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*Literary Exhortations:*  
*The Early Fiction of George A. Birmingham*

Gerard Dineen, B.A., H.Dip.Ed., M.Phil., A.V.C.M.

A thesis submitted to the School of English at Trinity College, University of Dublin,  
in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2010

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## Contents

Summary

Acknowledgments

Dedication

INTRODUCTION	9
<u>CHAPTER ONE</u>	26
<i>The Seething Pot</i>	
<u>CHAPTER TWO</u>	124
<i>Hyacinth</i>	
<u>CHAPTER THREE</u>	201
I. <i>Benedict Kavanagh</i>	201
II. <i>The Northern Iron</i>	255
CONCLUSION	299
BIBLIOGRAPHY	303



## Summary

This thesis will demonstrate the important cultural contribution of the early fiction of the Irish writer George A. Birmingham (1865 – 1950). Born in Belfast on the eve of the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland and living through one of the most eventful periods in modern Irish history, this thesis will show that Birmingham's first four novels constitute an important part of the literary map of early twentieth century Ireland.

Beginning with *The Seething Pot* (1905), the first chapter of this thesis will show that the principal preoccupation of Birmingham's first novel is the landlord and his role in Irish society at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Birmingham's second novel, *Hyacinth* (1906), it will be shown, explores another aspect of Protestant Ireland: the Church of Ireland, along with its related institution, Trinity College, Dublin. The second chapter of this thesis will show that this novel betrays a fear, from a Protestant perspective, of the growing power of the Catholic Church in Ireland at the time of publication. Furthermore, the ultimate failure of the titular character's attempt to play a role in national affairs is, it will be shown, a reflection of the separation of Protestant and Catholic Ireland as advocated by the Irish Ireland movement at the time.

The first part of the final chapter of this thesis will deal with *Benedict Kavanagh* (1907). This novel, it will be shown, forms the final part of a trilogy, though in this case, unlike the previous two novels, the ending offers a vision of a Protestant character who finally manages to engage with the Ireland of the time, specifically as a consequence of his interest in the Gaelic League and Anglo-Irish literature.

The final part of the third chapter of this thesis will discuss Birmingham's fourth novel, *The Northern Iron* (1907), and will focus on that novel's treatment of the 1798 rebellion in Antrim.

All of the above novels will be analysed within the original historical context of the events, debates and controversies of early twentieth century Ireland. In this regard it will be shown that the four texts in question all operate as literary exhortations, in which Birmingham pleads with Irish Protestants of the time to embrace the political and cultural nationalism of the period.

From this historicist perspective it is then possible to see *The Seething Pot* as Birmingham's call for the gentry to play a leadership role at a time when the landlord was an increasingly emasculated and marginalized figure, due to the then recent passage of numerous legislative changes to land tenure.

With regard to *Hyacinth*, an analysis of this novel in the context of the history of the period will reveal that it both reflects and endeavours to react against the philosophy of the Irish Ireland movement, specifically as expressed by D. P. Moran at around the time of publication.

*Benedict Kavanagh*, it will be shown, needs to be read in relation to Birmingham's personal interest in the Gaelic League and his belief that it was an organization which transcended politics and religion. With this in mind Birmingham's third novel may be read as an attempt to promote the Gaelic League to Protestants at the time in Ireland, with the conclusion of that novel offering the prospect of empowerment to those Protestants prepared to show an interest in the language.

Finally, when the devolution crisis of 1904 is considered while reading *The Northern Iron*, it becomes clear that the novel offers more than simply a description of an aspect of the 1798 rebellion as it unfolded. Rather, this novel, in its portrayal of radical Presbyterianism and in its vision of Irish unity, may be read, it will be argued, as a provocative attempt to remind Unionists at the time of the novel's publication that their history did not match their vociferous stance against any form of Home Rule at the beginning of the twentieth century.

In conclusion, this thesis will show that, as well as offering a comprehensive overview of Edwardian Ireland and, in the case of *The Northern Iron*, a view of late eighteenth century northern Ireland, these novels also once operated as literary

exhortations which sought to encourage Irish Protestants to embrace the new Ireland of the early twentieth century, or else risk being marginalized in the new dispensation.



## Acknowledgements

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Terence Brown, for his guidance, hard work and care throughout the preparation of this thesis.

Heartfelt thanks are also due to two friends, whose support over the years has been invaluable: Cecilia Madden and Dr Kieran Brennan.

Finally, and most importantly, I would like to thank my family, who have always given me every conceivable assistance and without whose support this thesis would never have been completed. For this reason I offer my deepest gratitude to my parents, Mai and Tim, and to my brother, John.

*This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Mai and Tim, and to my brother, John*

## Introduction

On 2 February 1950, the Rev. James Owen Hannay died at his home in Queen's Gate, Kensington, London, and was buried in St Andrew's churchyard, Mells, in Somerset. For over quarter of a century before his death, Hannay had been a Church of England clergyman, first in the parish of Mells and later in Kensington. Furthermore, by the middle of the twentieth century, Hannay, under the pseudonym George A. Birmingham, had become synonymous with the popular, light fiction which he so effortlessly produced in such bewildering abundance for the last forty years of his life.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, his Alma Mater, Trinity College, Dublin, celebrated specifically this aspect of his creativity when it awarded him a Litt.D. in 1946. Beginning by acknowledging his reputation as a respected author of works on early ecclesiastical history, the university then focussed on the principal reason for his wide renown:

The Reverend James Owen Hannay formerly Rector of Westport and Canon of St. Patrick's Cathedral, is one of the principal authorities on Early Christian Monasticism, which formed the subject of his Donellan Lectures in this College in 1901. Those works of his which may perhaps be most fitly described as serious are highly esteemed by those best qualified to judge. But his chief claim to the proud title of "the most widely known Irishman at present living in England" – a description recently given of him by a competent authority – rests, of course, upon the brilliant and witty novels and plays dealing with this country and the life and habits of our people. Their popularity has for years been so great that it is unquestionably with them that 95 people out of every hundred associate Canon Hannay's name, or perhaps his pseudonym – George Birmingham. To praise them in detail is needless here and would indeed be impossible. Better by far are what Virgil called "the few words the case demands"; and they are these. The author of *Spanish Gold* has given us something like what mathematicians would describe as an "infinite series" of

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis the pseudonym 'George A. Birmingham' will be used when referring to the author of the works under that name; otherwise the name 'James Owen Hannay' will be used.



golden books; the creator of General John Regan has raised to himself a monument more enduring than bronze.<sup>2</sup>

All of the above details – his later country of residence and his typical literary genre – serve to highlight a problem of categorization when dealing with the literary output of this highly complex man, for though the above description is a fair representation of much of Hannay's achievement, it fails to do justice to Hannay's writing career in its entirety, especially his earlier contribution to Anglo-Irish literature.

To begin with, it should be acknowledged that although Birmingham did indeed write copious quantities of the type of fiction which would not normally confer immortality upon anyone, he was also impressively industrious when it came to his more serious output. In this regard, over the course of half of the twentieth century, Birmingham published respected works on Christian monasticism, as mentioned above,<sup>3</sup> collections of non-fiction essays,<sup>4</sup> biographies of the Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah,<sup>5</sup> as well as an account of the life of his father-in-law, a bishop in the Church of Ireland.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, he left behind a comprehensive record of his fascinating life and times, primarily in the form of his autobiography, *Pleasant Places*, but also in books dealing with periods of time spent in the United States, Hungary and France, the latter country being where he was chaplain to the British army for most of the Great War.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The two works by Birmingham referred to in the oration are a novel and a play respectively: *Spanish Gold* (London: Methuen, 1908) and *General John Regan* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1933). First performed, amid considerable controversy, as a play in Westport in 1914, *General John Regan* was also published in novel form in 1913: George A. Birmingham, *General John Regan*. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1913). For further details regarding the play's performance see: Joan FitzPatrick, 'The Riot in Westport: George A. Birmingham at Home' in *New Hibernia Review*. 5.4 (2001), 9 – 21.

<sup>3</sup> James Owen Hannay, *The Spirit and Origin of Christian Monasticism*. (London: Methuen & Co., 1903). Henceforth this book will be footnoted simply as *The Spirit and Origin of Christian Monasticism*. Another related book appeared the following year: James Owen Hannay, *The Wisdom of the Desert*. (London: Methuen, 1904).

<sup>4</sup> George A. Birmingham, *Spillikins: A Book of Essays*. (London: Methuen, 1926) and George A. Birmingham, *Ships and Sealing Wax*. (London: Methuen, 1927).

<sup>5</sup> George A. Birmingham, *Isaiah*. (London: Rich & Cowan, 1937) and George A. Birmingham, *God's Iron: A Life of the Prophet Jeremiah*. (London: Skeffington, 1939).

<sup>6</sup> James Hannay, *The Life of Frederick Richards Wynne D.D. Bishop of Killaloe: with Selections from his Written Unpublished Sermons*. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1897). Henceforth this book will be footnoted simply as *The Life of Frederick Richards Wynne*.

<sup>7</sup> George A. Birmingham, *From Connaught to Chicago*. (London: Nisbet & Co., 1914) and George A. Birmingham, *A Wayfarer in Hungary*. (London: Methuen, 1925) and George A. Birmingham, *A Padre in France*. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1918).

Again, however, all of the above only offers a partial glimpse of Birmingham's vast literary legacy, for it does not include his Irish material, of which there is much, and this aspect of his work is arguably his most important.

Born in Belfast in 1865, the son of a Church of Ireland clergyman, Hannay's interest in Ireland was, for a long time, serious, committed and deeply personal. Though his school years were spent in England, Hannay's university education took place in Trinity College, Dublin, from where he graduated in 1886 as a junior moderator in modern literature. Two years later he was ordained a deacon, and then a priest the following year. Though he began his ministry as a curate in Delgany, Co. Wicklow, it is the parish of Westport, Co. Mayo, with which he is primarily associated in Ireland, his rectorship of that parish lasting for just over two decades, from 1892 until 1913.

During his time as a clergyman in the West of Ireland Hannay invented the literary persona named George A. Birmingham and under that pseudonym began to write both fiction and non-fiction, a decision which was to result in the production, for the rest of his life, of what would cumulatively constitute a virtual edifice of published writing. Significantly, most of this earlier, 'Westport work' was deeply concerned with Irish affairs, itself a reflection of his serious engagement with the rapidly changing Ireland of the time.

Much of Birmingham's non-fiction from the first two decades of the twentieth century still offers a valuable insight into a particularly eventful period in Irish history, while also recording that time from the perspective – unique at the time – of a Church of Ireland clergyman from Belfast. The category of non-fiction from this period includes the books *Irishmen All* and *An Irishman Looks at His World*, both of which offer a serious analysis of the Irish social and political landscape of the early twentieth century and both of which, along with much of his other non-fiction, prove that Birmingham was capable of far more than the light humour which defined much of his literary output. The above two books, rather, show him to be a perspicacious and prophetic observer of Irish society and politics at a time when the country was undergoing rapid change.



Specifically with regard to his fiction from this period, Birmingham produced four remarkable novels – his first four – which are the focus of this thesis. Other academic work on Birmingham before now has either consisted of broad surveys of his entire fictional output or has focussed on aspects of his life from a historical perspective, specifically his controversial involvement in the Gaelic League.<sup>8</sup> An in-depth analysis of his most important fiction, however, has never been done before and the objective of this thesis is to provide that as yet absent appreciation of this important work.

Of everything that Birmingham wrote, the four texts in question are by far the most important in the context of Anglo-Irish literature as they demonstrate the same seriousness of mind to be found in some of his other work. Furthermore, they are a valuable record of a highly individual view of Irish life at the time, while also being fascinating examples of literary texts which were written as a series of political interventions at a time when both the essence of Irish identity and Ireland's relationship with Great Britain were being held under close scrutiny.

The novels in question – *The Seething Pot* (1905), *Hyacinth* (1906), *Benedict Kavanagh* (1907) and *The Northern Iron* (1907) – all deal with various aspects of Ireland at the time of publication from the perspective of a committed Protestant nationalist and thus they offer a comprehensive and compelling vision of the country during this time of great debate and creativity, while also striving, at the time, to play a role in that debate at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup>

Put succinctly, Birmingham's first novel, *The Seething Pot*, is mainly concerned with the topic of landlordism and the leadership potential of that class in early twentieth century Ireland. The central conflict of this novel concerns the struggle for leadership

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<sup>8</sup> The two earliest theses appeared in 1959 and 1966 respectively: Hilda Anne O'Donnell, *A Literary Survey of the Novels of Canon James Owen Hannay (George A. Birmingham)*. (Unpublished M.A. thesis, Queen's University, Belfast: 1959) and Therese Law, *The Fiction of George A. Birmingham*. (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Trinity College, Dublin, 1966). Both of the above are broad surveys of Birmingham's entire literary output and hence offer limited insight into any of the novels on an individual basis. Later, Eileen Reilly, in 1992, approached all of Birmingham's Irish fiction from a historian's perspective. This thesis gives a deeper analysis of Birmingham's earlier fiction, but the ambit of Reilly's work was still broad relative to this thesis: Eileen Reilly, *Rev. Canon James Owen Hannay, M. A., D. Litt. 'George A. Birmingham': An Irishman Looks at his World*. (Unpublished M.A. thesis, St Patrick's College, Maynooth, NUI, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> As these novels are relatively unknown, this thesis will provide a full synopsis of each text at the beginning of each chapter.



in Ireland between the forces of Protestantism, including both the landlord and a character based on Parnell, and the Catholic clergy. The protagonist of *The Seething Pot*, Sir Gerald Geoghegan, though he initially attempts to participate in the politics of the era, eventually retreats to the sanctuary of domesticity and thus, by the end of the novel, there is a renewed call for Protestant involvement in the affairs of the country.

*Hyacinth*, published the following year, deals primarily with another aspect of Protestant society: the Church of Ireland and its associated institution, Trinity College, Dublin. Through the eponymous hero, himself a member of the Church of Ireland and later a candidate for ordination, this novel describes the slow retreat from society which was conducted by the Church of Ireland in the post-disestablishment era, while also highlighting the entrenched Unionism of that Church. Furthermore, Trinity College, the site of the Church's divinity school and the university which Hyacinth attends, is also singled out for criticism, because of its detachment from the Ireland beyond its precincts. By the end of the novel, these two Protestant institutions are being rapidly overshadowed by an evermore powerful Catholic Church, so much so that by the final chapter the latter is presented as the new Ascendancy with an empire of its own, while the Church of Ireland is portrayed as a pathetically emaciated establishment which has entirely lost its former nineteenth century vigour. Again, as in the first novel, by the end of this text the titular character has retreated from his prior interest in Ireland and instead resigns himself to the comforts of matrimony.

*Benedict Kavanagh*, as will be shown in this thesis, can be read as the concluding part of a trilogy as characters from the first novel reappear, albeit briefly, in the second novel and then the eponymous hero of *Hyacinth* re-emerges in the third novel. More significant, however, is the fact that all three novels have a broadly similar pattern in that all three narrate the story of a young Protestant protagonist who earnestly attempts to participate in the national affairs of the country. However, *Benedict Kavanagh* is a new departure for Birmingham at the time as the novel does *not* end in failure and retreat, as do the previous two, but rather, this third text concludes with the titular character's commitment to Ireland and thus his leadership potential is unlocked. Benedict's success, as we shall see, is directly attributable to his interest in the Gaelic League and the Anglo-Irish literature of the period as these two aspects of

Irish culture act as doorways, through which the formerly Unionist Benedict passes in order to be initiated into the Ireland of the early twentieth century.

*The Northern Iron*, published in the same year as *Benedict Kavanagh*, takes as its historical setting the 1798 rebellion, with Birmingham's exclusive emphasis in the novel being on the Northern Presbyterian involvement on the rebel side in that insurrection. This novel repeatedly highlights the eighteenth century tradition of politically radical Northern Presbyterianism, while there is also considerable weight given to the theme of the historical unity of Irish Christians of different religious beliefs.

Immediately after *The Northern Iron* Birmingham published *The Bad Times* (1908) and it is clear that by the time he writes this fifth novel that he has – in the arena of fiction – exhaustively dealt with his most important concerns as this novel circles back to the earlier subject matter of landlordism and the Church of Ireland and for this reason *The Bad Times* will not form part of the discussion of this thesis.

*The Bad Times*, in its repetition of former themes, marks the point at which Birmingham ceases to be a serious novelist of new ideas, a status confirmed by his remarkable change of literary course with the subsequent publication, in the same year, of *Spanish Gold*. With that highly successful novel Birmingham settled on a comic formula which would serve him well for the rest of his life, but which would, as time went on, eclipse his earlier achievement as a writer of profoundly serious and important fiction.

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The period from Hannay's birth, in 1865, until the publication of his fourth novel, in 1907, needs to be introduced here as a backdrop to his first four novels, all of which respond to different aspects of Irish society and politics of the time.

What is most extraordinary about the events which unfolded in Ireland during the first forty years of Hannay's life is that, though any consideration of them necessarily ignores the Great War, the Easter Rebellion of 1916, the Anglo-Irish War, the Civil



War and the Second World War – all of which Hannay also lived through – this earlier period, from an Irish perspective, seems almost as eventful, such were the immense changes which occurred during this time.

To begin with, when Hannay was still a child, in 1869, the Church of Ireland was disestablished and thus began that institution's long retreat from the centre of Irish society.<sup>10</sup> The following year saw the foundation by Isaac Butt of the Home Government Association and thus the Home Rule movement began. Still in the same year, 1870, Gladstone's first Land Act was passed and thus three of the most important themes of Birmingham's early fiction – the landlord, the Church of Ireland and Home Rule – all surface as serious issues in reality for those of Hannay's parents' generation. Furthermore, the following decade witnessed the ascent to influence of the political colossus that was Parnell – upon whom the character of John O'Neill in Birmingham's first novel is partly based – and thus this era in Irish politics saw the continuation of the issues surrounding land ownership and legislative independence.

With the death of Parnell in 1891, political energy, according to Yeats, was temporarily channelled into cultural activities and indeed any reading of this part of Irish history, despite R. F. Foster's reappraisal of these years, to a large extent confirms this analysis. Most significantly with regard to Hannay, the Gaelic League was founded in 1893, and thus began an organization which would preoccupy Hannay, both in reality and in the fictional world of *Benedict Kavanagh*.

The remainder of the nineteenth century saw a further attempt, in 1893, to introduce Home Rule, while the Irish Local Government Act of 1898 concentrated political power at local level in mainly nationalist hands, thus further eroding the power of the gentry as they were now bereft of their previous roles as local administrators.

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the passage of the Wyndham Land Act of 1903, which was a further step towards the legislative eviction of the landlord from

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<sup>10</sup> This outline of this period of Irish history is based on chronologies from the following two sources: Margaret Kelleher & Philip O'Leary (Eds), *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature*. Vol II, 1890 – 2000. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) xvi – xvii and T. W. Moody, F. X. Martin & F. J. Byrne, *A New History of Ireland. VIII. A Chronology of Irish History to 1976: A Companion to Irish History, Part I*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 372 – 80.

Irish society, while the prospect of devolution, the following year, led to an intensification of the Unionist stance against Home Rule. Culturally these first few years of the new century are also important in terms of Birmingham's early fiction as they saw the emergence of the Irish Ireland movement, spearheaded by D. P. Moran in his articles in the *Leader*, the first number of which appeared in 1900.

The above period, then, was a time of immense change, which saw power and prestige gradually draining away from two aspects of Protestant Ireland which Hannay held in high regard: the Anglo-Irish aristocracy and the Church of Ireland.

With regard to the Irish gentry, L. P. Curtis, Jr. provides the following summary of the predicament of that class during the period in question, thereby indicating that it was not just legislative changes which the Ascendancy had to deal with at this time, but also a dramatically altering cultural landscape:

Deprived of their established Church, shorn of formal political power, denounced by priests and more secular politicians as rack renters, the Anglo-Irish landlords found some consolation in the thought that they still belonged to Ireland. Irish by birth and background rather than race, they were not about to abandon their roles as the social and cultural leaders of rural Ireland. They had no intention of handing over their functions, not to mention their land, to 'socialist' agitators who hounded them in speech and pamphlet. In spite of their colonial origins, their English manners and Protestant religion, the Anglo-Irish considered themselves as Irish as any non-Celt could ever be. (...) The sense of being Irish regardless of historical origins and ethnicity remained with them in fact, until the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the growth of a strikingly different Irish Ireland began to undermine their identity.

Anglo-Ireland might have gone on believing in its essential Irishness, that is, the ecumenical Irishness of Wolfe Tone, Thomas Davis, and Parnell, had it not been for the Irish Ireland movement of which the Gaelic Athletic Association, the Gaelic Union of the 1880's which evolved into the Gaelic League in 1893, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and Sinn Fein were the prime movers. Together these organizations and the ideology which they articulated transformed the



meaning of Irishness, thereby making the Anglo-Irish gentry look ever less Irish as the war approached. The explicitly political expression of the new cultural nationalism may be found in the writings of Griffith and Pearse. But many republicans read or listened to the ostensibly non-political words of Douglas Hyde and found therein confirmation of their political commitments. There was no room in the new Ireland for the sons of Sassenach planters and adventurers who refused to mend their ways and embrace the Celtic world then being rediscovered.<sup>11</sup>

Matters were equally grim for that other former bastion of Protestant power – the Church of Ireland – for during the period which witnessed the rapid growth of both political and cultural nationalism, the Church in which Hannay was a clergyman, along with the university which he attended, represented in the following quotation by Salmon and Jellet, had consistently and vehemently opposed the spirit of the time, as Alan Acheson shows:

With the primacy vacant, Archbishop Plunket presided at the special session of the General Synod held on 23 March 1886. (...) As ‘a body of Irishmen holding various political opinions’, it declared ‘unswerving attachment’ to the Union, denounced Home Rule as potentially separatist, and determined ‘to resist it as tending to impoverish, if not extirpate’ Protestants. These convictions were expounded in speeches by, among others, Bishop Alexander, Dr Salmon, Judge Warren and Provost Jellett. At the Synod’s ordinary session six weeks later, Plunkett (again presiding) reported that 20,000 copies of the earlier resolutions had been distributed, and 2000 of the full record sent to peers, MPs, and newspapers. The Standing Committee circulated a Protest against Home Rule before the Synod’s special session of 1893: it was endorsed by 1203 parishes out of 1229, with but 21 dissentient vestrymen in all Ireland. Primate Knox, an old-fashioned Whig, described the second Home Rule Bill as ‘bristling with dangers’ to the Empire, to Ireland, and to his church. Though intended for the

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<sup>11</sup> L. P. Curtis, Jr., ‘The Anglo-Irish Predicament’ in G. Almansi (Ed.) *Twentieth Century Studies*. (November: 1970, No. 4), 47 – 48.

better government of Ireland, 'it would be better to call it a Bill to suppress the Protestant faith – a Bill to subjugate this country to Papal dictation'.<sup>12</sup>

Thus Irish Protestantism – specifically both the landlord and the Church of Ireland – was becoming increasingly isolated from the *Zeitgeist* of Hannay's Ireland and the significance of all of the above historical background is clear when one considers that it forms the context within which Birmingham began the most important part of his career as a novelist. However, what Hannay wrote at this time outside the realm of fiction is of considerable importance also as it gives an insight into much of the philosophy underpinning his early fiction, as the following will show.

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In 1905, three months after the publication of his first novel,<sup>13</sup> Hannay pseudonymously published in the newspaper *The Irish Protestant* the first of five parts of an article entitled 'A Neglected Chapter of Irish History'.<sup>14</sup> These articles, which are an impassioned salute to the eighteenth century Irish Volunteers and their politics, begin by outlining the political situation from the middle of the eighteenth century to 1778 and thereby refer to the mainly Protestant ownership of land and the political power deriving from this:

Its members [the Church of Ireland] possessed nine tenths of the landed property, and all the political power. The Protestant aristocracy owned Ireland. The Protestant democracy – for, as we shall see, there was a Protestant democracy to be reckoned with – were privileged members of a governing caste. An Irish Parliament sat in Dublin. Its members were Protestant gentry. They were either nominated by the landowners who controlled pocket boroughs, or elected by Protestant voters.

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<sup>12</sup> Alan Acheson, *A History of the Church of Ireland 1691 – 2001*. (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2002), 225.

<sup>13</sup> Ada's (Hannay's wife) diary states that *The Seething Pot* was published on 3 March, 1905. Diary of Ada Hannay, 3 March 1905. TCD MS 9234.

<sup>14</sup> The five parts appeared in the following editions of the paper: 17 & 24 June and 1, 8 & 15 July (all 1905). The article later appeared in pamphlet-form and then came with the revealing qualification: "[r]e-written for Irish Protestants by Eoghan". 'Eoghan', of course, is the Irish translation of Hannay's middle-name, 'Owen'.

The use of Irish revenue by English statesmen in order to pay pensions to people who had no link with Ireland is then mentioned, as are the inimical restrictions on Irish manufacturing and trade. Hannay then points out how these matters aroused the anger of the Irish aristocracy, who placed Ireland's interests before their own because they saw Ireland as theirs to defend:

It is small wonder that the Irish Protestant aristocracy was discontented with such a condition of things. They were a privileged class, but they had no idea of preserving their privileges at the expense of their country. The spirit of Devereux and Swift was alive in them. They realised that Ireland was their country, and they were not content to see her bullied out of existence to gratify the whims of English statesmen, or the stupid selfishness of the English mercantile classes.

Thus the Volunteer movement was formed in 1778, with some prestigious leaders at its head: "The great landowners, men like the Duke of Leinster, Lord Charlemont and in remote Mayo the Earl of Altamont, took the command." The Irish constitution is next described, with an emphasis that it involved "Government by King, Lords and Commons." The hierarchy of power and the names of some of those who occupied each level are then listed, with implied admiration for the clear-cut and finely balanced nature of such power constantly in the background. It is especially interesting to notice that the following account portrays any confusion or conflict as occurring *outside* Ireland, whereas Ireland itself is monolithic in its obduracy and aloof poise:

Nor was there any doubt about what King. George the Third was the King of Ireland. The Spaniards might have hopes of setting up their King in his place. The Americans might have visions of an Irish Republic. But the Volunteers stood for King George as loyal men. Nor was there any doubt about what Lords and Commons. They sat there in Dublin; the Duke of Leinster, Lord Charlemont and others in the one House; Grattan, Yelverton, and more like and unlike them in the other. These formed the constitutional and only constitutional Government of Ireland.



The article continues by describing the February 1782 Convention of Dungannon at which 240 regularly elected delegates of the Ulster Volunteers met in the great church at Dungannon. Hannay emphasizes that this independent, exclusively Protestant group, democratically elected by Protestants without a hint of corruption, crushed two stereotypes of their own class by expressing neither bigotry nor the “anti-national, “garrison” vapourings of which Protestants are supposed to be fond.” It is at this point that Hannay jettisons all sense of self-restraint and describes the above assembly in the following unqualified, adulatory terms: “it is an undeniable fact, that from this assembly there came forth the strongest and most national resolutions of which Irish history has any record, and an assertion of religious liberty not at that time to be matched elsewhere in Europe.”

Significantly, the article points out, the resolutions of the Dungannon Volunteers stressed the ultimate and exclusive powers of the King, Lords and Commons, while also emphasizing the necessity of preventing any country from using any of Ireland’s ports, should this result in hostilities towards England. However, legislative independence was to be a transitory affair, lasting for less than the final two decades of the eighteenth century, and thus Hannay looks at the nineteenth century with anger, for it was then that Ireland rid itself of its Parliament while it also began to unceremoniously remove most of the gentry from their position of power in Irish society: “[t]he century which has just passed saw the utter violation of the constitution of Ireland and the complete triumph of English power in this country. It saw also the Irish gentry, bereft of every vestige of privilege and authority in process of being somewhat ungently elbowed out of their estates.”

The principal purpose of Hannay’s article is then revealed when he endeavours to remind his readers what they appear to be no longer aware of:

That we have forgotten what our forefathers did then is a shame to us; that we have so small a portion of their spirit is a still greater shame. For we also might do great things for Ireland. It is as true today as it was one hundred and twenty years ago that the power of a fearless democracy is stronger than any other power on earth. It is true still that men of sincere patriotism and broad religious



tolerance can, in spite of all the forces of disruption, carry all Ireland with them in the end.

Thus, it would appear, that although the days are gone when a landed gentry governed the country by virtue of who they were and what they owned, the present era is now in need of leaders, no longer with the automatic powers of their forefathers, but with at least their patriotism and tolerance. Such men might become leaders, earning their authority from the people by their good actions and, as we shall see, it is such a notion that Birmingham explores in some of his early fiction.

The article ends with a claim that the above constitution is, in fact, still in existence, with the implication that there is still a bridge to the past, a hope for regeneration by a return to the glories of eighteenth century politics, before the unsavoury details of ignoble bribery, the Act of Union and all the political instability and division which followed in the nineteenth century:

The constitution our forefathers stood for was no invention of their own. It was the Irish constitution before their grandfathers were born. *It is the Irish constitution still.* It is in abeyance now, but it exists. No single Irish Parliament had the power to abrogate it. This is the deliberate opinion, not of speculative politicians or historically minded antiquaries; but of the best constitutional lawyers. (...) The constitution claimed by the Volunteers in 1782 is the Irish constitution still and the only constitution proper to the kingdom of Ireland. *But we do not live under it.*<sup>15</sup>

Hannay concludes that, regardless of the circumstances, it is “never either right or wise for any one to treat as non-existent the constitution of the country of which he is a citizen.”

In a letter to Douglas Hyde which was written approximately a month before the above article was published, Hannay – while referring to the material which he was shortly about to make public – demonstrated in private his impassioned insistence on

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<sup>15</sup> All italics are in the original text.

a point which he would soon share with a wider audience: “I mean in the end to draw the inevitable conclusion “This is our constitution. As patriots, Protestants, and loyalists we are bound to – our constitution – not given back to us for it never could be legally taken away – but recognised and acted on.””<sup>16</sup>

All of the above is a clear indication of Hannay’s pride in the nationalism which he believed he had inherited from his Protestant ancestors of the eighteenth century and, as we shall see, much of Birmingham’s fiction from around the time of the publication of ‘A Neglected Chapter of Irish History’ reflects both this pride and his belief that his fellow Irish Protestants could only thrive in the new Ireland if they rediscovered this patriotism from the past.

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Three years later, by which time Birmingham’s phase as a writer of serious fiction had just come to an end, Hannay, this time in his role as a preacher in the Church of Ireland, was again exhorting Irish Protestants at the time to play a role in the affairs of their country. On St Patrick’s Day of 1908 Hannay delivered a sermon to a congregation of approximately two thousand in Saint Patrick’s Cathedral, Dublin, and what he said on that occasion in many respects was a reflection of the sentiments of much of his fiction from just beforehand.

Taking as his text “Ye are the salt of the earth. Ye are the light of the world”, Hannay outlined St. Patrick’s mission “to teach a nation”; his belief that he would “give our people light, and be to them the saving Salt”, and his success in achieving this: “His teaching led to the (...) shining anew of the light of learning – the establishment of a beautiful civilization.” He then mentioned Ireland’s contribution to the flourishing of learning beyond its own shores and thus he portrayed a golden age which could ultimately be traced back to St. Patrick’s intervention: “England, Scotland, and the Continent of Europe have everywhere surviving still witnesses in parchment, in tradition, in stone, and mortar that Irishmen, the spiritual children of St. Patrick, were once, because they were Christ’s, the Salt of the earth, the Light of the world.”

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<sup>16</sup> Hannay to Hyde. May, 1905. Hyde Papers, N.L.I. MS 18252.

Hannay then contrasted this period of Irish history with the present day and quoted a poet's description of what was then contemporary Ireland: "Only Thou, only Thou has reaped no fortunate harvest./Century following century, still at the heels of the nations/Poor, derided, divided; a witmark and sport to the dull." It is at this point in the sermon that it becomes obvious that Hannay was consciously addressing a Protestant audience with the notion of the possible extinction of that class in mind. He went on, however, to emphasize that such a fate for Irish Protestants was not preordained:

Is this to be our final fate? Are we to perish from among the peoples, a dwindling remnant with pathetic eyes for ever fixed upon a distant past, fading from life while our past itself fades from memory, as the clouds which reflect in the most strange glorious lights from a sun that has set, vanish from notice as their people dies, and the grey of night and oblivion steals over them? I cannot bear to think that we are doomed to such extinction. I am fully convinced that there is no unalterable fate decreeing it for us.<sup>17</sup>

Then, echoing a theme from some of his early fiction, Hannay spoke in strongly and repeatedly messianic language of the absolute need of "a power which is capable of saving us, raising us," and, referring to individuals who believed in Christ's teaching, he insisted that, regardless of the apparently hopeless state of any society, past or present, such men could "save it." These men, he continued, of "high destiny, would shed the light of God" on the problems of the day; they would be "begotten (...) by the Spirit of God" and from this Spirit alone they would draw "the impulse of their being"; they would be "our saviours, (...) the salt of our land, the light of our country" and they would be "men of Christ-like life and Christ-like saving power". Hannay then pondered where such men would come from and his thoughts on the matter must have been highly unsettling to the congregation as he suggested that not only could such divinely-sent help possibly come from outside the Church of Ireland, but the source, whatever it was called beforehand, would afterwards have a legitimate claim to the title 'the Church of Ireland': "[s]he will be the Church of Ireland. No claim of historic reasoning, no dictum of human law, no allegiance of a majority of people, no

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<sup>17</sup> *The Irish Times*. 18 March, 1908.



gaining of earthly wealth, no possession of political power can establish in reality the right to the title Church of Ireland.”

Hannay then concluded on a hopeful note by emphasizing that the Church of Ireland could produce a man fitting the above description, which would consequently legitimize the Church’s title; in other words, by rescuing Ireland, the Church of Ireland would simultaneously save itself:

Is this, the supreme glory of all, the justification of the title which we claim, to be ours? Are we to give birth to the men whom our country needs? (...) We have left to us no more than the shreds and tokens of the political and social power which once was ours. (...) We are but a minority, of small account in our own land in the matter of the counting of heads. (...) None of these things need hinder us in the least from claiming and using the great power – the power to save.

What emerges from a consideration of the above article and sermon is Hannay’s obvious desire for the reappearance of the Protestant nationalism of the past, which he believed was necessary in the early twentieth century if Irish Protestants were not to be marginalized in the new Ireland. What this thesis will show is that Hannay *as Birmingham*, in his early fiction, used the novel as a type of paper pulpit, exhorting and warning a wider Protestant flock as he confronted them with what he sincerely believed as both a private and public individual.

With all of the above in mind, then, Birmingham’s first four novels can often be seen as a fictional means to a political end, whereby, in each work, the creation of an imagined world is ultimately an attempt to recreate, to some degree at least, the actual political world of early twentieth century Ireland. In this way, the four novels to be examined in this thesis, in their sustained engagement with the political issues which seriously preoccupied Hannay, can be read as the latter’s attempt to contribute, initially anonymously, to the debates of the time, specifically those about the political role of the Protestant gentry; the place of the Church of Ireland and Trinity College in early twentieth century Ireland and the issues of the Gaelic League and Home Rule as they related to Irish Protestants during the period in question. At times, as we shall

see, Birmingham's message is stridently delivered, the evangelical voice of the preacher superseding that of the narrator, resulting in the fictional world being briefly dispensed with in an effort to explicitly influence a political debate contemporaneous with the time of composition. At other times, however, specifically in his first two novels, as we shall see, Hannay's political messages are often more complex and occasionally even seemingly self-contradictory. In such cases the novels deal as a whole, both gradually and experimentally, with some of the above issues, investigating the theme of Protestant nationalism in its various forms and concluding in failure, itself a reflection of the predicament of Protestants who sought to align themselves with the nationalism of the time.

Finally, in contrast to all of the above, sometimes Birmingham's novels, particularly *Benedict Kavanagh* and *The Northern Iron*, move as a whole towards a concluding political vision. In the case of Birmingham's third novel such a vision takes the form of a landlord – inspired by his immersion in Irish culture – finally making a generous commitment to his local community, while in *The Northern Iron* we have a text which can be read as a provocative reminder, for the time, of the attempt by eighteenth century Northern Presbyterians to gain Irish independence. Thus, in these two latter instances, the fictional worlds also function as extended sermons, presenting worlds that might be, that once were, that should be again.

# CHAPTER ONE

## *The Seething Pot*

### i. Synopsis

The prologue to *The Seething Pot* begins in a courthouse in Clonmel in which Gerald Geoghegan, a member of the Church of Ireland, is found guilty of armed rebellion in Tipperary against the reigning monarch, Queen Victoria. Geoghegan is sentenced to be hanged but this punishment is commuted to transportation for life to Australia. Afterwards his brother, Sir Thomas Geoghegan, who had previously disowned him once Gerald declared himself a member of the Young Ireland party, vows, in the aftermath of the rebellion, never to utter his brother's name again.

In Australia Geoghegan, frequently referred to later in the novel as 'Geoghegan the rebel', has a successful farm and his family consists of a wife and son, also called Gerald. With the death of the latter's cousin, Sir Giles Geoghegan, the title, estates and personal property of the deceased all pass to Gerald Geoghegan *filis*, who soon travels to Ireland for the first time in order to live in Clogher House in County Mayo.

While on a train to Holyhead Sir Gerald meets Desmond O'Hara, the owner and editor of the paper *The Critic*, and they discuss a number of issues, including the leadership potential of the Irish landlords. The following day Sir Gerald stays in Dublin where O'Hara takes him to an exhibition of Jim Tynan's paintings, where, as well as the painter himself, Sir Gerald meets a nationalist writer, Dennis Browne, among others.

Afterwards Sir Gerald travels to Clogher and his arrival at the town's station initially appears to be greeted by an enthusiastic crowd until his agent, Mr Godfrey, explains that the people have assembled to meet Michael McCarty, a local MP who has just been released from prison, where he served time for incitement to outrage. Sir Gerald and Godfrey leave the station as they are denounced by McCarty. Afterwards



McCarty and some others go to the local presbytery, where they are welcomed by Fr Tom Fahy and his curates; later McCarty visits John O'Neill, the Protestant MP and leader of the National Parliamentary Party, whose principal objective is the restoration of an independent Irish Parliament.

