

Claire Connolly (Cork)

Title: “Improving Ireland: Maria Edgeworth to Sally Rooney”

Abstract:

Recent accounts of Ireland’s social transformation have tended to connect progressive legislation in the areas of sexuality and reproductive rights to the flourishing of fiction by Irish women in the new millennium. In this lecture I consider the part played by Sally Rooney’s novels in this wider cultural reckoning and develop a longer history of the relationship between women’s fiction and ideas of improvement. Early nineteenth-century novels by Maria Edgeworth inscribe ideas of improvement in a colonial register, imagining women’s lives playing out against a recalcitrant landscape slow to give up its future. Unstable dramas of power and identity ensue along with narratives that, as with Rooney, carry the weight of ideas and debate in ways that some readers find unlikable. By tracking these connections between sexuality, modernity, power and narrative, the lecture makes a case for the value of a longer and more capacious literary history of our changing cultural present.