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Modernity and Nineteenth-Century Ireland:
The Making of a 'National Reader'

This paper examines 'national reading' in nineteenth-century Ireland in relation to concepts of Irish modernity. Through William St Clair's framework of the 'reading nation', I assess historical descriptions of reading against the grain of Irish cultural nationalism to query the discrepancy between perceptions of a reading culture and the facts of reading *practice*. With attention to the context of the Irish Revival, I suggest that Ireland's exposure to a European modernity through print culture was much broader than nationalist portraits of an 'Irish reader' permit.

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In November 1841 the Irish nationalist leader Daniel O'Connell famously threw his copy of the latest number of *The Old Curiosity Shop* – the issue relating the tragic death of Little Nell – out of the window of the train in which he was travelling, sobbing bitterly to his companions in the carriage that 'He should not have killed her! – He should not have killed her! – she was too good!' I often use this anecdote to illustrate to students the dramatic effects of Dickensian sentimentality, but I've returned to it again recently in beginning a research project on practices of reading in nineteenth-century Ireland. What, simply, did the Irish Victorians read?

We know very little about this subject beyond what a handful of Irish writers tell us in letters and memoirs. In 1849 for example, the elderly novelist Maria Edgeworth read aloud of an evening to her nieces and nephews extracts from the Irish comic genius Charles Lever, but on her own, she enjoyed Macaulay's *History*, volumes one and two, which she acquired through her subscription to Mudie's lending library. Charles Lever himself meanwhile, was reading *Dombey and Son* ('Dickens' last book has set the gravestone on his fame' he lamented), but he thought much more highly of George Eliot's 'absolutely delightful' *Felix Holt*. Peasant storyteller William Carleton began reading Maria Edgeworth's Irish estate comedy *Castle Rackrent* when he moved to the lonely Irish midlands, but it failed to displace his lifelong attachment to the romance of Le Sage's *Gils Blas*, the book which he had 'got from a pedlar' as a boy and treasured ever since. Emily Lawless, author of several romantic sagas set on Ireland's west coast Aran Islands, was delighted with Alfred Lyell's biography of Tennyson; W.B. Yeats' collaborator Lady Gregory tells us she picked up a copy of *Don*

Quixote in the Aran Islands; Yeats himself, at least as he reports rather smugly in his 1903 essay on 'Magic', had never read *Frankenstein*.¹

Reading is a fascinating, elusive subject in our contemplation of a post-Enlightenment literary culture and a key element in our understanding of how 'modernity' operates. Ireland's reading practices are far from straightforward however. Literacy, which was comparatively high in Ireland in the nineteenth century, is not the issue here: as William St Clair reminds us in the introduction to his magisterial study of book culture in the Romantic period, the literate nation is not the same as the *reading* nation.² But what is the 'reading nation', particularly in a country caught up in the traumatic process of becoming 'national'? In focusing so assiduously on what the Irish were *writing* in the Victorian era and the early years of the twentieth century, there seems to be a good chance we have overlooked this significant question.

This is not entirely surprising, given the inconvenience that reading presents for a narrative of Irish cultural nationalism grounded securely not in reception but in literary *production*, and the acceleration of cultural creativity from around the mid nineteenth century to the Irish Revival, led by Yeats and his colleagues. Commentators from Ernst Gellner and Miroslav Horch to John Hutchinson and Joep Leerssen have invested, repeatedly and persuasively, in the history of a cultural initiative which, in Ireland as in Scotland, pre-dated political nationalism; an incentive which ultimately forced its way towards a twentieth-century modernist rupture, manifest politically in the Easter Rising of 1916, and heralded in culture by the book so appropriately published (though not set) in that same year, Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Our concept of Irish modernity, meanwhile, has tended to disengage itself from the archive-heavy drag of Victorian print practices, among other things, in favour of more compelling and localised evolutionary structures. Ireland is typically seen as exceptional to diffusionist models of a modernity that spread outwards from metropolitan and continental cities through a rationalising print culture. Irish modernity, as the critic Joe Cleary has argued, pursues its own terms and

