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The Irish Schoolboy Novel

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Some men never recover from education.

OLIVER ST. JOHN GOGARTY¹

IN HIS 1965 AUTOBIOGRAPHY, *Vive Moi!* Seán O'Faoláin recalled a Sunday morning ritual from his childhood in Cork City. His father, a member of the local Royal Irish Constabulary, would lead Seán and his brothers to Wellington Barracks, where they would join the loyal citizens of Edwardian Cork in saluting the church parade of the local British Army regiment. O'Faoláin remembered a connection he once had made, listening faithfully to "God Save the King" at his father's knee:

When the drums rolled and the brass shook the air I could hear the sabre clash, the hoofbeats, the rifle fire of all the adventure books I had read—Mainly Henty's: *The Dash for Khartoum*, *With Kitchener in the Soudan*, *One of the Twenty-eighth*, *Under Drake's Flag*.²

*This research was funded by the National University of Ireland (NUI Traveling Studentship 2007).

1. Oliver St. John Gogarty, *It Isn't This Time of Year at All: An Unpremeditated Autobiography* (New York: Country Life Press, 1954), 83.

2. Seán O'Faoláin, *Vive Moi! An Autobiography* (London: Rupert Hart Davis, 1965), 30.

O’Faoláin was not alone among Irish writers in his exposure to G.A. Henty’s many empire adventure stories.³ Generations of Irish boys and girls had by then sat enthralled, reading of the exploits of well-mannered wanderers fresh from public schools, as they colonize and civilize out among the farthest reaches of the British Empire. These adventure stories were the lineal descendants of the “schoolboy novel,” a genre that owes its existence to the phenomenal popularity of an 1857 novel by Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, based on life at the famous English public school in Rugby. The passing of progressive legislation in the 1870s, the Forster Education Act of 1870 in Britain, and the Intermediate Education Act of 1878 in Ireland helped create over one million new places in schools across Britain and Ireland.⁴ An increasingly literate youth audience, in turn, was targeted by cheap periodicals, such as *The Boy’s Own Paper* (1879–1967). By the close of the nineteenth century, this genre was firmly established and its formula had altered to reflect the expansionist rhetoric of British society, allowing offshoots based on young adulthood and imperial adventure, such as those contained in the Henty novels of Seán O’Faoláin’s youth. For Irish nationalists of the revival period, such as Padraic Pearse and Douglas Hyde, the consumption of these distilled tales of imperial power by Irish youths was at best corrupting and at worst invidious and anti-Irish.

Ireland has its own set of much neglected schoolboy novels. Aside from James Joyce’s seminal work, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), few have received any critical attention, due in many cases to small print runs. This article is an attempt to rescue the Irish schoolboy novel from its relative obscurity. Although the quality of some of the novels may well be debatable, they nevertheless provide us with a rare and valuable glimpse at the reality of school life for Irish boys in the nineteenth century. The Irish form of this popular genre experienced three main phases from its birth in 1895 to its decline (along with that of the English schoolboy novel) in the 1930s. The earliest of the schoolboy novels, written while Ireland

3. George Alfred Henty (1832–1902) was a prolific writer of juvenile fiction, often historical and always pro-Empire.

4. Don Randall, *Kipling’s Imperial Boy: Adolescence and Cultural Hybridity* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 53.

was united with Britain, all reveal a distinct British cultural influence, the infamous “West Briton” tendency.⁵ In contrast, those written in the first decade of the Irish Free State mark the emergence of Cúchulainn as an important icon of heroic boyhood that provided an apparently ultra-Irish alternative to Tom Brown and his public school politesse. Finally, toward the end of what is considered the heyday of the schoolboy novel, a more critical and radical form emerged in the 1930s, hugely influenced by Joyce’s *A Portrait* and best understood in relation to the *Bildungsroman* tradition in Ireland. All schoolboy novels are essentially novels of youth, of childhood, and of personal growth—providing authors with something of an ideological clean slate on which to forge a new national identity. As the Irish novels were published in a period often referred to as the “birth” of modern Ireland, it is possible to see them as a forgotten record of that problematic infancy, the childhood of Ireland.

“BILDUNG”

The importance of the popularized school story to the imperial project in Great Britain has been the subject of extensive inquiry.⁶ Despite its widespread popularity amongst boys of all classes, the genre was an inherently elite one in both subject matter and tone. From the 1860s onward, the Victorian discovery of adolescence produced a wealth of literature for the juvenile market, segregated by sex.⁷ The original schoolboy novels concentrate on a very particular type of elite education, that of the English public school. As with Henty’s heroes, the boys portrayed in popular periodicals, such as Jack Harkaway of *The Boys of England* (1866–99), padded along a well-worn path dictated by English social expectations. They typi-

5. “West Briton,” “Castle Catholic,” and “Shoneen” were all contemporary and derogatory terms used to denote those Catholics in Ireland who were seen to be pro-Union and pro-Empire.

6. For an overview, see Jacqueline S. Bratton, *The Impact of Victorian Children’s Fiction* (London: Croom Helm, 1981); Kelly Boyd, *Manliness and the Boys’ Story Paper in Britain: A Cultural History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003).