*The Connaught News* publishes an account of Sir Gerald's arrival in Clogher, in which Sir Gerald is unfavourably compared to the memory of his father. At this point Sir Gerald begins to relinquish any hopes of active involvement in Irish affairs and instead he preoccupies himself with the management of his house and grounds, while avoiding any contact with John O'Neill, who attempts to meet him. During this time Lord Clonfert visits and soon befriends Sir Gerald and urges him not to associate with John O'Neill, warning him that such contact would lead to his social alienation. Through his friendship with Lord Clonfert, Sir Gerald meets the Clonferts' daughter, Hester Carew, and a mutual attraction is soon established.

During a visit by Desmond O'Hara to Clogher House Sir Gerald is requested to meet a deputation, appointed by the District Council, which wishes to propose a scheme for the benefit of the tenants on his estate, where at present there is an uneven distribution of land between impoverished and better off tenants. O'Hara suggests the assistance of John O'Neill, whom Sir Gerald and O'Hara both meet the following day.

O'Neill advises Sir Gerald to divide his grazing land, fix the rents at an acceptable amount, put the tenants' interest in the new farms up to public auction and then, after he has been paid for these sales, O'Neill suggests that Sir Gerald return this money as a loan to his incoming tenants. Sir Gerald, O'Hara and Godfrey then meet the deputation, the members of which are Fr Fahy, Michael McCarty and Mr Walsh, the chairman of the District Council. After hearing the proposal Fr Fahy decides to report it to the District Council. However, when Godfrey is told that the scheme is in fact O'Neill's, he immediately asks to be relieved of his duties, declining to share the management of the estate with O'Neill, whom he describes as a rebel and a murderer, while also ending his acquaintanceship with Sir Gerald. At this point O'Hara warns Sir Gerald not to become too close to O'Neill, telling him that such an alliance would lead to Sir Gerald's rejection by his class and a subsequent loss of influence; Godfrey offers similar advice when he resigns.

Sir Gerald's proposal to the deputation is presented to the local branch of the League, the nominal president of which is O'Neill, though it is Fr Fahy, in fact, who usually chairs the meetings. Despite the priest's attempt before the meeting to have the scheme rejected, he is foiled by O'Neill, who chairs the meeting on this occasion and informs those present that he is the author of the plan.

Meanwhile Sir Gerald begins to notice the social repercussions of his friendship with O'Neill as the local gentry and even his own servants alter their attitude towards him. Furthermore, the Clonferts, with the exception of Hester, also treat him differently. Notwithstanding this, Sir Gerald asks O'Neill to recommend a new agent to replace Godfrey and he begins to visit O'Neill socially, instead of the Clonferts. However, despite the cooling of relations between Sir Gerald and Lord and Lady Clonfert, Sir Gerald proposes marriage to Hester, who accepts his offer. Sir Gerald then goes to Clonfert Castle to tell Hester's parents that he wishes to marry their daughter, while also informing them that he intends to become a member of O'Neill's party; Lord and Lady Clonfert are not impressed. Nevertheless, the wedding takes place a month later, though Hester's mother refuses to attend.

When the couple return from their honeymoon there is a famine of sorts in the West of Ireland and Sir Gerald becomes a member of the local committee for the distribution of food and this, as well as his plan for dealing with his grazing lands, soon begins to attract positive media attention. As he works alongside Fr Fahy in an effort to relieve the hunger in the area, the priest's honesty and concern for the poor become evident to Sir Gerald. As a result of this he is on the verge of altering his planned changes to his estate in order to settle the most indigent of his tenants on the new farms, but a political situation suddenly arises which temporarily ruptures his friendship with the priest.

As a consequence of the legislative oppression of religious Orders in France, a number of monks flee to England, where a controversy erupts, which is both religiously and politically motivated, and soon the Opposition is challenging the government about the matter. In this context the government negotiates with the Irish Catholic bishops and is thus assured of enough Irish votes to strengthen it in the crisis. Speculation, however, immediately surrounds O'Neill's as yet unknown position on



the issue until a clerical paper declares that O'Neill's intention is to vote against the government and for this reason Catholic nationalists are urged to desert their leader and support the Church.

Soon afterwards, before the opening of Parliament, O'Neill chairs a meeting of his party in Dublin, at which he informs those present that the government is dependent on their votes. Furthermore, he reveals that the Opposition is prepared to offer him a separate legislative assembly for Ireland and therefore he orders his party to ensure the defeat of the government. However, O'Neill soon realizes that most of his party are against him on the issue and shortly afterwards Michael McCarty, who has been a member of the party for over a decade, resigns his seat in Parliament, being unwilling to either follow or fight O'Neill on the matter.

After the meeting O'Neill returns to Clogher and asks Sir Gerald to be his nominee for the seat vacated by McCarty, hoping that Sir Gerald will enhance his chances of defeating both the clergy and the rebellion within his party. Sir Gerald agrees to stand for Parliament and, after a week, he makes a speech in Clogher, but fails to capture the crowd. Instead Patrick O'Dwyer, an MP on the militant wing of the party, speaks in favour of Sir Gerald, referring to his father and telling the crowd that Sir Gerald will not hesitate to continue his father's militant nationalism; Sir Gerald protests to O'Neill afterwards, but he is persuaded to continue in the campaign.

Before long Sir Gerald, O'Neill and O'Dwyer are on their way to Ross, where O'Dwyer is advertised to speak, but the police stop them before they reach the town and inform them that they can go no further. Sir Gerald twice loses his patience with the police, but the party of three is eventually forced to return to Clogher. At this point Sir Gerald feels he can no longer continue to compromise himself as a gentleman by supporting O'Neill and he also concludes that it is wrong to fight the priests as they now appear to him to be the proper leaders of the people. For these reasons he decides both to give up standing for Parliament and to leave O'Neill's party altogether.

By the end of the novel O'Neill is terminally ill with pneumonia and O'Dwyer, now conscious of his leader's imminent demise, expresses his intention to resign his seat and leave for the United States, where he will work for the future independence of

Ireland. Sir Gerald, on the other hand, now sees Ireland's proper place as being within the British Empire, while he accepts for himself a life of peaceful domesticity and a happiness which will be marred only by an awareness that he will no longer be a participant in Irish affairs. After we are informed of the death of O'Neill the novel concludes with an open letter from O'Hara to Sir Gerald, published in *The Critic*, in which O'Hara claims, as he had done almost a year ago when he first met Sir Gerald, that it is a king, assisted by an aristocracy, which is required in the current seething pot of Irish events.

## ii. Introduction

The formal architecture of *The Seething Pot*, as outlined above, is clearly built around the central theme of the struggle for authority between the forces of Protestantism and Catholicism in Ireland at the time of publication. More specifically, this contest manifests itself in the novel as a battle between Protestant politicians and the Catholic clergy, with particular emphasis being given to the topic of the landlord's potential role as a leader in Irish society and all the difficulties inherent therein. In fact, the prologue alone offers a concentrated synopsis of the principal preoccupations of the novel, with themes such as militant Protestant nationalism, its attendant social alienation and the subsequent retreat into private life all anticipating the development of those themes throughout the novel as the story of Sir Gerald unfolds. Furthermore, the movement, by Sir Gerald, towards and then away from militant nationalism and his eventual intention to desert the public stage for a peaceful private life is underlined, as we will see, by two literary references at key moments in the novel: James Clarence Mangan's 'Dark Rosaleen' and Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach'.

Apart from Sir Gerald, the character of O'Neill, a fictional mixture of Charles Stewart Parnell and William O'Brien,<sup>18</sup> is the most significant in the novel as he is a reminder of the historical reality, in the case of Parnell, of then recent Protestant leadership in Ireland. Birmingham, of course, was one of many writers from the time who had an interest in Parnell: James Joyce and William Butler Yeats being the two most obvious examples. Specifically with regard to *The Seething Pot*, however, O'Neill's final

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<sup>18</sup> In this chapter, in order to prevent confusion, William O'Brien and William Smith O'Brien will be referred to throughout by their full surnames.



defeat and death at the end of the novel, coupled with Sir Gerald's simultaneous retreat into the domestic sphere and his ultimate acceptance of the Catholic Church's leadership role in Irish society, would all seem to signify the termination of any future chances of Protestant leadership in the country. Despite this, the final chapter of the text, which contains O'Hara's letter to Sir Gerald, appears to rescue the novel from such pessimism as the letter, with its emphasis on the need for a true king of Ireland, in contrast to the monarch rebelled against in the prologue, calls again for non-clerical leadership, the reference to a sovereign pointing to the memory of Parnell's reign, when he was popularly referred to as a king.

### iii. Historical context

One of the central themes of *The Seething Pot*: the position of the landlord in early twentieth century Irish society, has an obvious immediate political context when we consider the seismic transformation which had occurred in the Irish landholding system from around the time of Hannay's birth in 1865 to the year in which his first novel was published, 1905. Such a revolutionary period must be understood with reference to the agrarian agitation and numerous legislative changes related to land tenure of the time, all of which were witnessed by Hannay before he began his career as a novelist and most of which had culminated shortly before the publication of *The Seething Pot*.

R. B. McDowell describes the role of the landlord in mid-nineteenth-century Irish society in the following terms:

The landed world had immense influence. A landlord's way of life, with its privileges and responsibilities, affording, as it did, independence, leisure and opportunities for manly sports, provided the most favourable environment for the production of a gentleman. And gentlemen, the Victorians firmly believed, should be the natural leaders and guardians of the community. In Ireland the landlords controlled county government, managed local charities, officered the militia and ran the hunts and race meetings, and their younger sons and many

small landowners entered the professions and helped to set the standards of conduct over wide areas of Irish life.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, the Irish landlords' political power during the above period was formidable, as W. E. Vaughan shows:

Their formal political power, that is the power they wielded through offices conferred on them by tradition and status, was also still impressive in the 1850s: they acted as justices of the peace, as *ex officio* poor-law guardians, as county grand-jurors, and as managers and patrons of schools. Their informal political power is shown by their continuing dominance of parliamentary politics: in 1852, 68 of Ireland's 104 M.P.s were from landed families, and in all elections up to 1880 landlord influence played an important part in returning candidates – both liberal and conservative. Their strength in Parliament was greater than their numbers might suggest, for they were able to ally with the powerful landed interest in Britain.<sup>20</sup>

Later in the same century, however, all of this would alter irrevocably. For example, in 1879, when Hannay was a teenager, the Land League was founded, with Parnell as its president. The League's radicalism was evident in its constitution, which proclaimed, in its Declaration of Principles:

The land of Ireland belongs to the people of Ireland, to be held and cultivated for the sustenance of those whom God decreed to be the inhabitants thereof ... Those who cultivate it ... have a higher claim to its absolute possession than those who make it an article of barter to be used or disposed of for purposes of profit or pleasure. The end for which the land of a country is created requires an equitable distribution of the same among the people who are to live upon the fruits of their labour in its cultivation.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> R. B. McDowell, *The Church of Ireland 1869 – 1969*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 4 – 5.

<sup>20</sup> W. E. Vaughan, *Landlords and Tenants in Ireland 1848 – 1904*. (The Economic and Social History Society of Ireland, 1994), 6.

<sup>21</sup> D. J. Hickey & J. E. Doherty, *A New Dictionary of Irish History from 1800*. (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2003), 262.

The Land League, one of the objectives of which was the abolition of landlordism, advocated the practice of boycotting and led the Land War, which began in 1879 and continued until 1882 and involved violence between landlords and tenants. Described as the first truly democratic organization in modern Irish history, the League united the tenantry of Ireland in an unprecedented display of solidarity and began a process that would weaken and ultimately destroy the landholders of the time.<sup>22</sup>

The Land War erupted again, in a different form, with the instigation of the Plan of Campaign in 1886, which continued until 1891. The Campaign, organized by William O'Brien and others, utilized boycotting as a tactic and had as its principal aim a reduction in rents at a time when the price of some farm produce was declining; a refusal by the landlord to accept a reduced rent would result in no rent being paid.<sup>23</sup>

O'Brien's work in this area continued a few years later, in 1898, when he established the United Irish League in Westport, County Mayo; at this point Hannay was already rector of the town. As will be discussed later, the League sought the redistribution of large estates among small farmers, but for now it will be sufficient simply to consider the rapid growth of the organization: in less than a year it had fifty three branches, mainly in the county of Mayo. Soon it spread beyond Connaught and claimed 462 branches by 1900, with membership amounting to in excess of sixty thousand in twenty five counties. Around this time, in 1899, O'Brien founded and began editing the League's weekly paper, the *Irish People*, which continued to be published until 1908. By 1901, at which point John Redmond was president, the League had become the new constituency organization of the Irish Party and had 100,000 members.<sup>24</sup>

This period of Irish history, then, is largely defined by its protracted obsession with land, immediately apparent in the many relevant legislative changes from the time. In fact, no fewer than ten Land Acts were passed between 1860 and the year in which *The Seething Pot* was published, namely: Landlord and Tenant Law (Amendment) Act (Ireland), 1860; Landlord and Tenant (Ireland) Act, 1870; Land Law (Ireland) Act, 1881; Settled Land Act, 1882; Purchase of Land (Ireland) Act, 1885; Land Law

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 262 – 63.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 396.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 494 & 233.



(Ireland) Act, 1887; Land Purchase Act, 1888; Purchase of Land (Ireland) Act, 1891; Land Law (Ireland) Act, 1896 and Irish Land Act, 1903.<sup>25</sup>

The practical effect of all of this was something in the manner of a gradual social earthquake which involved a slow but unprecedented and permanent transfer of power from landlord to tenant, the magnitude of which was immense:

In 1870 there were some 19,288 landlords, of whom many were absentees; 302 had estates of more than 10,000 acres. Of 538,833 tenants, fewer than a third (135,000) had a lease, while the remainder held land by verbal agreement, subject to six months' notice of eviction.

Within a generation, following the passing of the Irish Land Act (1903) (the 'Wyndham Act'), power on the land had shifted to a new class of peasant proprietors, now holding more than half the holdings.<sup>26</sup>

The above mentioned Wyndham Act of 1903, based mainly on the recommendations of the Land Conference which had met in 1902 to decisively resolve the land issue, was the last Land Act to be passed before Birmingham began his career as a novelist and thus it marks an important historical point just prior to the writing of *The Seething Pot*. Furthermore, just a few years previously, in 1898, the Local Government (Ireland) Act had radically undermined the power of the Ascendancy by effectively transferring the control of local government from Protestant to mainly Catholic hands.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, when considering the immediate context of Birmingham's first novel, the Local Government Act and the Wyndham Act may be seen as the most important legislative changes of the time as both of them fundamentally altered the status of the Irish

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 258 – 59.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>27</sup> McDowell notes that "the democratization of Irish local government in 1898 deprived the Irish landed class of much of their prestige and power." McDowell, *op. cit.*, 69. Furthermore, McDowell makes it clear that threats to the landlord's automatic involvement in Irish politics were emerging before 1898: "until the ballot act of 1872 and the representation of the people act of 1884 greatly changed the conditions under which Irish elections were fought, the Irish county seats were usually won by men belonging to landed families." *Ibid.*, 4.

landlord. As a result of these changes, as well as the many previously mentioned nineteenth century Acts, the Ascendancy could no longer expect to simply inherit power, but rather, as Birmingham's first novel shows, it was now necessary for them to struggle in order to retain some of their influence in a rapidly changing society, otherwise their only remaining option would be to withdraw from the new Ireland, which would continue to develop, with or without their assistance.

#### **iv. Prologue: Gerald Geoghegan and William Smith O'Brien**

*'your monstrous crime'*<sup>28</sup>

The prologue to the novel allows for the brief appearance of the character Gerald Geoghegan, based on the historical figure of William Smith O'Brien, the nineteenth-century Repealer and Young Irelander, with whose grandson Hannay attended preparatory school.<sup>29</sup> Here we are given a condensed account of what we can take to be the trial of Smith O'Brien as the judge provides us with a catalogue of the crimes which the fictional Gerald Geoghegan has committed:

you have been found guilty of taking up arms in open rebellion against your lawful Sovereign, Queen Victoria, in this her kingdom of Ireland. Your crime is one which in an ignorant peasant might move our pity, might be found, perhaps, to have some shadow, not of justification, but excuse. But you are a member of a Church which has always inculcated loyalty upon her children as a sacred duty, and taught the sinfulness of rebellion. You have enjoyed the advantages of an education which should have shown you the folly of the attempt which you have made. You are a member of a class whose traditional boast it has been that they are England's garrison in this country. In your case, therefore, there is no plea to be urged in palliation of your monstrous crime. I sentence you to be hanged by the neck until you be dead, in the market place of this town. I direct

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<sup>28</sup> This is the judge's description of Gerald Geoghegan's rebellious activity in the prologue to the novel. George A. Birmingham, *The Seething Pot*. (London: Edward Arnold, 1905), 2. All future references to this novel will be cited parenthetically as, for example, (SP, 2).

<sup>29</sup> Hannay attended the English preparatory school Temple Grove with Dermod O'Brien and in his autobiography Hannay points out that O'Brien's "grandfather, William O'Brien, was one of the heroes of the Young Ireland rebellion in the middle of the nineteenth century." George A. Birmingham, *Pleasant Places*. (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1934), 24 – 25. Henceforth this book will be footnoted simply as *Pleasant Places*.



that your body be cut into four by the common hangman, the portions afterwards to be disposed of in accordance with the pleasure of Her Majesty. (SP, 1 – 2)

Shortly afterwards the precise nature of Geoghegan's rebellion is described: "[h]e had led a dwindling band of half-starved peasants among the by-roads of Tipperary. He had fired upon a police patrol. He had surrendered himself to a country magistrate. That was the whole story." (SP, 2)

All of the above details about Geoghegan correspond to the biography of Smith O'Brien.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the judge's words, as quoted above, are important in the context of the novel as they underline the three principal factors which should have precluded Geoghegan from any involvement in armed rebellion: his membership of the Church of Ireland; his privileged education and his social class. Here the judge differentiates between how Geoghegan is expected to act and how the peasantry might be merely pitied for behaving: an educated upper class Protestant, such as Geoghegan, is expected to be loyal to England; the peasants are a different matter. In this way, the pre-ordained destinies of two distinct classes in Irish society are made clear at the very outset of the novel as the judge emphasizes that the enormity of Geoghegan's crime is due to the fact that he has blatantly transgressed this class barrier and perversely acted like a peasant in his rebellion against the monarch.<sup>31</sup>

The above belief that militant nationalism is incompatible with the aforementioned inheritances of education, religion and class, especially the latter two, is an important issue which receives sustained investigation in *The Seething Pot*, as we shall see. By

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<sup>30</sup> A Protestant, Smith O'Brien was educated at Harrow and Cambridge and was a landlord with estates in Cahermoyle, County Limerick. However, none of this prevented him from taking part in the 1848 rebellion, in which he led the only significant action. Marching a small force of men around part of County Tipperary, he fought off a contingent of policemen at the Widow McCormack's house in Ballingarry, for which he was arrested and sentenced to death for high treason.

<sup>31</sup> The judge's words here are entirely fictitious, but it is interesting to note that in reality Smith O'Brien's class is conspicuous in the trial report; he was tried along with four others who are described in the document as: a gentleman, two labourers and a yeoman and thus Smith O'Brien, who is identified in the same report as an 'Esquire', stands out as being of the highest social class of all the accused. The names are listed in the report as follows: "William Smith O'Brien (...) Esq.; Terence Bellew MacManus (...) gentleman; James Orchard (...) labourer; Denis Tyne (...) labourer; and Patrick O'Donnell (...) yeoman." Edward W. Cox (Ed.), *Reports of Cases in Criminal Law, Argued and Determined in All the Courts in England and Ireland*. Vol. III, 1848 – 1850 (London: Law Times Office, 1850), 362.



presenting us with the judge's remarks in the prologue, Birmingham allows himself ample room to challenge such rigorously pre-set, conventional roles by offering us fresh alternatives in such anomalous personages as Gerald Geoghegan, a militant patriot complete with an impeccable Protestant pedigree and a fictional reminder of the historical Smith O'Brien. Gerald Geoghegan, as we shall see, is the first of a number of unconventional characters in the novel, some of whom will not be confined by the judge's prescriptive pronouncement on the behaviour expected of a certain class in Irish society.

The prologue continues by informing us that Geoghegan, like the historical Smith O'Brien, is eventually shown clemency by the law: "[h]is sentence was changed into one of transportation for life. He sailed for Australia in a convict ship." (SP, 2)<sup>32</sup> Such forgiveness, however, is not to be found within the rebel's family as, by the end of the prologue, Geoghegan's brother's contempt for what his sibling has done is evident: "His brother, Sir Thomas Geoghegan of Clogher, heard of his exile without a word, and received his last letter without reading it. He had disowned Gerald when he first declared himself a member of the Young Ireland party. He determined after the fiasco of the rebellion not to speak, and if possible not to hear, his name again." (SP, 3)

This appears to be an allusion to Smith O'Brien's brother, Sir Lucius, who publicly condemned William for his role in the rebellion when he "denounced and disowned him as a traitor on the floor of the House of Commons."<sup>33</sup> The fraternal rejection of William Smith O'Brien's fictional counterpart, Gerald Geoghegan, introduces an important theme in the novel: the social ostracism endured by Geoghegan's son, Sir Gerald, who at least temporarily alienates himself from his own class for the good of the country.

The selection of Smith O'Brien as the basis for the novel's first character becomes clear when we consider that within the Young Ireland group, which Smith O'Brien joined in 1846, Smith O'Brien did not share the anti-landlord politics of John Mitchel

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<sup>32</sup> Here again we are being reminded of the story of Smith O'Brien, whose death sentence was commuted to penal servitude in Tasmania, where he spent five years, before going to America with a conditional pardon. A full pardon in 1856 enabled him to return to Ireland, though he played no further role in politics, except to condemn Fenianism, and his withdrawal from Ireland became a literal one when he retired to Bangor, North Wales, where he died.

<sup>33</sup> William O'Brien, *Irish Ideas*. (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1893), 19.

and James Fintan Lalor. In fact, despite criticism from his contemporaries, he never relinquished the dream of a patriotic gentry as future leaders of Ireland.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, his aspirations for the gentry's role in the 1848 rebellion were optimistic in the extreme, as William O'Brien shows:

up to the very eve of the revolt of '48 Smith O'Brien and some of his colleagues nourished the extraordinary delusion that the Irish gentry were meditating going over *en masse* to the young men who were counting their pikes and guns for an insurrection. It was O'Brien's noble fault to believe everyone to be as open-hearted and as chivalrous as himself. He actually wrote letters anticipating that the gentry would be found heading the insurrection at the very moment when these same gentry were entreating Dublin Castle to suspend the Habeas Corpus Act.<sup>35</sup>

Though many of the above points appertaining to Smith O'Brien are absent from the prologue, they do, in fact, become relevant when dealing with the hero of the novel, Sir Gerald Geoghegan, who, in his failed attempt to be a nationalist landlord, repeats the defeat of both his fictional father, Gerald Geoghegan, and the latter's historical source: Smith O'Brien.

#### **v. Sir Gerald Geoghegan and Desmond O'Hara**

*'Tell me something – tell me what an Irish landlord ought to do, and how he ought to live.'*<sup>36</sup>

By the beginning of the first chapter of the novel Gerald Geoghegan *films* has inherited his recently deceased cousin's title, estates and personal property in Clogher and soon afterwards he makes the journey from Australia to Ireland. Even before he reaches his destination, however, this twenty-five-year-old is consumed by excitement, which is to be expected, as the narrator points out, when one considers that "the prospect of taking up the position of a great landed proprietor and a very wealthy man is one

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<sup>34</sup> Richard Davis, *Revolutionary Imperialist: William Smith O'Brien 1803 – 1864*. (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1998), 367.

<sup>35</sup> William O'Brien, *op. cit.*, 18 – 19.

<sup>36</sup> This request for information, which appears in the first chapter of the novel, is addressed to O'Hara by Sir Gerald Geoghegan.



which might shake the equanimity of a gray-haired philosopher” (SP, 4); the privileges and attendant responsibilities of landlordism will become a theme in the novel, as we shall see, but for now it is our introduction to Sir Gerald<sup>37</sup> in this first chapter which is important as here we are supplied with an impression of his character which will be repeatedly confirmed throughout the novel: he is hesitant and indecisive and thus this inheritor of a “baronetcy and the Clogher estate” (SP, 4) makes an inauspicious entrance, a first appearance which will establish a pattern of personal failure throughout the novel, as shown below.

While travelling by train to Holyhead Sir Gerald shares his compartment with Desmond O’Hara, editor and owner of the paper *The Critic*, which, O’Hara claims, “represents the intellect of Ireland.” (SP, 6) When the editor guesses that Sir Gerald is an Irishman the latter replies, unconvincingly: “‘I suppose I am,’ (...) ‘at least, my father was; but I’ve never set foot in the country in my life.’” Soon afterwards, however, he confirms that he is a “Connaught Celt” (SP, 5), but then complicates the matter further by admitting that he doesn’t even know this for certain, even though he is prepared to call Mayo home (SP, 5). Before long O’Hara guesses correctly who Sir Gerald’s father was and though he praises Gerald Geoghegan and his fight for Irish freedom, he is quick to emphasize that Sir Gerald must not imitate his father: “‘Don’t think I’m advising you to go and do likewise. The thing is not to be done that way now. We’ve got on to a new track. We’re working out salvation another way.’” (SP, 8) Thus, already, there is a suggestion of a messianic role for Sir Gerald here.

Not surprisingly, Sir Gerald, a young man who is unsure of both himself and his place in Ireland, soon looks for advice and it is notable that one of the first questions he asks O’Hara has to do with his new role as a landlord: “‘Tell me something – tell me what an Irish landlord ought to do, and how he ought to live.’” (SP, 8) At this point the narrator informs us that O’Hara is eminently well qualified to speak about the role of the Irish landlord; *The Critic*, though it manages to cover a bewilderingly wide variety of topics, is devoted to one particular subject: “It always returned, however, to the subject of landlords, their prospects and duties, their sins and mistakes. Its true

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<sup>37</sup> To prevent confusion, Gerald Geoghegan’s son will henceforth simply be referred to as ‘Sir Gerald’.



position was that of candid friend to the unfortunate class whom England in self-defence is being obliged to squeeze out of existence.” (SP, 9)

Such a description of *The Critic* immediately suggests that it is based on Standish James O’Grady’s paper the *All Ireland Review*, published from 1900 until 1907.<sup>38</sup> For this reason it is relevant to note that shortly after *The Seething Pot* was published, a letter by Hannay to O’Grady appeared in the *All Ireland Review*, which revealed as much about the source of the character of O’Hara as it did about Hannay’s estimation of the *All Ireland Review*:

“The Critic” in my novel is, of course, *All Ireland Review*, of which I have read every number since the first. I brought it into my novel because it seemed to me the purest and most elevated force at work in the “Seething Pot” of our national life. That I have not truly represented the idealism, enthusiasm for righteousness, patriotism and tolerant kindly humour of A. I. R., goes without saying, I tried to do so but failed. The description of the editor was a work of mere imagination. Desmond O’Hara is such a man as I, not knowing, conceived that the editor of A.I.R. might be. (...) What interested me was the attempt to represent the effect of your teaching on my hero.<sup>39</sup>

*All Ireland Review* dealt repeatedly with the notion of aristocratic leadership and this is reflected in the novel, both in O’Hara’s preoccupation with this particular issue and in his attempt to teach Sir Gerald how to behave as a landlord; even in the first chapter, O’Hara, as an authority on this particular issue, offers his opinions on the

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<sup>38</sup> Michael McAteer offers the following description of O’Grady’s *All Ireland Review*:

A remarkable journal that attracted contributions from T.W. Rolleston, Russell, Yeats, Gregory and others, it epitomised the energy that O’Grady brought to Ireland’s cultural and political landscape (...). Aside from providing discussion on many crucial events of the period, including the establishment of the National University of Ireland, the dramas of the Abbey Theatre, the Landlord’s Convention, the Wyndham Land Act and the Limerick pogrom of 1904, O’Grady used his newspaper for republishing much of his earlier writing, including ‘The Great Enchantment’, taken from *Toryism and the Tory Democracy*.

Michael McAteer, *Standish O’Grady, AE and Yeats: History, Politics, Culture*. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2002), 149.

<sup>39</sup> *The All Ireland Review*. 18, March, 1905. A friendship began between Hannay and O’Grady after the publication of *The Seething Pot* and in his autobiography Hannay describes O’Grady as “the father of all who wrote in Ireland at that time” and “to whom Anglo-Irish literature owes a great deal.” *Pleasant Places*, 160 & 60.

matter in the following terms: ““You are an Irish gentleman, Sir Gerald, and therefore one of the natural leaders of the Irish people.”” (SP, 9) Sir Gerald, however, immediately interjects and calls into question such a belief about the role of a gentleman: ““Excuse my interrupting you,’ said Sir Gerald, ‘but isn’t that a little mediaeval – out of date, you know? Of course, I may be prejudiced, coming from Australia, but I always thought that the idea of a gentleman, as a gentleman, being a leader had quite passed out of existence everywhere, especially, perhaps, in Ireland.”” (SP, 9)

O’Hara proceeds, however, in the true spirit of O’Grady, to demonstrate that Ireland is not nearly as democratically minded as Sir Gerald believes it to be,<sup>40</sup> though he warns that the landlord has not, as yet, answered this call for leadership and consequently, at least for the time being, the vacuum has been filled by others who are less suitable for the task:

Don’t you go starting life in Ireland with any of those fine democratic one-man’s-as-good-as-another notions. (...) they’re no kind of use in Ireland. We’re an aristocratic people, and we’re loyal to our leaders. We don’t set up to be independent sons of toil or any nonsense of that sort. Unfortunately, our gentry, our aristocracy, stand out and won’t lead us, so we fall back on priests and politicians. Leaders of one sort or another we must have, and we ought to have you and your class. (SP, 9 – 10)<sup>41</sup>

The reference here to the authority of politicians and the Catholic clergy in the absence of leadership from the gentry anticipates a development much later in the novel, to be discussed below, when O’Neill, briefly assisted by Sir Gerald, attempts to defeat the combined threat to him of both the clergy and the rebels within his own party. For now, however, O’Hara argues that the landed aristocracy should become

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<sup>40</sup> Phillip L. Marcus states that O’Grady “grew up with an aristocratic bias and a dislike for democracy.” Phillip L. Marcus, *Standish O’Grady*. (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1970), 59.

<sup>41</sup> The source of O’Hara’s assertions here would appear to be O’Grady’s *Toryism and the Tory Democracy*, first published in 1886, and described by McAteer as follows: “[t]he political *credo* of *Toryism and the Tory Democracy* essentially consisted of appealing to a traditional sense of loyalty O’Grady perceived among the peasant and proletarian classes in Ireland and Britain.” McAteer, *op. cit.*, 86. For example, one claim from *Toryism and the Tory Democracy* is as follows: “the modern Irishman, in spite of all his political rhodomontade, does very deeply respect rank and birth.” Quoted in *ibid.*, 56.



fully involved in the industrial revival. He urges Sir Gerald, with Swiftian zeal, to support Irish manufacture in every possible way:

Clogher House ought to be furnished with Donegal carpets; its chairs, tables, and sofas could be made in Dublin; linen of every kind must of course come from Belfast; the floors should be washed with Irish soap; the housemaid's caps could be best stiffened with Irish starch. Sir Gerald himself ought to smoke Irish manufactured tobacco, and light his pipe with an Irish match. (SP, 10)

Before the end of the chapter O'Hara concludes his conversation with Sir Gerald with an idea which will be echoed at the very end of the novel:

'Ireland might be united, and there's one man who could effect the union if he chose.' O'Hara sank his voice impressively, and lifted his cap from his head with a certain reverence. 'The King,' he said.

(...) 'you've got the usual notion of the King as a sort of glorified head of the Civil Service. Now, I dare say it's different with England. The Lord alone knows how an Englishman likes to be governed. But Ireland can't be ruled by cynical politicians in Secretaries' offices, or noblemen who drive four-in-hand to Punchestown with pretty wives beside them. Ireland wants a King. Give us a King to love us, and we will be a united nation and loyal – not loyal, mind you, to that system of government by people with long tongues and no consciences that's called the British Constitution, but loyal to the throne and to ourselves.' (SP, 12 – 13)

This reference to the imperative of royal leadership will be discussed in detail below, but for now it is sufficient to state that the novel begins, as quoted above, with a call for strong leadership and it will be Sir Gerald's challenge, as we shall see, to fulfil such a role.



## vi. 'redundance of blood'

Following his conversation with O'Hara, whom he arranges to meet again the following day, Sir Gerald is left alone with his memories and thoughts for the future. Here, in a passage which includes references to poetry, politics and journalism, Sir Gerald's perception of himself as both landlord and potential saviour of Ireland is revealed:

He had listened to his father's evening readings of Mangan's verses until he learnt to repeat them for himself. In lonely places he found expression for the passions which fill the souls of boys by shouting aloud Red Hugh O'Donnell's dedication of himself to the service of the Dark Rosaleen. As he grew older his father's teachings made him familiar with the hopes and ideals of Thomas Davis and the Young Ireland party. His day-dreams were of a return to take up the dropped thread of *The Nation's* work. He had pictured to himself a life spent in his country's service, a beginning in obscurity and poverty, a rising to influence and fame. (...) Then came the great surprise of his inheritance. He realized suddenly that he was indeed to return to Ireland, and that, not as an unknown adventurer, but as a great man, the owner of a vast estate, the bearer of an ancient title. (...) his old dreams came back to him, and on the voyage home he found himself again sketching out an heroic future. Ireland was spiritualized once more. She looked for his coming, awaiting him – 'The young deliverer of Kathaleen-ni-Houlahan.' (SP, 14 – 15)

The significance of the reference to James Clarence Mangan's 'Dark Rosaleen', first published in the *Nation* in 1846,<sup>42</sup> becomes apparent when we consider that as Sir Gerald recalls this poem he is travelling by sea to Ireland and thus it is obvious that he is now identifying himself with the speaker of Mangan's poem:

Over hills, and through dales,  
Have I roamed for your sake;  
All yesterday I sailed with sails

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<sup>42</sup> Sean Ryder (Ed.). *James Clarence Mangan: Selected Writings*. (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2004), 224.

On river and on lake.  
The Erne, ... at its highest flood,  
I dashed across unseen,  
For there was lightning in my blood,  
My Dark Rosaleen!  
My own Rosaleen!<sup>43</sup>

The mention of Red Hugh O'Donnell in the above passage from the novel is an allusion to Mangan's headnote to 'Dark Rosaleen', part of which indicates the poem's genesis in the Gaelic artistic tradition:

This impassioned song (...) was written in the reign of Elizabeth by one of the poets of the celebrated Tirconnellian chieftain, Hugh the Red O'Donnell. It purports to be an allegorical address from Hugh to Ireland on the subject of his love and struggles for her, and his resolve to raise her again to the glorious position she held as a nation before the irruption of the Saxon and Norman spoilers.<sup>44</sup>

Such information is of considerable significance when one notes that at this point in the novel Sir Gerald hopes to take the role of national saviour, even though traditionally, according to Mangan's headnote, people such as Sir Gerald's ancestors would have been regarded as the enemies of Ireland, from whom the country needed to be rescued. Furthermore, in his reference to 'Dark Rosaleen' here in the opening chapter of the novel, Birmingham may well have wanted the reader to recall the references to Catholic assistance, both clerical and political, in the first stanza of the poem:

O, my Dark Rosaleen,  
Do not sigh, do not weep!  
The priests are on the ocean green,  
They march along the Deep.  
There's wine .... from the royal Pope,

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<sup>43</sup> Second stanza (lines 13 – 21). *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

Upon the ocean green;  
And Spanish ale shall give you hope,  
My Dark Rosaleen!  
My own Rosaleen!  
Shall glad your heart, shall give you hope,  
Shall give you health, and help, and hope,  
My Dark Rosaleen!<sup>45</sup>

When one considers that *The Seething Pot* is primarily concerned with the struggle for leadership in Ireland between the forces of Catholicism – led by the Church – and the remnants of Protestant power – led by O’Neill, with the temporary assistance of Sir Gerald – it becomes obvious that the novel’s above reference to ‘Dark Rosaleen’ is an attempt by Birmingham to set before us a poetic tradition which normally sought Catholic assistance against Protestant rule in Ireland. This tradition, then, at this early point in the novel, is simultaneously invoked and radically undermined by the story of Sir Gerald as it begins now and then later unfolds, however unsuccessfully; by offering, instead of the Catholic Church, the figure of a Protestant landlord – historically maligned in nationalist lore – as a potential leader and national redeemer, Birmingham performs a bold early manoeuvre, while also setting his hero an unenviable challenge.

All of the above is deftly reinforced by a quotation from another poem by Mangan which appears at the end of the above paragraph from the novel. The poem in question is ‘Kathaleen Ny-Houlahan’, the final line of the fourth stanza of which reads: “We wait the Young Deliverer of Kathaleen Ny-Houlahan!”<sup>46</sup> Sir Gerald, then, inspired by Mangan, Thomas Davis, the Young Irelanders and “the poetry and the essays in *The Nation*” (SP, 17), at least for now believes himself to be the “Young Deliverer” of Mangan’s poem.

The reference to ‘Kathaleen Ny-Houlahan’ at this point in the novel requires further comment here because of its close proximity to O’Hara’s previously discussed thoughts about the need for regal governance in Ireland. Mangan’s ‘Kathaleen Ny-

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<sup>45</sup> First stanza (lines 1 – 12). *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>46</sup> Fourth stanza (line 16). The poem was first published in 1841. *Ibid.*, 113.