¹ For sources see Amy Cruse, *The Victorians and their Books* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1935), p. 166, p. 314; *Charles Lever: His Life in His Letters*, ed. by Edmund Downey, 2 vols. (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood, 1906), Vol. 1, pp 202-4; William Carleton, *Autobiography* (1896: London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1968), p. 148, p. 110; Heiddi Hanson, *Emily Lawless, 1845-1913: Writing the Interspace* (Cork: Cork UP, 2007), p. 127; W.B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan Papermac, 1989), p. 33

² For this and other useful points, I am much indebted to William St Clair's *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004)

logic as an anomalous product of Catholic aberration and colonisation rather than Reformation and industrialisation.³

These narratives are compelling and self-perpetuating, sustained by their reliance on inaugurating fractures. To implicate them in a random preoccupation with what books the Irish Victorians may have kept on their bedside tables seems at best, redundant, at worst, spurious. Perhaps then, reading should be left alone? The fact that Irish writers (and the general public) were so obviously reading outside and beyond the formative national canon must be regarded simply as a chronological anomaly of the nationalising project itself, a mere byproduct of the imperial cultural system from which the nation was disengaging. For cultural nationalism, writing is seminal; reading would appear to be excess, a cultural residue rather than an essence.

If this has been the landscape of Irish cultural history in the past, it is now beginning to change. The study of book, publishing and print culture has re-emerged at the forefront of current academic interests, and our attempts to understand a reading culture have followed suit. This relates, obviously, to innovative technology and the facility with which digital archival and research projects can re-map cultural history. The impact on Irish literary history – particularly of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – is already visible in the re-integration of an Irish cultural milieu with British, European and worldwide literary and publishing networks. An ironic conclusion of the monumental multi-volume Oxford University Press *History of the Irish Book*, of which volumes four and five have recently appeared, has been the indication that there is, in effect, no such thing as the ‘Irish book’: we need to acknowledge instead the collaborative or intersecting patterns of print, distribution and reception which undercut the ‘national’. Accountants of Irish modernity have begun to renegotiate the terrain therefore, and to factor in a proliferation of random, tangential and supra-national reading practices, challenging Pascale Casenove’s portrait, in *The World Republic of Letters* (1999), of the ‘closed circuit’, or the ‘closing in on itself’ of the late nineteenth-century cultural nation.⁴

³ See his ‘Introduction: Ireland and Modernity’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture* ed. by Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005). Similar arguments are made of course for other countries – including Romania – where the valorising of terms such as ‘tradition’, ‘folklore’ or even ‘primitivism’ is part of a conflicted response to the cultural or political impositions of a centralising authority.

⁴ *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. by M.B. Debevoise (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard, 2004), pp. 106-7

In the light of this, perhaps we do need to think carefully about how to recover the profile of ‘grassroots’ reading, and its influence, in Ireland in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some cultural historians will suggest that reading has already been fully recognised: was not the momentum of nineteenth-century nationalism carried by reading, with the proliferation, first, of Repeal Society reading rooms – established in Dublin and country-wide throughout the 1840s – and subsequently by the Gaelic League Reading rooms, located in the capital and every provincial town, stocked with newspapers, journals, and other reading matter? Were not the 1830s and 1840s characterised by a vast increase in Irish periodical literature – the *Dublin University Magazine*, the *Penny Magazine*, the *Saturday Magazine*, the *Dublin Weekly Journal*, the *Irish National Magazine*? And was not the Irish capital regarded with envy by booksellers throughout Europe in the same period, when, according to Young Ireland editor and journalist Charles Gavan Duffy, ‘the number of books published in Dublin coloured with the national sentiment continued to excite the wonder of English critics’, and literary production flourished, constantly fuelled by nationalist vigour even in the worst years of the mid-century Famine?⁵