7. Patrick A. Dunae, “New Grub Street for Boys,” in *Imperialism and Juvenile Literature*, ed. Jeffrey Richards (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 13–14.

cally attended an established public school such as Eton or Winchester, studied at either Oxford or Cambridge, and often followed this with a career in the military or perhaps empire administration. These school stories therefore reflected not only the imperial ambitions of the society that adored them so but also the central position of education to the success of the Empire. To a certain extent, then, it is possible to align the goals of the English schoolboy novels to those of the English Bildungsroman—where the concept of Bildung, or personal development, became tied to “pragmatic discourses of social recruitment and social mobility,” which in turn led to a triumph of social responsibility over personal Bildung—something that is notably absent from the Irish Bildungsroman.⁸ This can be explained without much difficulty: the classic route to success in the British Empire was navigated through distinctly Protestant institutions, such as Eton, or Oxford, and Cambridge. For Catholic boys—and the majority of those Irish boys reading *The Boys of England* were Catholic—the path was less clear. Arguably, for an Irish Catholic to excel in either Ireland or Britain under the Act of Union, a certain amount of colonial mimicry was required. Such mimicry, or mimesis, is a common trait in a colonized society, and there is ample evidence of it in both the schoolboy novels and the educational institutions upon which those novels were based.⁹

The Irish schoolboy novels follow a similar plot outline to their English precursors, while incorporating the fundamental elements of “Bildung,” defined by Buckley as being *inter alia* “childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for love and a working philosophy.”¹⁰ The main difference between the Irish and English schoolboy story is that adherence to social convention more or less guarantees upward social mobility for the boy hero in the English novels, whereas the same adherence in the Irish novels results in frustrated ambition and internal struggle. A successful Bildung in

8. Gregory Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 30.

9. See Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 121–45.

10. Jerome H. Buckley, *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 18.

Ireland therefore necessitated either the overthrow of those same social norms that facilitated Bildung in England or a determination to assimilate them, to become *more English*. The motivation behind the emergence of the Irish schoolboy novel in the 1890s was therefore one of equality of opportunity for Irish boys, and in particular, Irish Catholic boys. For precisely this reason, all but two of the novels discussed in this study describe a Catholic elite education. In 1909, J.S. Sheehy, a priest at the prestigious Castleknock College in Dublin, highlighted the pressing need for an Irish rival to the English boy hero in an article entitled “The Need of an Irish ‘Boys’ Paper.” His concern at the anglicizing effect of popular boy’s novels and periodicals was explicit:

These books are excellent for *English* boys, whether they are Catholic or Protestant. They show forth types of healthy-minded, brave, truthful, open-air boys. But they are essentially English. Thus unconsciously, Irish boys, during their plastic years, are being West-Britonized. Their heroes are English warriors of the past, or English public school boys of today, or English adventurers and detectives. . . . I am anxious to get the Irish boy to look at home for his models, to see in Irish boys, like himself, examples of bravery, truth, “playing the game,” culture, self-respect, also fun and diversion, as well as among English boys.¹¹

Sheehy correctly identified a gap in the juvenile market. There were no idealized versions of the boy hero for Irish boys to look up to. Could there be an Irish boy hero to rival Tom Brown and Jack Harkaway?

Recent work by Elaine Sisson on the revolutionary leader Padraic Pearse and his experimental Irish-Ireland school at Saint Enda’s has done much to expose the importance of the boy hero to the cultural nationalism of the period. The figure most often singled out by Pearse and his contemporaries as emblematic of a young Gaelic role model was that of the mythical Cúchulainn, rehabilitated by Gaelic revival writers in the 1880s. In Irish folklore, Cúchulainn was a boy warrior (originally named Setanta) whose abilities in sport and the use of weaponry were unparalleled. Along with Fionn MacCumhaill,

11. J.S. Sheehy, “The Need of an Irish ‘Boys’ Paper,” *The College Chronicle, Castleknock* 2, no. 24 (June 1909): 32. Italics are the author’s.

Cúchulainn provided one of the central iconic figures in the Irish nationalist creation of “idealized memories of a *golden age* . . . of virtue, heroism, beauty, learning, holiness, power and wealth.”¹² Pearse took this devotion to Cúchulainn further than most, organizing a pageant dedicated to the story of Setanta-Cúchulainn in 1908 (Pearse’s first academic year at Saint Enda’s) and deliberately invoking the motto of the boy hero at his school—“I care not though I were to live but one day and one night if only my name and deeds live after me.”¹³ Cúchulainn, with his sporting prowess, fearlessness, and purity, provided Irish authors with a hero who could rival a Tom Brown or Jack Harkaway in the battle to capture boys’ imaginations. Of course, the considerable similarities between these boy heroes points to the prevalence of Victorian expectations of “manliness” and conforms to what Declan Kiberd has rightly identified as a mirror effect in Irish nationalism, where “any valued cultural possessions of the English were shown to have their Gaelic equivalents.”¹⁴ Such colonial mimicry was not confined to the boy hero image in literature. It can be traced throughout Irish elite culture in the late nineteenth century and is nowhere as prevalent as in the sphere of education.

What then of the educational experience that inspired the Irish schoolboy novel? The Irish genre is an overwhelmingly Catholic and elite one. It is also strikingly southern. All but one of the novels is based on boarding schools for boys, and only two of them on Protestant schools. The majority of the novels arose from personal experience of one of the four most prominent Catholic colleges of the period—Clongowes Wood; Saint Stanislaus, Tullabeg; Blackrock College; and Castleknock College. Many of Ireland’s most prominent twentieth-century public figures received their education at these schools. Literary giants such as James Joyce, Oliver St. John

12. Anthony D. Smith, LSE Centennial Lecture: “The Resurgence of Nationalism? Myth and Memory in the Renewal of Nations,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 47, no. 4 (Dec., 1996): 583.