Houlahan' twice refers to the "king's son",<sup>47</sup> who would, the speaker claims, have the capacity to confer royal status on Kathleen, transforming her thereby. The son in question, referred to as the "Young Deliverer" in the line quoted in the above passage from the novel, is Charles Edward Stuart, the grandson of James II, sometimes referred to as the 'Young Pretender.'<sup>48</sup> The further significance of this reference to a royal national rescuer becomes evident when, immediately after the passage in question, Sir Gerald recalls O'Hara's previous comments about the king, which now begin to make "a certain appeal to the romance in him", though he is still ambivalent about the matter (SP, 15). Then, however, Birmingham appears to jettison subtlety, as Sir Gerald arrives in Kingstown and the chapter concludes with the young baronet observing the obelisk which marks the place where George IV, "who was ever popular in Ireland", once landed (SP, 16). Thus, even before Sir Gerald reaches Clogher, there are intimations of his potential as a national leader, a Protestant figure of authority who might transform the Ireland of Mangan's poem; Sir Gerald's ultimate failure to achieve this, as we shall see, is one of the main concerns of the novel as it reaches its conclusion.

One final point, for now, needs to be made about 'Dark Rosaleen', specifically concerning its final stanza, part of which reads as follows:

O! the Erne shall run red  
With redundance of blood,  
The earth shall rock beneath our tread,  
And flames wrap hill and wood,  
And gun-peal, and slogan cry,  
Wake many a glen serene,  
Ere you shall fade, ere you shall die,  
My Dark Rosaleen!  
My own Rosaleen!<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Lines 8 & 12. *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>48</sup> Charles Edward Stuart (1720 – 88). *Ibid.*, 457.

<sup>49</sup> Seventh stanza (lines 73 – 81). *Ibid.*, 224.

Thus the poem concludes with the promise of national insurrection and bloodshed as a means of attempting to rescue the country and it is precisely this aspect of nationalism – its propensity for violence – which Sir Gerald is confronted with in the following chapter, in a most unexpected setting; the topic of militant nationalism, already introduced in the prologue, will, as we shall see, continue to haunt the novel.

Before leaving for Clogher, Sir Gerald spends a day in Dublin and there he attends an art exhibition, at which the artist, Jim Tynan, shows him a painting unlike any of the others on display, while also revealing its biblical provenance:

In the foreground were two great dogs, Irish wolf-hounds, whose jaws dropped red. Behind there was the nude figure of a man viewed from the back. The light fell strongly on the left foot and leg, which were splashed with red. Sir Gerald realized that it was blood which dripped from the dogs' jaws and coloured the man's flesh. There was a dim suggestion of a human body, mangled and torn, in the background.

'We Catholics,' said the artist, 'are supposed never to read our Bibles, but that is a Scriptural subject. Do you remember how it says in the Psalms, "That thy foot may be dipped in the blood of thine enemies, and the tongue of thy dogs may be red through the same?"' (SP, 21)

When Sir Gerald voices his preference for a series of Irish sketches, seen prior to the above painting, Tynan's response anticipates the theme of militant nationalism, already foreshadowed in both the prologue and the reference to 'Dark Rosaleen', as discussed above:

'But all my work is Irish, this as well as the rest – national in sentiment, I mean.'

'But surely your conception of that bloodthirsty verse has nothing to do with Irish feelings.'

'I imagine,' said the artist, 'that we Irish have felt that way sometimes in the past. Perhaps we do still, now and then.' (SP, 22)

Later in the novel, as we shall see, Sir Gerald will be forced to deal with the issue of militant nationalism, but already his future stance on the matter may be discerned in his above reaction to Tynan's painting.

vii. *'the hope of rousing our gentry to a sense of patriotism is a delusion.'*<sup>50</sup>

After Tynan's exhibition and before he begins his journey to his estate in Mayo, Sir Gerald observes a group of people in his hotel and again he is confronted with a provocative image which anticipates the challenges inherent in his new life in Clogher; here a party of three, who are dining near him, symbolize everything that make the Anglo-Irish seem, to him, the most preposterous choice as leaders of the Irish people:

The girl was beautifully dressed; her rings and her necklace sparkled as she moved. She held herself confidently, and threw her laughter back in return for what the man said to her, as if she knew that admiration was her simple right. The attitudes and manner of the whole three told of a conviction that life was good, and that the best part of what was pleasant in it belonged, and ought to belong, to them. They were Irish people, for they spoke of hunting during the winter in places which bore Irish names, and of race-meetings at famous Irish courses. The young man told a story of an effort made by some 'blackguards belonging to the League' to stop the hunting near his place. The elder man replied with a bitter scoff at a political agitator, one Michael McCarty, whom he had helped to send to a well-deserved period of hard labour in gaol. The girl laughed.

'Do you remember,' she said, 'how old Lady Louisa used to speak of them as the "canaille"? It's just what they are.' (SP, 28 – 29)

This scene portrays the Ascendancy at their most contemptible: affluent, arrogantly confident and showing all the signs of a privileged, introverted existence which they believe is their incontrovertible birthright, they are entirely devoid of any sense of duty or responsibility. They demonstrate no serious commitment to Ireland as their

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<sup>50</sup> The words are spoken by Sir Gerald to Desmond O'Hara (SP, 132).



nationality is only signified by their references to Irish hunting grounds and race courses and they fail to show even the vaguest impulse to do anything for those less fortunate than themselves, instead displaying unmitigated disdain for those outside their class, dismissing them as the mere masses. Furthermore, they simply detest the nationalist activists around them, without even attempting to comprehend the grievances at the root of the problem. Such a depiction of the Ascendancy may have had its origins in a number of sermons preached by Hannay's father-in-law, Frederick Richards Wynne, a former Bishop of Killaloe, whose biography, which includes a selection of Wynne's sermons, was published by Hannay in 1897.

In a sermon entitled 'Cure for Stealing', which was preached at Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin in 1892, Wynne, invoking Thomas Drummond, outlined the injustice and perils of a parasitical class which wasn't prepared to contribute to society. Wynne's exhortation to act with a sense of duty is what will initially inform Sir Gerald's behaviour and this, at least temporarily, will differentiate him from the party at the table, who could be seen as symbolically representing those whom Wynne criticizes here:

Doubtless many of the cries levelled against what are called capitalists are but the old greediness to seize what does not belong to us. But underneath these wild and unreasonable war-cries there is a gradually rising and spreading conviction that the existence of a large class of idlers in a state is a grievous evil, that it has in it a continual menace to the stability of society, and that public opinion must more and more raise its indignant protest against able-bodied men fattening and luxuriating on the labours of others. In a word, that, as was said in a pregnant sentence some forty years ago, "Property has its duties as well as its rights."<sup>51</sup>

The following year, in 1893, Wynne's Harvest Festival sermon at Killaloe, entitled 'Christ's teaching on the Labour Question', lamented the perceived intrinsic sloth of the Irish upper classes, attributing many of society's ills to the tolerance of such indolence. The sermon then continued as an outspoken excoriation of the derogatory,

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<sup>51</sup> *The Life of Frederick Richards Wynne*, 206 – 207.

snobbish attitudes of this section of society and Wynne's words here would appear to be echoed by Birmingham, a few years later, in the above contemptuous references in the novel to "blackguards" and "the canaille":

You know what used to be considered in this Irish land as the description of a "real gentleman" – "one who never did a hand's turn of work in his life." I fear this description has been too often true. Many of our national miseries have resulted from this miserable social lie – that it is honourable to be idle.

And men – men who are called gentlemen – are sometimes even worse. I have heard such "gentlemen" give their orders to their grooms and their labourers in a voice which I should be ashamed to use to a dog. And they re-echo the same miserable cant about keeping the "lower classes" "in their place."

How dares the man to speak in bullying tones to another man because that other man is busy while he is enjoying himself – idling on his toil? Oh, ignorant and insolent slave-driver, a cut of the lash on your own back may be needed to teach you your position!

And what is resulting now from this heathen idea about keeping people in "their places"? There results the dangerous gulf between what are called the classes and the masses. The tone of insolent superiority on the one side awakens fierce and sullen resentment on the other. In the surly, defiant scowl on the face of the labourer as the rich man passes by, you see what is a constant threat to social order – the popular vengeance that purse-pride is laying up for itself.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, in an address to his synod at Killaloe in 1895, Wynne denounced the once leisured existence of the gentry, as embodied, for example, by the sports enthusiasts whom Sir Gerald observes with dismay in the above passage from the novel. Wynne continued, however, on a positive note, claiming that that class had recently been transformed and was now a productive element in society, seeking new, more

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 223 – 24.

worthwhile ideals and occupying a God-given role which Sir Gerald envisages for himself for much of the novel:

The ideal of the country gentleman whose whole business in life is sport, - a grown-up baby who does nothing but play, only exchanging the form of his play-toys, taking up dogs and horses and cards instead of dolls and rattles, - this ideal among educated men is almost extinct. And the stern logic of facts has made most of our Irish gentlemen feel (and I think we may be very thankful for being made learn that lesson) that 'if any man will not work, neither shall he eat.' If in times past Irish 'squires' and Irish 'squireens' were too often idle and wasteful, mere cumberers of the ground, their descendants in the present day have had these vices pretty well lashed out of them. And, as a rule, they have found it necessary to 'learn and labour to get their own living, and do their duty' in the very difficult state of life 'into which it has pleased God to call them.'<sup>53</sup>

Wynne's more favourable comments here, however, are not initially reflected in Sir Gerald's private reaction to the group of three dining near him in his hotel. Instead, he is at first convinced that such a class could never govern Ireland: "Sir Gerald felt that these people belonged to a different world from that of the men and women whom he had met in the afternoon. They represented the class that O'Hara had said ought to be leading the people. What folly it seemed to think such a thing possible!" (SP, 29)

Then, suddenly, Sir Gerald realizes that he is also of this class, as was his father, whose politics were diametrically opposed to those expressed by the above gentry. Thus the notion of Protestant leadership in Ireland, which he has just dismissed as impossible, quickly becomes a feasible prospect as Sir Gerald becomes aware that although his pedigree is as fine as that of the group near him, his behaviour need not necessarily be the same and thus he could, like his father, be the obverse of what he has just observed and been appalled by; now it is as if Sir Gerald unexpectedly envisages for himself the new reality of his class as described by Wynne above:

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.



He remembered, with a sensation of pleasure which surprised him, that he, too, belonged to this class – belonged to it by right of birth and wealth and station. (...) It had been among these people, or those like them, that his father had moved. (...) And his father had given it all up and gone out to the others, the people, the ‘canaille’ (...). Certainly his father had attempted to lead the people; ineffectually, perhaps, but even his attempt made the thing seem possible. Perhaps, after all, O’Hara was not so foolish as he seemed. (SP, 29)

Thus, emboldened by the memory of his father and the exhortations of O’Hara, Sir Gerald finally arrives in Clogher, where he initially assumes that a cheering crowd and band on the platform of the railway station are there specifically to welcome him. However, the assumption is rapidly revealed to be unfounded when he is informed by his agent, Mr Godfrey, that the group are actually there to meet Michael McCarty, a local MP who has just been released from prison. Hence it becomes immediately apparent that respect for Sir Gerald will by no means be automatic, despite his late father’s politics; in fact the opposite is the case in this situation as before Sir Gerald and his agent leave the station the former is threatened and cursed by the crowd. Clearly, Sir Gerald will have to earn the esteem of these people as his position as landlord seems to provoke resentment rather than admiration.

#### **viii. Clogher: churches and clergy**

Shortly before arriving in Clogher, as Sir Gerald is travelling through Connaught on his way to the town, the narrative describes the ecclesiastical architecture visible from the train:

The spires and towers and walls of great garish churches overtop and dwarf the houses. Featureless ranges of convent buildings have seized the vantage-ground of neighbouring hills. The church has dominated these towns, but not, as sometimes in England, where a minster looks down like a venerable mother upon the streets beneath. Here the ecclesiastical buildings are obtrusive, self-assertive, new. (SP, 31)

A few pages later, just after Sir Gerald has arrived at his destination, there is a description of Clogher's churches, but here architectural obtrusiveness is unambiguously attributed to one particular denomination and the symbolism of the passage in general leaves little to the imagination:

The town of Clogher consists mainly of one long street, which runs straight to the gates of Sir Gerald's demesne. At one end stands the Roman Catholic church, obtrusively raw and remarkable, even among Irish Roman Catholic churches, for the peculiar hideousness of its architecture. (...) At the other end of the street, on a patch of ground cut out of the demesne, stands the fane of the Church of Ireland. It has turned its back deliberately, even ostentatiously, on the town. Within the locked gates that lead to it, the gravel walk is smoothly raked, and the grass on the graves trim and tidy. The edifice itself is decent, according to the conception of the old Ecclesiastical Commissioners. Compared to its newer and wealthier rival, it has the prim air of a decayed gentlewoman in the presence of some self-assertive *nouveau riche*. (SP, 37)

The Catholic church here, although it may be vulgar, is also both intrusive and wealthy – in other words crudely powerful – and this, as we shall see later, is Birmingham's symbolic prologue to his portrayal of the clergy of that Church in this novel, a depiction which proved particularly controversial after publication. The Church of Ireland church, on the other hand, is shown to be intimately linked with the demesne, being physically on Sir Gerald's land, and, as with the unpatriotic landlords which both Hannay and Birmingham so often admonished, this church building proudly refuses to involve itself in the life of the community and thus, as George Boyce claims, this description of Clogher's Church of Ireland church "expressed symbolically the withdrawal of Anglicanism from its proper role in modern Ireland."<sup>54</sup> In its self-imposed, rigid isolation it simply decays and its sterility and lifelessness lend it the air of a mausoleum rather than an active component of modern Irish life. Thus, though it might appear more decorous than its rival at the other end of the street, it has embraced a largely passive role; one of its few activities being to prepare a grave for itself. Therefore, in this brief description of a single church,

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<sup>54</sup> George D. Boyce, *Nineteenth-Century Ireland: The Search for Stability*. (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd, 1990), 218.



Birmingham conveys his concerns about the Church of Ireland as a whole, while simultaneously pointing towards the close association between the Church and the Irish landlords, the two aspects of Irish life which dominate his early fiction and much of his later non-fiction and the two institutions which were, he repeatedly argued, guaranteed to perish together if they did not positively participate in the affairs of their rapidly changing country.<sup>55</sup>

Canon Johnston, like his church building, as discussed above, is portrayed in the text as being obdurately politically conservative. For example, early in the novel the clergyman hopes that Sir Gerald has not inherited his father's rebel-blood and his concerns about the matter are reflected in his thoughts on Sir Gerald's predecessors

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<sup>55</sup> Another example of such a symbolic depiction of a Church of Ireland church appeared on 16 January, 1909, when Birmingham had the first piece of a two-part article entitled 'A Doomed Aristocracy' published in *Westminster Gazette*. In the following extract the initial detailed description of a church edifice soon becomes a synecdochical analysis of an ecclesiastical institution which is atrophying in arrogant isolation, with the emphasis on the surrounding graves being a portentous indication of the ultimate destiny in store for the Church of Ireland if it continues in such a state. However, the Church's capacity to salvage itself is evident in its obvious strength and it is this point that allows Birmingham to make a comparison between the Church and the Irish aristocracy, for the latter, though also incorporated into this portrait of aloof decline, like the church which it has made and owns, also has the strength to avoid its own extinction:

The church stands stoutly on the very summit of the hill. Its bold square tower faces west, fronts the storms which sweep in unbroken from the Atlantic. It is built of great blocks of greyish-purple stone and roofed with blackish-purple slates. There is no beauty about it, but it gives the beholder a sense of uncompromising, defiant, isolated strength. No dwellings of poor men cluster in its shelter. There is nothing near it except graves and time-worn, weather-battered memorials of the dead. The path to the door is grass-grown, little trodden, and by very few feet. Like the rusted railings round the graves and the green-stained marble of the tombstones, the church itself has felt the touch of time and decay. But age, so beautiful elsewhere, has given no venerable softness to this church. The climbing ivy has shunned its walls. They are still bare, still angular, still stark and rigid. The slipped slate on the roof, the broken iron down-pipe, rust-eaten, the sagging eave-shoot choked with moulding grass, are the witnesses here of the passage of time, of the coming of old age. It is impossible to think of human love hallowing this building, even the love of those who have been carried to its font or murmured marriage vows within its walls. It is, in its decay, as it has always been, aloof, alone. It retains in its decay the signs of one great quality, sheer upright strength – strength which defies storms from a hill-top, which scorns tenderness, which values truth, seen clearly because narrowly, above love.

It is, as all the works of men are, not so much a type as an actual embodiment of the spirit of those who made and own it. Just as it is, so is the Irish aristocracy which is perishing (...). This aristocracy of ours is passing, unsung, unlamented, in such a way that the world, cherishing a last vision of it, will think of it hereafter as a class of higglers driving belated bargains in a failing market. They have lived, these gentlemen of Ireland, aloof from their people and their land. They are dying aloof from them now. They have earned in the past no love. Humble folk have not gathered round them for shelter and protection. No beauty of service or sympathy has won the heart of Ireland to them. And yet they were men and strong men. They are in their isolation and their decay, strong men still.

*Westminster Gazette*, 16, January, 1909. The second part of the article appeared in the same paper on 23, January, 1909.



and his conviction that “both the imbecile [Sir Giles Geoghegan] and the miser [Sir Giles’s father] were to be preferred to the Young Ireland leader [Gerald Geoghegan].” (SP, 40) The Catholic clergy, however, as the next chapter of the novel reveals, have unequivocally taken up the nationalist cause, for the time being at least, and thus the novel moves closer to the ultimate contest for Catholic or Protestant leadership, the result of which will become evident later in the text, as we shall see.

The nationalist Member of Parliament Michael McCarty, newly released from prison, is soon outside the local presbytery being welcomed by Fr Fahy and his curates, and it is not long before he is brought inside for a meal. At this point there is a seemingly immaterial remark made about the meat to be served to McCarty, but the comment clearly serves to convey that it is Fr Fahy, who has just aligned himself with McCarty, who is the most important member of the community, not Sir Gerald. The passage in question begins with Fr Fahy asking:

‘Will you eat your mutton roast or boiled, Mr. McCarty? (...) I told McKeown to give us the best meat he had for to-day.’

‘Faith, and it’s yourself knows how to choose a joint, Father Fahy. I’ll engage McKeown didn’t send the equal to that down to Sir Gerald to-day.’

‘It would be queer if he did. Who’d have a right to the best if it wasn’t the priest?’

‘And the people’s representative,’ said Father Fahy, ‘the martyr to the cause.’ (SP, 43)

Clearly Sir Gerald has not inherited the pre-eminent position in his new surroundings and, the above excerpt implies, as indeed the novel does as it unfolds, Sir Gerald will have to enhance and broadcast his nationalist credentials if he is to occupy a leadership role in this community. Fr Fahy’s right to the best meat from the butcher, as mentioned in the above dialogue, deserves further attention here, especially when this moment from the novel is contrasted with Birmingham’s description of the hierarchical method of meat distribution in Westport during his time as rector there. When the following extract from Birmingham’s autobiography is read in conjunction with the above lines from *The Seething Pot*, written while Birmingham was living in Westport, the significance of the above fictional conversation is further underlined:

There was (...) a regular butcher in the town (...) who supplied us with most of our meat. The principle on which she conducted her business was peculiar. When an animal was slain, the best joints, such as a sirloin, were allotted to the customers of highest social standing, in strict order of precedence. When Lord Sligo was in residence no one else could get a sirloin. It was regarded as no more than right that he should have the best joints and it was no use anybody ordering it beforehand. When he was not in Westport it was possible for humbler people like ourselves to get a good joint. But anyone much lower down in the social scale than we were, never got a good joint at all. I remember an Englishman who came to live in Westport asking me quite seriously whether the Irish beasts had sirloins. He said he had been ordering sirloins ever since he had been at Westport and he had never once succeeded in getting one. I told him sympathetically that he never would, unless he could persuade the government to give him a knighthood. It was not a question of paying more or less than other people. All joints, good or poor, cost the same per pound. I think it must have been the Glendenning, whose statue adorned the market-place, who introduced this aristocratic way of doing business.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, with the above historical information in mind, the previously discussed fictional moment, though seemingly unimportant, may actually be read as descriptive of a significant power shift involving the loss of Ascendancy prestige and the consequent empowerment of the Catholic clergy, a theme which will, as already stated, dominate much of the rest of the text, as well as Birmingham's second novel, to be discussed in the next chapter of this thesis. Soon afterwards, as if to emphasize the broader significance of the distribution of meat, as discussed at the table, just before McCarty leaves the presbytery Fr Fahy informs him that "John O'Neill isn't quite as big a man as he used to be" and the priest warns him not to allow himself be bullied by O'Neill (SP, 46); clearly the sectarian contest for power has already begun and, now that the ascendancy of the Catholic clergy has been established – by the previously discussed ecclesiastical architecture and by the above reference to meat distribution – the odds are, even at the outset, very much against the Protestant O'Neill.

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<sup>56</sup> *Pleasant Places*, 106 – 107. Glendenning was an eighteenth century agent of the Sligo family and ruled the town, according to Birmingham, "as a dictator." *Ibid.*, 97.



### **ix. John O'Neill: William O'Brien and Charles Stewart Parnell**

Our introduction to John O'Neill begins with a description of the location of his home: "John O'Neill lived about two miles from the town of Clogher. His house nestled down to the shore of one of the innumerable little inlets of the great bay. At full tide the sea washed against the wall at the bottom of the lawn." (SP, 47) As Hilda Anne O'Donnell shows, these lines from the novel correspond exactly to Michael MacDonagh's description of William O'Brien's house in *The Life of William O'Brien*: "He and his wife settled down in a romantically situated house by Clew Bay, Mayo, with its hundred islands. Mallow Cottage, they called it. The waters of the bay lapped its lawn."<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, Therese Law points out that after 1900 O'Brien spent more and more time at Mallow Cottage, near Westport, where Hannay knew him.<sup>58</sup>

O'Brien had founded the United Irish League in 1898, the objective of which was the redistribution of the western grass ranches to small farmers. The League was militant especially from its foundation to 1901 and between 1906 and 1909 and such activity took place in eastern Connaught, where the letting of large grass ranches to graziers on short tenancies stood in contrast to the position of the established tenants, often on poorer holdings of uneconomic size.<sup>59</sup> Later in the novel, as we shall see, the problem of the distribution of land on Sir Gerald's estate is finally solved by O'Neill, whose solution shows the influence of the League's approach to the issue, as outlined above.

O'Brien's United Irish League, in fact, was the reason for what is most likely Hannay's first documented public statement on the topic of Irish landlordism, published as a letter in *All Ireland Review* in 1902. Addressed to the editor of the paper, Standish James O'Grady, Hannay's letter begins by condemning the threatening rhetoric of the United Irish League and then refers to a report by a committee to the Westport District Council on the Congested Districts of the union; it is at this point that Hannay makes the following impassioned remarks, depicting as irrational and regressive a policy that was seen to be progressive at the time:

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<sup>57</sup> Hilda Anne O'Donnell, *op. cit.*, 8 – 9. The original source of the quotation is: Michael MacDonagh, *The Life of William O'Brien, the Irish Nationalist: A Biographical Study of Irish Nationalism Constitutional and Revolutionary*. (London: Ernest Benn Ltd., 1928), 146.

<sup>58</sup> Therese Law, *op. cit.*, 26.

<sup>59</sup> S. J. Connolly (Ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Irish History*. (Oxford: University Press, 1999), 567.



Is it really politic to banish, if possible, all large land holders? I know, more or less, either personally or by reputation nearly all the men named on the list in the Report. (...) some of the names, both of landlords and tenants, are those of farmers. They rear cattle, but they also till their land. They introduce new agricultural machinery, experiment in new methods, and improve breeds. They do this because they are men of energy, intelligence, and ambition. In virtue of these qualities, they have acquired large tracts of land. Because they have these large tracts they are able to do work of immense value which would be simply impossible to the tenant of twenty or thirty acres. Ought these men to be deprived of their land? On the other hand, is it possible to differentiate? The U.I.L. refuses to do so. Even this report sees only the fact that some men hold more than their share, and others less than their share of land. In the revolution that is coming will anyone be able to see, or rather, to recognise, more than this?

Using biblical language he continues to predict the detrimental effects of this levelling down approach to land-ownership and prophesies doom if the situation continues:

It seems as if we shall be obliged to destroy the righteous with the wicked. The loss will certainly be ours if we do. We shall deprive ourselves of the services of the very men by whom improvements are effected. Afterwards we shall not improve. It does not seem to be in accordance with experience that even an ideally benevolent "board" can do the sort of work effectively that a good farmer does for the country when he works for himself.<sup>60</sup>

O'Brien, then, due to his connection with the issue of landlordism in Connaught at the time and because Hannay knew him and had been provoked by the policy of the League before he wrote his first novel, is not a surprising choice as part of the basis for the character in *The Seething Pot* who politically confronts landlordism. O'Brien's interest in the landlord, however, began, in fact, in the previous century and some of what he said then may be relevant when considering O'Neill's desire for Sir Gerald's help, despite the former's position on the landlord class as a whole. For example, O'Brien delivered a lecture in the Leinster Hall, Dublin, in 1887, later published as a

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<sup>60</sup> *All Ireland Review*. 20, October, 1902; the letter was dated September 29<sup>th</sup>.

chapter in his book entitled *Irish Ideas*, which appeared in 1893;<sup>61</sup> that chapter is entitled ‘The Lost Opportunities of the Irish Gentry’ and many of its sentiments reappear in Birmingham’s writings. In an address which MacDonagh claims “is important as an expression of the settled policy of his career”,<sup>62</sup> O’Brien explained the nature of the opportunity which the gentry had lost. In words echoed by Desmond O’Hara in *The Seething Pot*, he referred to the Irish people’s instinctive respect for those of exalted social class:

they had the country and people for hundreds of years like potter’s clay in their hands. If they had chosen to be leaders instead of being their slave-drivers, the Irish aristocracy might have had a great career. Unquestionably, rank and brilliancy and chivalry, and all the qualities that appertain to a privileged, leisured class, have always had a fascination for the Irish people. Men of that class who, instead of standing apart in cold and haughty isolation, have given their hearts and lives to the rescue of their down-trodden nation, are the heroes and idols of our history – men like Sarsfield, Grattan, Lord Edward Fitzgerald, Davis, Smith O’Brien, and Charles Stewart Parnell. Did the Irish people ever ask what was these men’s religious faith, or in what century their ancestors came over? (...) If ever men were petted as leaders, and besought to become leaders of the Irish people, it was the Irish gentry.<sup>63</sup>

After detailing the numerous occasions when the Irish gentry squandered their potential to lead the Irish people, he describes their consequent diminution of status and power in the present. However, though democracy is replacing oligarchy in Ireland, he insists that this does not necessarily mean that the gentry no longer have a role to play in the new dispensation. In language that is significantly replete with theological concepts such as sacrifice, forgiveness and redemption, he expounds his conviction that there is now only one way in which the gentry can save themselves and thus he outlines their final opportunity:

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<sup>61</sup> William O’Brien, *op. cit.*, 13 – 29. The lecture was delivered on 8 September, 1887. *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>62</sup> MacDonagh, *op. cit.*, 92.

<sup>63</sup> O’Brien, *op. cit.*, 17 & 18.

I think the lesson is beginning to impress itself upon the comprehension of the most fossilised old gentleman in the land – that a man's importance and his place in the esteem of his fellow-countrymen will depend for the future in Ireland, not upon the length of his purse, not the length of his pedigree, but upon his usefulness to the community and his readiness to labour and to sacrifice himself for the benefit of his fellow-countrymen.

(...) The Irish people have not the slightest dislike to a man merely because he has a good coat to his back, or because he comes of an ancient family. The objection to Mr. Parnell's class is that it produces only one Mr. Parnell to ten thousand aliens or enemies and oppressors of the people. If in the morning the Irish gentry proposed frankly to draw a wet sponge over the past, there is not a prominent politician in Ireland who would answer with a churlish or contumelious word. They would be welcomed. They would be honoured. (...) Irish forgiveness is to be had to this hour for the honest asking. A single Smith O'Brien redeems a whole pedigree of Murrough the Burners and Black Inchiquins.

(...) There will be false gods no more in Ireland, but for good men and capable who have a heart for the miseries of their countrymen and the will to labour for their alleviation, there is still, and there will be always, welcome, honour, and gratitude, no matter what their class or from what race they may have sprung.

(...) Finally, the revolutionary spirit of Ireland (...) has a heart equally large and equally warm for Protestant and for Catholic – for every man who has a heart or hand for Ireland.<sup>64</sup>

Thus O'Brien's point is that, notwithstanding the gentry's deplorable record of contempt and savagery, they were by no means precluded from involvement in the new Ireland then emerging, though their political survival was entirely contingent on their willingness to commit themselves to the welfare of the country and its people. This is one of the main themes of *The Seething Pot*, and it is a recurring motif in

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 25, 26 & 27.



much of Birmingham's other writings as well, and for this reason O'Brien's thoughts on the gentry are important when considering Birmingham's contribution to the debate. However, despite the novel's allusion to O'Brien's place of residence, it quickly becomes evident that the figure of John O'Neill was also inspired by another figure from the then recent Irish past, who, in fact, had been closely associated with O'Brien for years and thus it is possible that Birmingham saw O'Brien as a tangible link to this other, recently deceased hero. Shortly after O'Neill's house is described we are offered the following portrait of the owner:

As the leader of the National Parliamentary party he was cut off absolutely from the society of the few gentry who lived in the neighbourhood. Himself a gentleman and sprung from an historic Irish family, he not only did not care to cultivate, but deliberately avoided, social intimacy with most of the men who followed his leading in the House of Commons. His religion formed yet another safeguard for his solitude, for he was Protestant. His own co-religionists hated him heartily. The Roman Catholic priesthood distrusted him even while they supported his policy.

On the afternoon when Michael McCarty set out from the priest's house to call on him, he was idling in a deep chair in his study with a French translation of one of Gabriele d'Annunzio's novels. (...) His listless attitude suggested nothing of the boundless energy and force which had made him the unquestioned leader of a great party, the dictator of a nation's policy. (...) John O'Neill was a puzzle to his enemies and friends alike. (...) It was rumoured amongst his supporters that he had once said to a Prime Minister: 'I have no objection whatever to selling my eighty votes to you for any purpose, good or bad, but I must have my price.' John O'Neill's price was an independent Parliament for Ireland. (SP, 47 – 48)

The figure of Charles Stewart Parnell, of course, inevitably comes to mind: the Protestant leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party. Furthermore the reference to O'Neill's historic family background is probably an allusion to the five Members of Parliament amongst Parnell's ancestors since they settled in Ireland in the seventeenth century and in particular to Sir John Parnell who was Chancellor of the Exchequer in

Grattan's Parliament and who lost office when he opposed the Act of Union.<sup>65</sup> Though the days of Grattan's Parliament have long since passed in the world of *The Seething Pot*, on numerous occasions, as above, O'Neill is seen to desire, more than anything else, a similar Parliament for the Ireland of his time. Indeed, much of what he stands for is merely a means of achieving this principal objective: "Everything was subordinated to the desire of obtaining a practically independent Irish Parliament. The Land Question, which seemed to bulk so large in Irish life, above all else he regarded as of only second-rate importance. He used it as a means of keeping up the enthusiasm of the mass of the Irish voters." (SP, 157)

O'Neill's unremitting determination to acquire such a system of government for his country is epitomized in his willingness to sell his eighty votes to a government in crisis for a very specific price: "They will offer me another Land Act, but it won't do. My price is an Irish Parliament. If the Government won't promise it – and I don't see how they can – the Opposition will. My game is to wreck the Government." (SP, 159) On two other occasions he speaks of such a Parliament as a foregone conclusion, once in conversation with Sir Gerald when he is reported as having delivered a lecture to the latter on the economic difficulties which "lay before an Irish Parliament, when such a thing existed." (SP, 213) Shortly afterwards, in a speech about the bond between nationalists and the Catholic clergy, he asserts that this "confederacy is already breaking up, and can't survive the first independent Irish Parliament." (SP, 224) In this regard O'Neill's character is clearly based on Parnell and his beliefs about the short-lived Irish Parliament of the late eighteenth century.

Parnell often referred in idealistic terms to Grattan's Parliament and on two well-known occasions he made a theatrical gesture towards the building itself: in September 1881, after a Land League rally, and in December 1890, following his defeat at Kilkenny. Furthermore, exactly a century after the institution of the independent Irish Parliament in 1782, Parnell established the Irish National League, the principal aim of which was Home Rule "which Parnell generally represented as amounting to the restitution of 'Grattan's Parliament'."<sup>66</sup> He famously expressed his

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<sup>65</sup> Noel Kissane, *Parnell: A Documentary History*. (Dublin: Criterion Press, 1991), 1.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 107 & 57.



desire for the political reincarnation of the late eighteenth century Irish Parliament in a speech in his constituency of Cork city on 21 January 1885:

I do not know whether England will be wise in time and concede to constitutional arguments and methods the restitution of that which was stolen from us towards the close of the last century (cheers). (...) We cannot ask for less than restitution of Grattan's Parliament (loud cheers), with its important privileges and wide and far-reaching constitution. We cannot under the British constitution ask for more than the restitution of Grattan's Parliament (renewed cheers).<sup>67</sup>

Parnell's association with Grattan's Parliament survived undiminished in people's imaginations even after his death, as the *Illustrated London News* noted in an article describing his funeral: "College Green was one dense mass of men and women, and the most striking scene of all was, perhaps, the passage by the famous old Parliament House, whose glories Mr Parnell had come so near to reviving."<sup>68</sup> Thus when we consider what has already been discussed regarding Hannay's thoughts on Grattan's Parliament, as revealed in 'A Neglected Chapter of Irish History', it quickly becomes apparent that Hannay must have seen Parnell as the tragically failed potential reviver of that Parliament.

Two final points concerning the above passage from the novel remain to be made. Firstly, the description of O'Neill mentions his social alienation from the neighbouring gentry, a consequence of his nationalism and a fact which is emphasized at the end of the chapter when it is revealed that the last time O'Neill went to church Canon Johnston preached a sermon in which he compared the political leader to Judas Iscariot (SP, 56), the archetypal pariah; later in the novel, as we shall see, Sir Gerald will also encounter the reality of being a social outcast. Secondly, it is notable that in our introduction to O'Neill he is described as reading "one of Gabriele d'Annunzio's novels." Though the purpose of Birmingham's reference to the then contemporary Italian writer<sup>69</sup> may now seem somewhat inscrutable, further investigation is clearly

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<sup>67</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 22, January, 1885. Quoted in *ibid.*, 62.

<sup>68</sup> *Illustrated London News*, 17, October, 1891. Quoted in *ibid.*, 107.

<sup>69</sup> Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863 – 1938).



required when one considers that d'Annunzio has been identified as the "most famous writer in the world in 1900."<sup>70</sup> Of particular importance here is his fiction from the late nineteenth century, specifically his first novel entitled *Il Piacere*, published in 1889, which portrays an aristocracy living according to the principles of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*,<sup>71</sup> the ideal superior man of the future who would transcend traditional Christian morality to invent and implement his own values. *Il Piacere* was the first book of the trilogy *I Romanzi della Rosa*, the other novels being: *L'Innocente* and *Trionfo della Morte*, published separately in 1892 and 1894 respectively. The overarching theme of this trilogy is significant when one considers the above characterization of O'Neill as a strong leader and his eventual defeat and death at the end of the novel:

Although these novels deal with very different themes and settings, they all have in common a male character who is seeking spiritual renewal after a dissipated life and who wants to affirm his intellectual superiority, which places him above the average man and outside the suffocating and hypocritical conventions of bourgeois morality. This portrait of a potential Dannunzian superman only partly echoes the Nietzschean *Übermensch*. D'Annunzio's hero is invariably bound to fail.<sup>72</sup>

The relevance of such background becomes evident when one considers that after O'Neill's meeting with McCarty, during which the latter is treated as a mere underling, the issue of Protestant or Catholic leadership is briefly discussed between O'Neill and his wife. Here O'Neill asserts an Arnoldian understanding of the Celtic people's alleged need for a dominant master and in this context it is clear that O'Neill sees himself as an alternative to the influence of the Catholic Church and thus he emerges as a potential Nietzschean *Übermensch* whose objective is to supersede the authority of the Church of the majority. However, the legitimacy of such Protestant leadership is questioned by Mrs O'Neill and this issue will return to trouble both

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<sup>70</sup> Louis Kibler in Peter Bondanella & Julia Conaway Bondanella (Eds), *Cassell Dictionary of Italian Literature*. (London: Cassell, 1996), 151.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>72</sup> Anna Meda in Gaetana Marrone (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Italian Literary Studies 1*. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 540.

O'Neill and Sir Gerald later in the novel, as we shall see. The passage in question begins with O'Neill saying to his wife:

'You don't understand the Celt. He's not a man to reason with or persuade. He requires a master, someone to stand over him with a whip. If I didn't bully him, someone else would. Probably he'd lie down on his back and ask his priest to walk on him.'

'Exactly,' said Mrs. O'Neill; 'but you forget that his priest has a sort of right to walk on him, and you haven't. Take care he doesn't find that out.' (SP, 54)

#### **x. Sir Gerald: landlord**

As the above conversation proceeds it unfolds that O'Neill is keen to secure the assistance of Sir Gerald, who, because he is a landlord but also the son of a rebel, at least appears to promise more than most of the other gentry of the time:

I feel as if I would do anything almost to have just one man of position and property on my side. If there was the faintest chance that the gentry of the country would ever do anything else than lick the boots of Englishmen, I'd chuck up this wretched land agitation to-morrow. But they won't. I know them. They care nothing about Ireland. They'd see her turned into an English shire to-morrow without an effort to help her, if they could only make sure of getting their beggarly rents. But this young man is different. (SP, 55)

Sir Gerald's ultimate challenge, as we shall see, will be to fulfil such expectations, but in the meantime he begins to settle into his new surroundings and he shows a genuine desire to prove himself as a good landlord. He is determined to familiarize himself with both the management of his property and the recent legislation which has affected Irish land tenure. Sir Gerald's initial attitude to his own position is significant: "Sir Gerald entered on his investigation with a prejudice against his own position. He had learnt somehow to think of Irish landlords as a race of tyrants from whose clutches benevolent Governments were trying to rescue helpless tenants." (SP, 57) However, he quickly discovers that this is not the case, but rather that a series of mistaken government interventions has resulted in an impasse: "He realized with a



good deal of surprise that most of the enactments of Parliament dealing with Irish land were well-intentioned blunders which had resulted in a kind of deadlock. Landlords could not, and tenants would not, attempt any improvements.” (SP, 57) The Land Acts alluded to here have already been discussed in the introduction to this chapter, but now the chief point is that within this context of deadlock Sir Gerald will attempt to achieve something, as the novel continues.