Objections to this line of thinking are worth repeating. Establishing the outlines of a national literature is not the same as exposing to view the fundamental processes of national *reading*. In some respects the two may even be antithetical. Reception of texts tends to be, for the most part, invisible: at present, beyond the anecdotal references we find in memoirs and letters of the leading figures of the Victorian period in Ireland (such as those listed above), a sense of a general reading culture is notoriously difficult to track, requiring what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as a ‘lower sociology’, rather than a straight critical narrative. This task is beyond the scope of this essay but an exciting challenge for Irish book history in the near future. What I want to do here, as a preliminary move, is simply to begin to unpick the seams between the concept of a national literature and a ‘national reader’. If the latter ever existed in Ireland, it was largely a creation of the Irish Revival in the late nineteenth century. In foregrounding a particular canon, the Revival effectively blurred our view of popular reading practices in an Ireland which remained – as Joyce’s *Ulysses* attests – closely attuned to the tastes of imperial and metropolitan culture. How did reading itself become ‘nationalized’ at a pivotal stage in Ireland’s evolution, and what implications might this have had for Ireland’s proximity to the modernizing effects of European culture?

⁵ *Young Ireland: A Fragment of Irish History, 1840–1845* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1896), 2 vols, Vol. 2, p. 159

The machinery of Irish literary production which began with the *Nation* newspaper in the mid nineteenth century, and which was extended through the Gaelic League and then numerous initiatives led by Yeats and his circle, represented the effective masterminding of a comprehensive national culture, legitimised by parallel initiatives in other European countries (including Romania) and spearheading a political separatism. It registered, self-consciously, a profound break from concepts of the 'Victorian' (an ethos much denigrated by Yeats himself), in the interests of 'renaissance' rather than continuity, engendering a fresh cultural energy, autonomous and independent of contexts or traditions which preceded it.

The harnessing of a reading culture to this 'self-fashioning' enterprise was inevitable and immediately apparent in the late nineteenth-century instinct, in Ireland, to compile lists, canons, and 'cabinets' of national literature. From the 1880s onwards, list-making of one kind or another was ubiquitous. Charles Gavan Duffy expanded his *Irish Library* reprint series, Yeats compiled his *Hundred Best Irish Books*, and Dublin's *Freeman's Journal* – borrowing a popular idea from London's *Pall Mall Gazette* – ran a lengthy and hotly-debated series on favourite Irish writers. The collection of literary and cultural artifacts at this time was in itself of course, a means of 'producing' national culture: in their respective studies of literary anthologies, both Julia Wright and Leah Price identify the assembly and editing of literary collections as an integral part of nation-building across Europe from the late eighteenth century onwards. The engagement of Dublin's *literati* in the same process was bolstered, in the late nineteenth, by a strengthening domestic publishing industry and a handful of highly competent, effective editors.⁶

One enterprise that has gained critical attention in this context, and which serves a useful illustrative purpose in our account of 'national' reading, is *The Cabinet of Irish Literature*, a compendium of Irish writing of various genres first published in 1880. Initiated under the editorship of writer and journalist Charles Read, it was completed after his death in 1878 by his widow, together with a close colleague, T.P. O'Connor. The *Cabinet* was overtly aimed towards the promotion of national sentiment. The publisher's announcement stressed that the editors' aim was to supply a want for a work 'thoroughly NATIONAL in character', a counter to English and Scottish domination of the Irish literary scene throughout the century.⁷

⁶ See Julia Wright, 'The Order of Time: Nationalism and Literary Anthologies 1774-1831', *Papers on Language and Literature* 33 (Fall, 1997); and Leah Price, *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000)

⁷ *The Cabinet of Irish Literature: Selections from the Chief Poets, Orators and Prose Writers of Ireland* (London, 1879-1880)

Authors included in the work ranged from Swift and Goldsmith to Edmund Burke, and the compendium was a major publishing success as well as a statement of national literary and philosophical endeavour.

In 1902, the task of revising the first edition of the *Cabinet of Irish Literature* was given to the prolific Irish author Katherine Tynan (publishing under her married name of Hinkson), a close associate of W.B. Yeats and a card-carrying Revivalist in the period. Tynan took a pragmatic approach to the material, condensing the collection into three volumes, and completely overhauling Reade's original preface. While she maintained the title and character of the original she cut a number of contributions (pointedly, from oratory, scientific writing, and Irish language material), and in their place sought to emphasise contributions which were primarily literary and aesthetic: a less inclusive, though still elastic definition of Irishness which was, as the critic Margaret Kelleher has shown in her detailed study of the *Cabinet*, more closely in tune with a Revival agenda.⁸