13. Elaine Sisson, *Pearse’s Patriots: St. Enda’s and the Cult of Boyhood* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2004), 79. Such ideas were, of course, prevalent across Europe, with a “cult of boyhood” evident particularly in the work of Wagner. Irish boys, however, were much more likely to be reading the popular English versions in magazines such as *The Magnet* or *The Gem*.

14. Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of a Modern Nation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), 151.

Gogarty, and Brian O’Nolan stand alongside era-defining statesmen such as John Redmond and Éamon de Valera in the lists of their past pupils. The colleges drew sharp criticism from leading nationalists toward the turn of the century for delivering an educational product that differed only slightly from that of English public schools.¹⁵ D.P. Moran openly attacked the schools in the press for providing a “sound English education,” believing the adoption of English public school signifiers such as cricket and rugby, Eton suits, Old-Boy Unions, and “school songs” to be a menace to Irish manhood:

A “sound English education” is one of the graves of Irish initiative and prosperity. What do the people of Ireland want with a curriculum suitable to the needs of England . . . ? The effect is the very opposite to the aim of true education, for it tends to turn out imitators, shallow despisers of their own nationality, simperers, prigs and bounders instead of men and Irishmen.¹⁶

Moran was, of course, being somewhat disingenuous. If upper- and middle-class Catholic families were to jockey for position in a United Kingdom dominated by Protestant management, the socialization of their sons into a homogenous, recognizably superior group was bound to be of the utmost importance to them. To retain a Catholic emphasis may well have been the top priority at such schools. Beyond that, the benefits to be had from imitation of English public schools were clear, and the schools that opted for this imitation were by far the most influential and successful in Ireland. Such cynical replication of fashionable English public schools is applauded in several of the early Irish schoolboy novels and disparaged in several of the later ones. Significantly, it is an acknowledged presence in all of them.

15. See Senia Pasetta, *Before the Revolution: Nationalism, Social Change and Ireland’s Catholic Elite, 1879–1922* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999), especially 36–44.

16. *The Leader*, 1 September 1900, 7.

CONFUSED? WRITING IRELAND THROUGH ENGLAND

The relatively late appearance of the first Irish schoolboy novels in 1895 can perhaps be explained in relation to the development of an Irish literature during the Gaelic revival period. The emergence of mythical figures such as Cúchulainn and Fionn MacCumhail in the work of revivalists such as Standish O'Grady may have provided rival boy heroes but hardly ones that could be easily inserted into a boarding school context. Instead, Cúchulainn would inspire later schoolboy novels written by men who were exposed to such revival mythology in their formative years. Early treatments of Irish schoolboy life include Percy FitzGerald's *Schooldays at Saxonhurst* (1867) and William O'Brien's *When We Were Boys* (1890), though neither could be considered to be a schoolboy novel in its own right.¹⁷ The first novels to draw entirely upon a school experience in Ireland appeared in 1895 and were the work of two novices, Canon P.A. Sheehan and William Patrick Kelly. Sheehan later became one of Ireland's most consistently popular novelists in the first quarter of the twentieth century, his priest-centered novels striking a chord in Catholic Ireland.¹⁸ His first novel, however, was far from a success, with one reviewer dismissing it as "really a 'novel with a purpose,' [that] has none of the atmosphere of a boy's story about it."¹⁹ The book was loosely based on Gayfield College ("Mayfield" in the novel), a short-lived cramming school in Dublin. Parts of the novel seem anti-British in tone, but this has much to do with Sheehan's belief that Anglicization was an "instrument of modernization."²⁰ The two main characters in the novel, Geoffrey and his friend Charlie Travers, wrestle with the idea of religious vocation throughout. Geoffrey's vocation is confirmed in a sequel, *The Triumph of Failure*

17. It is interesting, in light of Joyce's Bildungsroman, that O'Brien's book *When We Were Boys* should be one of the volumes to appear on the bookshelf at Leopold Bloom's residence in *Ulysses*.

18. Catherine Candy, *Priestly Fictions: Popular Novelists of the Early 20th Century* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1995), 132.

19. J.S. Sheehy, "Fiction and the Irish Boy," *The Leader*, 10 March 1923, 105. The implication is that the "purpose" of Sheehan's novel is to encourage young Irish boys to enter the priesthood. My thanks to Riona Nic Congáil for this reference.

20. James H. Murphy, *Catholic Fiction and Social Reality, 1873-1922* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997), 120.

(1899), but Charlie finds voice here. Through him, Sheehan articulates a damning verdict on Irish society:

If ever the day should come that I, lifting up my voice, could wean my young fellow countrymen from their West-British ambition and desires, their Civil Services, and snug Governmental sinecures, and concentrate all their energies in building up a great Catholic nation—Irish in its traditions, Irish in its sympathies . . . then I think I could sing my *Nunc dimittis* with resignation, ay, even with pleasure.²¹

In Sheehan's version of Irish childhood, the dangers of Anglicization, modernity, and greed all combine to threaten Irish purity and morality, something he considers innate and "racy of the soil." For Sheehan, as for Pearse, the greatest dangers to the Irish boy are British cultural influence and the imitation of British cultural norms—from these they ought to be weaned.