With regard to his own estate, Sir Gerald is happy to discover that it has been managed for many years “with the greatest consideration for the tenants.” (SP, 57) Here rents are low and tenants, many of whom are very poor, are rarely pressed for payment, even if they are in arrears. Furthermore, evictions occur only in the most extreme of circumstances and there is even a private list of charities “from which it appeared that considerable sums were paid every year for the relief of exceptional distress among the poorer tenants.” (SP, 58) Clearly Sir Gerald has inherited a system which is generously compassionate, rather than tyrannous, and thus he has the opportunity of building on a tradition of good relations with the tenants of the estate.

Sir Gerald soon realizes the enormous importance of the estate for the community as a whole when it is revealed to him that it annually pays the rector’s stipend, while also funding the upkeep of the schools and other charities in the parish. In addition, an annual sum is paid to the Catholic administrator of the parish and we are informed that it “gratified Sir Gerald to think that the religion of the majority of his tenants received substantial help from the estate.” (SP, 58) Although this donation initially simply appears to stress Sir Gerald’s benevolent, inclusive paternalism, it is quickly made clear that this yearly payment has an entirely different purpose, far removed from Sir Gerald’s first concept of it as an act of sheer generosity; Godfrey explains that it is essentially a method of maintaining ““a sort of hold over Father Fahy. It might be stopped, you know, and – well, as long as it is paid things won’t get much beyond the talking stage here. The estate will be easily managed.””(SP, 59) Sir Gerald replies that it therefore constitutes a bribe to the priest to keep his people quiet: ““It is my danegelt.”” (SP, 59) The use here of the latter term is significant as it, in itself, describes the relationship between the landlord and the Catholic Church at this point



in the novel:<sup>73</sup> the fact that Sir Gerald, like his predecessors, is effectively paying protection money to the Catholic Church, underlines the considerable power of that Church, as well as its potential to be an inimical force in relation to the landlord, all of which the novel will deal with in more detail later, as we shall see. In response to Sir Gerald's unease about the matter, Godfrey insists on the basic pragmatism of the bribe, mentioning how it even saved the estate from the ravages of the recent Land War:

I prefer to say that you liberally support the Roman Catholic clergy, and that they are not so hostile to you as to most of the Protestant landlords. This estate came through the bad times better than any other in the country. The agitation here never reached a dangerous head. If the rest of the gentry had done as your family did, there never would have been a land agitation. The priests would have been our most valuable allies. (SP, 59 – 60)

Thus, the necessity of pacifying the Catholic clergy so that the landlord may go about his business in relative peace is clear, and although Sir Gerald still dislikes the method used to achieve this, he decides not to interfere, but by now the potential power of the Catholic Church has been further underlined, thus preparing us for that Church's eventual clash with O'Neill, as described later in the novel.

Soon afterwards Sir Gerald reads an article in *The Connaught News* about his recent arrival in Clogher and it is a powerful reminder of the negative public perception of the landlord. Entitled 'A Degenerate Son' it begins by portraying Gerald Geoghegan in mythical terms and describes his departure from Ireland as kneeling crowds wept on the shore; these are the people for whom Sir Gerald's father "braved death and suffered imprisonment and banishment." (SP, 62) The article then proceeds to juxtapose this scene with a description of Sir Gerald's arrival in Ireland, whom the crowds met "only to scorn and 'vituperate'" (SP, 62), the only person there to welcome him being Godfrey, described as "the hired tool of his tyrannies." (SP, 62) The crowd, however, offers a positive reception to McCarty, described by the reporter

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<sup>73</sup> A Danegeld was a land tax levied in Anglo-Saxon England during the reign of King Ethelred to raise funds for protection against Danish invaders. Later the term was used to refer to taxes collected for national defence by the Norman kings until 1162. Judy Pearsall (Ed.), *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*. (Oxford: University Press, 1998), 465.

as “returning emaciated from the prison-house of the oppressor”; the article continues: “The enthusiasm of a great people greeted this martyr as he stepped from his third-class carriage. ‘The curled and scented representative of the ancient tyranny descends from the luxurious cushions of his saloon. Which of the two is the true son, the spiritual son, of Gerald Geoghegan the rebel?’” (SP, 63)

The article’s suggestion that McCarty, rather than Sir Gerald, is the more likely successor to Gerald Geoghegan reinforces what is becoming increasingly and depressingly apparent to Sir Gerald: that birth, wealth and station count for nothing in the Ireland to which he has recently moved. Indeed, if anything, his class actually militates against him making any progress in his new environment, a fact which is conveyed, for example, by how the writer of the above article reviles the trappings of Sir Gerald’s first-class carriage. Now he must contend with priests as well as starving martyrs such as McCarty, while his father’s memory serves only to repeatedly condemn him, for he has yet to show signs of a rebel heart. Thus, though Gerald Geoghegan initially serves as an inspirational figure for his son, a model-landlord to emulate, the novel is later shot through with moments such as this one, when Sir Gerald is confronted or haunted by the memory of his father as the mythical, ideal patriotic landlord and it is at junctures such as these that Sir Gerald’s inadequacies are accentuated and his inability to lead is confirmed.

Sir Gerald’s idealism, however, is not destroyed; he still wishes to serve Ireland and he dismisses as “‘impossibly degrading’” (SP, 67) Canon Johnston’s claim that Irish politics is solely about land and he insists that it is, rather, a struggle for nationality. Despite this, even at this point it seems that Sir Gerald is beginning to retreat from the hostile world of Irish public affairs, thus abandoning his initial hope of rescuing his people. Here the novel explicitly draws attention to the fact that this withdrawal on Sir Gerald’s part is a reflection of what was happening within Irish landlordism at the time the novel was written, as outlined in the introduction to this chapter:

His first actual touch on Irish political life had a certain effect on his dreamings. Before he came to Ireland he had been accustomed to think of himself as one of the people, identified with their hopes, a willing soldier in the battle they were fighting. Now he liked rather to look back into the past, or forward to a remote



future. He shrank from bringing his sentimental patriotism into any relation with what was going on around him. There was nothing to force him to take any active part in local affairs or in the wider politics of the nation. Everyone around him assumed (...) that the part he had to play was settled for him by his position. An Irish landlord is like a general in a strongly entrenched position. So far as public life is concerned, he is confined to a policy of defensive inactivity. It is impossible for him to take part in local administration, and only a few are in a position to make their influence felt in the counsels of the Government. After awhile, too, Sir Gerald realized that there was very little for him to do in the management of his estate. The details which Mr. Godfrey submitted to his consideration did not interest him. He came by degrees to a comfortable decision to leave the whole matter in his agent's hands. (SP, 69 – 70)

Here Sir Gerald's gradual abandonment of his original, ambitious public role merges with an account of the then contemporary Irish landlords' enforced withdrawal from local and national politics in the wake of both the Local Government Act and the numerous Land Acts, all of which were passed not long before the publication of *The Seething Pot*, as discussed in the introduction to this chapter. Thus, here, Sir Gerald, now in retreat even from the present, becomes the fictional incarnation of the emasculated and politically paralysed landlord of the early twentieth century who, by definition, could not any longer be a soldier, actively serving his people on the political battlefield, but rather was compelled to play the role of an entrenched general, detached from the new Ireland which was bringing itself into existence.

The diminished status of the landlord at this time in Irish history was a topic which Birmingham would return to in *Irishmen All*, a collection of essays on different professions in Irish life, first published in 1913. In a chapter entitled 'The Country Gentleman' Birmingham gives a detailed account of the landlord's former, multifaceted role as a powerful administrator of local affairs and then contrasts this with his more recent redundancy in modern Ireland:

For indeed their political power, their weight in the councils of State, is not the only thing the Irish gentry have lost. (...)



(...) The Irish gentleman has lost his influence in local affairs. Once a member of the Grand Jury he levied the local taxes, appointed the nephews of his old friends to collect them, and spent them when they were gathered in. He controlled the Boards of Guardians, appointed dispensary doctors, regulated the diet of paupers, inflicted fines and administered the law at Petty Sessions. Of all of this power hardly a vestige now remains to him. Taxes are levied by County Councils, and he, somehow, is not a member of these bodies. The nephews of County Councillors, men strange to him, go round with demand notes and extract cash from the pockets of unwilling citizens. The roads are mended, and he reflects, not with entire satisfaction, that they are no worse than when he managed the mending of them. Even in the Petty Sessions Court he no longer holds his old pride of place. Magistrates – *ex officio* magistrates, who are only magistrates because people elected them to something else – sit side by side with him, and the law, though slightly altered in its tendencies, is quite as erratic a thing in these new hands as it was when he had it entirely in his.<sup>74</sup>

Like Sir Gerald in the above extract from the novel, the historical landlord, as Birmingham continues to describe him in *Irishmen All*, was legally obliged to retreat from his former spheres of influence, ultimately becoming an individual with nothing to contribute to society: “The Irish gentleman, bereft of his chance of going to Parliament, cut off from the interest of managing an estate, denied the control of local affairs, considerably poorer than he used to be, is apparently condemned to a life of idleness.”<sup>75</sup>

Thus, having at least temporarily forsaken his prior commitment to his country, Sir Gerald settles into his role as a conventional landlord, quickly developing a taste for “a certain ceremonial stateliness in his surroundings.” (SP, 70) He begins to relish the trappings of his wealth: the linen, the silver and the glass; even the addition to his staff of a footman seems to constitute “a pleasant dignity added to life.” (SP, 70) He comes to appreciate “the ritual of smoothly ordered service which goes to make up the dignity of a rich man’s life” (SP, 70 – 71) and he enjoys the company of those visitors

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<sup>74</sup> George A. Birmingham, *Irishmen All*. (London: T.N. Foulis, 1913), 106 & 109. Henceforth this book will be footnoted simply as *Irishmen All*.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 109 – 10.

from the surrounding area “whose social position entitled them to call upon him.” (SP, 71) John O’Neill, however, finds that he is now no longer able to meet Sir Gerald, who avoids him for the time being, though this causes Sir Gerald some discomfiture when he recollects the indignation he once experienced on being told that his father, because of his nationalism, had been rejected by one of his friends: “He had not been able to understand then how anyone who was an Irishman could be anything else than a Nationalist. Now he appeared to have learnt, not only devotion to the English Government, but contempt and hatred for those who resisted it.” (SP, 76 – 77) Thus, after refusing to admit O’Neill into his house, Sir Gerald is forced to accept that he is now guilty of the type of bigotry which he once found so abhorrent: “It was almost as if he had shut the door of the house in his own father’s face.” (SP, 77) Sir Gerald’s struggle between his nationalist inheritance and what society expects of him as a landlord will continue to dominate his thoughts throughout the novel, as we shall see.

Sir Gerald’s abnegation of nationalism at this stage in the novel is underlined by the simultaneous beginning of his friendship with Lord Clonfert, a local landowner. Lord Clonfert’s advice to Sir Gerald not to associate with John O’Neill, a known advocate of physical force against the British government (SP, 117), is significant as his words here help to explain the anti-nationalist stance taken by many landlords at the time:

‘There isn’t a gentleman in the county but would cut you if you were a friend of John O’Neill’s. Of course you don’t understand, but I can remember when they were shooting us like partridges. Poor old Thompson, the Sub-sheriff, was shot dead, and lots more. I was shot at myself. You can’t go and call on a man who would pot you from behind a hedge.’

(...) ‘I never went out after dark [during the Land War] but she [Lady Clonfert] spent her time on her knees praying for my life till I came home again. I remember when a man daren’t sit in a room with a lighted lamp and an open window.’ (SP, 91)<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Later in the novel Canon Johnston voices a similar antipathy towards nationalism, while also expressing, like Lord Clonfert, his intolerance of Protestant nationalism. While discussing Desmond O’Hara the clergyman says: “I believe he is one of that half-Nationalist lot, like Dennis Browne.



The historical reference here is to the Land War, dealt with in much greater detail in Birmingham's fifth novel, *The Bad Times*, first published in 1908. The following decade, in 1913, Birmingham would return to this historical topic in *Irishmen All* and here again he would attempt to explain the seemingly bigoted attitude of the Irish landlord at this time, his words here about the gentry of the older generation having a direct bearing on Lord Clonfert's sentiments, as expressed above:

In what Michael Davitt called "The Fall of Feudalism" they [the Irish gentry] have lost their land, and the revolution which changed the ownership of the soil of Ireland was brought about with great bitterness of spirit. (...) Assassinations and hangings – even when they go on for years – do not result in as much loss of life as a couple of well-fought battles; but they leave much more ill-feeling behind. It is not easy for the men who lived through the "bad times" in Ireland to pass a damp sponge over the records of the past. The iron has entered into the soul of the men who took willing or unwilling part in our land war. And perhaps magnanimity is a harder virtue for the conquered than the conqueror to attain. The Irish gentry of the older generation still regard agrarian Nationalists as "blackguards." It is easy to blame them for a stubborn refusal to see any point of view but their own, but for men with their experience many excuses must be made.<sup>77</sup>

Years later, in his autobiography, Birmingham would again describe this particular period of agrarian unrest and its subsequent repercussions in the context of his account of a controversy which occurred during his rectorship of Westport. During this time he founded a literary society, at which his wife, Ada, once delivered a paper in which she expressed her admiration for some of the nineteenth century Young Irelanders and their poetry, specifically mentioning Davis, Mitchel, Speranza and others. Those present, many of whom were Anglo-Irish gentry, were annoyed, but matters were compounded when one member of the audience, "a strong nationalist of Fenian sympathies", zealously supported Ada's view of the Young Irelanders. At this point Hannay, in an effort to restore equilibrium, intervened by, bizarrely, reciting

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There's some excuse for Browne – he's a Roman Catholic; but how any man who's a Protestant and comes of a decent family, as I believe O'Hara does, can mix himself up with that set is more than I can understand." (SP, 113)

<sup>77</sup> *Irishmen All*, 106 – 7.



“some of Mangan’s Jacobite Nationalist poetry”, specifically ‘Dark Rosaleen’, which obviously exacerbated the situation.<sup>78</sup> Apart from the intriguing connections with *The Seething Pot* – the references to both the Young Ireland Movement and Mangan’s ‘Dark Rosaleen’ – Hannay’s ability to comprehend the source of the annoyance caused is worth considering as his words here demonstrate his profound understanding of the landlord’s deep-seated distaste for nationalism:

Many members of our little [literary] society belonged to the class of Anglo-Irish gentry. They were distrustful of anything Irish and very much shocked at the thought of anyone speaking kindly of men tainted with nationalism. (...)

(...) Many of them had lived through the “bad times” of the land war, when their lives were in constant danger, when men came armed even to church and laid their revolvers in the book-rests of the pews, when many had endured the slow torture of being boycotted. Such memories bite deep into the consciousness and are not easily obliterated. It was only too easy to feel that when I expressed Nationalist sympathies I was doing something plainly wrong.<sup>79</sup>

Thus Lord Clonfert, and other characters like him in Birmingham’s novels, can be seen as fictional depictions of the type of anti-nationalist Protestants whom Hannay had encountered and evidently understood, as indicated above.

Soon after Lord Clonfert’s above quoted warning to Sir Gerald, the effect of the former’s attitude towards nationalism is reflected in the younger man’s behaviour as he drifts ever further from his early commitment to Ireland. Now, allowing himself to be locked into the traditional role of the landlord, his former patriotism is furthermore being gradually supplanted by a more personal preoccupation:

He was a gentleman and the representative of a class. He had no possible duty except to fight as well as he could the battle of his side, or else to let things slip along as they might without his interference.

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<sup>78</sup> *Pleasant Places*, 179 – 82.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 181 – 82.

Yet his old dream of loving Ireland lingered still at the back of his resolution. Kathaleen ny-Houlahan haunted him, the beautiful figure of Ireland; but now he saw her face, and it was the face of Hester Carew. (SP, 92)

Shortly afterwards, during an exhibition of industries at Clonfert Castle, Sir Gerald's reluctance to play a meaningful role in Irish affairs is symbolized by his refusal to take a prominent seat at a speech delivered by the Right Honourable George Chesney, a cabinet minister who is "popularly supposed to govern Ireland." (SP, 95) The significant matter here is neither Chesney nor what he says, but the hierarchical manner in which the audience is seated:

two very great ladies occupied chairs in the front. Round and behind them were grouped minor dames with such of their husbands and sons as they had succeeded in dragging with them to the show. Behind these, on forms, closely packed, were the local clergy with their wives, doctors, solicitors, and some of the leading shopkeepers from Clogher. At the back of all were a few farmers. (SP, 97 – 98)

Despite Godfrey's efforts, Sir Gerald refuses to sit in the front row and instead he "clung to a position in a corner near the entrance" (SP, 98), which enables him to make a discreet exit during Chesney's speech, all of which signifies his inability to wholeheartedly commit himself to Irish politics, let alone lead his people; indeed, his premature departure from the tent here ultimately points towards his miserable exit at the end of the novel. Furthermore, as if to emphasize the disintegration of any potential for leadership which may once have resided in Sir Gerald, a few pages later, in reference to Irish politics, Sir Gerald admits to Hester: "I am frightened by every difficulty, and swayed this way and that. I'm nothing but a coward." (SP, 105)

Sir Gerald's self-confessed cowardice, however, is soon challenged by O'Hara, who, while advising Sir Gerald about the management of his estate, invokes the philosophy of a famous nineteenth century sage: "The editor quoted more or less appropriate passages from Carlyle, and produced from his own brain sentiments clothed in language which might have been Carlyle's." (SP, 114)

Thomas Carlyle, the nineteenth century Scottish historian and social critic, advanced the theory that “great personages are the most important causal factor in history.”<sup>80</sup> Such an idea finds expression, for example, in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, published in 1841, in which Carlyle claims:

Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realisation and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world’s history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these.<sup>81</sup>

O’Grady, represented in the novel by O’Hara, was indeed influenced by Carlyle, the Irish writer being the author of “works on Irish history and legend that were greatly influenced by Thomas Carlyle’s values of tradition, heroism and feudalism.”<sup>82</sup> In the novel O’Hara’s use of Carlyle, indicative of a particular concept of history, as quoted above, is developed in what the editor says next during a discussion about the proposed new scheme for the estate which Sir Gerald is anxiously contemplating. Aware that the new system will result in a financial loss for Sir Gerald, O’Hara points to the enormous benefits of the plan, for the land, the tenants concerned, the country and even Sir Gerald himself; note in particular the suggestion, at the end of the extract, of Carlyle’s notion of certain individuals being the engines behind human history and how O’Hara is applying this to Sir Gerald:

‘It’s better for the land,’ he said, ‘to be tilled than grazed. It’s better for the country to have men in it than bullocks. It’s better for the people to have farms to live on than to be pushed away to the degradation of life in the great American cities. It’s better for you, too, though you do lose money by it. Why, you have it in your power to become a genuine aristocrat – one of the good men

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<sup>80</sup> Robert Audi (General Editor), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*. Second Edition. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 118.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>82</sup> McAteer, *op. cit.*, 1 – 2.



of the world with power in your hands. You may be a captain of the world's greatest industry.'

(...) 'It's money-grubbing or a great captainship for you, and there can be no hesitation about your choice.' (SP, 114 – 15)

Sir Gerald's first opportunity of doing something substantive as a landlord for his tenants comes his way in the form of a deputation appointed by the District Council to propose a scheme for the benefit of the tenants on his estate, a matter which, as discussed above, Sir Gerald has already been considering. Sir Gerald is very willing to meet them, contrary to his agent's and the rector's advice. In fact, he has taken the step of consulting John O'Neill beforehand, in order to decide what to do in this case.

What O'Neill says during the above consultation is important as his words here further stress the political opportunity which may yet be grasped by Irish landlords, such as Sir Gerald, if they are prepared to renounce their foolishly misplaced and self-destructive loyalty to England:

There is nothing in the world I'd rather have than the Irish aristocracy on my side. Unfortunately, I can't get them. They are English at heart, and not Irish; therefore, like everything else that stands in the way of Irish nationality, they have got to go. We have taken their power and most of their influence from them. Now we are taking their property. I am sorry for it. I would rather they were with us to help to govern Ireland in the days that are coming. If they choose to cling to England, I can't help it. They will be robbed more and more. But who robs them? Their own friends, the English Government. Why could they not have understood twenty years ago that the English care nothing for them or their properties? If they had stood by their country, they would have been sitting to-day in an Irish Parliament helping to govern Ireland, instead of licking the boots of politicians in Westminster, who will go on betraying them right to the end. (SP, 120 – 21)

Thus O'Neill delineates the requisite course of action – a resolute commitment to Ireland – which the gentry must embrace if they are to have any hope of saving themselves and it is with this in mind that Sir Gerald leaves O'Neill's house.

Sir Gerald's meeting with the deputation constitutes a key moment in the novel because of the points made by this group concerning a previous landlord – Sir Gerald's uncle – and his behaviour during the Famine. As a result of this, although the deputation comes to suggest a specific scheme for the estate, Sir Gerald is also quickly presented with ugly facts about one of his predecessors and, in this way, a historical context is introduced which Sir Gerald, as the present-day representative of such a class, must atone for if he is to redeem himself and landlords in general. In this way, the troubling ghost of Sir Gerald's father is momentarily replaced by a far more disturbing ancestral spectre which Sir Gerald will have to do much to exorcise.

Michael McCarty, who in words intriguingly reminiscent of Bram Stoker's aristocrat called Sir Gerald “a tyrant and a bloodsucker” (SP, 125) on the day Sir Gerald arrived in Clogher,<sup>83</sup> reads from a document which describes the present iniquitous situation: “The whole potential wealth of the district (...) is in the hands of the landlord and a few individuals who refuse to develop it. The great majority of the people live under conditions which condemn them to hopeless poverty.” (SP, 124) For this reason McCarty then asks Sir Gerald to divide his grazing-lands into farms of approximately twenty acres so that they can be let to the tenants currently living on smaller farms. He then outlines the historical reasons for the negative perception of the landlord from the tenants' perspective:

What I am going to tell Sir Gerald Geoghegan is down in the books of the estate. After the famine the people were cleared off the land we're talking of. It's nothing but our own old homes we ask for back again. My own mother, sir, was a girl at the time. Her mother was turned out, and she a widow with young children. She was a decent woman – one that worked hard, and paid her rent, and reared her family well. Yes, and she loved your people. They were the old stock, and why wouldn't she love them? But it's little your uncle cared. He

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<sup>83</sup> Bram Stoker's *Dracula* was first published in 1897.

turned her and her children out on to the roadside. He burnt the house before their eyes. They might have starved, and they would have starved – as many a family starved on the roadside in those days – but for a brother of my grandmother’s that took them in, into the same little cabin where my mother is living this minute. We haven’t forgotten, sir, and we can’t forget – never, so long as the breath of life is in us – what happened in those times, nor how your people treated our people. If I spoke of you as a tyrant, didn’t them that went before you deserve the name of us? (SP, 127)

McCarty’s story represents in miniature what occurred during and after the Famine, which is portrayed here as native Ireland’s equivalent of the landlords’ later ‘bad times’. Historically the scale of evictions during the period in question was indeed high, as shown by W. E. Vaughan, who, after claiming that tenants were not in fact oppressed by landlords for much of the nineteenth century, then proceeds to describe one deplorable exception:

The 90,000 evictions between 1847 and 1880 are not so easily disposed of, especially the 50,000 that occurred during the years 1847 – 50; no calculations can mitigate the miserable plight of those who suffered during the Famine, or of those who were evicted in minor clearances after the Famine, such as the Derryveagh evictions in 1861.<sup>84</sup>

#### **xi. Attempted atonement and alienation**<sup>85</sup>

Sir Gerald is moved by McCarty’s speech, as quoted above, and, after admitting the justice of what has been said (SP, 129), he makes the following proposal to the deputation, which is implemented later in the novel (SP, 182 – 183):

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<sup>84</sup> Vaughan, *op. cit.*, 23. Vaughan gives the following account of the Derryveagh evictions of 1861: “[o]ne of the most publicized clearances of the post-Famine period was the evictions at Derryveagh, Co. Donegal: (...) in February 1861, the landlord, John George Adair (...) proceeded to enforce the ejectments; on 8 – 10 April, therefore (...) 47 families were evicted by the sub-sheriff of Donegal.” *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>85</sup> Atonement is specifically mentioned at this point in the novel when O’Hara speaks to Godfrey concerning Sir Gerald’s reaction to McCarty’s speech during the deputation’s meeting with Sir Gerald: “I don’t know how you can expect him to listen to the story of those famine clearances without wanting to do something in atonement for all the suffering.” (SP, 129 – 30)



I shall divide up the land in question, as you wish, into farms of about twenty acres each. I shall fix the rents at a figure which the land court is not likely to reduce. I shall then put the tenants' interest in the new farms up to public auction, exactly as is done every day by outgoing tenants. The money I receive from these sales I shall be prepared to lend to the incoming tenants at a moderate rate of interest. I shall thus secure myself from loss, and at the same time get a class of tenants who have capital enough to work the land. (SP, 128)<sup>86</sup>

After the deputation leaves to report Sir Gerald's plan to the District Council, O'Hara reveals to Godfrey that the above proposal was in fact originally suggested by O'Neill, whereupon Godfrey immediately tenders his resignation as Sir Gerald's agent, refusing to share the management of the estate with "a rebel and a murderer." (SP, 131) Furthermore, Godfrey also terminates his acquaintanceship with Sir Gerald, because of the latter's friendship with O'Neill. Thus Sir Gerald is given an instant indication of the cost of association with nationalism, a theme which will dominate the remainder of the novel, as we shall see. However, although Godfrey's stance might initially appear to be simply the result of political prejudice, O'Hara is quick to point out the reason for this seemingly disproportionate reaction; here again, as before, Birmingham characteristically endeavours to explain the apparently unreasonable position of conservative landlordism by reference to then recent historical memory: "Well, I'm not sure that I should call it simply political prejudice. You see, Godfrey went through the "bad times" here. He was a great friend of that poor fellow Morris who was shot. He was fired at himself once or twice. That kind of thing leaves its mark on a man." (SP, 131) It is within such an explosive context that Sir Gerald must endeavour to play a leadership role and for this reason O'Hara alerts Sir Gerald to the perils of too close an alliance with O'Neill, claiming that it will

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<sup>86</sup> The *Morning Leader* of 4 April, 1905 criticized this particular part of the novel:

Mr. Birmingham complicates an agrarian difficulty unnecessarily when he assumes that if a landlord creates new holdings out of grazing land which were not within the scope of the Land Acts the new tenants would be entitled to a periodical revision of rents by the Land Commission. The point is one which influences his hero in the management of an estate and we believe that Mr. Birmingham's view is quite wrong –though really in a very remarkable book an error over a system which nobody but Mr. Tim Healy even pretends to understand is not of much importance. (p.8)

Furthermore, The *Saturday Review* of 20 May, 1905 asserted: "Mr. Birmingham makes good use of the standing problem of grazing lands in Connaught, but his knowledge of the Land Acts is faulty."

simply result in the loss of Sir Gerald's influence and the type of social alienation which O'Neill himself endures:

'Besides, I don't think you ought to get too thick with O'Neill. He is a marked man, very indelibly marked indeed. There is no use your flying in the face of prejudice. You ought to aim at arousing a national spirit among the upper classes. You have a magnificent opportunity, and you must not throw it away by getting yourself branded at the outset as a friend of John O'Neill's. If you do, you will make an enemy of every gentleman in Ireland, and your influence will be gone.'

(...) 'He [O'Neill] has blotted himself out of the book of the living. He has disappeared as the rest of the class to which he belongs is disappearing. It is a pity, for it is gentlemen that Ireland wants to-day, and will want more in the future.' (SP, 132 & 133 – 34)

## **xii. Two aristocracies**

O'Hara's above comparison between O'Neill's social death and the imminent extinction of the class from which he comes, directly precedes a lengthy paragraph about the two Irish aristocracies in which a link is established between the actual disappearance of one and the impending end of the other:

It is likely that O'Hara was right. The future historian will probably view the ruin of the Irish aristocracy as a great, though inevitable, misfortune. The end of the seventeenth century saw the passing away of one Irish aristocracy. The Jacobite nobility and gentry who were driven from the service of Ireland into that of France, Spain and Austria were lost through their incurable loyalty to a King who was a fool. Ireland suffered. She lay like a corpse for a century. Yet her case was not wholly hopeless, because the aristocracy she lost was succeeded by another. Strong men took the place of those who were gone, and they in their turn learnt to be Irishmen. After breathing the atmosphere of Ireland for a hundred years, this race of men rose up, demanded and got freedom for the country of their adoption. The end of the nineteenth century saw



the ruin, the beginning of the twentieth will see the final extinction, of this aristocracy. It is curious that they, too, are perishing through mistaken loyalty. They have quite forgotten that their grandfathers stood for Irish nationality. They have chosen to call themselves English. In the future men will speak of them as stupid and blind almost beyond belief, but no one will call them either cowardly or base. At different stages of the struggle they might have saved themselves and led a really united Ireland in a great battle for nationality. They never did, and never would. They conceived of themselves as an English garrison, and held loyalty to England as their prime duty. Never, surely, not even in the case of James II. [sic], has loyalty been so hopelessly misplaced. England has betrayed them again and again, has deliberately sacrificed them not once or twice. There is probably no more pathetic instance of dog-like fidelity than the way the Irish gentry have turned, and still turn, to lick the foot that spurns them. This has been their grand mistake, their crime, since excessive stupidity must in history be reckoned for a crime. The peasantry whom they despised were wiser; for long ago, in their own tongue, they made a proverb which might have saved the gentry if they had known it: 'Beware of the head of a bull, of the heels of a horse, of the smile of an Englishman.' (SP, 134 – 35)

The assertions made in this central paragraph from the novel are reiterated almost verbatim in much of what Birmingham wrote in his non-fiction about the Irish gentry. For example, in *Irishmen All*, first published in 1913, he again underlines the parallels between the two aristocracies, focusing in particular on their respective misplaced loyalties:

I here point out that Ireland has seen the decay and failure of two aristocracies, and that the circumstances which attended the collapse were to some extent the same in both cases. We lost one aristocracy at the end of the seventeenth century, when Lying Dick Talbot died in Limerick, and Patrick Sarsfield, with the Wild Geese in his train, crossed the seas to France. That was a very nice, picturesque aristocracy with a lot of fine qualities, especially good at fighting, which is indeed a characteristic of all aristocracies worthy of the name. Poets sang songs about it, most beautiful songs, and we have all sentimentalised about it ever since. The other aristocracy went under two hundred years later. We have



not yet discovered that it was picturesque – our children will probably find that out – and nobody has as yet sung a single song about it; but it too was a fine fighting stock.

(...) Both aristocracies were loyal in a stupid, unselfish way. Our seventeenth-century Jacobites were loyal to James II. [sic], who never cared anything about them, but used their loyalty as long as he thought it profitable to do so. Our nineteenth-century gentlemen were loyal to England, which was quite as stupid a thing to be, for Englishmen cared just as little for them as the Stewarts did for their predecessors. As long as they could be serviceable to England as a garrison to hold Ireland down, England used them. As soon as English statesmen discovered that they could govern Ireland more easily in other ways they surrendered their “faithful garrison,” and the Irish aristocracy was forced to act the uncomfortable part of Jonah in the ship of State.

(...) That they should go on trusting the English and continue loyal is amazing. For the English had quite as much to do with taking away their land from them as the Irish agitators. Act after Act was passed by Parliament, sometimes by one party, sometimes by the other, which diminished the power of landlords over what they regarded as their absolute property; until at last there was no way out of the hopeless tangle except the final abdication of sale.<sup>87</sup>

Later, in another work of non-fiction, Birmingham made the same comparison:

The Gaelic aristocracy which preceded them [the Anglo-Irish gentry] was driven into exile, and crossed the seas, a long flight of “Wild Geese.” This aristocracy is no less exiled, though they linger in their houses and demesnes in Ireland. They are spiritual exiles who have gone forth or have been driven forth from the life of the community. They are men without a country, servants of an Empire to which they are able to give a loyalty unconfused by the mixture of any narrower patriotism.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> *Irishmen All*, 99 – 100 & 107.

<sup>88</sup> George A. Birmingham, *An Irishman Looks at His World*. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1919), 194. Henceforth this book will be footnoted simply as *An Irishman Looks at His World*. Birmingham

And he was, again, critical of the Anglo-Irish gentry's foolish loyalty in the same book:

England has steadily sacrificed the Irish aristocracy whenever it was in her interest to do so. It made no matter what the England of the moment might be. The England of the Whig and Tory landowners, the England of the Liberals of commerce, the England of the later democracy were all alike in their treatment of Anglo-Irishmen. Attempts have been made of late to win the affections of Irish Irelanders, generally by giving them doles and grants of money. The money came, directly or indirectly, out of the pockets of the Anglo-Irish. To-day England professes to be ready to give anything to Ireland – except of course what Ireland asks – but she cynically refuses to pay the money she owes to those disinherited members of the Irish aristocracy who parted with their property at her request.<sup>89</sup>

### xiii. Preacher

Thus when Birmingham's non-fiction material about the Irish gentry is taken into account, the above passage from *The Seething Pot* may be seen as one of the occasional explicit authorial interventions in the novel where the normal narrative, and thus the fictional world, is momentarily disrupted by a forthright discussion of a particular topical issue. In some ways, this is where Birmingham gives way to Hannay, who briefly short-circuits the obliquity of fiction by fleetingly transforming the novel into a pulpit. For this reason it is difficult to concur with McDowell when he claims that Birmingham's novels dealing with Irish issues "and more especially with the problem of what ought to be the attitude of Irish protestants to Irish nationalism (...) are preserved from the stiff didacticism which so often afflicts novels with a purpose by Hannay's interest in people, wide knowledge of Irish life and kindly delight in its absurdities."<sup>90</sup> Though it is true that these novels are not simply sermons masquerading as works of fiction, when the voice of the preacher does temporarily supersede that of the narrator, the change is conspicuous and thus the exhortation is

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also compared the two aristocracies, in a similar manner, in: Birmingham, 'The Passing of Two Aristocracies from Ireland' in *The Lady of the House*, Christmas 1910.

<sup>89</sup> *An Irishman Looks at His World*, 191 – 92.

<sup>90</sup> McDowell, *op. cit.*, 100.

highlighted, compelling the reader to consider not only the words of the ‘sermon’, but also to what extent hortation is latent whenever it is not overt.<sup>91</sup>

*The New York Times* remarked on the above feature of *The Seething Pot* in a review of the novel in 1914, a year after the publication of *Irishmen All*, quoted above, and by which time Birmingham had established a reputation for himself as an author of light, humorous fiction. Significantly dispensing with the novelist’s pseudonym and instead identifying the writer by his clerical title and real name, the review thus emphasized how the novel communicates some of the clergyman’s genuinely-held sentiments, as opposed to merely narrating the inventions of the novelist. Furthermore, because of the reviewer’s references to the failure of the Irish aristocracy to lead, together with their forthcoming ruin, as well as their pitiful allegiance to England and the latter’s lack of concern for them, it is almost certain that the writer had the previously discussed paragraph from the novel in mind:

‘The Seething Pot’ (sic) is very unlike most of Mr Birmingham’s novels – so unlike them, in fact, that one is tempted to speak of its author as Canon Hannay, rather than by the pen name which has become synonymous with humour.

Canon Hannay speaks sadly of what he regards as the failure of the Irish aristocracy to sympathise with and become the real leaders of the people – a failure which involves, he thinks, their fast approaching ruin. They have been “pathetically loyal” to England, who cares nothing for them.<sup>92</sup>

#### xiv. O’Grady

W. B. Yeats claimed of O’Grady: “‘here was a man whose rage was a swan-song over all that he held most dear, and to whom for that very reason every imaginative writer

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<sup>91</sup> Birmingham’s propensity to preach in his fiction was commented on by T. W. Rolleston, specifically in relation to *Hyacinth*, and it is noteworthy that Rolleston’s comments here suggest that he believed Birmingham’s fiction bore strong similarities to the non-fiction of the period, including, presumably, Horace Plunkett’s *Ireland in the New Century*: “[i]f you must preach, I suppose you must. You have got their ear now – why not preach directly in a book like Plunkett’s or a magazine which, or series of them instead of through the medium of fiction? If you want to make converts I believe that is the way to do it.” 10/4/1905. TCD MS 3454, 189.

<sup>92</sup> *New York Times*, 25 January, 1914.



owed a portion of his soul.”<sup>93</sup> Birmingham’s soul was also indebted to O’Grady, for what is most striking about the above quoted passages by Birmingham about the two aristocracies is that they can all be traced directly back to part of O’Grady’s *Toryism and the Tory Democracy*. One chapter from the latter book, entitled the ‘The Great Enchantment’, was reprinted episodically in *The All-Ireland Review*,<sup>94</sup> a paper with which, as already mentioned, Hannay was thoroughly familiar. One part in particular of the chapter in question, because of the comparison it makes between the two Irish aristocracies and because it accepts that the demise of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy is a foregone conclusion, is unquestionably the source of the above passage from *The Seething Pot*, as well as the above excerpts from Birmingham’s non-fiction:

Aristocracies come and go like the waves of the sea; and some fall nobly and others ignobly. As I write, this Protestant Anglo-Irish aristocracy which, once owned all Ireland from the centre to the sea, is rotting from the land in the most dismal farce-tragedy of all time, without one brave deed, without one brave word. Our last Irish aristocracy was Catholic, intensely and fanatically Royalist and Cavalier, and compounded of elements which were Norman-Irish and Milesian-Irish. They worshipped the Crown when the Crown had become a phantom or a ghost, and the god whom they worshipped was not able to save them, or himself. They were defeated and exterminated. They lost everything; but they never lost honour; and because they did not lose that, their overthrow was bewailed in songs and music which will not cease to sound for centuries yet.