The *Cabinet of Irish Literature* was significantly re-orientated by the changes Tynan made. Moreover the new edition, which appeared in 1904, made it clear that she aimed to promote not only new definitions of Irish writing but also a fresh profile of the Irish 'reader', now defined as a racially distinct being from an English counterpart. In her preface Tynan segregates the two, underlining innate differences in reading preferences and practices between the nations, an emphasis closely linked to the broader Revivalist agenda of the article. 'By and by, when the ranks of Irish writers are thronged as the ranks of English writers are, many more deserving than some of us will be trodden down, crushed out and clean forgotten', she suggests, then continues:

It is our compensation for being little read in our lifetime; *for the race of Irish readers of Irish books is not yet*: and the more Irish we are, the less likely we are to find favour with English readers. That is to say, that with the best will in the world the two peoples are widely different.[my italics]⁹

Not only different forms of production then, but different modes of consumption supposedly demarcate Irish cultural life in the period. Anticipating the emergence of the 'Irish reader' as a racially determined type is paralleled by a diminishment of the 'English reader', a figure incapable of comprehending genuine Irish material. The English adore the Irish comic

⁸ 'The *Cabinet of Irish Literature*: A Historical Perspective on Irish Anthologies', *Eire-Ireland*, 38:3-4 (Fall/Winter 2003), pp. 72-7

⁹ *The Cabinet of Irish Literature: Selections from the Works of The Chief Poets, Orators and Prose Writers of Ireland*, ed. by Charles A. Read and Katharine Tynan Hinkson (London: Gresham, 1904), pp. xiii-xiv

writer Charles Lever of course, and 'Ladies who write in the same light-hearted and irresponsible fashion', but works of Irish genius are like a Chinese puzzle, impenetrable and obtuse. 'The English public will have the Irish writers in perpetual high spirits or it will have none of him', Tynan complains. She concludes by consolidating the racial fault-lines of her editorial with a suggestion that Irish readers, by nature too volatile politically to sit still for long periods, are unsuited to the kind of reading matter represented by George Eliot's fiction: 'The Irish at present are a conversational, animated, unrestful race, feeling more the direct appeal of the orator or the dramatist than the quiet concentration which a book demands.'¹⁰ The Irish, then, are categorised as responsive to oral, not textual, literature (a characteristic which surreptitiously distances them from a culture of European modernity invested heavily in the genre of the novel).

That the revised *Cabinet of Irish Literature* reflects a trend towards the segregation of literature along national lines, in tandem with political incentives in the period, is hardly surprising. But it also registers a wider investment in the process and protocol of national *reading*. To appreciate the pertinence of Tynan's editorial revisions in this respect and to comment further, in particular, on her portrait of the naturally 'unrestful' Irish reader, we can look to the backdrop of a general late Victorian interest, across various political and cultural parties, in the politics of reading. By the end of the nineteenth century readers were repeatedly being defined in communities and cohorts, their differing constituencies of much interest to educationalists, censorship legislators and publishers alike.¹¹ Much of the debate was carried on in British journals such as the *Pall Mall Gazette*, *Temple Bar Magazine*, *The Athenaeum*, and above all, *Nineteenth Century* – the organ of the British Liberal party – which had a strong Irish presence in its contributors list. Throughout the 1880s the *Nineteenth Century* ran articles entitled 'What do the working class read', or 'What are our schoolchildren children reading?' And in June 1884, the journal turned to the question: 'What do the Irish read?'

Written by John Pope Hennessy, formerly an Irish Member of Parliament and a colonial governor, this piece exhibits some of the worst excesses of Celtic whimsy to appear in the journal, but remains a very useful source of information on Irish reading, or rather, contemporary and

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xiv, p. xiv

¹¹ See the useful discussion by Kelly J. Mays, 'The disease of reading and Victorian periodicals', in *Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century British Publishing and Reading Practices*, ed. by John O. Jordan and Robert Patten (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), pp. 165-94

strategic misapprehensions of Irish reading. ‘Irish men who return to their country after a few years absence’, Hennessy begins, ‘will see that there is an extension of popular literature and a great increase in the number of readers, not just in the middle classes but also lower classes [...] it is worth enquiring then, exactly what they are reading.’ Recounting a tour of the country (partly through his adopted and disguised persona, a wandering trout fisherman), he meets various individuals, all of whom are frantically absorbing the contents of the local Land League reading rooms – Charles Gavan Duffy’s *Irish Library* series or Justin McCarthy’s *Book of Irish Ballads* – a diet rich in nationalist texts and sentiment.