The book that exceeds all others in West British imitation is *Schoolboys Three* (1895), inspired by an education at Clongowes Wood in the early 1860s. The most striking curiosity in *Schoolboys Three* is that of location. Strangely, the author has located an autobiographical account of his education at "Castle Browne" (Clongowes) in the north of England rather than in Ireland.²² The novel opens at Merton Hall, the childhood home of Charley Wynn, on the border between England and Wales. Our first exposure to an Irish character comes early in the narrative in the form of a maid, Nurse Ellen. Her dialogue is the first break from the reserved opening descriptions and sharply introduces an Irish other:

"Arrah! What a gomm ya're," she said to the housemaid, who had been complaining of the extra labour; "bekaise ye've had a little work to do for wanst in your life, ye have a nose on ye that wan could hang his hat on. Musha!"²³

21. Canon P.A. Sheehan, *Geoffrey Austin, Student* (Dublin: M.H. Gill, 1895), 154. *Nunc Dimittis* is the prayer recited by Simeon at the presentation of Jesus at the temple (Luke 2:29–31).

22. The author (living in Harrogate at the time) may have been conscious of the greater profit to be derived from the much larger English schoolboy market. In any case, the authorities at Clongowes Wood were not offended—the school magazine gave the novel a glorious review on publication.

23. William Patrick Kelly, *Schoolboys Three: A Story* (London: Downey & Co., 1895), 7.

The novel also features another stage-Irish character, Jack Kilgannon, one of Charley's closest friends at Castle Browne. Jack is the novel's most vibrant character: he drinks, smokes, swears, and provides the most memorable dialogue. Thrown from his horse mid-chase at a local hunt, Jack emerges from the drain, dusts himself down, and declares, "I feel as right as a trivet, bedad; and if I could only take it out of that brute . . . I'd be as happy as a Tipperary boy at a faction fight."²⁴ Jack's accent and phrasing is far from uniform, however, and entirely contingent upon situation. When the occasion demands it, Jack uses distinct English public school expressions. When a teacher is sympathetic to his cause, Jack resorts to a stock phrase in this genre, exclaiming that the teacher in question is a "regular brick." This suggests that Jack could suppress the comical regional dialect without difficulty and that he could imitate his classmates with relative ease. In contrast, Charley's assimilation into Castle Browne was somewhat problematic, despite the author making his protagonist at least nominally English.

Charley's father is a widowed landowner, a local judge, and one of very few Catholics in the locality. Charley's only sibling is a younger sister, Mary. Before leaving Charley in the care of the Jesuits at Castle Browne, his father warns him of the need to act in a gentlemanly manner, appealing to his Christian conscience in the moral dilemmas that he will face at school. Here, Kelly echoes a very famous scene in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, when Tom's father articulates his wish that Tom will turn out "a brave, truth-telling Englishman, and a gentleman, and a Christian."²⁵ Charley's initial encounter with his schoolmates is traumatic. His code of honor, so important in novels of this type, is called into question early, as is his social status:

"What's your name?" asked one of them then, a small boy with a sharp face.

"Wynn," I answered.

"Oh!" he ejaculated "*Mr. Wynn*, I suppose?" he further inquired.

"No," said I, "Charles Wynn."

24. Kelly, *Schoolboys Three*, 138.

25. Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (London: Juvenile Productions, 1954), 78.

“Oh!” he said again “Charles Wynn; only that! Why we’re all misters here,” he went on; “and ’tis pleasant to know that *you* are only a Charley . . .”

Here the others began to laugh, and I began to get angry.

Class identification is a feature in any schoolyard, but it is Charley’s contested identity that adds spice to this scene. In 1905, the author provided a key to the novel for his old school magazine, *The Clongowman*, and we can be quite sure that Charley’s character is autobiographical and that Mary’s is based on the author’s sister.²⁶ When Charley’s tormentors move into the realm of sexual innuendo, the scene becomes all the more significant:

“Have you any sisters?” asked, with an appearance of great interest, another boy, who had a puffed-out, unwholesome-looking face.

“Yes,” I answered, “I have one;” and my angry feelings died out, as I thought of my dear Mary who was so far away, and amongst strangers as I was myself.

“What’s her name?” . . .

“What’s that to you?” I said indignantly “you don’t know her.”

“No?” he replied, with an affected look of surprise.

“I think I saw her at Margate last summer, just at the corner, you know, where she was eating oysters out of the shells, the big fat ones, you know, at eightpence a dozen. I’m sure twas’ her,” he continued; “What’s her name, and I’ll know for certain . . . send her my love when you write home next.” And here he laughed, apparently at his own wit; and the others laughed also.²⁷

This scene preempts a much more famous schooldays scene, also based on school life at Clongowes, in Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In *A Portrait*, Stephen Dedalus is asked whether or not his father is a magistrate; later, he is quizzed as to whether he kisses his mother goodnight.²⁸ At first, he denies that he does, and then admits to it, only to be ridiculed each time. Tracy Teets Schwarze has argued that Stephen’s inability to give the right answer

26. *The Clongowman*, June 1905 (issue no. 1, vol. 4), 63.