(...) Worst of them they were, for they made a fatal mistake; and they had to go; but they brought their honour with them, and they founded noble or princely families all over the Continent.

Who laments the destruction of our present Anglo-Irish aristocracy? Perhaps in broad Ireland not one. They fall from the land while innumerable eyes are dry, and their fall will not be bewailed in one piteous dirge or one mournful melody. They might have been so much to this afflicted nation; half-ruined as they are,

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<sup>93</sup> Quoted in McAteer, *op. cit.*, 127.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

they might be so much to-morrow; but the curse that has fallen on the whole land seems to have fallen on them with double power – the understanding paralysed, the will gone all to water, and for consequence a sure destruction. (...) If it be asked what hope I now entertain regarding them, I would answer that I have none; but do think that here and there I may be able to touch individual members of the class, and one man of the right kind, if awake and alive, might do much.<sup>95</sup>

Edward A. Hagan claims that many Irish writers acknowledged their debt to O'Grady, including W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, AE, T. W. Rolleston, John Todhunter, Katherine Tynan, Aubrey de Vere and Austin Clarke.<sup>96</sup> Clearly, however, Birmingham is also part of that company of writers who expressed the spirit of O'Grady, specifically, in Birmingham's case, through the character of O'Hara in his first novel, but more generally in his long-term preoccupation with the landlord, which permeates *The Seething Pot* and *The Bad Times* in particular, as well as much of his non-fiction, as already cited.<sup>97</sup>

#### xv. Belligerent priests

At the beginning of the chapter which immediately follows the above quoted passage from the novel about the two Irish aristocracies, there is a reference to the then recently passed Local Government Act, already discussed in the introduction to this chapter. Here it is initially made clear that the Act contained a clause which prohibited "any priest or minister of religion becoming a member of a board or council." (SP, 137) In practice, however, the Catholic clergy exerted considerable control over local politics, as the paragraph in question states:

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<sup>95</sup> Standish O'Grady, *Selected Essays and Passages*. (Dublin: The Talbot Press Limited, n.d.), 180 – 82.

<sup>96</sup> Edward A. Hagan, "*High Nonsensical Words*": *A Study of the Works of Standish James O'Grady*. (New York: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1986), 1.

<sup>97</sup> In a work of non-fiction published in 1926 Birmingham again compared the two Irish aristocracies, though here the important point is that he explicitly mentions O'Grady, almost certainly having in mind the latter's above quoted passage on the Anglo-Irish aristocracy: "Even Mr. Standish O'Grady, as faithful a friend as any our failing aristocracy ever had, was unable to guess at the possibility of romance gathering round them. There are some words of his often quoted in which he laments with the sorrow of a Hebrew prophet the failure of our later Irish gentlemen to glorify their defeat with a single noble word or striking deed." George A. Birmingham, *Spillikins: A Book of Essays*. (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1926), 113.



Priests don't, of course, sit on local boards as elected members. They preside over preliminary meetings of the particular League which happens at the time to be in fashion. Here the business of local government is discussed, resolutions are prepared, and affairs come before the actual board or council merely to receive formal approval. (SP, 137 – 38)

This contemporary political background then becomes the historical context for the novel's presentation of the struggle for power between Catholic and Protestant forces as Sir Gerald's suggestion for dealing with his land is discussed at a meeting of the local branch of the League, the president of which is John O'Neill. After Fr Fahy, McCarty and the chairman of the district council have all made speeches vehemently rejecting Sir Gerald's proposal, O'Neill addresses the excited audience, informing them that in fact he is the originator of the scheme under discussion. Despite this, and to the audience's delight, Fr Fahy proclaims the author of the plan "as a reptile traitor to the people of Ireland." (SP, 142) At this point, of course, this fictional confrontation begins to carry the added historical dimension of the then relatively recent Parnell divorce scandal, when the Catholic clergy denounced Parnell in front of a national audience; indeed, this fictional moment and its historical overtones will, by the end of the novel, be seen as prefiguring O'Neill's final defeat, as we shall see. For now, however, Fr Fahy ultimately loses this particular battle as the motion against the proposal is withdrawn and thus Sir Gerald's scheme is accepted, while O'Neill maintains his power, for the present at least. The incident ends, nevertheless, by anticipating another far more calamitous conflict with the clergy for O'Neill, with further reminders of the Parnell divorce scandal in evidence here: after the meeting O'Neill rebukes McCarty for his submission to Fr Fahy, asking McCarty:

'Why did you let the priest talk you over? I've repeatedly told you to be careful about allowing yourself to be led by the nose by the priests. They are more or less on our side now, but they will desert us when it comes to the pinch. The Church doesn't want an independent Ireland. It gets too much money out of England to want to cut the connection.'

'I'm sorry,' said McCarty, 'but it's all right, isn't it? You beat Father Fahy to-day.'

'Yes, I beat him to-day. But shall I always be able to beat him?'



'I don't know. The priests distrust you. For one thing, they don't like your being a Protestant. Then, they think you've got too much power. I think they would like to beat you.' (SP, 144 – 45)

Thus the novel is preparing us for a decisive clash between Protestantism and Catholicism, with O'Neill and Sir Gerald on one side and the Catholic Church on the other.<sup>98</sup> The imminence of such a significant conflict is again brought to our attention during the above brief conversation when the topic of "the immigration of the foreign Religious Orders" (SP, 145) is mentioned by McCarty. The Church, as McCarty explains, is determined to support the government on the matter, which is soon to be debated, and the Church expects to be followed on the issue: "He [Fr Fahy] says that it's a Church question, and that the Irish party are bound to support the Government." (SP, 145) Again, it seems likely that this is an allusion to the previously mentioned Parnell divorce scandal, which involved a question of morality on which the Church, together with the government, was unwilling to compromise.

Thus we are assured of the inevitability of battle and we are also left in no doubt about the precise nature of the clerical army which is preparing for war, described by the narrator later in the novel in the following, infamous terms:

no Roman priest ought to have any sense of personal dignity. The dignity of his office he will maintain when it suits him, but he must achieve the end he has in view, even at the cost of humiliation for himself and his office. (...)

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<sup>98</sup> In the next chapter O'Neill seems even more certain of his defeat at the hands of the Church, while he also predicts the subordination of the country to the interests of the Church:

'I have Ireland at my back to-day, but I can't keep it. There is a power in Ireland greater than mine. In the end the Roman Church will beat me. I may hold out long enough to snatch a Parliament for Ireland out of the fire, but if I don't do it at once I shan't do it at all. They can beat me in the end.'

(...) 'I think,' said O'Neill, 'that they [the Catholic clergy] mean to wreck me now if they can. (...)'

(...) '(...) The real tug will come at the General Election. The best of my men may be beaten at the polls if the priests throw themselves into the struggle.'

(...) '(...) then there will be no Irish Party strong enough to do anything. We shall have another half-century of concessions to what are supposed to be Irish demands, and at the end of that time you will have a spectacle unique in Europe – a country which exists solely for the purpose of supporting and enriching a Church.' (SP, 158 – 60)

Men have denounced the Irish priests for tyranny and greed and lust of power. Every one of these charges has been, and is to-day, miserably true. (...)

The great world which is neither Celtic nor Catholic can only wonder at what it sees. For, however to be explained, the facts are plain enough. The Irish priests have schemed and lied, have blustered and bullied, have levied taxes beyond belief upon the poorest of the poor (...). Some who try to understand Ireland see the priests and what they do. Then they curse Ireland and despair of her, or hope only that her people will some day cease to be Catholics. Others see the people, and love them for their goodness. They shut their eyes to all the evils of the pervading priestcraft. (SP, 178 & 186 – 87)

It should firstly be noted that the above extract is, for the purposes of this analysis, a condensed version of a longer discussion of the Irish clergy from the novel, in which the above language of bitter condemnation is qualified by references to the admirable qualities of the Catholic clergy. However, there can be no mistaking that the very worst aspects of the clergy are described here in a particularly forthright manner and for this reason it seems plausible that such language was elicited by some incident which had occurred shortly before the novel was written. In this regard it is impossible to ignore one notorious instance of bullying which was the direct result of the noxious mendacity of one particular priest. The controversy in question took place the year before Birmingham's first novel was published and was reported on in O'Grady's *All-Ireland Review*,<sup>99</sup> a paper which, as already shown, Hannay had read every number of, from its first appearance in 1900 until at least the time of publication of *The Seething Pot*.

In January of 1904 a Redemptorist priest, Fr John Creagh, delivered two sermons in Limerick which, a century later, are still the object of historical interest.<sup>100</sup> On 11 January, while addressing a large congregation, Creagh initially spoke elliptically about the foolishness of protecting a viper because of that creature's ability to kill its benefactor; he then proceeded: "So too is it madness for a people to allow an evil to

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<sup>99</sup> McAteer, *op. cit.*, 149.

<sup>100</sup> See: Dermot Keogh & Andrew McCarthy, *Limerick Boycott 1904: Anti-Semitism in Ireland*. (Cork: Mercier Press, 2005).

grow in their midst that will eventually cause them ruin.”<sup>101</sup> Then, pointing out that people were “allowing themselves to become the slaves of Jew usurers”,<sup>102</sup> the preacher summarized the then recent history of the Jewish people in the following lurid details:

Nowadays, they dare not kidnap and slay children, but they will not hesitate to expose them to a longer and even more cruel martyrdom by taking the clothes off their back and the bit out of their mouths. Twenty years ago and less the Jews were known only by name and evil repute in Limerick. They were sucking the blood of other nations, but those nations rose up and turned them out and they came to our land to fasten themselves on us like leeches, and to draw our blood when they had been forced away from other countries. They have, indeed, fastened themselves upon us, and now the question is whether or not we will allow them to fasten themselves still more upon us, until we and our children are the helpless victims of their rapacity.<sup>103</sup>

Creagh concluded by referring to a then recent controversy which, as already mentioned, features in *The Seething Pot*:

I do not hesitate to say that there are no greater enemies of the Catholic Church than the Jews. If you want an example look to France. What is going on at present in that land? The little children are being deprived of their education. No Nun, Monk or Priest can teach in a school. The little ones are forced to go where God’s name is never mentioned – to go to Godless schools. The Jews are in league with the Freemasons in France, and they succeeded in turning out of their country all the nuns and religious orders. The Redemptorist Fathers to the number of two hundred had been turned out of France, and that is what the Jews would do in our country if they were allowed into power.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Quoted in: Dermot Keogh, *Jews in Twentieth-Century Ireland: Refugees, Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust*. (Cork: Cork University Press, 1998), 27.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 30.



Michael Davitt, in a letter published on 16 January in the *Freeman's Journal*, declared that there was “not an atom of truth in the horrible allegation of ritual murder, here insinuated, against this persecuted race” and he protested as an Irishman and a Catholic:

against the barbarous malignity being introduced into Ireland, under the pretended form of material regard for the welfare of our workers. The reverend gentleman complained of the rags and poverty of the children of Limerick as compared with the prosperity of the Jews, and on this ground deliberately incited the people of that city to hunt the Jew from their midst.<sup>105</sup>

Creagh's next sermon on the topic, delivered exactly one week after the first, attracted international press attention and confirmed, according to Dermot Keogh, that he was “an intransigent and unrepentant anti-Semite.”<sup>106</sup> The discourse finished with the statement that “the Jews have proved themselves to be the enemies of every country in Europe, and every nation had to defend itself against them’. (...) ‘Let us defend ourselves before their heels are too firmly planted upon our necks.’”<sup>107</sup> In Keogh's opinion Creagh's words here were “an incitement to violence.”<sup>108</sup>

As a result of these sermons the Jewish community in Limerick was boycotted and in some cases ostracized, intimidated and assaulted,<sup>109</sup> all of which resulted in the inevitable:

the Jewish community in Limerick had been dealt a severe blow which threatened its viability. The Ginsbergs left. The Jaffes left. The Weinrocks followed the Greenfields to South Africa. The Goldbergs left for Leeds, before Louis brought his family back to Cork. Virtually the entire Jewish community in the city joined in the exodus.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 32.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 43 & 47.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

It was not long before Hannay's Church voiced its official position on the controversy: the Church of Ireland bishop of Limerick, Dr Thomas Bunbury, vigorously defended the Jews of Limerick at his Church's General Synod in Dublin on 15 April.<sup>111</sup> In his speech he claimed that much of what Creagh had said was untrue<sup>112</sup> and the synod passed a motion drawing "the attention of His Majesty's government and all Protestant members of Parliament to the persecution of Protestants and Jews in Ireland."<sup>113</sup>

It is not difficult to imagine what Hannay, as a member of a religious minority in Ireland and as someone who had elsewhere expressed concern about the Catholic Church's conduct in relation to the Dreyfus affair, would have thought of this particular Irish controversy, which chillingly demonstrated the considerable capacity of just one priest to affect the lives of an entire religious community. Therefore, the suffering precipitated by Creagh's bullying words – publicly condemned as lies – may well have influenced Birmingham's description of the Irish Catholic clergy the following year, as quoted above.

Despite the controversy engendered by the above comments from the novel about the Irish clergy, Birmingham echoed them less than a decade later in *Irishmen All*, and this time without the anonymity initially conferred by his pseudonym.<sup>114</sup> What is of considerable importance here is that in this passage Birmingham specifies the reason for the existence of the type of clergy criticized in the previously discussed extract from *The Seething Pot*. Referring to Gerald O'Donovan's novel *Father Ralph*, published in 1913, Birmingham discusses the representative nature of two contrasting characters from O'Donovan's novel. Beginning with the figure of Fr Duff, who, Birmingham claims, is a fictional reflection of the many good priests working in

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 47 – 48.

<sup>113</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 48.

<sup>114</sup> R. B. D. French gives the following account of the early loss of Hannay's anonymity as a novelist:

Hannay took trouble to conceal the identity of 'George A. Birmingham', and though it became known in some Dublin circles it remained a secret in the West for nine months after the publication of his first book. But in January 1906 Hannay came up to Dublin to deliver a lecture on Irish fiction. (...) John Dillon (...) rose from his place in the audience, praised the brilliancy of the lecturer (...) and revealed Hannay as the author of *The Seething Pot*.

R. B. D. French, 'J. O. Hannay and the Gaelic League' in *Hermathena: A Dublin University Review*. No. CII, Spring 1966 (Dublin: The Academic Press Ltd), 43.

Ireland at the time, he continues by contending that another, very different character from O'Donovan's novel, Fr Molloy, is by no means confined to the realm of fiction:

There is also a Father Molloy, and he too, unfortunately, is a justly drawn figure. Those who know Ireland recognise him as surely as they recognise the other. The man is essentially a bully. He finds himself in possession of a power which no tradition of the class from which he sprang has fitted him to use, which his education has in no way prepared him to endure nobly. The least opposition to his will, the mildest criticism of his action, makes him furious. His acts, like those of all bullies, are violent. The language in which he boasts of them is coarse. He is greedy of personal gain, and avaricious for the enrichment, not of his Church, for the poor are his Church, but of the corporation which manages his Church's affairs. In the name of the Church he levies intolerable taxes. In the name of purity he establishes a tyranny for crushing the joy of life, distorting humanity in the twisted mirror of a prurient puritanism. In the name of God, in the name of the gentle Jesus, he inflicts savage blows on women and children. After the manner of all bullies he cringes to the rich and strong. He can be crafty as well as violent, and the same man who will kick a defenceless creature in the street will stand hat in hand suavely complaisant before a high official from whom he hopes to gain some fresh power, some new influence. (...) It is men of this type who constitute the real danger to the power of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland. They are a new type. A few years ago they could not have existed. The Protestant aristocracy possessed a power which rivalled and curbed theirs in secular affairs. It is the fall of that aristocracy which has made them possible.<sup>115</sup>

This passage, in its description of a tyrannical, bullying and crafty clergy, whose objective is the greedy accumulation of further power and taxes, is strongly reminiscent of the previously discussed extract from *The Seething Pot*. What gives this passage its special significance, however, is its assertion that the existence of a formerly strong Anglo-Irish aristocracy once acted as a counterbalance to the power of such clergy. Apart from the historical value of such an idea, the argument also

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<sup>115</sup> *Irishmen All*, 182 – 84.



helps to explain the central preoccupation of much of Birmingham's early fiction: the conflict in early twentieth century Ireland between the forces of Protestantism and Catholicism. This struggle is, as is being postulated in this chapter, the main theme of *The Seething Pot*, and it continues, in varied forms, to be just as important in both *Hyacinth* and *Benedict Kavanagh*, as we shall see.

The above passage from *Irishmen All* continues by explaining the reasons why O'Donovan's Fr Molloy had his real counterparts in Ireland at the time, though what is of particular interest here is Birmingham's point about the inadequacies of the literature of the Literary Revival in the face of an enormous national challenge. Beginning with a description of the social circumstances which had brought into existence such undesirable clergy, Birmingham argues:

The singular isolation of their lives has left all the evil in them free to develop terribly. The training of a large public school would have saved them. They are reared in seminaries. The social life of a university would have taught them humanity. They did not get it. Free intercourse with men on terms of equality would have helped them to common sense. They are denied it. The existence of a freely critical Irish literature would hold them in check; but the Irish literary movement is lyrical in spirit rather than critical, and nearly everyone in Ireland is afraid to laugh. It is only since yesterday that these priests have existed. It is only till to-morrow that they can survive. But the business of getting rid of them, if the number of them increases, may very well shake our social order to its foundation.<sup>116</sup>

Thus, along with the absence of normal social interaction, Birmingham identifies the dearth of unrestrictedly critical Revival literature as one of the reasons why such priests were becoming prevalent. This is particularly significant when one considers that a few pages earlier in the same chapter of *Irishmen All* Birmingham alludes to a then recently published novel which, because of its overt criticism of the Irish clergy, had generated considerable hostility:

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<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

A few years ago a novel was published in which the Roman Catholic priests in Ireland were criticised, mildly enough indeed, but in plain language. One particular priest, a man of great gentility but humble origin, took it into his head that he was the prototype of one of the characters in the book. (...) He was exceedingly angry with the author, not because he was represented as unfaithful or immoral, but because his dinner-table was described, so he thought, as more remarkable for the hospitable abundance of the food on it, than for its elegance. (...) It was a question of whether it was gentlemanly or not to have a ham and a leg of mutton on the table at the same time. This priest was a man of great influence in his locality, and for some time after the publication of that book the whole neighbourhood was swept with a wave of religious bitterness.<sup>117</sup>

Birmingham never names the novel in question but it is, of course, *The Seething Pot*, the offending part, as described above, to be found in the fourth chapter, when food is brought to the table in Fr Fahy's presbytery for a number of guests: "Mary (...) pushed her way round the table (...). She deposited great joints of mutton at the head and foot. Two hams and large dishes of potatoes were arranged along the sides." (SP, 43)

What all of this suggests is that Birmingham, frustrated with the Revival's tendency not to confront or satirize the new type of clergy then emerging in Ireland, decided to intervene critically and provocatively with *The Seething Pot*, part of the objective of which may have been to specifically target such priests and thus to "hold them in check", as he articulates the point in the above passage from *Irishmen All*. In this regard comparisons may be made between Birmingham and both James Joyce and George Moore: the early stories from Joyce's *Dubliners* and the complete collection of Moore's *The Untilled Field* all appearing shortly before the publication of Birmingham's first novel. The actual result of Birmingham's intervention, however, could not have been anticipated by the novelist, though what unfolded in reality ironically proved the very points which he had made in his fiction:

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 177 – 78.

The Roman Catholic priest in Westport, a man with whom I had hitherto been on friendly terms, conceived the idea that I had caricatured him in *The Seething Pot*. (...) But it was certainly not true that I had that priest in mind when I wrote. (...) He was extremely bitter about my supposed caricature. I had, so he thought, represented him as something less than a gentleman and this was my real offence. (...) This priest, in his fury, stirred up the people of Westport against me. He used to write weekly articles in the local papers with such headings as, “The Author of *The Seething Pot* Unveiled.” The people, convinced that they ought to rise in defence of their faith, used to gather outside my house at night and boo at me. They burnt me in effigy in the streets. They made an attempt, only moderately successful, to boycott me, all in the hope of demonstrating to an uninterested world that this priest had the table manners of a gentleman. It was an amazingly silly business, though only mildly amusing at the time.

Other priests – though not all – took up the cause of their insulted brother. They made things as unpleasant for me as they could on all public occasions. They refused to sit on committees of which I was a member. They succeeded finally in driving me out of the Gaelic League, though I was at the time a member of the governing body.<sup>118</sup>

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Now let us return to the passage from the novel in which the Irish clergy are forthrightly condemned: because of it we are left increasingly persuaded that no individual or class or group in the novel could possibly have the remotest chance of defeating such sinister sacerdotal soldiers. Furthermore, we are informed that the Church can always depend on the slavish loyalty of its lay members, such allegiance being a defining feature of Irish Catholicism, a point similar to that made by Joyce in his fiction in the following decade:

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<sup>118</sup> *Pleasant Places*, 162 – 63. French identifies the priest in question as Fr MacDonald, the parish priest of Westport at the time. French, *op. cit.*, 42. See the above article by French for a full account of the controversy.



An Irishman will occasionally bully and abuse his priest, but he is always repentant afterwards. The enemies of the Roman Church in Ireland have frequently congratulated themselves on the signs of a popular rebellion against priestly authority. Hitherto their rejoicings have proved to be premature. The very men who are most violently anxious to break loose from clerical bondage turn out, when the first frenzy of rebellion is past, quite as eager to refasten their own fetters. (SP, 178 – 79)<sup>119</sup>

Nevertheless, Sir Gerald, along with O'Neill, strives to work in this context, as the next section will show.

#### **xvi. Sir Gerald perseveres**

*'My deadliest offence is that I am arising and going back to my father.'*<sup>120</sup>

By the middle of the novel Sir Gerald has grown ever more conscious of the social consequences of his association with O'Neill. Now, with the news of Godfrey's resignation widely known, Sir Gerald finds himself "suddenly in the position of a stranger of very doubtful reputation among the people he had begun to make friends with." (SP, 151) As the Clonferts, the local gentry, Canon Johnston, his bank manager and even his servants begin to withdraw from him, the novel again attempts to explain sympathetically such Protestant intolerance of nationalism:

the impenetrable mass of prejudice against national sentiment of any kind (...) is as strong as religious faith in a certain class of Irish people. Indeed, it is in reality stronger. (...) The one unforgivable person is the political renegade, the gentleman who has friendly dealings with the Nationalists. The strength of the

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<sup>119</sup> Seamus Deane, in his introduction to Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, states:

*Portrait* is among the most important of Irish novels because it is the first to examine the distorted relationship between the Irish community and oppression and to focus upon oppression's ultimate resource – the cooperation of the oppressed. (...)

(...) Joyce's version of Parnell was part of his analysis of the aborted progress of the Irish people from colonial slavery to near-freedom. The double empire of London and Rome weighed so heavily on the Irish because they had grown to love their enslavement and to fear freedom and its responsibilities.

James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Edited with an introduction and notes by Seamus Deane. (London: Penguin Books, 1992), vii – viii & xxxv.

<sup>120</sup> Sir Gerald to Hester on his political alignment with O'Neill (SP, 166).

prejudice has something noble in it. It is the protest of a class which is being driven against the wall, against what appears to be base desertion to the ranks of a conquering majority. (SP, 152)<sup>121</sup>

Despite such prejudice, Sir Gerald begins a friendship with O'Neill and his wife, while the former also gradually becomes a source of inspiration for Sir Gerald: "O'Neill's strength of character and directness of purpose began to exercise a fascination on the young man." (SP, 156)

The personal consequences of Sir Gerald's association with O'Neill are immediately evident when he informs Lord and Lady Clonfert, his prospective parents-in-law, of his intention of becoming a member of O'Neill's Parliamentary Party, with the possibility that he may one day be elected a nationalist MP. The Clonferts, not unexpectedly, refuse to permit their daughter to be, as they see it, degraded by marriage to a man who consorts with "thieves and murderers." (SP, 171) The wedding, however, takes place, though without the attendance of Lady Clonfert.

Shortly afterwards the alliance between Sir Gerald and O'Neill is perceived as a serious threat to the political power of Irish Catholicism: during a meeting between Fr Fahy and his bishop the latter detects the ultimate source of his priest's concern: "You seem to think (...) that the people are likely to accept the guidance of John O'Neill and Sir Gerald Geoghegan in preference to yours." (SP, 183) When Fr Fahy admits that this is the case the ensuing conversation underlines the nature of the central conflict in the novel: the contest for political leadership of the country between O'Neill, the Protestant, and those associated with him, and the Catholic Church. Referring to O'Neill's predicted opposition to the issue of the Religious Orders,

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<sup>121</sup> Such ingrained prejudice may be more fully understood when considered alongside O'Neill's later thoughts on the subject of honour; again, Birmingham's comprehensive understanding, this time of human nature, is undeniable here:

'What do you suppose is honour? It is the reflex action of the prejudices of our birth and education. Look here: I cross my legs and hit my knee – so. My foot jumps. That's because I am a tissue of nerves inside, which react to a certain stimulus quite apart from my will. You'd call me a fool if I made a fetish of my foot and let my actions be guided by its jumping more or less. A man's mind is just like his body. It is woven through with prejudices. They come to us by inheritance and education. Something excites one of them, and there comes a jump, like the jump of my foot. You call it a feeling of honour, and refrain from doing something you want to because of it. I call a man a superstitious fool who lets himself be hampered in any such way.' (SP, 161)



which the Church will support, the bishop expresses the following fears in anticipation of a victory by O'Neill:

'If John O'Neill carries the party with him, he will inflict a severe blow on our prestige. If after the General Election he comes in again at the head of the Irish Party, there will be no doubt about his position. He will be the leader of an anti-clerical party.'

'I suppose so,' said the priest. 'There are a great many of our own people who would gladly join such a party if they got a good lead.'

'If such a thing should occur,' said the Bishop, 'it would be a bad day for us. Anti-clerical political parties all begin in the same way. They profess to be sincerely religious, and to desire nothing but a reasonable limitation of priestly power. They all end in the same thing – a wave of infidelity, and subsequent immorality.'

'I have always thought that Protestants as political leaders were most undesirable and dangerous. They are sure to be jealous of our power over the people.' (SP, 183 – 84)

Soon afterwards Sir Gerald is presented with the opportunity of continuing his work as a good landlord and thereby enhancing his credentials as a potential Protestant leader when a famine of sorts begins in the West of Ireland. The point is made that this particular food shortage, not unusual in the area, is simply a manifestation of the chronic poverty of the region (SP, 188), but nevertheless, as a result of Sir Gerald's efforts on behalf of the hungry and because of his plans for his estate, he becomes an enlightened landlord in the public mind:

Sir Gerald found himself a member of the local committee for the distribution of Indian meal and potatoes. He also discovered, to his surprise, that he was an object of considerable interest to the representatives of various newspapers and to inquisitive philanthropists on tour. He owed his fame to the discovery, by an intelligent reporter, of the plan for dealing with the grazing-lands on his estate. He was posed before the public of Manchester and Liverpool as an enlightened landlord. (SP, 188 – 89)



Despite the above references to Indian meal and potatoes, what is being described here is in no way comparable to the nineteenth century Famine. However, it would seem that this particular episode allows Sir Gerald at least some means of partially atoning for the deeds of his uncle, whose actions after the Famine were described by McCarty earlier in the novel, and thus Sir Gerald makes some contribution, however small, towards the rehabilitation of his class in his locality and beyond.

Sir Gerald's scheme for his grazing-lands generates much media attention, as mentioned above. However, when questioned about the new system by a reporter from *The Morning Observer*, Sir Gerald denies being a reformer on a large scale and, when pressed on the matter, exclaims: "Did you think I had started a communistic brotherhood?" (SP, 193). Although the notion of such a community is categorically dismissed by Sir Gerald here, the reference to such a syndicate may have a historical source, which Hannay was aware of and in which he took an active interest, as the following will show.

In 1897 a Mr Bracher, inspired by the communistic ideas of Tolstoi, founded the colony of the Whiteway Anarchists, providing it with approximately forty acres of land in the Cotswold Hills. Hannay read about this brotherhood in F. R. Henderson's *New Order*, the latter featuring articles on the colony in September 1899 and February 1901. In fact, the case so intrigued Hannay that he briefly corresponded with the author of one of the articles.<sup>122</sup> As a consequence of such investigation Hannay was conscious that "eager Socialists in Protestant England and Protestant Germany are listening" to Tolstoi.<sup>123</sup> Furthermore, rather than Christianity and socialism being mutually exclusive, Hannay shows in *The Spirit and Origin of Christian Monasticism* that there was a noble and holy precedent for communistic ideology and its implementation to be found in the early Church; notice here the use of a term which will reappear later in *The Seething Pot*: "The Church in Jerusalem during the early years of its existence was a *communistic brotherhood*, in which the renunciation of private property, if not an actual condition of membership, was certainly the general practice."<sup>124</sup> Indeed, Hannay continues, it was said that even in order to begin

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<sup>122</sup> *The Spirit and Origin of Christian Monasticism*, 22 – 23.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 39. Italics mine.

conquering the sin of avarice it was firstly imperative to commit oneself to “the complete renunciation of all property.”<sup>125</sup> Sir Gerald, however, as quoted above, stops far short of such radicalism and it is possible to interpret his abnegation of such revolutionism as a foretaste of his later reactionary stance, to be discussed below.

Returning to the novel: during the famine Dennis Browne stays for some time in Clogher, where he owns a house and some property. While staying with the Geoghegans he describes a print which hangs in one of the rooms of Clogher House: ““It shows Britannia, a plump lady, in a low-necked dress, giving a Bible to a kneeling Indian. A gentleman in a white waistcoat, representing the respectable English middle class, stands behind her. His face betrays the satisfaction of a righteous man who sees a good deed done.”” (SP, 208)

The painting in question here is clearly T. J. Barker’s *Queen Victoria* (*The Secret of England’s Greatness*), dating from the 1860s. Though it should be acknowledged that Browne’s reason for introducing the painting as a topic for discussion is simply so that he can criticize the rotund queen’s choice of a revealing dress, the mention of this particular image seems to have a significance beyond Browne’s frivolousness. As discussed above, the second chapter of the novel contains a description of one of Jim Tynan’s paintings which, as the artist himself suggests to Sir Gerald, depicts militant Irish nationalism, a tradition represented by Sir Gerald’s father, among others. Barker’s painting, however, portrays native submission to political and cultural imperialism and the fact that it hangs in Sir Gerald’s house suggests that it and the earlier one by Tynan represent the two political extremes, between which Sir Gerald will ultimately be forced to choose; indeed, as we shall see, he will soon have to decide between a full commitment to O’Neill’s party, and everything it represents, or a complete withdrawal from Irish politics and a subsequent acceptance of Ireland’s place within the British Empire.

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<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.



xvii. the poverty which clamoured at their doors<sup>126</sup>

In chapter fifteen of the novel the narrator, while describing the famine which has just begun in the West of Ireland, makes the following statement about the cause of such a food shortage: "As a matter of fact, the peasants in certain parts of Connaught are always so poor as to be on the verge of actual hunger. Some winters things are a little worse than usual." (SP, 188) Later, as the famine subsides in the public mind, Sir Gerald comes to an appreciation of such poverty when he realizes that "whatever unreality there might be about the periodical cries of famine, the normal poverty of the people was appalling, and quite indisputable." (SP, 212 – 13) Furthermore, as a landlord he is distressed by the knowledge that some of those who pay him rent are living at or even below subsistence-level: "It came on him as a revelation that there were families on his estate who could afford to buy no food except Indian meal for a portion of every year. He was horrified at the thought that these people paid him rent." (SP, 213)

Such references in the novel to the extreme indigence of parts of the West of Ireland almost certainly had their source in Hannay's experiences of that region during his time as rector of Westport. In *Pleasant Places*, for example, Birmingham describes Co. Mayo as "the most desolate and backward county in the whole of Ireland",<sup>127</sup> while, more specifically, he refers to the village of Keel, on Achill island, as "the most primitive and utterly poverty-stricken village I have ever seen."<sup>128</sup> There is one particular account in his autobiography, however, which graphically conveys the extent of the appalling destitution of the area:

I can remember when I visited the house of one of my parishioners for the first time, being shocked to discover that the habitation consisted of one single room. In it lived, sleeping and eating, the farmer and his wife, their grown-up daughter, two cows, a calf, a couple of pigs, a dog and a whole flock of hens which roosted on the rafters of the building. Later on the daughter got married

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<sup>126</sup> The full sentence, which relates to Hester and Mrs O'Neill's charitable work, reads as follows: "Sometimes he [John O'Neill] drove them on their more distant expeditions, for they were not content to relieve only the poverty which clamoured at their doors." (SP, 198)

<sup>127</sup> *Pleasant Places*, 96.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.



and her husband joined the party in this single-roomed cottage, and in it, ultimately, the girl's first baby was born.<sup>129</sup>

Hannay was not the only writer from the period who encountered and recorded the pauperism of this part of the country, as Herbert Howarth shows in his study of the writers from this time:

When AE first saw the Congested Districts in the west, he was horrified to silence; in 1897, when he had just begun his rural tours for Plunkett, he wrote to Synge from Belmullet in Mayo: "This wild country here has imposed such a melancholy into my blood that I have not had the heart to write to [Yeats] or anybody else if I could help it. I had nothing to say except accounts of the distress here which is a disgrace to humanity and that is not cheerful subject matter for a letter". Synge was just as aware of the distress of the Districts when he travelled with Jack Yeats in 1905, and his prose studies contain the dour reality.<sup>130</sup>

And indeed Synge was acutely conscious of the extreme immiseration of this region, as is demonstrated in a series of articles which he wrote for the *Manchester Guardian* in the year that Birmingham's first novel was published.<sup>131</sup> In one article, for example, he describes Carraroe, "which is said to be, on the whole, the poorest parish in the country."<sup>132</sup> Allowing one of the inhabitants of the area to give an account of the conditions of life there, the ensuing impression of people living perpetually on the brink of starvation is similar to Birmingham's representation of peasant life in Connaught in *The Seething Pot*, as quoted above:

I asked him if many of the people who were living round in the scattered cottages we could see were often in real want of food. 'There are a few, maybe, have enough at all times,' he said, 'but the most are in want one time or another,

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<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>130</sup> Herbert Howarth, *The Irish Writers 1880 – 1940: Literature Under Parnell's Star*. (London: Rockliff, 1958), 220.

<sup>131</sup> The articles in question were published as a series of twelve in the *Manchester Guardian* from 10 June 1905 to 26 July of the same year. Alan Price (Ed.), *J. M. Synge: Collected Works. Volume II: Prose*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 283.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

when the potatoes are bad or few, and their whole store is eaten; and there are some who are near starving at all times, like a widow woman beyond who has seven children with hardly a shirt on their skins, and they with nothing to eat but the milk from one cow, and a handful meal they will get from one neighbour or another.<sup>133</sup>

In another article from the same series Synge recounts one experience of an area near Belmullet, “another district of the greatest poverty.”<sup>134</sup> Here Synge’s description of the interior of one particular cottage is not unlike Birmingham’s above recollection of the house of one of his parishioners:

After a while the carman stopped at a door to get a drink for his horse, and we went in for a moment or two to shelter from the wind. It was the poorest cottage we had seen. There was no chimney, and the smoke rose by the wall to a hole in the roof at the top of the gable. A boy of ten was sitting near the fire minding three babies, and at the other end of the room there was a cow with two calves and a few sickly-looking hens. The air was so filled with turf-smoke that we went out again in a moment into the open air. As we were standing about we heard the carman ask the boy why he was not at school.

‘I’m spreading turf this day,’ he said, ‘and my brother is at school. To-morrow he’ll stay at home, and it will be my turn to go.’<sup>135</sup>

*The Seething Pot*, then, as indicated above, gives at least some sense of the penury suffered by many at the time of composition and Sir Gerald continues for some time to be troubled by this aspect of life around him, as is apparent when he admits to himself the selfishness of his planned redistribution of his land; politics, however, is about to alter everything:

Sir Gerald knew very well that the plan for distributing his land was carefully calculated to exclude the very people to whom the acquisition of more land was

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<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 292. The constant threat of hunger in the Congested Districts region is reiterated by Synge at the end of his series of articles: “the failure of a few small plots of potatoes brings them literally to a state of famine.” *Ibid.*, 339.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

the first necessity of all. It is likely that he would have yielded to Father Fahy, and attempted to settle the very poorest of his tenants on the new farms, if a rapid development of the political situation had not broken for a time his friendship with the priest. (SP, 213 – 14)

Thus begins the controversy over the French religious orders, which precipitates the expected clash between O'Neill and the Irish Catholic Church. At this point, though O'Neill instructs his party to oppose the government on the issue, the members, importuned by the Irish Catholic bishops to support the government, refuse to follow O'Neill.