The details of the kind of books being read are secondary, in the end, to the sentimental gloss the article casts onto the figure of the Irish reader; a young girl, for example, sitting outside her cottage in the sun, reading from Sullivan’s *Green Leaves* to her elderly mother, or a boy, the local priest’s servant, who can recite from memory all the poems of Irish romantic nationalist poet James Clarence Mangan. The latter offers a particularly vivid caricature of the Irish reader. Sitting on the steps of the house, the young lad is engrossed in a copy of the *United Ireland* newspaper when the visitor approaches. In the ensuing conversation, the boy reports that his preference is to skip the speeches contained in the paper in favour of stories and poems, and he proceeds to recite for Hennessy (or his fisherman alter-ego) several stanzas of Mangan’s romantic Irish ballad ‘Dark Rosaleen’, which he knows by heart. The two then discuss several other popular collections of national literature, *Irish Penny Readings*, McCarthy’s *Irish Ballads* and a volume from Duffy’s *Irish Library* series, before the boy orates yet another well-known Irish nationalist lyric for his guest.¹²

While the article is clearly intended to show a native Irish charm, its effect is to reinforce two characteristics of the supposed Irish ‘reader; first, that he or she will instinctively privilege poetry over prose, and second – more significant – that orality or recitation is quickly substituted for the actual process of reading a text. The suggestion of a racial tendency is as distinct as in Tynan’s editorial: the idealised ‘Irish reader’ seems to work against the processes of modernity (and arguably, literacy itself) in this beguiling portrait. Hennessy’s vision of the representative Irish reader reciting the classics of romantic nationalism peels back the nineteenth century and its progressive instincts to reveal a quintessential and primitive peasant pastoral at the heart of the nation.

The supposed ‘national reader’ of the period was seen then to be out of step with modernity, and in tune, instead, with an Irish culture that bypassed

¹² ‘What do the Irish read?’, *Nineteenth Century*, 14 (Jan-June 1884), pp. 920-8

the industrial, the popular, and the commercial attributes of reading in the neighbouring island. It is a persuasive image. But is it possible to juxtapose it with a more authentic portrait of an *actual* Irish reader in the period? These are difficult questions even in relation to British reading practices. There has been groundbreaking work certainly, by book historians such as Jonathan Rose, James Raven, Richard Altick and others, on identifying the ‘English common reader’. But their methodology, which is based largely on researching the ephemera of literary production – commercial and trade registers, library accession catalogues, literary advertisers and gazettes – is by their own admission, faulty. As the numerous still uncut volumes in Trinity College Long Room library suggest, the fact that a book was published does not prove it was ever read; the fact that a book is advertised does not mean it was ever published. And does a book have to be *read* to have an influence? We might reflect on the local priest in rural Ireland in the 1830s, who reported smugly to his superiors that *not one copy* of Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* had breached the boundaries of his parish, as a tantalising reminder that ‘reading’ takes many different routes to have its effect. Yeats may not actually have read *Frankenstein*, but was able to speculate, in knowledgeable relation to the book’s contents, on the possibility of reanimating a dead body.

The obstacles to recuperating widespread reading practices remain an issue, but there *is* evidence to be found nonetheless, in Irish contexts. We might look for example to Belfast Public Library, which kept a borrowing record for 1888, shortly after the institution opened and just four years after Hennessy’s ‘What do the Irish read?’ was published. This gives us a very different picture of the Irish reader (albeit an urban reader) in the same period. Borrowings were listed by author and title, and the top loans for that year were all from the popular fiction category: Frederick Marryat’s *Mr Midshipman’s Day*, followed by the *Pickwick Papers* and *David Copperfield*.¹³ The profile here is much more predictable, in line with the popular commercial tastes of a British Victorian reading public, and focused – as might be expected – on the strength of the novel genre.