27. Kelly, *Schoolboys Three*, 23. Italics are the author’s.

28. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Dover, 1994; originally published 1916), 6.

is a mimetic failure.²⁹ Charley, in *Schoolboys Three*, suffers a similar ritual humiliation. In reflecting at that moment on his sister Mary who was, as Charley says, “amongst strangers as I was,” the modern reader is tempted to interpret the scene as a colonial reenactment. Mary, in effect, embodies Hibernia, the feminized image of Ireland. Her integrity is questioned by English scoundrels with “unwholesome faces” and is protected by a young, virtuous Irishman, who is both outnumbered and outgunned. Kelly’s schoolboy novel can hardly be deemed successful in its attempt to portray either an Irish or an English school. Nonetheless, it was at least a material success and was reprinted three times, twice in Ireland. His subsequent novels, somewhat appropriately, were written in the empire adventure mold.

Other than *A Portrait*, only two novels based upon school life in Ireland appeared before 1920: Helen Elrington’s *Schoolboy Outlaws* (1904) and Shan Bullock’s *The Cubs* (1906). Both are based on small Protestant schools and are for the most part unremarkable and written in the classic British tradition. Mathias McDonnell Bodkin’s *When Youth Meets Youth* (1920) is based on school life at Raglan College (Tullabeg) in the 1870s and has much in common with *Schoolboys Three*.³⁰ His study of an Irish childhood is a simple one, and a contemporary reviewer praised it for its “quiet beauty.”³¹ Of all the Irish schools in the 1870s, Tullabeg had perhaps most deliberately modeled itself on the fashionable English public schools. The rector prioritized cricket and boating, having first copied word-for-word the rules of Eton College.³² Such overt simulation was common to many middle-class schools across the United Kingdom in the late nineteenth century. The explosion of organized sport coincided with the publication of the findings of the Clarendon Report on the English public schools in the 1860s. Clarendon revealed much in the way of trade secrets to the general

29. Tracey Teets Schwarze, “Silencing Stephen: Colonial Pathologies in Victorian Dublin,” in *Twentieth Century Literature* 43, no. 3 (Autumn, 1997): 243–63.

30. Bodkin’s novel proved unpopular with Irish boys, however, and the Talbot Press lost a significant sum of money as a result. W.E. Lyons to Aodh de Blacam (4 Feb. 1921), Talbot Press Papers, Irish National Archives, 1048/1/64.

31. *Irish Book Lover* 12 (May–July 1921): 135.

32. “School Rules of Tullabeg,” Clongowes Wood Archives.

public, and the social ambitions of the burgeoning middle classes on both islands can be judged from the demand for the customs and norms of public school education to be incorporated into schools that were previously considered to cater for a lower social cachet.³³ The effect of such imitation at Tullabeg is reflected in Bodkin's schoolboy novel. The main character, Gerald Burke, is a star pupil and a decent cricketer. Gerald's evolution is seen in his natural progression from the wild "native" games to the more sophisticated game of choice in Britain: "Gradually I learned that a cricket bat was not a hurley. . . . I climbed to the second eleven. I was spoken of for the first."³⁴ As in *Schoolboys Three*, the terminology used in the novel would be familiar to any reader of Henty. The boys at Raglan College are "chums," and if they prove themselves "awfully decent" they may well be described as a "regular brick." These early schoolboy novels are based on schooldays in the 1860s and 1870s, and therefore prior to the Gaelic revival—the idea that the nature of the education described was elitist was not something the authors felt obliged to address. As with the English schoolboy novel, an apparently natural order prevails. In fact, both Charley Wynn and Gerald Burke are seen as privileged to be somehow different from their fellow Catholics, and similar to Sheehan's Geoffrey Austin, they have highly anglicized names. The novels owed a great deal to their English precursors, such as *Tom Brown's Schooldays* or Henty's adventure stories. Such a framework could hardly suffice post-independence. In an Ireland much less forgiving of that which could be labeled (whether fairly or not) West British, Irish boys would need a new hero, a more recognizably Irish invention.

33. This simulation is obvious in prosperous middle-class schools such as Radley, Lancing, and Cheltenham. See J.R. De S. Honey, *Tom Brown's Universe: The Development of the Public School in the 19th Century* (London: Millington Press, 1977), 47–103.

34. M. McDonnell Bodkin, *When Youth Meets Youth* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1920), 94.

CÚCHULAINN: IRISH BOY HERO

The early years of Irish independence were marked by a notable conservatism. With the long-fought campaign for cultural and political severance from Britain at an end, it seemed obvious that the infant Free State would instead focus on the creation of a new and somewhat more Irish Ireland. Such expectations proved unfounded; this newer Ireland was in no way radically different from the old. Perhaps it is fitting, then, that the new heroic figure of the Irish schoolboy novel in the 1920s was Cúchulainn, who was in no way radically different from those who preceded him. Three schoolboy novels appeared between 1925 and 1930, written in such a way as to appeal to a young readership. Two were written by prominent Jesuits. Fergal McGrath, S.J., published a schooldays novel called *The Last Lap* (1925) and Matthias Bodkin, S.J., produced another two years later entitled *Floodtide: A Story of Chuan College* (1927). Both are loosely based on Clongowes Wood and follow a similar pattern. Although they are novels with a distinctly Catholic and, indeed, vocational message, this message is delivered much more subtly than in *Geoffrey Austin*. McGrath's novel, *The Last Lap*, is set between 1920 and 1922, with the War of Independence as a background. Centering on a young, athletic Irish boy called Alec Russell, its early pages establish him as a blond-haired, sporty boy. Alec is a gifted hurler and much more likely to be found at play than at his studies. In effect, he is an amalgamation of the Tom Brown-type athletic schoolboy and Cúchulainn, whose prowess in the Gaelic sport of hurling was an integral part of his legend. As such, the author uses Alec to personify an Ireland emerging from English political and cultural influence. Throughout the novel, Alec is confronted with five moral dilemmas and becomes increasingly conscientious and devout as a result. Alec's friend, Moriarty, is a committed republican, and McGrath peppers the text with references to influential printed works, such as Henry Mitchell's *The Evolution of Sinn Féin* (1920), presumably in order to highlight Alec's slow conversion to republicanism. At the beginning of the novel, Alec is ambivalent to both religion and nationalism, something that is common to all protagonists in the Irish schoolboy novels. The reader notes this ambivalence when Alec argues with his sister, Una, over

the correct term for Dun Laoghaire (Dunleary), an Irish port town known as Kingstown before Irish independence:

I can't understand why people lose their hair over things like that. What on earth does it matter whether we call the blooming place Kingstown or Dunleary? It's a four-penny fare anyway.³⁵

By the novel's end, Alec is a committed Catholic and has developed a love of country. In one telling scene, he and Moriarty visit an elderly woman named Old Bridget in a cottage in the west of Ireland while on vacation. Moriarty converses with the woman in the Irish language. The inference is clear here, and the "Shan Van Vocht" image of the literary revival a familiar one. McGrath's ideal Irish boy is manly and devout, with a real love of Ireland—a Catholic nationalist.

Both *The Last Lap* and *Floodtide* idealized Irish childhood in the recent past with a heavy emphasis on character, Christian morals, and the need for a healthy and active childhood, and in this sense they are quite similar to the English schoolboy novels of the late nineteenth century. It is therefore significant that these ideas reappear in the Irish schoolboy novels of the nascent Irish Free State, especially when we consider that the English novels upon which they were based were originally vilified by nationalists as pro-Empire and West British. This dichotomy is further enunciated in *The Boys of Ben Eadar: A School Story of 1950* (1930) by Father Michael Gaffney, O.P. Unlike the other novels, *The Boys of Ben Eadar* is set in the near future, thus allowing the author to project an "ideal" Ireland to his contemporary youth readership. Gaffney's novel is full of boyish thrills. For example, each student at the Irish-speaking college, Ben Eadar, owns his own airplane, and hurling and swimming are the principal sports.³⁶ The protagonist is Frank Irwin (nicknamed "Son"), holder of the prestigious "Cúchulainn shield," a national swimming award. Where possible, Gaffney names places and things in the Irish language and the repetition of the image of Cúchulainn is very deliberate. Despite this, traces of Tom

35. Fergal McGrath, *The Last Lap* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1925), 70.

36. "Beann Éadair" is present-day Howth in North County Dublin. Significantly, the name features in the Cúchulainn sagas.

Brown's influence remain: for example, the stock phrase "that boy is a brick" appears, as does the trope of the "old school-tie." When Son leaves Ben Eadar for University College Dublin, his professor is a Ben Eadar old boy and former winner of the Cúchulainn shield.³⁷ Though clearly Catholic in sympathy (Son is at one point greatly affected by a Pedro Calderón play, almost certainly *Devotion to the Cross*), Gaffney's novel was more obviously concerned with the creation of an Irish boy hero than any that preceded it. The Ireland of 1950 that he projects draws firmly from the nationalist myths of his youth and is perhaps an indication of the extent to which Irish nationalism had by then become intertwined with the dominant faith in the Irish Free State to create an identity best described as Catholic nationalist.

For a group of later lay authors, creating the Irish boyhood as "national" involved a conscious rejection of the influence of both Tom Brown and Catholic devotion. In relation to these novels, James Joyce's *A Portrait* must be considered the dominant influence. In *A Portrait*, Joyce created an anti-Tom Brown, Stephen Dedalus, one that follows that proscribed path of Bildungsroman, of "mobility and interiority."³⁸ Stephen is restless, sensitive, and eventually dismissive of the claims of the external forces seeking to control him: church and state. The impact of the book cannot be overstated. It made clear the potential for radical criticism in an Irish novel of youth and had an immediate impact on younger writers. Two books by such writers appeared in 1919 and 1920 that show rather clearly the influence of *A Portrait*, though neither concentrates entirely on schooldays. Eimar O'Duffy's *The Wasted Island* (1919) and Conal O'Riordan's *Adam of Dublin* (1920) both feature sensitive and tortured boys in a Bildungsroman narrative based for the most part in Dublin city. O'Riordan's hero, Adam Macfadden, even studies at Belvedere College briefly, as did Dedalus in *A Portrait*. This critical tradition in Irish Bildungsroman continued for much of the twentieth century, with novels such as Kate O'Brien's *The Land of Spices*

37. M.H. Gaffney, O.P., *The Boys of Ben Eadar: A School Story of 1950* (Dublin: The Talbot Press, 1930), 223.

38. Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 2000), 4.

(1941) and John McGahern's *The Dark* (1961). That it suffered a brief hiatus in the first decade of the Free State is perhaps indicative of an optimistic belief that the "new Ireland" of the future would evolve differently from the old. Regardless, the critical tradition returned with a vengeance to the Irish schoolboy novel in the 1930s.