### **xviii. Messiah**

What is most compelling about this part of the novel is that at the very moment of his defeat by his own party, O'Neill emerges as a messianic figure. After McCarty discloses to his leader that the party will not be forced to oppose the government, O'Neill echoes Jesus's words when he asks: "How many of you are going to desert me?" (SP, 231)<sup>136</sup> Despite being told that most of the members have resolved to support the government, O'Neill refuses to alter his stance on the matter, declaring: "If you like to sell me, you can. I hope you'll get a better price out of your priests than your own miserable souls." (SP, 231) O'Neill's words here would seem to suggest the betrayal of Jesus by Judas Iscariot and the priests' payment to him of thirty pieces of silver. Then, immediately after the party has determined to vote with the government and thus defy O'Neill, the latter speaks of betrayal four times (SP, 239 & 240), and on the final occasion he significantly mentions the disciple who betrayed Jesus, thus tacitly comparing himself to the Messiah: "Even Judas Iscariot

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<sup>136</sup> This question may be an allusion to that part of John's Gospel where Jesus, after he has declared himself to be the Messiah, is abandoned by a number of his disciples; note also the reference to betrayal here:

From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him.  
Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away?  
Then Simon Peter answered him. Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life.  
And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God.  
Jesus answered them. Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil?  
He spake of Judas Iscariot the son of Simon: for he it was that should betray him, being one of the twelve. (John 6: 66 – 71)



got thirty pieces of silver for his betrayal. What are you going to get?” (SP, 240). By the end of the chapter O’Neill utters words which are especially pregnant and which elucidate Birmingham’s characterization of him:

The men whom he taunted could bear no more. They sprang up before him, threatening him. It seemed as if nothing could prevent their beating him down, when his voice rang out clear above their tumult:

‘You dogs! Do you dare to yelp about my heels and snarl at me? I am your master still. Stand back from me!’ (SP, 240)<sup>137</sup>

When one considers that later on, in conversation with his wife, O’Neill admits that “the hounds have so nearly pulled me down” (SP, 260), it seems likely that these references to assailing dogs may, on one level, be an allusion to a quotation from Goethe, which, as Yeats records in his *Autobiographies*, was much in evidence after the death of Parnell: “During the quarrel over Parnell’s grave a quotation from Goethe ran through the papers, describing our Irish jealousy: ‘The Irish seem to me like a pack of hounds, always dragging down some noble stag.’”<sup>138</sup> Thus we are reminded of the historical foundation for much of O’Neill’s characterization: Parnell. However, when one bears in mind the previously discussed intimations of messiahship in this chapter, it would appear that there could also be a far more profound meaning at the heart of the above words spoken by O’Neill. It is possible that the dogs in question are an allusion to two verses from Psalm 22, well known for its prophetic vision of Christ’s crucifixion: “For dogs have compassed me; the assembly of the wicked have enclosed me; they pierced my hands and my feet (...) Deliver my soul from the sword; my only one from the power of the dog.”<sup>139</sup> Therefore O’Neill is indeed portrayed as a potential yet defeated saviour of Ireland.

The above messianic overtones of O’Neill’s characterization may be explained by reference to the myth of Parnell, which, though evident in his lifetime, intensified

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<sup>137</sup> Another description of the members of O’Neill’s party as dogs occurs earlier in the novel when McCarty confronts his leader about the way in which O’Neill treats the members of his party: “You treat us as if we were your slaves or your dogs!” (SP, 229)

<sup>138</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*. (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1955), 316.

<sup>139</sup> Psalm 22, verses 16 & 20. C. I. Scofield (Ed.), *Holy Bible: Authorized King James Version*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 610.

shortly after the great leader's death. Here Howarth offers the following account of Parnell's burial:

The procession moved to the cemetery in the afternoon. The storm was declining. Katherine Tynan has described the scene. She says that the sky over the grave had cleared, and that the stars were looking out of a quiet green and gold space. When the coffin was lowered into the pit, a woman shrieked and there was second's confusion. As it touched earth, a meteor sailed across the clearing and fell. "He had omens and portents to the end", she wrote.

Many spectators saw, or as time passed believed they had seen, the portents. Standish O'Grady said: "I state a fact – it was witnessed by thousands. While his followers were committing Charles Parnell's remains to the earth, the sky was bright with strange lights and flames.... Those flames recall to my memory what is told of similar phenomena, said to have been witnessed when tidings of the death of St. Columba overran the northwest of Europe."<sup>140</sup>

Such reported signs, along with the circumstances which preceded Parnell's death, all led to the retrospective attribution of messianic properties to Parnell by a people who had long sought for such a figure, as Howarth explains:

The beliefs and the myths that consolidated in Irish imagining and Irish writing after Parnell's death, were not new. They had been eddying among the people for at least a century. But the fall and death and portentous burial of the Chief pulled them to a focus. They had been filtering into literature as something attractive but scarcely understood. Now the poets seized on them deliberately.

The essence of these beliefs was Messianic. Among the oppressed, Messianism is always strong. Ireland had been an occupied land, a land exploited, for 700 years. Its peasants were among the poorest in Western Europe. For a point of comparison we have to think of Portugal and Spain, perhaps of Morocco or pre-Kemalist Turkey, or Egypt. In these countries the poor had long been enfolded

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<sup>140</sup> Herbert Howarth, *op. cit.*, 4.

within the close organisation of Catholicism or Islam. They were faithfully orthodox, but beneath the orthodoxy they moved to the rhythm of more primitive convictions, which lived in their stories, proverbs and parables, and songs. The oppressed wait for a Messiah to come to redeem them – literally to bring them food and raiment and consolation. The Irish oppressed were more than once ready to identify a political leader with Him. How quickly they gave the nineteenth-century leaders such names as the Counsellor, the Agitator, the Liberator.<sup>141</sup>

Howarth continues by stating that for a while the Irish saw O’Connell as their messiah, but by 1843, when he failed to lead a rebellion against England, “his power ebbed away from him. New leaders were sought, new Messianic candidates.”<sup>142</sup> For this reason, Howarth claims: “[t]he imagination was hungry for a leader like Christ or Charlemagne or Barbarossa – a hero whose death is only similitude, who rises again, who will come, a Golem, from his covert when his people need him.”<sup>143</sup> Specifically with regard to the writers of the Literary Revival, Howarth explains: “[t]he minds that made the Irish literary movement, the Irish Risorgimento, were shaped at the earliest age by the tradition of the rebellion and the hopes of a Messiah and interpenetrated by images like these.”<sup>144</sup> Thus: “[i]n the martyrological passions and public guilt of the end of 1891 the Irish Messianic legends were remade and the themes of the national literature coalesced and were remade. But remade slowly. It took ten years for the Messianic theme to grow, traceable only through the help of journals and letters, and emerge in literature.”<sup>145</sup>

Thus the messianic presentation of O’Neill at the above point in *The Seething Pot* could well be a reflection of a historical perception of Parnell from around the time the novel was written.

At around the point in the novel when O’Neill is presented in the above messianic terms, Sir Gerald begins to distance himself both from O’Neill and his politics. Before

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<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.



this, however, despite the fact that O'Neill is seen by some as being unscrupulous, Sir Gerald is initially pragmatic and, pointing out that his father, Gerald Geoghegan, ultimately failed, Sir Gerald doubts that "the men who do great things in the world can keep their hands clean." (SP, 225) Notwithstanding Sir Gerald's apparent acceptance of O'Neill's dubious methods here, the notion of becoming personally contaminated by nationalism will soon develop into a source of major concern for Sir Gerald and the matter will ultimately lead to his withdrawal from Irish politics, as we shall see. Thus, in this regard, the novel investigates whether a gentleman can involve himself in nationalist politics, in all its potential sordidness, and still maintain his identity as a gentleman, and thus his respectability, or whether such aberrant political behaviour taints and ultimately diminishes such a man. The novel, so far, has explored and promoted, in the character of Sir Gerald, the possibility of a patriotic landlord, but the remainder of the text demonstrates the impossibility of Sir Gerald's position, ending with his retreat from political life, thus reinforcing our initial doubts that such an anomalous stance was ever viable to begin with.

*ixx. but he could not use his opportunity*<sup>146</sup>

In chapter seventeen of the novel O'Neill expresses the belief that if he is victorious in his battle with the government, the Catholic clergy and those opposed to him within his party, then Sir Gerald will be "governing Ireland" (SP, 224) ten years afterwards. However, the first sign of Sir Gerald's future withdrawal from Irish affairs is evident when O'Neill asks him to stand for election as a Member of Parliament, now that McCarty has resigned his seat. At this moment, as Sir Gerald is being asked to commit himself in a very real and public manner to nationalism and to O'Neill's hope of "beating O'Rourke and the priests" (SP, 246), the baronet's physical reaction to the request is enough to indicate his feelings about the matter and the ultimate outcome of the novel is now easy to predict:

Sir Gerald grew slowly numb. His face lost all expression. He sat looking vacantly at John O'Neill. He saw clearly before him the prospect of a choice that he dreaded. He realized that he must either plunge himself into a contest

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<sup>146</sup> Said of Sir Gerald when he fails to make an impact on the initially attentive crowd at Clogher (SP, 253).

where he had small sympathy with either side, or be false to a friend, and that in the moment of his greatest need. (SP, 246)

Even before he finds himself in this awkward position he has already voiced his misgivings about O'Neill, his methods and the improbability of his being successful; this expression of disquietude concludes with the ominous words: "I doubt if ever I should have cared to be a member of his party. If things had gone right with him, I should have kept out of politics. Now, if I am any use, I shall stand by him." (SP, 242) Now, pathetically, he is forced to stand by O'Neill, only because the latter is certain to fail and as it would simply be dishonourable to abandon a man in such a state, though desertion might well have been the better option, especially when this supporter can openly admit: "I am a very poor fighter. I think you would do better if you chose some other man." (SP, 247) Yet O'Neill insists on Sir Gerald as the only candidate, significantly invoking scripture as he does so: "It is you that I want,' (...) 'If I quoted Scripture like your friend O'Hara, I should say, "Thou art the man!"'" (SP, 246 – 47)<sup>147</sup>

Soon Sir Gerald is about to address his first audience from a platform in Clogher, beneath a recently-erected statue, described thus:

As an expression of popular sentiment it was remarkable. It represented Humbert, the French General who attempted the desperate task of rescuing Ireland from English rule. One brief flicker of success had rested on his arms, and only one. Yet he has become something of a popular hero, and his poor little victory at Castlebar has been bragged of and sung about as if it were a counterpoise to Aghrim and the ferocious suppression of the rebellion in Wexford. It seemed significant to Sir Gerald that the platform from which he was to address his first audience was erected beneath this statue. The shadow of General Humbert would fall upon him while he spoke. (SP, 249)

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<sup>147</sup> Shortly afterwards O'Neill underlines his fervent desire to gain the support of Sir Gerald and thus further emphasizes the latter's unique potential in this situation: "There is no other man,' said O'Neill, 'who would have the slightest chance. It is you or nobody.'" (SP, 247) Later, although O'Neill realizes Sir Gerald's obvious shortcomings, he still insists on the crucial importance of his candidacy: "He's weak (...). He's no real good. He'll boggle and shy at the first fence we put him at; but I must have him. He's the only candidate that will give me a chance of winning this election.'" (SP, 259)



Here the statue of Humbert has a double significance: firstly it represents the assistance from abroad which offered, albeit momentarily, victory to the Irish during the insurrection of 1798. Secondly, the monument's recent erection also points towards the long-lasting Irish popular perception of the French general as a hero of the eighteenth century rebellion.<sup>148</sup> Thus the statue, the significance of which is not lost on Sir Gerald, becomes a visible sign of what Sir Gerald, also an outsider, might achieve if he completely commits himself to nationalism; now is his opportunity, previously dreamt of, to become, like Humbert, the immortal "young deliverer of Kathaleen-ni-Houlahan." (SP, 15)

Notwithstanding the above promise, as represented by Humbert, at this point in the novel Sir Gerald soon realizes, uncomfortably, that in putting himself forward for Parliament, he "was engaged to work with men who hated not only England and her Parliament, but the Empire and the King. He accepted his position helplessly." (SP, 250) However, despite Sir Gerald's internal turmoil, he has the luxury of a transfixed audience as the crowd is initially fascinated by the fact that he, a landlord and thus a traditional enemy of theirs, is now amongst their leaders on a nationalist platform:

The crowd cheered him madly. It was something to them to see a landlord, one of the class whom they had learnt to regard as their natural enemies, standing among their leaders, about to appeal to them in the name of Ireland. The very novelty of the thing secured a silence for the opening of Sir Gerald's speech. (SP, 253)

At this crucial moment Sir Gerald fails miserably: he succumbs to nervousness, is initially inaudible to most of his listeners and ultimately loses the attention of the crowd. However, although Sir Gerald and O'Neill are both aware of the former's failure to make any impact on the crowd, O'Dwyer endeavours to salvage the situation by emphasizing that Sir Gerald is not about to represent them as a landlord, but as the son of Gerald Geoghegan 'the rebel'. The crowd are told the story of Gerald

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<sup>148</sup> Years later Birmingham referred to this moment in Irish history in *The Lighter Side of Irish Life*: "the landing of the French at Killala, an event which ought surely to have impressed itself on the Mayo people, is only very vaguely recollected." George A. Birmingham, *The Lighter Side of Irish Life*. (London: T. N. Foulis, 1911), 153. Birmingham's fourth novel, *The Northern Iron*, published in 1907, would deal exclusively with the 1798 rebellion, as will be discussed in the final chapter of this thesis.



Geoghegan and even Sir Gerald is caught up in the near evangelical frenzy which O'Dwyer creates. Finally, O'Dwyer grabs Sir Gerald and presents him to the crowd with the following words:

'We ask you to vote for him,' he cried, 'because he is the son of such a man; because he will not fear to go the way his father went; because we are sick of politicians and priests who prate and cant of law and order; because it is time to have done with those who talk, and then sell their own souls and Ireland's liberty; because henceforth we mean to fight England with the only weapons that have ever conquered tyranny.' (SP, 256)

The appeal to physical force here is obvious and it should be noted that shortly before this point in the novel Sir Gerald is informed that O'Dwyer, the speaker of the above words, "almost worships the memory of your father. He has him in a frame over his bed along with Emmet and Wolfe Tone." (SP, 248) Thus O'Dwyer, the worshipper of a triptych of Protestant militants, is now challenging Sir Gerald to discard his former, sentimental, vacillating nationalism and to contemplate the wholly new dimension of violence as a means of liberating his country; in this way he is being called on to inherit the tradition of arms and open rebellion as championed by his father and as depicted in the previously discussed painting by Jim Tynan, described near the beginning of the novel. Shortly afterwards, however, Sir Gerald writes to O'Neill, protesting against the sentiments expressed by O'Dwyer and declining to be associated with what he sees as sedition; the sword of rebellion, once wielded by Sir Gerald's father, is now being rejected, it would seem, in favour of the sword of the law.<sup>149</sup> Such an attitude is reminiscent of William Smith O'Brien's condemnation of Fenianism after his return from Tasmania and it is one example which shows how Sir Gerald is sometimes a combination of both himself and the historical figure on which his father is based.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Later in the chapter, when the police intercept Sir Gerald, O'Neill and O'Dwyer on their way to a political meeting at Ross, one officer's sword is referred to as follows: "[h]e held his sword in his left hand to prevent it dragging in the mud." (SP, 262) Here the sword of the law can be contrasted with the sword of rebellion, as mentioned in the prologue: "[h]e [Gerald Geoghegan] sailed for Australia in a convict ship, the last and the most ineffective of the long line of those who have drawn the sword for Ireland." (SP, 2)

<sup>150</sup> Later in the novel Sir Gerald thinks of himself as O'Neill's "unwilling recruit, upon a desperate enterprise, uncertain even of the justice of the cause for which he fought." (SP, 270) Sir Gerald's sentiments here are suggestive of William Smith O'Brien's reluctant leadership of the 1848 rebellion.

Long before the above incident, during Sir Gerald's first meeting with O'Neill, the latter makes a distinction between his own nationalism and that of both Sir Gerald and O'Hara:

There are some things you would not do for Ireland, Mr. O'Hara – so you tell us in *The Critic* now and again. There are some things Sir Gerald wouldn't do, either. You see, you are both gentlemen, and gentlemen don't do certain things. Well, I do them – the dirty things not fit for gentlemen. I do them, and I expect my followers to do them – for Ireland. (SP, 121 – 22)

O'Neill's words, as quoted above, are now shown to be quite accurate as the idea of being debased by contact with nationalism begins to torment Sir Gerald and eventually causes him to completely withdraw from what was, all along, a very ambivalent involvement in Irish politics. At this point, after losing his temper with those around him, he believes his behaviour is becoming worryingly ungentlemanly.<sup>151</sup> On two occasions he verbally abuses a policeman for merely carrying out his duty and he immediately becomes aware of the indecorous nature of such conduct, especially when, on the second occasion, he realizes that it is the officer who has spoken like a gentleman and not himself.<sup>152</sup> Then the officer's words, as well as underlining for Gerald the hopelessness of his political venture, also seem to confirm for Sir Gerald the impossibility, for a man of his background, of continuing down the disreputable road of Irish nationalism: "I've known Ireland, south and west, for forty years, and I tell you it's no use your fighting the priests. Everyone that ever tried got beaten and went under. (...) Besides (...) it's not a very dignified position for one of the first gentlemen in the county to be disputing with a lot of bobbies on the public road." (SP, 268 – 69)<sup>153</sup> It is at this point that Sir Gerald finally and

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<sup>151</sup> Near the end of the novel Sir Gerald says to his wife: "It's not only that I dislike rows with the police, (...) 'though I don't think they are suitable for a man in my position.'" (SP, 281 – 82)

<sup>152</sup> Later Sir Gerald reiterates this reversal of roles: "The policeman behaved like a gentleman. I have probably earned a reputation as a rowdy." (SP, 274) Furthermore, he states: "They dragged O'Dwyer about a bit, and I dare say I deserved the same treatment; but the officer was a gentleman, and let me off." (SP, 281)

<sup>153</sup> The notion of a gentleman's character being irreparably damaged by any dealings with the police is later emphasized by Hester's reaction to what has happened: "Hester's voice betrayed the fact that she was really shocked. There is something about any contact with the police which brings with it a feeling of disgrace. The stigma of having been once arrested for drunkenness and disorderly conduct would cling to a respectable citizen even though his innocence of the charge were afterwards made clear as the noon-day." (SP, 273 – 74)



completely submits to the call of domesticity, abandoning Parliament for the drawing room, his wife and children, and thus deserting Ireland in the process. If any pattern is now to be discerned in Sir Gerald's world it is the re-emergence of his early love of order and polite Anglo-Irish society:

Every word that the officer said struck Sir Gerald as true. He felt the painful indignity of his position. He was convinced that it was hopeless to fight the priests. The battle would be a vile one in any case. There opened up before his mind a prospect of appeals to the worst passions of the mob, of detestable tactics, of utterly sordid details. Besides, he was not sure if he wanted to beat the priests. He knew by heart all that could be said about their tyranny and greed, their craft and narrow dogmatism. But he remembered also Father Fahy's care for the poor people out on the mountains and bogs. It did not seem to him either possible or right to set these people free from their priests. Surely, life would be better spent in taking care of them and trying to lift them out of the quagmire of their poverty.

He was depressed and sickened by the experiences of the last few days. He no longer saw any heroism in the struggle before him, and wished heartily that he could have done with the whole thing. There rose up in his mind a vision of what his life might be. He saw a long vista of peaceful days, with Hester by his side, with children, perhaps, growing up around his knees. He thought of the ordered routine, the deference, the honour and affection which might surround him; of pleasant intercourse with men whose ways and thoughts would not jar on him, and with ladies who were gracious and benign. (SP, 269 – 70)

Now, the hoped-for paternalistic landlord has utterly abandoned his previous nationalist aspirations and has resigned himself to the sphere of a simpler fatherhood, suddenly delegating the care of his people to their priests. However, not only has the notion of a paternal landlord been forsaken, Sir Gerald's potential as a messianic figure, destined to suffer for the sake of many, also disappears as he passes back the cup of suffering and baulks at what the prophets said he would do. In the following extract, with its clear allusion to the prophet Isaiah's anticipation of the Messiah, Sir Gerald even wonders if to embark on such a messianic course of action would ever,



even objectively, have been the right thing: “His heart rebelled at the magnitude of the sacrifice he was called upon to make. After all, why should he do it? Who was he, that he should try to set the crooked straight? Was he sure that he was even attempting that? Sure that he was not engaged in making the crooked crooked?” (SP, 270)<sup>154</sup>

Soon afterwards Sir Gerald convinces himself that he was, in fact, on the wrong side all along and that, if anything, the power of the Catholic Church needs to be cherished and actively maintained in order to preserve the morality of the Irish people. With such thoughts he not only completely relinquishes any desire to lead his people, but also willingly allows the Church to take his place as a potential leader, categorically supporting this aspect of its ministry. Now it is no longer merely a matter of preserving his status as a gentleman; to retreat now is to actually uphold the righteousness of the people and thus there is a sudden and dramatic change of heart and sides:

His day’s work with O’Neill had outraged his sense of dignity and offended his feelings as a gentleman. (...) He saw himself now as an ally in a crusade against righteousness. He had not understood before, as he thought he did now, that the wonderful power of the Church in Ireland was really necessary if the distinctive purity of the Irish was to be preserved. It seemed to him inconceivably horrible that he should be taking part, even the smallest part, in shattering the dam which kept out the tide of immorality. (...) now the side which had seemed the selfish one was reinforced with considerations of religion and purity. The issue no longer remained doubtful. At whatever cost to his sense of loyalty and

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<sup>154</sup> The relevant passage from the Book of Isaiah is as follows:

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; and *the crooked shall be made straight*, and the rough places plain;  
And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. (Isaiah, 40:3-5, italics mine)

In the New Testament the Gospel of Matthew (3:3) asserts that the first of the above verses is a reference to John the Baptist. The latter was the last to prophesy the imminent arrival of the Messiah and thus the Old Testament verses in question carry substantial prophetic weight in their promise of the Messiah to come.

friendship, he must definitely break with O'Neill and withdraw from the political contest. (SP, 279 – 80)<sup>155</sup>

## xx. Withdrawal

As we approach the end of the novel, Sir Gerald firmly renounces any previous potential that he might have had as a potential saviour of Ireland and instead exchanges this possible role for that of the self-confessed coward. As he leaves his country to find its own eternal destiny, this failed messiah will henceforth impotently and pessimistically watch from the margins, where he has voluntarily placed himself:

I can see no good to come for Ireland any way. I cannot think of Ireland or work for Ireland. Hester, you may call me a coward, and I dare say I deserve it. I am giving the whole thing up. Ireland must go her own way, and work out her own salvation or damnation. I can't help her. I shall be one who looks on. (SP, 282 – 83)

At this point he is asked by his wife if he has now forgotten his father and thus Sir Gerald's feeble and craven nature is further confirmed: "“You have only told me what I knew before – that I am weak and cowardly.”" (SP, 283) The chapter concludes with Sir Gerald quoting the following lines of poetry to Hester:

‘Do you remember these lines, dearest? –

“We are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.”

(...) ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘and I remember the beginning of the passage, too:

“Ah, love, let us be true

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<sup>155</sup> Sir Gerald repeats the same sentiments shortly afterwards to his wife, admitting that Dennis Browne's thoughts on the matter have influenced him: "“I've come to think that the Irish peasants are best left to the guidance of their priests. I see nothing but trouble and evil if they ever break free from it. I can't be one of those who try to emancipate them.”" (SP, 282).

To one another!” (SP, 283 – 84)

What is being recited here is, of course, part of the final verse paragraph of Matthew Arnold’s famous ‘Dover Beach’, first published in 1867, the entire last stanza of which reads as follows:

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.<sup>156</sup>

Though Arnold’s haunting poem is explicitly about the erosion of orthodox religious faith during the Victorian era, Birmingham expertly alters the meaning of the poem for his own purposes by quoting exclusively from the final stanza of ‘Dover Beach’. Thus, the lines which appear at this point in the novel are now about the truth to be found in a loving human relationship, seen as the only possible refuge from an unintelligible political world of conflict and confusion. In Arnold’s poem the reference to night-time battle has its source in Thucydides’s description of the Battle of Epipolae, in 413 B.C., during which the Athenians, as a result of poor visibility, unintentionally fought each other.<sup>157</sup> Towards the end of *The Seething Pot*, however, these final three lines of the poem describe the perplexing conflict of Irish politics from which Sir Gerald is now withdrawing. Therefore, although Mangan’s ‘Dark Rosaleen’ and ‘Kathaleen Ny-Houlahan’, both referred to in the first chapter of the novel, suggested that Sir Gerald had grand patriotic intentions, ‘Dover Beach’, as Birmingham uses it near the end of *The Seething Pot*, signifies our hero’s retreat from the battlefield of Irish politics to the security of conjugal love.

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<sup>156</sup> Miriam Allott & Robert H. Super (Eds.), *Matthew Arnold*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 136.

<sup>157</sup> Miriam Allott (Ed.), *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*. (London: Longman, 1979), 257.



Shortly afterwards, Sir Gerald's conversation with the fiercely nationalist O'Dwyer, MP, described by Browne as "a passionate and reckless lover of the Dark Rosaleen" (SP, 286), serves to highlight Sir Gerald's exit from Irish politics. O'Dwyer, on one extreme, looks forward to witnessing the collapse of the British Empire:

No empire which the world has ever seen has had in it the element of permanence. Least of all does it seem possible for the British Empire to last. Some day a shot will strike the hulk between the wind and water. That will be our opportunity. The final catastrophe will come with incredible swiftness, because there will be a people here at England's very doors who hate her. These enemies of hers will also be across the sea under other flags and under her own flag. They will be even in the streets of her own great towns. It will not matter that they do not know each other, for there will be one desire in all their hearts. For myself, I have only one prayer – that I may live long enough to see the day. (SP, 293 – 94)

Sir Gerald, however, sees Ireland's proper place as within the Empire, though, unlike O'Dwyer, his emotional relationship with his country is characterized by hesitation, much as it was at the very beginning, when he first spoke to O'Hara: "I cannot hope for such a time," said Sir Gerald. "I think – I am sure – that I love Ireland, too. I rather wish to think of her as taking her part in guiding the great Empire which, after all, she has had her share in building up." (SP, 294)

Indeed, Sir Gerald continues to oscillate until the very end as, immediately after expressing the above political stance, he seems to be privately equally convinced of O'Dwyer's belief regarding the complete irreconcilability of Ireland and England and the necessary defeat of one race. Ultimately, all that remains certain is that he will remain passively and happily outside the affairs of the country for which his father made such sacrifices. In the end, cosseted by those within the exclusive sphere of the family, he may even lose his already half-hearted love for Ireland: "The misery of my life lies in this – that it will be happy. I shall live here. I shall be loved, and warmed, and fed. I shall grow slowly older, and in the end I shall die peaceably. I shall be quite happy, but I shall do nothing. In the end I suppose I shall come to not even love Ireland." (SP, 295)

He is now, more than ever before, the antithesis of the memory of his rebellious father and he is even beginning to resemble the gentry that he observed so contemptuously in the hotel before he left for Mayo.

### **xxi. Pot and king**

*The Seething Pot* concludes, after the death of O'Neill, with a letter, published in *The Critic*, from O'Hara to Sir Gerald. Here we are informed of the source and meaning of the novel's title, while the imagery used offers us a vivid metaphor for the frenzy of cultural, linguistic and practical activities which followed the death of Parnell, an eventful period which was reaching its climax just as Birmingham was writing his first novel. It is within this fevered context that O'Hara exhorts Sir Gerald to play a leadership role, despite the concomitant personal risks for Sir Gerald:

I am on the whole inclined to think, as you evidently do, that at present politics are no game for a gentleman to play. Do you ever read the prophet Jeremiah? (...) I read a few chapters last night, and came across a verse which seemed to me to apply to the present condition of Ireland. "I see a seething pot, and the face of it is towards the north." (...) we are a seething pot – we, the Irish people. Just now it is the scum which is coming malodorously to the surface, and perhaps scalding your hands and feet. Yet within the pot there is good stuff. It may be dinner "for the childer," to make them grow into men and women; it may be food for the men to make them strong; it may be fattening for the less honourable beasts of the field. It is, at all events, the raw material of life. Far better it is to be sitting beside a seething pot than a stagnant pool. Dear G. G., let us keep the pot seething if we can. Let us do our little part in this dear Ireland of ours to stir men into the activities of thought and ambition. If we get our toes burnt and our fingers grimy, let us put up with it bravely. If there is a nasty smell, we shall remember that there is good food in the caldron. (SP, 296 – 98)

Such a landscape of ceaseless, energetic movement, however, has a void at its centre, O'Hara appears to claim, and he is specific about exactly what it is that Ireland now requires:



I said that Ireland wanted her gentlemen, and that Ireland wanted a King. (...) I am surer than ever now that it is only a King, a King with an aristocracy to help him, who can deal with our seething pot. Only he must really be a King, and he must be brave enough to take off the spectacles which official people put upon the eyes of Kings, and look straight at us with the good clear eyes that God has given him. And he must surely be the King of Ireland, not a foreigner looking curiously at a strange people. Shall we ever find such a King? Sometimes I am not very hopeful, and the pot seethes very confusedly. Yet I think, dear G. G., that we ought to hope. (SP, 298)<sup>158</sup>

Thus the novel concludes with O'Hara's reminder of the role to be played by the Irish aristocracy in the new Ireland, while his references to a king may well be an allusion to Parnell, the basis in part for O'Neill's character.

### xxii. King Charles

Although Parnell had been dead for over a decade by the time Birmingham began writing his first novel, this certainly had not diminished his eminence, in fact, it had the contrary effect, as it was his very absence which accentuated his stature, as Hannay recalls in his autobiography when he mentions the "long political stupor which followed the death of Parnell."<sup>159</sup> The vacuum created by the disappearance of Parnell from the Irish political scene quickly gave rise to a mythic figure at the beginning of the twentieth century; at around the time Birmingham was beginning his career as a novelist, Parnell was, as Law claims: "beginning to evolve into the romantic figure of the lost leader" and thus John O'Neill in *The Seething Pot* is "a romantic portrayal of an autocratic leader, not inconsistent with Hannay's conception of an Anglo-Irish saviour of Ireland."<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> O'Hara's call here for an active aristocracy which would assist a true king of Ireland may have been inspired by what John Wilson Foster identifies as "O'Grady's notion of the ideal society with its various ranks cemented by the mutual fellowship between king and subject, a repeated ideal in revival literature which has as backdrop dissatisfaction both with contemporary Irish society and with English administration and royalty felt to be alien." John Wilson Foster, *Fictions of the Irish Literary Revival: A Changeling Art*. (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 47.

<sup>159</sup> *Pleasant Places*, 164.

<sup>160</sup> Law, *op. cit.*, 22 & 28.



However, Parnell himself had acquired regal status in the eyes of the Irish people as a result of the immortal sobriquet given to him by Timothy Michael Healy in 1880. As F. S. L. Lyons recounts, while Healy and Parnell were in Montreal, as part of their tour of the United States of America, which they had just extended to Canada, Healy “transferred to Parnell a phrase that had previously been used of Daniel O’Connell, hailing him as ‘the uncrowned king of Ireland’”; it was a title which was “to cling to his name long after he was dead and gone.”<sup>161</sup> It is possible that Birmingham is hinting at this public perception of Parnell in his choice of surname for Parnell’s fictional counterpart in *The Seething Pot*: O’Neill; exactly nine hundred years before Parnell received his royal epithet, “The obit of Domnall ua Neill in 980 is the first contemporary record of the term *ard-ri Erenn*”<sup>162</sup> Francis J. Byrne explains how the name Ui Neill was synonymous with Irish kingship for many centuries. The family were declaring themselves kings of all Ireland by the seventh century and in the following century the power of the dynasty became more defined as a pattern established itself: the Northern and Southern Ui Neill shared “alternately in the titular high-kingship of Tara which was the symbolic bond of the Ui Neill unity.”<sup>163</sup> The towering significance of the Ui Neill achievement in the area of Irish kingship soon became apparent, as indicated by Byrne:

In the course of the ninth century the consolidation of Ui Neill power proceeded apace, culminating in the general acceptance of the kings of Tara as high-kings of Ireland. Whatever the mystique that lay behind the title of king of Tara, and however vague the dominion exercised by its holder, it remains true that from their first appearance in the fifth century the Ui Neill had introduced a dynamism which disrupted that archaic hierarchy of the Five Fifths. Although tribal kingship never entirely disappeared, the new dynastic polity evolved by the Ui Neill relegated it to the position of a primitive survival.<sup>164</sup>

The reality of high-kingship in Ireland is thus intimately linked with the Ui Neill, even if its conceptual provenance was a different matter: “[i]f the concept of high-kingship originated in Iona and Armagh, its realisation was due to the prowess of the

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<sup>161</sup> F. S. L. Lyons, *Charles Stewart Parnell*. (London: Collins, 1977), 114.

<sup>162</sup> Francis John Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 257.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 254 & 94.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

Ui Neill” and it was the Ui Neill, in the twelfth century, who came nearest to translating this high-kingship into an effective monarchy of Ireland.<sup>165</sup>

If, however, John O’Neill’s regality is for the most part implied in *The Seething Pot*, as suggested above, Parnell’s kingly status is made repeatedly explicit in an unpublished, undated play entitled *Parnell*, written by Hannay and Edward Knoblock in 1934.<sup>166</sup> In the play, Healy, in reference to Parnell, exclaims: “Why not call him the uncrowned King of Ireland and be done with it?” (P, 32) and McCarthy,<sup>167</sup> after asking Parnell to temporarily resign during the meeting in Committee Room Number Fifteen, promises that Parnell would be welcomed back and that McCarthy himself would be the first to “submit to you as master – even pay you homage as my King.” (P, 23) The play ends with Kitty’s exclamation to Parnell: “My King!” (P, 30), a description of her husband which she has uttered a total of fifteen times before this; she also refers to his duty to the Irish people: “You mustn’t give them up, you mustn’t forsake them. You cannot desert them now. You, their King.” (P, 30)

Thus the character of John O’Neill, with his implied regal qualities, is the type of personage longed for by Desmond O’Hara at the end of the novel. O’Neill, as the fictional representation of Parnell, who was himself a landlord,<sup>168</sup> stands, to Irish landlords, as a paradigm worthy of emulation. As a leader of incomparable quality he offers a tantalizing glimpse of what the landed classes might achieve in terms of influence, though he also acts as a warning to landlords, presaging their end if they do not act to save themselves. However, despite O’Neill’s harsh criticism of landlordism it is nevertheless only through him or someone like him that the landlords will retain their power; Sir Gerald’s chances of “governing Ireland” (SP, 224), for example, are dependent on O’Neill’s victory. O’Neill, then, acts as a potential saviour for both his

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<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 260 & 86.

<sup>166</sup> R. B. D. French has attributed the above year of composition to the play. R. B. D. French’s catalogue in the Manuscripts Room, Trinity College, Dublin. The play is manuscript 11. Henceforth all references to the play will be cited parenthetically, as, for example: (P, 1).

<sup>167</sup> The character of McCarthy is probably based on Justin McCarthy who was elected chairman of the forty five MPs who opposed Parnell and withdrew from Committee Room Fifteen on the evening of 6 December, 1890, after they had passed a resolution ending Parnell’s chairmanship. Kissane, *op. cit.*, 90.

<sup>168</sup> Though O’Neill is not a landlord in *The Seething Pot*, Parnell is twice described as one in Hannay and Knoblock’s play *Parnell*.

country and his class; if a person of O'Neill's calibre might only come forth in reality, Birmingham the preacher must have wanted to communicate, much would be saved.

### xxiii. Conclusion

Thus *The Seething Pot* explores the struggle for leadership between the forces of Catholicism and Protestantism in early twentieth century Ireland. The character of Sir Gerald, because of his rebel father, offers the prospect of Protestant leadership with popular support. However, due in part to his own misgivings, together with the personal and social consequences attendant on his foray into nationalism, Sir Gerald eventually withdraws from Irish politics, retreating to the world of matrimonial domesticity, and thus allowing the Catholic Church to take the place he might have occupied. Sir Gerald's changing relationship with Irish nationalism is symbolically emphasized by references to poetry and art in the novel, specifically: Mangan's 'Dark Rosaleen' and Arnold's 'Dover Beach' at the beginning and end of the novel respectively, along with the early description of Jim Tynan's painting of blood-drenched nationalism, to be counterbalanced later in the novel by a mention of T. J. Barker's *Queen Victoria*.

The other important Protestant nationalist in the novel, the character of O'Neill – sometimes depicted in messianic terms in the text – is based in part on the historical figure of Parnell, and is therefore a reminder of the past achievements of Irish Protestant nationalists. Though O'Neill dies before the end of the novel, *The Seething Pot* concludes by longing for someone of the stature of Parnell to lead the new Ireland, then brewing in the cauldron of the new century.



## CHAPTER TWO

### *Hyacinth*

#### **i. Synopsis**

The initial setting of *Hyacinth* is mid-nineteenth-century Connemara during the latter phase of the Second Reformation, a historical English-led Protestant crusade which sought to convert Irish Catholics to the Church of Ireland, a mission which met with some success. Within this context Aeneas Conneally, a Gaelic speaker from a farming background, converts from Catholicism to the Church of Ireland, takes holy orders and becomes the first rector of his native village, the newly created parish of Carrowkeel. Although he begins his ministry with great zeal, he soon discovers that the era of intensive proselytizing is over and, after his marriage, his missionary enthusiasm begins to dissipate. Two years afterwards Hyacinth is born and, after a further two years, the boy's mother dies.

Hyacinth, also a Gaelic speaker, is intimately part of his local community from a very young age and shows early signs of studiousness. He matriculates at Trinity College, Dublin but, due to impecuniousness, resides and studies at home. After passing his examinations and taking his degree he then moves to Dublin in order to study at the Divinity School in Trinity College, where his potential is quickly recognized by Dr Henry, the divinity professor.

Hyacinth's experience of university life, which occurs during the Boer War, is largely negative as he is continually confronted with the pro-English and anti-Boer sentiments of his fellow students. He is ostracized, blackballed, derided and physically assaulted, all of which deepens his antipathy towards the politics of his university. He eventually finds merciful relief in friendship with a set of fervent pro-Boer nationalists whom he meets outside the college, namely: Augusta Goold or Finola, based on the historical figure of Maud Gonne; the poet Mary O'Dwyer; the historian and archaeologist Thomas Grealy, and the journalist Timothy Halloran.

Hyacinth's violent defence of Augusta Goold at a political meeting in the Rotunda results in his popularity amongst some of his peers at Trinity, though the staff of the Divinity School are not impressed. In an attempt to gain the respect of his lecturers he immerses himself in his study of theology but he is unable to sustain his diligence and he begins to spend more and more time with his nationalist friends. After he insults one of his teachers, Dr Spenser, during a lecture, Dr Henry recommends that he defer his ordination for about three years and in the meantime seek employment in England.