If factual sources for Irish reading are difficult to track however, we should perhaps turn to the resource of fiction itself. In 1932 Amy Cruse published *The Victorians and their Books*, a wonderful account of nineteenth-century reading habits based, for evidence, on reading referred to in novels.¹⁴ Her plunder of Gaskell, Trollope, Thackeray, and their contemporaries for references to titles is perhaps not a sufficiently scientific

¹³ This is usefully documented by J.R.R.Adams, *The Printed Word and the Common Man: Popular Culture in Ulster 1700-1900* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1987), pp. 168-9

¹⁴ *The Victorians and their Books* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1935)

method for contemporary print-culture historians but it offers rich pickings for all that, and might tempt us to follow an Irish parallel. Consider, for example, a novel of 1867, *Old Trinity: A Story of Real Life*, by Thomas Mason Jones. In this three-decker tale an impoverished young man, Tom Butler, is trying to gain a scholarship to Trinity College, Dublin, and is helpfully given access to a local Protestant clergyman's private library in a house in rural Ireland. In the Reverend Young's library, the young man relates: '[T]he books completely covered the walls from the ceiling to the floor. There I spent all my spare moments, and devoured, rather than read, the fictions of Fielding, Smollett, Brooke, Miss Edgeworth, and Walter Scott...poets from Chaucer to Moore...Baxter, Howe, Calamy, Lardner, Chillingworth, Jeremy Taylor and the English Divines, the modern preachers, the metaphysicians, etc, finishing of course, with the Bible.'¹⁵ The full list is worth perusal, as is Tom Butler's attitude to reading itself as a dedicated (and far from 'unrestful') activity.

A more familiar example, not fictional but autobiographical, is to be found in the *Autobiography* of William Carleton, the Irish novelist and author of the popular 1830s series *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*. In this case we change profile yet again from middle class and urban reader to a rural Catholic counterpart, but this perhaps makes Carleton's case even more striking. His memoir offers an extraordinary account of a reading life which, though began in poverty, offered him significant access to books. In his home village, he recalls, he read Ovid and later Virgil, Justin and the first chapter of St John in the Greek Testament. Later, in a wealthier friend's house, 'I saw, for the first time, an odd volume of *Tom Jones*; but I have not the slightest intention of describing the wonder and the feeling with which I read it.' He continues, 'It was a little before this that I met first the thing in the shape of a novel that ever came into my hands. It was published as a pamphlet, but how I came by it I don't recollect. The name was *Amoranda; or the Reformed Coquette*.' Carleton became a devotee of reading, explaining that 'It is true I had read all those cheap amusing little works which were at that time the only reading books in the common schools, from *The Arabian Nights* downwards.' He hunted the homes of the local parish for more, insisting that reading was much more prevalent than might have been supposed in the rural Ireland of the time, and that: although the state of education was, at the period of which I write, very low, and knowledge scanty among the people, yet it is surprising what a number of books, pamphlets and odd volumes, many of these works of fiction, I found among

¹⁵ T. Mason Jones, *Old Trinity: A Story of Real Life*, 3 vols (New York and London: Garland repr., 1979), Vol.2, p. 116

them. If you examined the number of Catholic families in the parish, you would find that one half of them could not read; yet several of these utterly illiterate persons had many of the works I have alluded to, most carefully laid up, under the hope that some young relation might be able to read them.

This emphasis on the facilities available for reading continues when Carleton describes his move to the Irish capital. In his Dublin lodgings in Francis Street, there is a circulating library, where he reads for up to sixteen hours daily. This establishment was kept by a widow, a Mrs Richardson, and was, reports Carleton, 'a mass of obscurity and profligacy', with intriguingly titled volumes such as *The History of Mrs Leeson* and the *Irish Female Jockey Club*, the latter a scandalous *roman à clef* which Carleton insists he read 'out of youthful curiosity only'. The variety and indecency of much of this material astonishes the young country boy. 'How booksellers were found to publish the books it is difficult to say, or how they escaped prosecution', he ponders. 'There was not a book in the whole library but Mrs Richardson was acquainted with its character, a fact which she never denied.'¹⁶