STRIPPING THE IVY FROM THE TREE

Many of the revival writers were at pains to situate the Irish child as a subject of a colony, a starting point that allowed the colonized child to emerge as Irish in opposition to the colonizer and that facilitated a favorable comparison for the fledgling Irish nation.³⁹ Consistent with that trend, the 1930s introduced a new breed of schoolboy novel, one that rewrote not only the Irish boy hero but also Irish history as seen through the boy hero. Francis Hackett's *The Green Lion* and Kathleen Pawle's *We in Captivity*, both published in 1936, are the best examples of novels that reject the influence of Anglicization and simultaneously reclaim the middle-class boy from a corrupting and antinational Catholic education. The transformation from colorless and apathetic adolescent to nationalist boy hero is made possible through involvement in the two major national factions in the south: Parnellism and the Volunteer movement.

Francis Hackett attended Clongowes Wood between 1897 and 1900 before leaving Ireland for America and embarking on a career as a journalist in Chicago and New York. Hackett returned to a very different Ireland in 1926, and his schoolboy novel is a peculiar mix of familiar nationalist rhetoric and genuine, astute observations of a childhood in what is often referred to as the revival era. The novel is set against the backdrop of the fall of Parnell in the early 1890s, as seen through the eyes of Jerry Coyne, an illegitimate child abandoned by his parents. His father, a failed seminarian, has fled to Australia. His mother, daughter of a local farmer, opted for that other traditional Irish destination—America. Jerry's fractured childhood is split between two very different families inhabiting two very different Irelands. He first experiences a simple rural life in the care of his Uncle Matt in Knock, eight miles outside Kilkenny City. Here

39. See Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 104.

Jerry learns his love of Gaelic Ireland. He watches hurling, and sitting in Matt Coyne's kitchen, Jerry "says the rosary and reads *Freeney the Robber*."⁴⁰ When circumstances dictate that he must move to Kilkenny and live with his Aunt Agnes and her Parnellite husband Humphrey Laracy, Jerry is exposed for the first time to a more cosmopolitan Ireland. Here the reading material is recognizably English; he reads *The Boy's Own Annual*, Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, and Charles Reade's historical novel, *The Cloister and the Hearth*. References to Parnell abound in *The Green Lion*, presumably in order to strengthen Jerry's nationalist credentials. Should the reader doubt the veracity of Jerry's nationalism, the narrative voice points out that having been "brought up by two uncles, one who read Zola with passion, the other the salt of the earth," Jerry was a "demi-peasant by origin, he saw in the cause of Ireland only the disinterested cause of an oppressed people."⁴¹ Two separate father figures have therefore contributed to Jerry's ideas of Irishness. By the time he departs for Saint Ignatius (Clongowes) at age fourteen, he has developed a more mature and settled nationalism.

At Saint Ignatius, he finds yet another Ireland, "a strange, mad school . . . anchored out from the community, separate as a ship." Jerry, whose name briefly but symbolically changes to Gerald in the narrative, observes that boys are sent to Saint Ignatius for a distinct purpose:

To be polished for a particular world, and in that world, where the cricket crease and the tennis court were of sumptuary importance . . . it was indispensable for the Jesuits to prepare their boys along current class lines, to send them into the Indian Civil Service, the British Civil Service, the army, the navy.⁴²

Jerry's budding nationalism is out of place at Clongowes. Even hitting twenty runs in a game of cricket does not win him the acceptance he desires, his technique being judged uncouth by his peers. Revenge comes in the form of a school debate on "English

40. Francis Hackett, *The Green Lion* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1936), 3.

41. Hackett, *The Green Lion*, 231.

42. Hackett, *The Green Lion*, 228–29.

Rule in India.” Jerry, though nervous and isolated, delivers a violent critique of English colonial governance, describing those who dared defend it as “footlickers at the English throne.”⁴³ Although jeered by his schoolmates, he has now publicly identified himself as a nationalist and is accepted by what is a very small minority of sympathizers within the school. From here on, Jerry successfully negotiates his time at Saint Ignatius and emerges untainted. Disillusioned with the state of Irish nationalism in the vacuum left by Parnell and filled with outright hostility toward the Catholic Church, our hero emigrates to America at the novel’s close. By virtue of his illegitimacy, Jerry is unacceptable in Catholic, rural Ireland, and his nationalism precludes him from upward mobility among his educated peers. Within Jerry Coyne, there are competing definitions of Irishness. One could be a hurler among peasant stock, read Zola in a Kilkenny drawing room, and reject an “English” education all within a thirty-mile radius.

Ignatius Proudfoot, hero of Kathleen Pawle’s schoolboy novel, *We in Captivity*, also flees to America. Before doing so, he plays a surprisingly central role in the Easter Rebellion of 1916. Pawle was English born. Her book, published only in America, was remarkable in that it was written with the aid of testimony from a past pupil of Blackrock College, identified as Dermot Darby in the dedication.⁴⁴ Ignatius ticks all the right boxes: at the beginning of the novel, he is entirely without patriotic feeling. He is a devoted follower of the adventure stories of Marryat and Henty and cares little for Irish nationalist rhetoric, deciding to forsake Irish Ireland for a life as captain of a cargo ship, “briny and hoary and filled with strange oaths, gorgeously drunk in Boston or Liverpool.”⁴⁵ Pawle divides her novel into three parts, in which both Ireland and Ignatius experience the same awakening under recognizable and symbolic headings: “The Old Woman Shams Sleep,” “Do not Sigh, Do not

43. Hackett, *The Green Lion*, 271.

44. The student registers at Blackrock College show that a William J. Darby attended the school between 1897 and 1906; this is almost certainly the man who provided Pawle with her information. Ledger of Student Accounts (K), Blackrock College Archives.