Hyacinth returns home and his father dies shortly after recounting to his son how Christ once informed him of an impending Armageddon on Irish soil. After time spent thinking about his future options Hyacinth finally decides to return to Dublin to join a band of volunteers which is about to leave the city to fight alongside the Boers in South Africa. However, after meeting the commander of the volunteers, Captain Albert Quinn, Hyacinth changes his mind as it becomes evident that Quinn's principal reason for going abroad is to avoid being arrested for fraud and soon Hyacinth begins to doubt the integrity of the other volunteers as well. Before the end of their meeting, however, Quinn suggests that Hyacinth ask Quinn's half-brother, James, for a job as a clerk and commercial traveller for his woollen factory in Ballymoy, Co. Mayo.

Hyacinth goes to Ballymoy and begins working for James Quinn. While there, his exposure to the faith of both the Quinns and the rector, Canon Beecher, rekindles his own faith. Another change occurs within Hyacinth at this time when, after a while, he begins to fall in love with the rector's daughter, Marion. At this point in the novel Hyacinth gradually resigns himself to a peaceful domestic life with Marion, thereby relinquishing his previous ambitions to play a part in the affairs of his country.

During his time as a traveller for James Quinn, Hyacinth encounters cynicism about the 'Buy Irish' campaign, as well as religious bigotry, which is directed at him, and which ultimately takes the form of a sectarian boycott of James Quinn's goods. Hyacinth also hears that the Congested Districts Board is subsidizing a convent-run woollen factory in Robeen, which results in unfair competition for his employer. The Robeen factory, which pays its workers low wages, finally forces Quinn out of business and Hyacinth consequently loses his job.



Shortly before finishing his work for Quinn, Hyacinth receives the offer of a post as a journalist with the *Croppy*, now under the editorship of Mary O'Dwyer's brother, Patrick. Though Hyacinth is tempted, as this is his opportunity to serve his country, instead he decides, because of his spiritual renewal, to be ordained, with a view to working in England; now that he begins to look forward to sharing his life with Marion, his prior commitment to Ireland wanes.

Meanwhile a festival at the convent in Robeen attracts an impressive array of visitors, including the chief secretary, Mr Chesney, and by the end of the day the Reverend Mother has been assured of further assistance from the Congested Districts Board, all of which leads her to look with considerable confidence towards the future, her thoughts at this stage pointing towards the future monetary enrichment and consequent expansion of her Church.

By the end of the novel Hyacinth has been ordained by the Bishop of Ripon for the curacy of Kirby-Stowell, but he shows little enthusiasm for or belief in his work. The novel concludes with Hyacinth, along with his wife and child, paying a visit to Ireland after an absence of three years. While there, although his native country arouses some excitement in him, he gives no indication that he will eventually return to offer his services, even when he is told that the Church of Ireland parish of Carrowkeel has had a succession of rectors since the death of Aeneas Conneally, the worshippers now being reduced to the coastguards of the area.

## ii. Introduction

To begin with, there are a number of similarities between *Hyacinth* and *The Seething Pot*, which are important to stress. The connection between both texts is clear when one considers that both heroes are Protestant, both endeavour to play a role in national affairs, but both are unsuccessful in this regard, ultimately choosing to retreat into the sphere of married life. Furthermore, both novels are *romans-a-clef*, often depicting contemporaries of Birmingham under fictitious names.

The above comparisons notwithstanding, *Hyacinth* does not offer the same sustained treatment of the topic of landlordism as Birmingham's first novel, though there are a



number of occasions when the subject arises and therefore this chapter will include a discussion of the relevant references. However, it is now evident that Birmingham's attention has shifted to other, related matters and this chapter's detailed analysis of *Hyacinth* will examine Birmingham's ideas about the then contemporary precariousness of another form of Irish Protestant power: the Church of Ireland and its related institutions.

Furthermore, Birmingham's second novel needs to be considered on two discrete but related levels. First, *Hyacinth* is concerned with the careful symbolic sequencing of a number of episodes from Irish history, which in their ordered entirety within the text depict, over the course of half a century, the gradual disengagement of Protestant Ireland from a rapidly changing country. Beginning in the 1850s during the latter phase of the Second Reformation, a movement which historically revealed an aggressive crusading capacity within Anglicanism as that campaign was effectively an act of theological war against Catholicism, the novel thereafter presents the institutions of Irish Protestantism, particularly the Church of Ireland and Trinity College, as introverted and therefore removed from national concerns. Over exactly the same period of time, however, the Irish Catholic Church, presented at the beginning of the novel as being assailed by a crusading Protestant army and thus at a point of near defeat in the post-Famine era, then describes a diametrically opposite trajectory to that of its ecclesial counterpart, growing in power until finally, in the last chapters, it evolves into the new Ascendancy in Ireland, ultimately occupying a place at the heart of an internationally expanding religious empire. Thus, as in *The Seething Pot*, here a particular aspect of Protestant Ireland is portrayed in conflict with Irish Catholicism, the latter ultimately emerging as victorious in both novels.

*Hyacinth*, however, also operates on a different, though connected level. As a *Bildungsroman* it relates the development of its titular character as he moves from innocence to experience in Ireland. In this way *Hyacinth*, because of both his membership of the Church of Ireland and his decision to be ordained, is, in effect, a concentration in human form of all the issues confronting his Church for most of the period which the novel covers. Thus, *Hyacinth's* personal story parallels and underlines the previously mentioned historical changes experienced by the Church of Ireland during the time in question. For example, *Hyacinth's* life begins with his

intimate involvement with his local community in Carrowkeel but he quickly discovers, once he leaves this world, that he is unable to integrate himself into any other community, whether it is the hostile environment of Trinity College, with its aversion to nationalism, or the morally suspect army which is about to leave the country to fight for the Boers. Furthermore, Hyacinth is subjected to a religious boycott during his time as a commercial traveller in Ballymoy and thus his journey, for most of the novel, is fraught with confusion and disenchantment, ultimately resulting in his withdrawal from Irish affairs as he departs for England to work there as a curate, his eventual detachment from Ireland being representative of the historical long retreat conducted by the post-disestablishment Church of Ireland.

Hyacinth's struggle throughout the novel should also be considered alongside a series of highly influential articles by D. P. Moran, first published between 1898 and 1900, as Moran's attempt in them to resolutely separate the two main religious traditions in Ireland and to dismiss the Irishness of Protestants can be seen to have had an influence on the plot of the novel in that Hyacinth at least tries to resist this worsening rift which was being advocated in Irish society at the time. However, Hyacinth's story ultimately merely confirms this prising apart of the two principal Irish traditions and in this regard the text can be read as a type of failed experiment in a literary laboratory in which Birmingham initially attempts to join the Church of Ireland and nationalism, but is ultimately unable to make the desired fusion.

Finally, if the novel is sometimes a laboratory it is, like *The Seething Pot*, also occasionally a pulpit, from which the authorial voice intermittently interrupts the narrative in order either to explicitly criticize certain aspects of Irish society or to warn of future dangers. Thus, like Birmingham's first novel, the text is also a *roman à these*, written by a Church of Ireland clergyman who was acutely aware of the increasingly insecure position of Protestantism generally in a quickly altering country at the beginning of the twentieth century. Hence, if a general political exhortation can be detected within the text, it is, as in *The Seething Pot*, a call for a counterbalancing Protestant influence in national affairs, both to offset the rapidly increasing power of Catholicism in Ireland, and to prevent the extinction of Protestant influence on matters of national importance.



### iii. the new reformation<sup>169</sup>

The novel begins in the 1850s, when “religious and charitable society in England was seized with a desire to convert Irish Roman Catholics to the Protestant faith.” (H, 9). Early in the text we are apprised of the specifics of this enterprise: the “mission to Roman Catholics”, directed and funded by a London committee, commenced in Connemara and was initially highly successful there, partly due to the fact that the “leonine John MacHale (sic), the Papal Archbishop of Tuam, pursued a policy which drove the children of his flock into the mission schools. (...) He refused to allow the building of national schools in his diocese, and thus left the cleverer boys to drift into the mission schools.” (H, 9 - 10)

MacHale, known to his supporters as “the Lion of the Fold of Judah”,<sup>170</sup> was indeed partly, though indirectly, responsible for the success of the New Reformation, as the *Dublin Evening Post* reported in 1851; here the particulars of a contemporary report can be seen to correspond precisely to the relevant details at the beginning of the novel:

Now the place which they [the Protestant zealots] considered peculiarly suitable was the diocese of Dr MacHale, Catholic Archbishop of Tuam. It was there, in the most Catholic population of Ireland, in many parts of which a Protestant was a perfect curiosity – that they planted first a colony – and in the next place that they invaded the entire diocese, North and West. They were right – they showed good generalship in their movements. They knew that education was put under ban and anathema in these parts. ... We see the result. ...The diocese has suffered more than any other, or perhaps than all the rest – from what are called the Protestant missionaries.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> The phrase is taken from the first page of *Hyacinth*, the full sentence reading as follows: “[e]lderly ladies, often with titles, were energetic in the cause of the new reformation.” George A. Birmingham, *Hyacinth*. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1916), 9. All future references to *Hyacinth* will be cited parenthetically as, for example, (H, 9).

<sup>170</sup> Desmond Bowen, *The Protestant Crusade in Ireland, 1800 – 70: A Study of Protestant-Catholic Relations Between the Act of Union and Disestablishment*. (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1978), 15 – 16.

<sup>171</sup> *Dublin Evening Post*, 11, November, 1851. Quoted in *ibid.*, 271.



Birmingham's decision to begin *Hyacinth* with this particular episode from Irish history demands considerable attention in order to fully understand many of the associated themes which emerge later in the novel and for this reason some historical background is required.

Though he is not mentioned by name in the novel, it is clear that the spirit of the Rev. Alexander Dallas dominates the beginning of *Hyacinth*. Dallas was both the leader of the English Evangelical crusade and the founding father of the Society for Irish Church Missions to the Roman Catholics, with headquarters in Exeter Hall, London.<sup>172</sup> Furthermore, Dallas did indeed use MacHale's opposition to the National School system in his archdiocese to his advantage by instead offering schools to further the Protestant cause.<sup>173</sup> Added to this, Dallas persuaded the Irish Society to join his crusade; founded in 1818 "for Promoting the Scriptural Education and Religious Instruction of Roman Catholics Chiefly Through the Medium of Their Own Language", the alliance was important for Dallas because of the number of Irish speakers at the time.<sup>174</sup> This latter point is reflected in the novel in MacHale's opposition to the violent imposition of the English language (H, 9 – 10); in Aeneas Conneally's desire to preach the Gospel to his people "in their own tongue" (H, 10) and in Hyacinth's initial fluency in Irish rather than English (H, 13). As we shall see, this effective use of the Irish language by a Protestant institution becomes obliquely pertinent in the next chapter of the novel, when Birmingham focuses on Trinity College, Dublin.

The initial success of the "ten years' war"<sup>175</sup> in Connemara is outlined at the very beginning of *Hyacinth* when we are informed that: "It appeared that converts were flocking in, and that the schools of the missionaries were filled to overflowing." (H, 9) Here the fictional account matches the historical record, as is evidenced by *The Times* gleeful report of 7 October, 1851: "It seems now pretty clear that something like a reformation is taking place in the province of Connaught. ... In the missions of

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<sup>172</sup> Bowen, *op. cit.*, 208 & 218.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 226 & 224 – 25.

<sup>175</sup> This was the term used for the work of the Irish Church Missions in Connaught in the 1850s in: W. C. Plunket, *Short Visit to the Connemara Missions* (1863), 58 – 59. Quoted in *ibid.*, 246.

the Irish Protestant Church which had achieved such signal success, we recognise a just and fair reprisal for the arrogant aggressions of the Pope.”<sup>176</sup>

In contrast, *The Nation* of 20 November 1852 was mournful in its analysis, but there was no difference in the facts which it presented to its readership: “There can no longer be any question that proselytism has met with an immense success in Connaught and Kerry. It is true that the altars of the Catholic Church have been deserted by thousands born and baptised in the ancient faith of Ireland.”<sup>177</sup>

The period from 1849 until 1854 was “a short but heady time of Protestant triumphalism – the ‘golden age’ of the ICM expansion – and Rome was seriously concerned over the Protestant advance.”<sup>178</sup> This particular moment of transitory Protestant victory, before the imminent and protracted defeat, is succinctly captured in Birmingham’s characteristically symbolic description of a number of key buildings associated with the crusade, boldly poised, as they are, on the brink of their own destruction: “The whole group of mission buildings – the rectory, the church, and the school – stood, like types of the uncompromising spirit of Protestantism, upon the bare hillside, swept by every storm, battered by the Atlantic spray.” (H, 11) Immediately after this description the Rev. Aeneas Conneally discovers that “[t]he day for making conversions was past, and the tide had set decisively against the new reformation.” (H, 11) Shortly afterwards the committee in London is forced to economize due to a diminishing income; the school falls “gradually into decay” and, after his marriage, Aeneas’s missionary enthusiasm begins to abate (H, 12). Again, here the novel offers an accurate sketch of what occurred historically: the first signs of a faltering crusade appeared in the autumn of 1854, when the London headquarters of the ICM admitted a decrease in its fund-raising activities.<sup>179</sup>

There are a number of reasons why the above initial historical setting of *Hyacinth* is important when considering the broader themes of the novel as they gradually emerge. To begin with, the period in question overlaps with a longer era of

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<sup>176</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 236.

<sup>177</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 237.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.



withdrawal by the Church of Ireland from affairs of national concern,<sup>180</sup> culminating in disestablishment in 1869, after which the clergy were no longer obliged, as they previously had been in theory at least, to serve the entire population, Catholics included. The clergy's relief after the lifting of such an invidious responsibility was echoed by their flocks: "[m]ost Protestant laity willingly followed their clergy in the grand disengagement from concern for the whole society of the nation" and "in the south of Ireland at least, abandoned their 'garrison' mentality (...) and withdrew into a kind of cultural ghetto."<sup>181</sup> Desmond Bowen outlines the post-disestablishment Church's dramatic and lasting contraction of both interest in and influence on national politics as it gradually retreated into itself:

Perhaps for survival the narrowing of concern of the Church of Ireland to purely ecclesiastical affairs was inevitable. (...) This change of focus on the part of churchmen soon became a tradition. Although outspoken clergymen still appeared, like Canon J. O. Hannay of Westport, and special meetings of protest were held over the first and second Home Rule Bills at the General Synod meetings of 1886 and 1893, such debate on secular affairs was unusual. The 'removal of the Irish Church from the political firing-line' was accepted as a sound policy. Except in Ulster, few politicians or statesmen bothered after 1870 to pay much attention to the rarely expressed political opinions of the Church of Ireland. In return for such political quietism it was able 'to escape with only slight damage from the activities of the Land League and Sinn Fein (...)'. After 1870 the Church of Ireland's chief concern was its role as a cultural expression of the minority people; its old political awareness was a thing of the past.<sup>182</sup>

Such historical background is essential when considering the way in which the Church of Ireland is presented in *Hyacinth*, especially when one takes into account that between the first and second chapters the novel moves from the days of establishment to disestablishment and, overwhelmingly, throughout the novel, the Church, in its clergy, laity, even its buildings and especially in the character of

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<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 275. Bowen identifies this period with most of John George Beresford's time as the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh, specifically from 1829 until his death in 1862.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 301 & 272.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 302. The quotations in inverted commas are from P. M. Bell, *Disestablishment in Ireland and Wales* (1969), 211.



Hyacinth, is portrayed as consistently unable to interact meaningfully with national affairs, as we shall see later in this chapter. However, there are other aspects of the Second Reformation to consider as they also have a critical bearing on any analysis of the novel.

#### iv. Armageddon

Sometimes on winter nights when the wind howled more fiercely than usual round the house, the old man would close the book they read together, and repeat aloud long passages from the Apocalypse. His voice, weak and wavering at first, would gather strength as he proceeded, and the young man listened, stirred to vague emotion over the fall of Babylon the Great. (H, 16)

Aeneas Conneally's above recitation of the passage from the Book of Revelation concerning the fall of Babylon<sup>183</sup> is directly connected to the theology underpinning Dallas's mission to Ireland, as Bowen shows:

Throughout the 1850s, whenever Dallas was not in Ireland organising his missions or in his parish of Wonston, he was busy preaching and lecturing throughout the country. His theme was apocalyptic. Rome and Britain, he maintained, were engaged in a great struggle that was both religious and political. The fate of men's souls hung upon the outcome of the struggle, as did the quality of British civilization. The struggle was to be a long one and a hard one until Babylon/Rome fell from power, as the Scriptures had promised.<sup>184</sup>

A version of such a vision of apocalyptic struggle reappears later in the novel when Aeneas shares with his son a divinely imparted message regarding an apocalypse which is imminently to take place in Ireland:

The last great fight, the Armageddon, draweth very near. All that is good is on one side in the fight, and the Captain over all. What is bad is on the other side –

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<sup>183</sup> The full verse reads as follows: "And he cried mightily with a strong voice, saying, Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird." Revelation, 18: 2.

<sup>184</sup> Bowen, *op. cit.*, 233.

all kinds of tyranny and greed and lust. (...) And the battlefield is Ireland, our dear Ireland which we love. All these centuries since the great saints died He has kept Ireland to be His battlefield. (H, 84)

It is, however, Hyacinth's initial attempt to construe his father's words which is important here as it is only at that point that the message is revealed to have its source in the theology of the Second Reformation: "he caught at the conception of the Roman Church as the Antichrist and her power in Ireland as the point round which the fight must rage." (H, 85)

The above quotation from the novel is best understood in the context of the early nineteenth century, when a specific form of millenarianism gained a following amongst Protestants. It consisted in a belief that Christ would return to rule for a thousand years before the end of the world and that under his visible authority the true Church would defeat the Antichrist, whom many identified as the Pope. The historicists of this school of thought believed, from their reading of such biblical texts as the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation, that there were unambiguous indications therein that the Second Coming was to be expected sooner rather than later and, as "the nearest centre of papal power was Ireland, the millenarians tended to look there for the first signs of the great battle between the forces of righteousness and of the powers of evil".<sup>185</sup> By the middle of the century, as the Great Famine proceeded to ravage Ireland, English evangelicals sought and found a suitable means of intervention in that crisis:

With God showing the way, what was needed in this hour was a Protestant general who would persuade militants of the true faith to take advantage of the situation and to give the poor starving people of Ireland the greatest of blessings, emancipation from spiritual slavery to the Antichrist in Rome. In the minds of the English Evangelicals who supported the ICM in its war with popery, Alexander Dallas was that general raised by God to lead the forces of righteousness.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 64 – 65.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

When considering the above information it is firstly important to acknowledge that Hyacinth's original interpretation of his father's words, as quoted above, is quickly replaced by a different explication: "[t]hen with a sudden flash he saw, not Rome, but the British Empire, as the embodiment of the power of darkness. He had learned to think of it as a force, greedy, materialistic, tyrannous, grossly hypocritical." (H, 85) However, this second construal is not convincing in the light of the novel as a whole because, as we shall see, one of the major preoccupations of *Hyacinth*, especially in its final chapters, is not the British Empire but rather the growing ascendancy of the Catholic Church. Furthermore, the ease with which Hyacinth mentally moves from the Catholic Church to the British Empire, as shown above, is particularly telling and suggests a link of some kind between the two ideas. In fact, the final sentence in the above quotation is carefully worded so that, within the context of the novel, it could just as easily refer to the Catholic Church, thus stressing that the Empire and the Church form an indivisible whole, as the novel later explicitly suggests, after the festival at Robeen convent. At that point in the text, as we shall see, it is beyond all doubt that the forces of Protestantism are losing on the battlefield of Ireland, facing, as they are, an increasingly powerful Babylon which has unquestionably risen from its fall. Thus the novel, while not presenting the Second Reformation in an entirely sympathetic manner, uses the nineteenth century crusade, along with a later portrayal of the early twentieth century Irish Catholic Church, to emphasize the dramatic power shift which occurred in Ireland over the course of half a century. In this way the novel demonstrates that as one Church withdrew from an aggressive campaign and then turned in upon itself, another became increasingly powerful, even militant, and eventually became the dominant ecclesiastical power in Irish society, a power which was not confined to purely spiritual matters, but rather extended itself into the sphere of politics as well.

Related to the above theme in the novel is one final aspect of the Second Reformation which needs to be discussed in order to fully understand the way in which the text frequently presents the Irish Catholic Church. In this regard Bowen suggests: "[p]erhaps the greatest effect of the ICM was its indirect one on the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland."<sup>187</sup> This effect was precipitated when news of the success of the

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<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.



Protestant crusade in Ireland reached Rome, at which point an aggressive counter-crusade was swiftly launched.<sup>188</sup> This involved the introduction to Irish Catholicism of ultramontanist, generally spearheaded by Pope Pius IX, who in 1850 returned from exile to Rome and was from then “determined to extend the Ultramontane power of the Holy See and to resist every political, cultural or social development that seemed likely to oppose papal authority.”<sup>189</sup> Pius sent Paul Cullen to Ireland as papal delegate and primate and Cullen proved himself to be totally committed to the ultramontane cause.<sup>190</sup> This facet of Irish Catholicism is alluded to at one point in the novel by Fr Moran when he says that many of his colleagues are: ““fonder of Rome than they are of Ireland.”” (H, 94) However, Cullen’s mission to Ireland had a broader aim than merely ecclesiastical reform, as Bowen explains: “Cullen was convinced that, if papal authority was to be extended at all in Ireland, a major counter-reformation campaign against both the Protestant state and the Protestant church had to be fought. An all-out attempt had to be made to establish Catholic ascendancy in Ireland.”<sup>191</sup>

Thus, Birmingham’s decision to begin *Hyacinth* with a chapter dealing with the Second Reformation and its eventual decline, coupled with the conclusion of the novel, which, as already mentioned, explores the ascendancy of the Irish Catholic Church, would all appear to suggest the novelist’s awareness of at least some of the causes of the growth of Catholic power at the beginning of the twentieth century in Ireland. This aspect of the text will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, but for now let us move to the next chapter of the novel, which brings us from Connemara to the metropolis and thus immediately into the heart of Irish Protestantism.

#### v. Separation

At the beginning of chapter two, immediately after Hyacinth leaves the Connaught community to which he was so intimately close, Birmingham introduces the theme of Protestant separatism when he describes the stark physical segregation of Trinity

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<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 259 – 60.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

College from the city around it, as well as the striking contrast in moods to be found within and beyond the precincts of the university. Thus we move from the crusading impulse and later vision of integration – in the case of Hyacinth – of the opening chapter, to a more introverted and static Protestant institution at this point; this shift, in fact, will continue and intensify for the remainder of the novel, as we shall see. Here, in the city of Dublin, town and gown are mutually exclusive and totally irreconcilable:

In Oxford and Cambridge town and University are mixed together; shops jostle and elbow colleges in the streets. In Dublin a man leaves the city behind him when he enters the college, passes completely out of the atmosphere of the University when he steps on to the pavement. The physical contrast is striking enough, appealing to the ear and the eye. The rattle of the traffic, the jangling of cart bells, the inarticulate babel of voices, suddenly cease when the archway of the great entrance-gate is passed. An immense silence takes their place. There is no longer any need for watchfulness, nor risk of being hustled by the hurrying crowds. Instead of footway and street crossing there are broad walks, untrodden stretches of smooth grass. (...) It needs no education, not even any imagination, to appreciate the change. (H, 19 – 20)

Like a number of buildings in Birmingham's fiction, the physical nature of the college is representative of the spirit of the institution itself in its "isolation from Irish life" (H, 21). Thus the difference between Trinity and Oxbridge is like the contrast between an aloof Irish aristocrat and his less removed English counterpart and in this regard the "broad walks" and "untrodden stretches of smooth grass" quickly take on the aspect of a landlord's demesne. In this context it is important to note that Trinity College was historically a once powerful landlord and in this capacity the college's status was staggering, as R. B. MacCarthy outlines:

At 195,573 acres the estates of Trinity College Dublin were among the largest holdings of land in the British Isles. They greatly exceeded the acreage held by any single college at Oxford or Cambridge while, within Ireland, they vastly outstripped in size any of the episcopal or capitular estates or the holdings of any of the London Companies in the north of Ireland. Indeed, the college estates



almost equalled the total acreage in Ireland of all the London companies and amounted to 1.08% of the whole country.<sup>192</sup>

Thus the university's association with landlordism was strong and varied: as well as being an actual landlord, it was the seat of learning for many who would go on to be Irish landlords themselves. Birmingham's above portrayal of the college is freighted with symbolism that points to this aspect of Trinity's role, for it is not difficult to see that the college's complete lack of integration with the city which encompasses it is emblematic of the landlord's distance from Irish life. Thus the "immense silence" can be seen as what both Birmingham and Hannay often saw as the refusal of the Irish landlord to commit himself to the country of his birth.

Shortly after the above physical description of the college, Birmingham underlines how the aforementioned chasm between the university and the city is reflected in Trinity's attitude to the country as a whole:

Yet this college does not fail to make an appeal also to the thinking mind, only it is a strange appeal, tending to sadness. The sudden silence after the tumult of the streets has come for some minds to be the symbol of a divorce between the knowledge within and the life without. And this is not the separation which must always exist between thought and action, the gulf fixed between the student and the merchant. It is a real divorce between the nation and the University, between the two kinds of life which ought, like man and woman, to complete each other through their very diversity, but here have gone hopelessly apart. Never once through all the centuries of Ireland's struggle to express herself has the University felt the throb of her life. It is true that Ireland's greatest patriots, from Swift to Davis, have been her children; but she has never understood their spirit, never looked on them as anything but strangers to her family. They have been to her stray robber wasps, to be driven from the hive; while to the others they have seemed cygnets among her duckling brood. It is very wonderful that the University alone has been able to resist the glamour of Ireland's past, and has failed to admire the persistency of her nationality. There

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<sup>192</sup> R. B. MacCarthy, *The Trinity College Estates 1800 – 1923: Corporate Management in an Age of Reform*. (Dundalgan Press (W. Tempest) Ltd., 1992), 1.



has surely been enough in every century that has passed since the college was founded to win it over from alien thought and the ideals of the foreigner. (H, 20 – 21)

The claim that the university, like the gentry, was enslaved to “alien thought and the ideals of the foreigner”, and that it was thus separated from the rest of the country, finds corroboration in R. B. McDowell and D. A. Webb’s account of the perception of the college at the beginning of the twentieth century:

By 1900, (...) Trinity was denounced on all sides not only as irredeemably Protestant but as ‘antinational’, a preserve of the wealthy ascendancy, living on a prestige which it no longer deserved and teaching an outmoded curriculum which gave no heed to the practical needs of contemporary Ireland. (...) Trinity was seen as representing one side of the divide and the plain people of Ireland the other. (...) it is fair to say that the two decades preceding the outbreak of the First World War found Trinity at the nadir of its popularity in Ireland.<sup>193</sup>

Such denunciation was indeed widespread at the time and would appear to be part of the genesis of the presentation of Trinity College in *Hyacinth*. For example, the above passage from the novel bears a pronounced similarity to part of Horace Plunkett’s *Ireland in the New Century*, published shortly before *Hyacinth*. After mentioning the names of Edmund Burke and Thomas Davis and maintaining that on such anomalous students Trinity had “exerted influence rather by repulsion than by attraction”,<sup>194</sup> Plunkett has the following to say about the lamentable gulf between the university and the country:

I am bound to say that Trinity College, so far as I have seen, has had but little influence upon the minds or the lives of the people. Nor can I find that at any period of the extraordinarily interesting economic and social revolution, which has been in progress in Ireland since the great catastrophe of the Famine period, Dublin University has departed from its academic isolation and its aloofness

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<sup>193</sup> R. B. McDowell & D. A. Webb, *Trinity College Dublin 1592 – 1952: An Academic History*. (Trinity College Dublin Press, 2004), 364.

<sup>194</sup> Horace Plunkett, *Ireland in the New Century*. (London: John Murray, 1904), 137.

from the great national problems that were being worked out. The more one thinks of it, indeed, and the more one realises the opportunities of an institution like Trinity College in a country like Ireland, the more one must recognise how small, in recent times, has been its positive influence on the mind of the country, and how little it has contributed towards the solution of any of those problems, educational, economic, or social, that were clamant for solution, and which in any other country would have naturally secured the attention of men who ought to have been leaders of thought.<sup>195</sup>

A slightly earlier and much more acerbic condemnation of the university came from the pen of Douglas Hyde, and though here the tone cannot be equated with that of Birmingham on the same topic, the essential idea is identical and thus holds the key to the underlying cause of the disenchantment of both graduates with their Alma Mater. Referring to graduates of Trinity, Hyde also comments on the growing polarity between them and the rest of the country:

of late years this Trinity College public has been occupying a space which is ever growing smaller and smaller, relatively (sic) to the whole mass of educated public opinion in Ireland, and everyone can see for himself that it is *not* from Trinity College or its pupils, but *wholly outside of them*, that all the vigorous movements of the intellectual life of the Ireland of to-day have arisen.

The soil of its making has been regularly and persistently sterilized by what a Yankee journalist might call “The Great De-nationalizing, Anti-Irish Company Unlimited, warranted one of the most perfect devitalisers in the world.”<sup>196</sup>

According to Hyde, Trinity had recently made “through the mouth of some of its most distinguished professors, a sweeping attack upon the Irish language and literature, and by implication upon the Irish race”. This was a then recent controversy upon which, in Hyde’s words, “public attention in Ireland was particularly riveted”<sup>197</sup> and an account

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<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>196</sup> Douglas Hyde, ‘A University Scandal’ in *The New Ireland Review*. Vol. XII. Dublin: December, 1899, 194.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*



of this dispute may help to elucidate the particular portrayal of Trinity College in the novel, as we shall see.

## vi. Bad language

In 1899 evidence was taken by a Royal Commission which had been established to investigate the operation of the intermediate system of education. John Pentland Mahaffy, professor of ancient history in Trinity College and the probable inspiration for the character of Dr Spenser in *Hyacinth*,<sup>198</sup> informed the Commission that though the Irish language might occasionally be useful in the context of salmon-fishing or grouse-shooting, it would be an unconscionable waste of time to teach it in schools since it was “almost impossible to get hold of a text in Irish which is not religious or that is not silly or indecent.”<sup>199</sup>

When Mahaffy was challenged by Hyde about such claims the professor revealed that the source of his allegations was Robert Atkinson, Professor of Old Irish at Trinity. Atkinson then decried the language’s alleged lack of standard grammar and spelling, testified that the study of *Diarmuid and Grainne* was not appropriate reading for children and asserted that many texts written in the Irish language were unfit to have in his house alongside his daughters as access to such reading material might scar the aforementioned offspring for life.<sup>200</sup> Furthermore, Atkinson asseverated, as reported in the press at the time, that “[i]t would be difficult to find an ancient Irish book that would not give his Lordship a shock from which he would not recover for the rest of his life.” More specifically, with reference to a particular text, probably S. H. O’Grady’s *Silva Gadelica*, he claimed that: “[n]o human being could read that book

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<sup>198</sup> In the novel Spenser, like Mahaffy, is said to have “a reputation for caustic wit” (H, 75) and at one point he publicly taunts Hyacinth about his nationalism (H, 75).

<sup>199</sup> Tomas O Fiaich, ‘The Great Controversy’ in Sean O Tuama (Ed.), *The Gaelic League Idea*. (Cork: Mercier Press, 1993), 67. Mahaffy’s comments on the language were not, in fact, confined to the Commission, as a few years previously he had described Irish in a British journal as “a most difficult and useless tongue – not only useless, but a mischievous obstacle to civilization” and shortly after his testimony to the Commission he asserted in the same publication that the revival of the language would be “a retrograde step, a return to the dark ages, to the Tower of Babel.” Quoted in: W. B. Stanford & R. B. McDowell, *Mahaffy: A Biography of an Anglo-Irishman*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 109 & 105. The first comment was published in 1896 in an article which appeared in the journal *19<sup>th</sup> Century*. The second quotation is taken from an article published in the same journal during the year of the controversy, i.e. 1899.

<sup>200</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*. (London: Vintage Books, 1996), 145 – 46.



without feeling absolutely degraded by contact with it, and the filth he would not demean himself to mention.” Being unwilling to expand on the matter in public, he stated that “[i]f the Commissioners would come to his rooms he would show them in private what he dared not say there”; he added that “[a]ll folk-lore was at bottom abominable.”<sup>201</sup>

Such virulent animosity towards the language at a time of fervent national consciousness naturally provoked considerable hostility and furthermore served to accentuate the perceived dissociation between Trinity and the life outside its precincts. Hyde became so exasperated that he was driven to censure the “Stygian flood of black ignorance about everything Irish which, Lethe-like, rolls through the portals of my beloved Alma Mater.”<sup>202</sup> There was also George Russell’s description of Mahaffy as “[a] blockhead of a professor drawn from the intellectual obscurity of Trinity and appointed as a commissioner to train the national mind according to British ideals.”<sup>203</sup> Lady Gregory also offered her opinion on the controversy, in particularly astringent terms. Quoting a friend who maintained that all communities resolve themselves into three individuals: the butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker, she had the following to impart about the first tradesman, implying that Trinity was proudly striving to be the abattoir of native Irish culture; here the university’s severance in the national context, already discussed in relation to *Hyacinth*, is now stressed in a singularly compelling manner:

his [the butcher’s] trade is in dead meat, (...) and the stirrings of life disturb his calculations; his business and his duty call to him to destroy life wherever it appears. (...) we recognise the hem of his blue apron under the frock-coat of a Commissioner of Education engaged in cutting through the veins that unite the present with the past: we recognise that apron when waved as a flag from the Chinese Wall that separates Trinity College from Ireland.<sup>204</sup>

Trinity’s publicly declared position on the Irish language, at least as articulated by Mahaffy and Atkinson, must also have been particularly repellent to Hannay, a

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<sup>201</sup> Quoted in Hyde, *op. cit.*, 197.

<sup>202</sup> Quoted in Stanford & McDowell, *op. cit.*, 107.

<sup>203</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 105.

<sup>204</sup> Lady Gregory (Ed.), *Ideals in Ireland*. (London: Unicorn, 1901), 9.

graduate of that university and a member of the Gaelic League, who in the year that *Hyacinth* was published celebrated the Eucharist in the Irish language in St Patrick's Cathedral on St Patrick's Day. Thus, on that morning at least, Hannay sacramentally united the native language and the Church of Ireland, corroborating in an unexpected way in the twentieth century what James Ussher had sought to demonstrate in the seventeenth century regarding the Irishness of the Church of Ireland; the clergyman's Alma Mater, however, as shown above, had just a few years previously condemned the language in a particularly forthright manner.

All of the above historical background can be seen as relevant to *Hyacinth* when considered in relation to the novel's previously quoted depiction of the college as both physically and culturally at variance with the life surrounding it. Furthermore, as shown below, this lacuna between the university and the city is underscored in the novel when the titular character's Gaelic-speaking nationalist friends, who are in no way connected with the college, become a substitute for both Hyacinth's anti-nationalist peers and lecturers in Trinity, thus serving to highlight and extend the novel's presentation of Trinity as culturally removed from the spirit in the country at the time, a spirit which decidedly included a passionate interest in the Irish language. The topic of Ireland's native language, as we shall see, is one which Birmingham would explore in more detail in his third novel, to be discussed in the next chapter of this thesis.

Thus begins one of the principal themes of the novel, which is the oscillation within Irish Protestantism between cultural integration and separation. Trinity's inveterate detachment from the life outside its walls is a stance representative of the wider problem of the Irish Protestant's apparently constitutional inability to embrace native Irish culture, an inability which, Birmingham is always at pains to emphasize, will eradicate any future possibility of Protestant involvement in the government of the country. Such a policy of separation, however, is, shortly afterwards in the novel, contrasted with organizations which had a unifying influence on Irish society, facilitating, as they did, Protestant participation in cultural and practical matters at the time.



## vii. Conflict & integration

Earlier in this chapter we discussed the mid-nineteenth-century theological conflict between Protestants and Catholics as rendered in the opening chapter of *Hyacinth*. Now, at the beginning of chapter four, Birmingham broadens this theme and carries it into the early twentieth century by offering a detailed description of two politico-religious entities which had dominated Irish politics from the time of the Act of Union and which were, in the new century, the prominent protagonists on the Irish political stage. Generally speaking these entities can be described as the forces of Protestantism and Catholicism, though now the emphasis is no longer purely doctrinal, as had been the case in the first chapter: power is now their principal objective. The importance of these passages from the fourth chapter becomes evident when one realizes that it is at this point in the text that two armies are being marshalled on the battlefield of the novel and thus the struggle between them, which will ensue for the remainder of the novel, is explicitly anticipated.

Just before chapter four, near the end of the previous chapter, as the eponymous hero approaches the presence of Mary O'Dwyer, he hears her reciting one of her poems to an intimate assembly of admirers. The poem resembles a Yeatsian roll-call of nationalist heroes when the names of Protestant patriots from the past, such as Fitzgerald, "[n]obly devote [sic] to his race's most noble tradition", as well as Emmet, Davis and O'Brien are declaimed (H, 36). However, the passage at the beginning of the following chapter, just described above, demonstrates that such Protestant patriotism has an indisputably anomalous status in Irish history. Here, in a characteristic interruption to the narrative, Birmingham yet again shows how the gentry-led Protestant cause has been severely weakened due to its fatuous and self-destructive allegiance to a country which has only the most tenuous grasp of Irish politics:

Ever since Pitt and Castlereas [sic] perpetrated their Act of Union two political parties have struggled together in Ireland. Both of them have been steadily prominent, so prominent that they have sometimes attracted the attention of the English public, and drawn to their contest a little quite unintelligent interest. The simplest and most discernible line of division between them is a religious



one. The Protestant party has hitherto been guided and led by the gentry. It has been steadily loyal to England and to the English Government. It has not been greatly concerned about Ireland or Ireland's welfare, but has been consistently anxious to preserve its own privileges, powers, and property. It has not come well out of the struggle of the nineteenth century. Its Church has been disestablished, its privileges and powers abolished, and the last remnants of its property are being filched from it. It is a curious piece of irony that this party should have hastened its own defeat by the very policy adopted to secure victory. No doubt the Irish aristocracy would have suffered less if they had been seditious instead of loyal. (H, 38 – 39)<sup>205</sup>

This, then, is the first army in the conflict and the separatist nature of the Protestant party, which, as indicated above, includes the Church of Ireland, is, as we shall see, a significant theme in the novel, especially in terms of the text's treatment of the Church of Ireland, the latter being frequently presented as tending to distance itself from Irish life.