So far, I have simply rehearsed the critical and cultural context of a national literature and the implications of this for the formulation of a supposed 'national reader', in the nineteenth century, with attention, necessarily, to the later decades and the acceleration of national literary incentives borne of the Revival. Practical questions continue to emerge, of course. Even if we track the factual and fictional sources extensively, can we ever recover a 'real' reader from the history of Victorian Ireland? And what difference would that recovery make to our understanding of a formative 'nation' in the period? Most damning of all, the recovery process is tedious. Book history at this micro-level is demanding, painstaking and largely unrewarding: why load ourselves down with this kind of cultural baggage when the sharper narratives of Irish cultural nationalism are so compelling in comparison?

The need to pursue reading habits and patterns only comes into full focus in the context of understanding an Irish 'modernity'. In my view, the neglect of Irish 'reading' has rendered certain cultural trajectories invisible or indeed faulty. We have little sense, for example, of the influence of the Romantic poets on the Irish Victorian *litterati*, yet even preliminary research suggests this was fundamental to cultural debate in the capital well into the late nineteenth century (and a basis indeed, for the publication of the landmark seven-volume edition of Wordsworth's *Poetry* emanating in 1892 from Dublin itself under the firm editorial hand of Trinity College Professor

¹⁶ *The Autobiography of William Carleton* (London, 1968), p. 44, p. 71, pp. 71-3, p. 177

of English, Edward Dowden). Similarly, the eclipse of the English industrial novel and its bourgeois preoccupations is significant in our attempts to comprehend an Irish society repeatedly and erroneously seen as missing the presence of a middle class. Science represents another obscured discourse of reading. At mid-century, scientific publishing in the Irish capital, and particularly in medicine, mathematics and astronomy, was internationally renowned, yet from the Revival perspective it is as if it never existed, blotted out in part by the anti-scientific rhetoric of the Revivalists themselves.¹⁷ Finally, one might ask: where were the Americans? Beyond some occasional allusions to Longfellow and Whitman, they too seemed to have had no impact whatsoever, yet presumably they infiltrated the libraries and reading rooms in Ireland as they did in Britain.

If we take memoirs such as Carleton's as a starting point, we can begin to move towards restoring the profile of Irish reading in the Victorian era, and excavating from beneath the 'national reader' promoted by the Revival era the actual reader of the period, both in the urban middle classes and the rural peasantry. The extent to which this might reshape our understanding of a formative national consciousness remains to be seen. My sense however is that aspects of Victorian Ireland would become highly visible in relation to what Joep Leerssen has termed 'cultural transfer', more porous than we have ever appreciated in terms of the reception and circulation of British, European and even American reading matter, than the cultural nationalist narrative has allowed.¹⁸

The implications of this are two-fold. The first is essentially, spatial: the Ireland traditionally constructed as a romantic and aberrant western periphery can be reintegrated into at least a European, if not a *world* republic of letters in the nineteenth-century period. The second is temporal. Critical constructions bound up in Irish chronological erraticism, an ever-present pre-modernity, a time-lag created by political and linguistic repression, must surely be addressed and re-negotiated outside the persuasions of a Revivalist aesthetic. If we ignore Ireland's absorption, through popular reading, of a mainstream European modernity, then at some point we are surely at risk of a kind of national narcissism; a position which would, in the end, lead to a dramatic re-interpretation of Daniel O'Connell's ejection of *The Old Curiosity Shop* from his train-carriage window as a symbolic, rather than literal,

¹⁷ On this point see in particular Charles Benson, 'Printers and Booksellers in Dublin, 1800-1850', in *Spreading the Word: The Distribution of Networks of Print, 1550-1850*, ed. by Robin Myers and Michael Hains (Winchester: St Pauls, 1990), p. 54

¹⁸ 'The Cultivation of Culture: Towards a Definition of Romantic Nationalism in Europe', *Working Papers. European Studies*, Amsterdam, no. 2 (Universiteit van Amsterdam: Opleiding Europese Studies, 2005) <<http://www.europesestudies.nl>>

gesture. Charles Dickens himself might well have written the scene as such; cultural historians, alas, must be more responsible.

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