45. Kathleen Pawle, *We in Captivity: A Novel* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1936), 30.

Weep!” and best of all, “A Brave New Cloak of Irish Green.” Revival images such as the Shan Van Vocht and Cathleen Ní Houlihan pepper the text, and as with Jerry in *The Green Lion*, or indeed Alec Russell in *The Last Lap*, the conversion of Ignatius Proudfoot to the noble cause of republicanism is a gradual one. Through a series of unlikely coincidences, Ignatius and some of his schoolmates at Blackrock College (Rochenoir in the novel) become involved in the inner circle of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Pawle includes republican luminaries such as Pearse and Countess Markievicz in a recreated Easter rebellion. In Pawle’s schoolboy novel, Ignatius (and indeed, Ireland itself) has transformed from Parnellite to Republican in one generation, achieved through the synergy of images from the revival era and popular memory of the Easter Rebellion.

Both novels are much more progressive than those discussed earlier. In *We in Captivity* and *The Green Lion*, both Ignatius and Jerry confront the grittier aspects of schoolboy life, such as masturbation, sex, and homosexual experimentation. *The Green Lion* was banned by the Irish Censorship Board, presumably as a direct result of such content.⁴⁶ Both *We in Captivity* and *The Green Lion* are set up in a remarkably similar way. The personal development, or *Bildung*, of both characters is more directly associated with the emergence of the state than in the early schoolboy novels. Both novels engage with the contemporary climate of censorship and are highly critical of the claustrophobic influence of the Catholic Church in the “new” Ireland, and both end with the main characters exiled from the country of their birth. In an effort to explain this exile, Hackett includes a scene toward the end of *The Green Lion* where young Jerry Coyne walks alongside his older cousin, Seán Gernon, a young man who has emigrated to London to work as a clerk. Seán’s prediction for the future of Ireland, once free from the British army, is far from positive:

But when it’s out, what’ll we have? We’ll be like a tree when the heavy ivy is stripped off it, with the scars in it where the big stems were. We’ll be weak and maimed, and then the new ivy will want to climb up into us. The church will suck the life out of us.⁴⁷

46. “Banned Books,” *The Irish Times*, 10 June 1936, 5.

47. Hackett, *The Green Lion*, 336.

For Pawle and Hackett, a Catholic Ireland is a limited Ireland. One must leave it in order to reach full maturity.

CONCLUSION

Seán Gernon's bleak prophesy highlights an important aspect of the Irish schoolboy novel: that it is didactic. All the books discussed here were written with the intent to influence a youth audience and, in the cases of *A Portrait* and *The Green Lion*, to appeal to an adult audience also. When Hackett predicted in *The Green Lion* that Ireland would be weak and vulnerable post-independence, he was in fact directly critiquing the "new" Ireland and knowingly comparing the stunted growth of his protagonist with that of the fledgling state. Consequently, the schoolboy genre is best seen as connected to the Irish Bildungsroman. They have much in common: both attempt to appropriate symbols of youth to create Irish heroes emerging in opposition to English ones, and to establish a superior Irish culture with its roots in ancient history. For precisely this reason the useful revival figures of Cúchulainn and Fionn were utilized in the development of the Irish schoolboy novel. It was convenient for Seán O'Faoláin to recall the Henty tales of his youth in his autobiography, or for that other writer of revolutionary memoir, Ernie O'Malley, to remember that in his schooldays both he and his brother had attempted to tell their "school chums" tales of Fionn and Cúchulainn, to no great avail: "They had read the latest Buff Bill . . . of split-up-the-back Eton suits and that other public school life of the *Magnet* and *Gem*."⁴⁸ The binary of Irish boy hero and English boy hero is significant; whether or not it eluded authors such as O'Malley is not.

The early imitation of Tom Brown in *Schoolboys Three* gave way gradually to the creation of a modern Cúchulainn in the later books, such as *The Last Lap* and *The Boys of Ben Eadar*. In frustration, both prototypes would later be dismantled by authors perhaps perturbed by the lack of movement toward the Ireland that the popular myths of their childhood had promised. Such a trajectory allows the obvious comparison with the emerging Irish Free State. Despite the best

48. Ernie O'Malley, *On Another Man's Wound* (Dublin: Anvil Books, 1994, originally published 1936), 18.

intentions of authors such as Hackett and Gaffney, there is not all that much difference between the heroes they created and the imperial boy heroes of their own childhood reading. Although the majority of the novels were published in a post-independence Ireland, they were written by authors educated before that event—and at schools that were both pro-status quo and resolutely Catholic. We must then view the Irish schoolboy novel as an exercise in manipulation. A successful and popular English model was hijacked in order to recreate an Irish childhood as national and heroic. By blending Tom Brown and Cúchulainn with increasing confidence, the authors admitted a desire to purge Ireland of English cultural influence but still remained firmly in thrall to it. Nevertheless, they have left us with something very valuable indeed, and very rare. The dichotomies evident in the Irish schoolboy novels result from the peculiar position occupied by middle-class Irish Catholics while under the aegis of Union and in the decades that followed political independence—a complex position that remains somewhat elusive. These novels were not the work of an underclass. Instead, they were written by a group that straddled Ireland and England and balanced nationalism with imperial impulse. As such, they offer an insight into a childhood now long forgotten.