (Angell 1960b, [n.p.]), and C. M. Newman's letter to Elizabeth Otis, rejecting two stories by Doris Lessing (Newman 1960, [n.p.]).
25 Edna O'Brien's American agent Mara Joel sent her poems to *The New Yorker* in August 1972. The poems were returned unread, with a letter explaining that the poetry department would be closed for a year until September 1973. See MacKenzie 1972a, [n.p.].
26 See Steinman 1996, 229 and Yagoda 2000, 389. The three chief fiction editors who replaced Robert Henderson and William Maxwell after their retirement in 1976 were Frances Kiernan, Daniel Menaker, and Charles (Chip) McGrath. See Kiernan 1998, 88–9l.

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