Immediately after the above paragraph appertaining to the defeated Protestant cause in Ireland, Birmingham continues by discussing the opposing side and inevitable victor in the battle for power in Ireland: the popular "Roman Catholic party" (H, 39), led by ecclesiastics, who have always wisely feigned solicitousness about the welfare of Ireland. This party is portrayed as having considerable influence over a number of political movements and, though not loyal to England, it bullies and worries her instead, seeking always and exclusively "the aggrandisement" (H, 39) of the Church, for which it is constantly prepared to sacrifice Irish interests, regardless of the consequences. The novel's treatment of the Catholic Church will be discussed in detail later in this chapter, but for now let us examine what lies beyond both of the above starkly delineated extremes: a group which, as shown here, strives for cohesion rather than the previously described division:

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<sup>205</sup> Hannay had expressed similar sentiments in 1905 in reference to the plight of the landlord after Parnell's parliamentary efforts: "[i]t is quite evident that our three decades of Parliamentary struggling have done us no good at all. The landlord class has got nothing by them. On the contrary, it has lost money, prestige, and power." 'The Gaelic League' in *Independent Review*. November 1905, p. 303.

Outside both parties there have always been a few men united by no ties of policy or religion, unless, as perhaps we may, we call patriotism a kind of religion. Other lands have been loved sincerely, devotedly, passionately, as mothers, wives, and mistresses are loved. Ireland alone has been loved religiously, as men are taught to love God or the saints. Her lovers have called themselves Catholic or Protestant: such distinctions have not mattered to these men. They have scarcely ever been able to form themselves into a party, never into a strong or a wise party. They have been violent, desperate, frequently ridiculous, but always sincere and unselfish. Their great weakness has lain in the fact that they have had no consistent aim. Some of their leaders have looked for a return to Ireland's Constitution, and built upon the watchword of the volunteers 'The King, the Lords, and the Commons of Ireland.' Some have dreamed of a complete independence, of an Irish republic shaping its own world policy. Some have wholly distrusted politics, and given their strength to the intellectual, spiritual, or material regeneration of the people. Among these men have been found the sanest practical reformers and the wildest revolutionary dreamers. On the outskirts of their company have hung all sorts of people. Parliamentary politicians have leaned towards them, and been driven straightway out of public life. Criminals have claimed fellowship with them, and brought discredit upon honourable men. Poets and men of letters have drawn their inspiration from their strivings, and in return have decked their patriotism with imperishable splendour. In future, no doubt, the struggle will lie between this party and the hitherto victorious hierarchy, with England for ally, and the fight seems a wholly unequal one. (H, 39 – 40)

This is an intriguing and very important paragraph as it complicates the previously outlined denominational dichotomy by describing a third body which transcends the narrow demarcations of creed and party and is, as Birmingham claims, the only group with even a slight chance of going into combat with the increasingly powerful Catholic party. The above reference to the Constitution of 1782 is a reminder of Hannay's reverence for both that document and the people who fought for it, as outlined in his 'A Neglected Chapter of Irish History'. The reference in the passage to the more radical concept of complete political separation from England is probably an allusion to Theobald Wolfe Tone, recognized as one of the architects of modern Irish



republicanism. Finally, the intellectual and spiritual regeneration referred to is most likely the Irish Literary Revival, begun in the late nineteenth century and reaching its climax around the time that Birmingham was writing *Hyacinth*.

The personal import for the novelist of the above third party becomes manifest when we consider that, at the time of composition, Hannay was involved in an organization which he always insisted was strictly non-denominational and apolitical, that is, the Gaelic League, which is the main topic of his third novel, *Benedict Kavanagh*, published in 1907. The religiously and politically neutral aspects of the League were underlined and forcefully advocated in a lecture Hannay delivered in 1906, in Dublin, before a branch of the society, later to be published as a pamphlet entitled *Is the Gaelic League Political?* Here Hannay offers a biblical vision of integration, which he believed the League offered, and thus he may have had the League in mind when detailing the above third party in the novel, for here is a group of people whose unity challenges the concept of Ireland as a battlefield of sectarian conflict:

It is an amazing thing; so amazing as to be at first simply incredible, that here in Ireland, in poor Ireland, the battle-ground of creeds, the fever swamp of miasmatic bigotry, that here in Ireland there exists an organization where men and women of different creeds meet in friendliness, where priest and parson love one another – why the golden age when lion and lamb feed together is nothing to this.<sup>206</sup>

The next chapter of this thesis, in its analysis of *Benedict Kavanagh*, will discuss Birmingham's fictional treatment of the Gaelic League in detail, but for now it is necessary to discuss an allusion in the paragraph in question to another organization which was becoming prominent as Birmingham was writing his second novel.

The reference in the above paragraph to the “material regeneration of the people” carried out by “the sanest practical reformers” brings to mind a specific agricultural movement which was attracting significant attention at the time. The importance of this movement in the context of the passage in question is plain when one considers

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<sup>206</sup> The Rev. J. O. Hannay, *Is the Gaelic League Political?* Lecture delivered under the auspices of the Branch of the Five Provinces on 23 January, 1906, p.8.



that the founder and chief exponent of the organization was a Protestant landlord who was then entreating his peers to emulate him in his practical attempt to reform and regenerate rural Ireland. The man in question is, of course, Sir Horace Plunkett, who was associated at this time with the co-operative movement, the Irish Agricultural Organization Society and the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction. The significance of Plunkett's work during this period was in fact commented on by Hannay. In a letter written a year after the publication of *Hyacinth*, Hannay discussed the various regenerative movements at work in Ireland at the time in terms that are reminiscent of the above paragraph from the novel; here the importance of Plunkett's efforts in this context are made clear:

The Gaelic League, in spite of the cowardice of its leaders, is one, the propaganda of the Sinn Fein Party is another. The literary, dramatic and artistic revival is a third, working indirectly but really. A fourth, perhaps the greatest of all, is Horace Plunkett's work. In a few years I hope that our people will be sufficiently educated and awake to make a dissolution of the present union with England safe and highly advantageous to us.<sup>207</sup>

Hannay and Plunkett were frequently in contact at this stage and Hannay's admiration for Plunkett is especially evident in the dedication to him in *The Bad Times*, his novel about the Land War published in 1908, not long after the publication of *Hyacinth*:

TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE  
SIR HORACE PLUNKETT, K. C. V. O., F. R. S.

O heart too brave to suffer long  
Under the spite of little men,  
Or pay their hatred back again  
With bitterness; O soul too strong

To turn from what you find to do  
In sick disgust or mere despair

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<sup>207</sup> J. O. Hannay to H. de F. Montgomery, 29 May 1907, (PRONI T1089/324) in: Trevor West, *Horace Plunkett, Co-operation and Politics: An Irish Biography*. (Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe, 1986), 96–97.

And find your life work other where

I offer this my work to you.

G.A.B.<sup>208</sup>

It is easy to understand why Hannay had such respect for Plunkett, whose father was the sixteenth Baron Dunsany: “[t]he Plunketts, originally Danish, but increasingly part of the Norman-Gaelic hegemony, had settled in Co. Meath in the twelfth century. (...) The Dunsanys belonged to the upper strata of Anglo-Irish society consisting of the major Irish landlords most of whom owned houses in London and often estates in England.”<sup>209</sup> Indeed, it is possible that Plunkett, with his aristocratic background, coupled with his personal commitment to Irish affairs, may have been for Hannay the Anglo-Irish messianic figure which he so hankered after in much of his writings. In this context it is important to discuss Plunkett’s *Noblesse Oblige*, published in 1908, as in it Plunkett’s opinions on the proper role of the landlord in Irish society bear a striking resemblance to Hannay’s position on the matter.

Explicitly addressed “especially to the resident gentry”,<sup>210</sup> *Noblesse Oblige* reads in many ways like a survival handbook for the increasingly marginalized landlord class after the passage of the Wyndham Act of 1903. At one point Plunkett points out that landlords largely avoided associating themselves with the co-operative movement at its inception, as it was criticized at the time “as a device for bolstering up landlordism.”<sup>211</sup> Though this may not have been the conscious intention behind the movement, it certainly, as Plunkett perhaps unwittingly portrays it in this brief publication, has all the appearances of an elaborate means of rescuing the landed gentry from imminent oblivion, as Plunkett perhaps unwittingly portrays it in this brief publication.<sup>212</sup> Plunkett begins by recounting that he hears on an almost daily

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<sup>208</sup> George A. Birmingham, *The Bad Times*. (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1919), 5.

<sup>209</sup> Trevor West, *op. cit.*, 4 – 5.

<sup>210</sup> Horace Plunkett, *Noblesse Oblige: An Irish Rendering*. (Dublin: Maunsell & Co., Ltd., 1908), 5. Henceforth this publication will be footnoted simply as *Noblesse Oblige*.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>212</sup> Plunkett’s reference to France and Germany in this respect is revealing:

To-day, in France and in Germany – countries whose social history has been most markedly different – the old aristocracy, the gentry, and the large farmers have taken a prominent part as leaders in the movement of agricultural co-operation. The movement in these countries has brought landlord, farmer, and labourer together on a basis of mutual interest never before

basis about landlords who have sold or are about to sell their estates and who claim that “there can in the future be no position of influence or utility for their class in Ireland.”<sup>213</sup> Now, with their “local and national influence and prestige already gone”,<sup>214</sup> they feel increasingly threatened in the new dispensation, no longer able to live in their houses with any sense of security. In response, Plunkett describes the new situation in exclusively positive terms, in a way that is a strong reminder of Birmingham’s portrayal of the third party in *Hyacinth*, stressing, as it does here, the integrative nature of such an enterprise:

I am not (...) here concerned with political or religious questions. My point is that now for the first time, without any sacrifice of political opinion, without arousing any serious apprehensions of danger to religious conviction, and with immense advantage to social and material progress, problems essentially neither political nor religious, but which it will require the best thought of the country to solve, can be approached by men of all religious and political views. Without compromising their positions in any way, while improving them in many ways, Irishmen can all help to solve these problems.<sup>215</sup>

Thus Plunkett’s vision of an organization which was inclusive, regardless of religion or politics, and which called for the gentry to play an active and potentially self-empowering role in the affairs of the new Ireland, is doubtless a fundamental part of Birmingham’s third party, as described in *Hyacinth*. The next chapter of this thesis, in its analysis of *Benedict Kavanagh*, will return to this discussion of *Noblesse Oblige*, but for now it is necessary to make some concluding remarks about Birmingham’s third party.

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realized; and has made possible a new harmony and a new out-look in rural economic and social life.

At another point, in reference to the work carried out by the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction, Plunkett points to the power to be gained from teaching the principles on which such work is based: “[t]hose who are best qualified to bring about this understanding will find themselves elected, first to the committees of the local representative bodies, and at a later stage to the Council or Boards attached to the central body.” *Ibid.*, 27 & 31 – 32.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.



It is not difficult to see that one of the salient features of the above third party, as described by Birmingham, is its strongly Protestant character. Along with the implied reference to Plunkett, as discussed above, the Protestant complexion of the party is manifest when we consider that Wolfe Tone was Protestant and the Volunteers, along with the pre-Union independent Parliament were also overwhelmingly Protestant. Furthermore, the Irish Literary Revival, which was reaching its peak at around the time that Birmingham began his career as a novelist, was predominantly Protestant-led and even the Gaelic League, the co-founder and first president of which was Douglas Hyde – the son of a Church of Ireland clergyman – at least initially managed to garner substantial backing from Protestants, most notably Hannay himself. Thus, all of the above are examples of Protestants directly involving themselves with the politics and culture of Ireland and are therefore in contrast to the previously mentioned Protestant party, which defined itself by its attachment to England.

Now let us discuss a reference to the landlord from chapter five of *Hyacinth* which is in every conceivable way the opposite of Plunkett's vision of that class.

#### **viii. Vampires in the Rotunda**

In the previously discussed opening paragraph of chapter four the "Protestant party" is described as being "guided and led by the gentry" and this party, the passage declares, "has not been greatly concerned about Ireland or Ireland's welfare, but has been consistently anxious to preserve its own privileges, powers, and property." (H, 38) Chapter five of *Hyacinth* contains a remarkably extreme example of such selfish disregard for Ireland on the part of landlords and the reference in question deserves detailed analysis.

In chapter five Augusta Goold, accompanied by Greal, Halloran and Mary O'Dwyer, interrupts a public meeting in the Rotunda, which had been organized by O'Rourke in order to appeal for funds for the Parliamentary Party, of which he is the leader. The interruption descends into a violent brawl, which receives much publicity in the newspapers the following day.

The above episode from the novel is based on an incident which took place in the Rotunda assembly rooms on 18 May, 1903, which later became known as the Rotunda Riot and which *The Irish Times* of the following day described as “one of the most sensational incidents in the recent history of Irish politics.”<sup>216</sup> Regarding the same incident, AE wrote to Yeats about “the most gorgeous row Dublin has had since Jubilee time. The Rotunda meeting was a free fight and two MPs are incapacitated.”<sup>217</sup> Maud Gonne, the chief protagonist of the actual drama, tells the story from her point of view in her autobiography. In a chapter entitled ‘The Battle of the Rotunda’ she retails how Yeats informed her that King Edward VII was about to be presented with the keys of the city of Dublin from the deputy Unionist Lord Mayor of the city. Related to this was the fact that Arthur Griffith’s *The United Irishmen* had published information about a Unionist conspiracy to ensure that the Lord Mayor, Tim Halloran, would not be in Dublin at the time so that instead his deputy, Alderman Cotton, would receive the king. It was after learning of this information that Gonne read a poster advertising a meeting of the Parliamentary Party in the Rotunda, to be held the following evening, which Tim Harrington was to chair while John Redmond would speak. It was then that she decided to publicly challenge Halloran to repudiate what Griffith had alleged in his newspaper. At the meeting Gonne’s importunate questioning of Harrington eventually led to ugly scenes: “[i]n every part of the hall people were now fighting and sounds of breaking wood could be heard as chairs were taken as weapons. Bits of wood were being hurled at the platform. I saw Mick Quinn (...) fighting desperately; he had a cut on his head which was bleeding.”<sup>218</sup>

What is most interesting about Birmingham’s fictional retelling of the above, however, is what he has O’Rourke, partly based on the figure of John Redmond, say to the crowd on the topic of landlords:

He described them as ‘ill-omened tax-gatherers who suck the life-blood of the country, and refuse to disgorge a penny of it for any useful purpose.’ Mr. O’Rourke was not a man who shrank from a mixed metaphor, or paused to consider such trifles as the unpleasantness which would ensue if anyone who

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<sup>216</sup> Samuel Levenson, *Maud Gonne*. (London: Cassell, 1976), 207, 210 & 209.

<sup>217</sup> Margaret Ward, *Maud Gonne: Ireland’s Joan of Arc*. (London: Pandora, 1990), 80.

<sup>218</sup> Maud Gonne MacBride, *A Servant of the Queen: Reminiscences*. Edited by A. Norman Jeffares and Anna MacBride White. (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1994), 327 – 28.



had been sucking blood were to repent and disgorge it. 'Where,' he went on to ask, 'do they spend their immense revenues? Is it in Ireland?'

He forgot what he had meant to say, floundered, attempted to pull himself together, and brought out the stale jest about providing each landlord with a single ticket to Holyhead. (H, 57)

Firstly it should be noted that though Redmond addressed the Rotunda audience about the Land Bill then before Parliament, his language was in no way like O'Rourke's, in fact, he hoped that the amended and amplified Bill would "work without injustice to any class, without friction, and without conflict."<sup>219</sup> Indeed, as Paul Bew argues, after the democratization of Irish local government in 1898, Redmond urged voters to show tolerance by electing those with a sense of public spirit, even if they were not nationalists and thus "unlike other nationalists who claimed that 'all the landlords deserve of Ireland is a single ticket to Holyhead', Redmond was offering an olive branch to all these landlords with any claim to public-spiritedness." Bew continues by citing an important speech which Redmond delivered in Parliament on 21 March, 1898 in which, although he began by denouncing the genesis and history of landlordism in Ireland, he asserted that the current generation of landlords were blameless and this, he maintained, had not escaped the majority of the Irish people:

After all, these landlords are Irishmen. They are mostly men of education and ability. While we have waged war against a system, I believe the great bulk of the Irish people never at any time desired to drive any class of their fellow countrymen from the shores of Ireland. So far from desiring to ruin them individually, I do not hesitate to say that I believe it would be a wise and blessed thing for Ireland to agree to any financial arrangement by which they could transfer their estates to the people upon such terms as would enable them to retain sufficient, at any rate, of their nominal income to enable them to remain in Ireland to take their proper place among the people. For my part, these are the views that I entertain, and have always entertained, upon this matter.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> *The Irish Times*, 19 May, 1903.

<sup>220</sup> Paul Bew, *John Redmond*. (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press Ltd., 1996), 21 – 22.



With all of this in mind it is highly probable that the character of O'Rourke is actually an amalgamation of two historical figures: John Redmond and John Dillon. Dillon, a highly influential nationalist politician and militant agrarian, was implacably opposed to landlordism throughout his career. In the novel the background figure of John O'Neill, partly based, as in *The Seething Pot*, on Parnell, is described as O'Rourke's predecessor (H, 61) and Birmingham also refers to O'Rourke's "revolt against John O'Neill" (H, 52), thus making him the latter's "betrayal" (H, 58). These descriptions of the fictional O'Rourke do indeed suggest the historical figure of Dillon, who became the leader of the main anti-Parnellite movement in 1896, but gave way to Redmond in 1900. The theory that O'Rourke is based on a composite of both politicians is strengthened by the fact that historically they both worked effectively as a team: Dillon residing in Dublin and Redmond, the public speaker, living mostly in London;<sup>221</sup> the latter is a point which is alluded to in the novel on a number of occasions before and during the meeting in the Rotunda.

However, it is specifically O'Rourke's remarks about Irish landlords which are of considerable significance here. As was stated in the previous chapter, *The Seething Pot* contains one reference to Sir Gerald as "'a tyrant and a bloodsucker'" (SP, 125) and O'Rourke's above comments about an ill-omened and blood-sucking class certainly underline the vampiric nature of Irish landlordism, at least as it was perceived by some at the time. Furthermore, though the narrator mocks O'Rourke's mixed metaphor in the passage in question and despite the fact that even his own audience remorselessly ridicules him, an interesting link can be made between this image and the most famous blood-sucking landlord from the pages of fiction, as shown below.

O'Rourke's description of Irish landlords as "ill-omened tax-gatherers who suck the life-blood of the country, and refuse to disgorge a penny of it for any useful purpose" is uncannily reminiscent of one moment in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, when Jonathan Harker attacks the vampiric count with a knife, with the result that "the point just cut

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<sup>221</sup> S. J. Connolly, *The Oxford Companion to Irish History*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 148.

the cloth of his coat, making a wide gap whence a bundle of bank-notes and a stream of gold fell out.”<sup>222</sup>

The link between literary vampirism and historical landlordism is made by Terry Eagleton in *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, in which he describes Stoker’s novel as “an allegory of the collapse of the gentry.” The character of Dracula, he argues, is:

an absentee landlord, deserting his Transylvanian castle to buy up property in London. Like many an Ascendancy aristocrat he is a devout Anglophile, given to pouring over maps of the metropolis; and this gory-toothed vampire plans, a touch bathetically, to settle in Purfleet, as a number of the Anglo-Irish gentry were to migrate from the wilds of Connaught to the watering holes of the English south coast. Living in a material world, Dracula is a material ghoul, much preoccupied with leases and title deeds (...). But Dracula, like the Ascendancy, is running out of land: by the end of the novel he is being hotly pursued around Europe, furnished only with the crates of Transylvanian soil he needs to bed down in for the night. His material base is rapidly dwindling, and without this soil he will die. The Ascendancy, too, will evaporate once their earth is removed from them.<sup>223</sup>

Seamus Deane offers a similar argument, situating Stoker’s depiction of the vampiric landlord in the wider context of the culture of the time:

Dracula’s dwindling soil and his vampiric appetites consort well enough with the image of the Irish landlord current in the nineteenth century. Running out of soil, this peculiar version of the absentee landlord in London will flee the light of day and be consigned to the only territory left to him, that of legend. Like

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<sup>222</sup> Bram Stoker, *Dracula*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 306. In her introduction to the novel Maud Ellmann asks why, in the scene just referred to, Dracula bleeds money. She offers Franco Moretti’s theory that the vampire represents capital run riot and then quotes Karl Marx’s famous metaphor which compares capital to vampirism: “[c]apital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.” *Ibid.*, xxi. Franco Moretti, ‘The Dialectic of Fear’, in *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs and David Miller. (London: Verso, 1983). Karl Marx, *Capital*, 3 vols. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), i. 342.

<sup>223</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture*. (London: Verso, 1995), 215.



O'Grady's and Yeats's Anglo-Irish, he will be expelled from history to enter the never-never land of myth, demonized more effectively but also more clandestinely than by Lalor, Mitchel, or Davitt.<sup>224</sup>

The depiction of the landlord as a vampire reappears implicitly in Birmingham's fourth novel, *The Northern Iron*, to be discussed in the next chapter of this thesis. Here, in an excerpt from that novel, the Rev. Micah Ward, a Presbyterian minister, in a heated argument with Lord Dunseveric, vehemently deprecates the Ascendancy as cruel, bloodthirsty, stealthy, predatory and gluttonous:

“Yes,” said Micah, “you care for Ireland, but what do you mean by Ireland? You mean a bloodthirsty, supercilious, unprincipled ascendancy, for whom the public exists only as a prey to be destroyed, who keep themselves close and mark men's steps that they may lay in wait for them; who forge chains for their country, who distrust and belie the people, who scoff at the complaints of the poor and needy, and who impudently call themselves Ireland. You have made the sick and the lame to go out of their way. You have eaten the good pastures and trodden down the residue with your feet. (...)

Go, I have done with you. Go, torture, burn, shed innocent blood, and then, like the adulterous woman, eat and wipe your mouth, and say “I have done no wickedness.”<sup>225</sup>

The relevance of such negative depictions of landlordism in Birmingham's early fiction becomes clear when one considers that they probably represent an effort to reflect past and contemporary perceptions of that class. However, they are balanced, throughout Birmingham's fiction from this period, by portrayals of landlords, such as Sir Gerald in *The Seething Pot* and the eponymous hero of *Benedict Kavanagh*, all of whom are sincerely committed to the welfare of their country. Furthermore, in the absence of the latter there are usually certain characters who express the hope that the Irish aristocracy might soon discover that their loyalty should lie with Ireland, as

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<sup>224</sup> Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 90.

<sup>225</sup> George A. Birmingham, *The Northern Iron*. (Dublin: Maunsel & Co., Limited, 1909), 84 & 86. All future references to this novel will be cited parenthetically as, for example, (NI, 84 & 86).



opposed to England. Such a desire to see a patriotic Irish gentry comes from the most unlikely source later in the novel, as the next section will show, but for now it is important to consider that the references to landlordism in *Hyacinth* ultimately explore the same issue that arises in the titular character's journey throughout the novel: the matter of constructive Protestant participation in the local and national issues in Ireland at the time and thus the novel's references to landlordism serve to underline the nature of Hyacinth's task from a different though related perspective. However, as we shall see later in this chapter, like Sir Gerald in *The Seething Pot*, Hyacinth is eventually portrayed at the end of the text as a failed messiah, further emphasizing the link between Hyacinth and the topic of landlordism, and ultimately showing the apparent impossibility of sustained Protestant involvement with Irish affairs during the period.

#### **ix. War and aristocracy**

Even a cursory glance at *Hyacinth* will reveal that war is one of the governing themes of the novel. In fact, there are several battles being fought on its pages, each one of which functions as a means of stressing the denominational divide in Ireland at the time. To begin with, there is the Armageddon of AENEAS Conneally's message from Christ, first interpreted by Hyacinth as an imminent battle against Catholicism in Ireland, which is related, as already shown, to the theological conflict of the Second Reformation. Furthermore, there is also the struggle, ongoing since the beginning of the nineteenth century, between the two political parties in Ireland, as described in chapter four. Added to these is the commercial war waged by the convent-run Robeen woollen factory on James Quinn's business in Ballymoy, as well as the sectarian boycott of his goods. Finally, near the end of the novel, there is the Reverend Mother's vision of an Irish Catholic Empire, created by a proselytizing missionary army who would be responsible for "bloodless warfare." (H, 234) All of these conflicts, in different ways, underscore the seemingly impenetrable line of demarcation between the two main traditions in Ireland, a division which Hyacinth's story at least endeavours to transcend, as we shall later discuss. Yet another battle, the Boer War, is the novel's only literal instance of combat, in the conventional sense, and it, interestingly, though initially appearing to confirm the traditional cultural divisions in Ireland, is ultimately an opportunity for one of the characters in the novel

to voice her unexpected sentiments regarding the landlord and the national need for his intervention, as we shall see below.

Chapter ten of *Hyacinth* begins with a description of Dublin in the grip of the excitement caused by the Anglo-Boer war of the turn of the century. What is important here is the mention of the landed element amongst those who joined the British side in the war in South Africa:

the streets were gay with amateur warriors. The fever for volunteering, which laid hold on the middle classes after the series of regrettable incidents of the winter, raged violently among the Irish Loyalists. Nowhere were the recruiting officers more fervently besieged than in Dublin. Youthful squireens who boasted of being admirable snipe shots, and possessed a knowledge of all that pertained to horses, struggled with prim youths out of banks for the privilege of serving as troopers. The sons of plump graziers in the West made up parties with footmen out of their landlords' mansions, and arrived in Dublin hopeful of enlistment. (H, 107)

The young "squireens" are joined by at least one son of a landlord, as will be discussed later, and that class's enthusiastic support for the war is commented on by the historian Donal P. McCracken, who shows that southern unionists were more anti-Boer than their northern counterparts and were thus more aligned with the British attitude to the conflict. The Ascendancy's position on the war, McCracken argues, was instinctive: "Southern unionists adopted a somewhat more anti-Boer stance, one indeed more in line with British pro-war sentiment. This is not surprising, for among the families of the ascendancy class who constituted the core of southern unionism, there was a long tradition of British military and imperial service."<sup>226</sup> The novel confirms the historical record in this regard when, earlier in the text, Mary O'Dwyer laments the fact that "the English garrison in Ireland can raise thousands of pounds for their war funds, and the Irish can't be got to subscribe a few hundreds." (H, 43) Historically, southern Irish funding for the pro-war movement was indeed considerable and one of the principal means of support was the relief funds for the

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<sup>226</sup> Donal P. McCracken, *Forgotten Protest: Ireland and the Anglo-Boer War*. (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 2003), 102.



destitute widows and children of Irish soldiers who died in the war. One such fund was set up at the suggestion of Lord Dunraven and another was organized by Lady Roberts, the wife of the future commander-in-chief of the British forces in South Africa, which raised in the region of £30,000.<sup>227</sup>

The strength of such Irish anti-Boer feeling is noted with troubled surprise in *Hyacinth*; those in Ireland who support the British side in the war are seen to be quite adept at mobilizing themselves in a formidable manner and this has serious consequences for the political future of the island:

It was not possible to deny that the despised English garrison in Ireland was displaying a wholly unlooked-for spirit. No one could have expected that West Britons and ‘Seonini’ would have wanted to fight. Very likely, when the time came, they would run away; but in the meanwhile here they were, swaggering through the streets of Dublin, outward and visible signs of a force in the country hostile to the hopes of the *Croppy*, a force that some day Republican Ireland would have to reckon with. (H, 109)<sup>228</sup>

In this context Augusta Gould recalls the past and tells Hyacinth that the Protestant aristocracy of former times once demonstrated a fervent loyalty to Ireland when they joined the Volunteers and voted against the Act of Union, despite the attempts made to bribe them. Such patriots, however, have been replaced by a class who, though strangely proud of their ancestors, now unquestioningly offer their service to England. The suggestion here would appear to be that such lamentably misdirected energy,

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<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>228</sup> The *Croppy*, at one point described by Hyacinth as “the organ of the extreme left wing of the Nationalist party” (H, 211), is possibly based on the *Irish Peasant*, a paper founded in 1903 by the Nationalist MP James McCann and edited by William Ryan; it closed in December 1906. It played an important part in the Irish Ireland movement, espousing the philosophy of the Gaelic League, and it was condemned by Cardinal Michael Logue, who described it as a “most pernicious anti-Catholic print.” In relation to this latter point, at one stage in *Hyacinth* the eponymous character, while in Ardnaree, is told that “The priests are dead against the *Croppy*.” (H, 170) Another newspaper of the time which is pertinent to this context is the *United Irishman*, a nationalist weekly paper edited in Dublin by Arthur Griffith from 1899 until 1906. The relevance of Griffith’s paper in relation to *The Croppy* is suggested by the fictional paper’s title and its implicit reference to the insurgents of 1798, known as the United Irishmen or the Croppies. Birmingham, however, refers to the *United Irishman* by name at one point in the novel (H, 161), which would suggest that *The Croppy* is distinct from it. In conclusion, it would seem reasonable to argue that the *Croppy* is either based solely on the *Irish Peasant* or is a vague compound of that paper and the *United Irishman*. D. J. Hickey & J. E. Doherty, *op. cit.*, 232 – 33, 494.



though indicative of the wasted resources of the contemporary gentry, is also paradoxically suggestive of the great national potential of that class, a potential which would be realized only if the Anglo-Irish could emulate their ancestors by embracing Irish patriotism again:

‘Look at that young man,’ she [Augusta Goold] said to Hyacinth, pointing out a volunteer who passed them in the street. ‘I happen to know who he is. (...) The father is a landlord in the North, and comes of a fine old family. He’s a strong Protestant, and English, of course, in all his sympathies. Well, a hundred years or so ago that boy’s great-grandfather was swaggering about these same streets in a uniform, just as his descendant is doing now. He helped to drag a cannon into the Phoenix Park one day with a large placard tied over its muzzle – “Our rights or –” Who do you think he was threatening? Just the same England that this boy is so keen to fight for to-day!’

(...) ‘Afterwards,’ she went on, ‘he was one of the incorruptibles. You’ll see his name on Jonah Barrington’s red list. He stood out to the last against the Union, wouldn’t be bribed, and fought two duels with Castlereagh’s bravoos. The curious thing is that the present man is quite proud of that ancestor in a queer, inconsistent sort of way. Says the only mark of distinction his family can boast of is that they didn’t get a Union peerage. Strange, isn’t it?’

‘It is strange,’ said Hyacinth. ‘The Irish gentry of 1782 were men to be proud of; yet look at their descendants to-day.’ (H, 109 – 110)

The reference to the North may well be an allusion to the fact that in Belfast, the main recruiting ground for the Royal Irish Rifles, enlistment for the regiment was initially brisk during the Boer war.<sup>229</sup> However, the fact that the son of a landlord is referred to here is the more important point as it emphasizes the dramatic shift in loyalty which the landed aristocracy made over the course of a few generations. The young man who is now prepared to fight for Britain, Augusta Goold explains, is the great-grandson of a Volunteer who was distinguished for two particular reasons. To begin with, he appeared on Sir Jonah Barrington’s red list, which is to be found in

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<sup>229</sup> McCracken, *op. cit.*, 101.

Barrington's *The Rise and Fall of the Irish Nation*, a chronicle of the Protestant Ascendancy, the title and content of which carry echoes of Gibbon's work on the Roman Empire.<sup>230</sup> Barrington's red list enumerates those Members of Parliament who voted against the Union in 1799 and 1800; there were one hundred and fifty names on the original list but many changed sides after being offered "money or offices" and thus a majority eventually voted for the Union, even though there were only one hundred and forty names on the original black list.<sup>231</sup> Obviously the Member of Parliament referred to by Augusta Gould was not venal and this is symbolically underlined by his two duels with Castlereagh's men, as mentioned in the above quotation.

Lord Castlereagh, as Irish Chief Secretary from 1798 until 1801, was principally responsible for both the dissolution of the independent Irish Parliament of the late eighteenth century and the passing of the Act of Union. Although at the time there was a suggestion from some of those who opposed the Union that a duelling club should be set up in order to literally battle with the leading members of Dublin Castle, the above reference in the novel to Castlereagh mainly serves to underline the principled stand taken by the MP in question as Castlereagh's name has become synonymous in Irish history with the bribery used to force through the Union.<sup>232</sup> Thus,

<sup>230</sup> Robert Welch (Ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 35. Birmingham wrote an introduction to *Recollections of Jonah Barrington*, which was published in 1917. Alfred Perceval Graves, William Magennis & Douglas Hyde (General Editors), *Recollections of Jonah Barrington*. (Dublin: The Talbot Press Limited, n.d.).

<sup>231</sup> Sir Jonah Barrington, *The Rise and Fall of the Irish Nation*. (Dublin: James Duffy and Sons, n.d.), 289 & 294. Near the end of *The Northern Iron* Birmingham summarizes in biblical terms the corrupt gentry's betrayal of Ireland and the consequent loss of legislative independence: "[i]n the summer of 1800 the Act of Union was passed. The Irish Constitution ceased to exist. (...) The Protestant gentry were frightened or bribed. They, or the greater part of them, surrendered their birthright without even Esau's hunger for excuse." (NI, 312) Earlier in the same novel the gentry's switch in loyalty from Ireland to England, despite their rightful role as leaders of their country, is captured in the context of the clamour for liberty and unity in the days before the 1798 rebellion: "[t]he natural terror of the classes whose ascendancy or prosperity seemed to be threatened, the bribes and cajoleries of British statesmen, turned the hearts of those who ought to have been leaders from Ireland to England." (NI, 23)

<sup>232</sup> Patrick M. Geoghegan, *Lord Castlereagh*. (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press Ltd, 2002), 2 & 26 – 41. Geoghegan quotes one particularly vituperative poem about the Union which was taught to generations of Irish schoolchildren:

How did they pass the Union?  
By perjury and fraud;  
By slaves who sold their land for gold,  
As Judas sold his God.

And thus they passed the Union  
By Pitt and Castlereagh:



as Augusta Goold relates the story, the Irish gentry have forsaken their patriotism over the course of a century, abandoning honour and Ireland for a misplaced allegiance to another country.

In this context the following passage from *Hyacinth* is of particular importance because of what Goold says about the Irish aristocracy, not only in relation to their past, but more significantly in terms of the potential she believes they still possess and how an Ireland of the future might yet owe its freedom to them. In fact, she goes so far as to assert that their involvement in the affairs of the country is imperative if their native land is ever to rise above its present position:

Do you know, I sometimes think that Ireland will never get her freedom till those men take it for her. Almost every struggle that Ireland ever made was captained by her aristocracy. Think of the Geraldines and the O'Neills. Think of Sarsfield and the Wild Geese. Think of the men who wrenched a measure of independence from England in 1782. Think of Lord Edward and Smith O'Brien. No, we may talk and write and agitate, but we'll *do* nothing till we get the old families with us. (H, 110)

Hyacinth, however, remains unconvinced, but Goold's response touches on the central preoccupation of the novel: the competition for dominance between a newly empowered Catholic Church and an increasingly emasculated Church of Ireland, with the attendant political consequences of this for Irish Protestants in general, all of which will be dealt with in more detail towards the end of this chapter:

'We are likely to wait, if we wait for them. Look at those.' He [Hyacinth] waved his hand towards a group of yeomen who were chatting at the street corner. 'They are going to stamp out a nation in South Africa. Is it likely that they will create one here?'

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Could Satan send for such an end  
More worthy tools than they?

Quoted in James McGuire, 'The Act of Union' in Liam de Paor (Ed.), *Milestones in Irish History* (Cork, 1986), 72 – 73. The poem is attributed to John O'Hagan.



‘It is not likely’ – she sighed as she spoke – ‘yet stranger things than that have happened. Have you ever considered what the present English policy in Ireland really is? Do you understand that they are trying to keep us quiet by bribing the priests? They think that the Protestants are powerless, or that they will be loyal no matter what happens. But think: These Protestants have been accustomed for generations to regard themselves as a superior race. They conceive themselves to have a natural right to govern. Now they are being snubbed and insulted. There isn’t an English official from their Lord Lieutenant down but thinks he is quite safe in ignoring the Protestants and is only anxious to make himself agreeable to the priests. That’s the beginning. Very soon they’ll be bullied as well as snubbed. They will stand a good deal of it, because, like most strong people, they are very stupid and slow at understanding; but do you suppose they will always stand it?’

‘They’re English, and not Irish,’ said Hyacinth. ‘I suppose they like what their own people do.’

‘It’s a lie. They are not English, though they say it themselves. In the end they will find out that they are Irish. Some day a last insult, a particularly barefaced robbery, or an intolerable oppression, will awake them. Then they’ll turn on the people that betrayed them. They will discover that Ireland – their Ireland – isn’t meant to be a cabbage-garden for Manchester, nor yet a *crèche* for sucking priests. Ah! it will be good to be alive when they find themselves. We shall be within reach of the freedom of Ireland then.’

Hyacinth was amazed at her vehement admiration for the class she was accustomed to anathematize. (H, 110 – 11)

Augusta Goold’s words here are not in themselves particularly remarkable. Her claim that the Irish aristocracy have, on numerous occasions, fought for Irish independence is not controversial and even her admiration for this class initially stuns Hyacinth more than it does the reader. What is crucial to remember here, however, is that the character of Augusta Goold is based on Maud Gonne and for that reason this passage is of considerable importance, because of the latter’s actual experience of landlordism, as shown below.

A few years before *Hyacinth* appeared, an article by Gonne entitled 'Famine in the West' was published in the *Irish Daily Independent* and in it she described a particularly horrific scene of destitution in Erris; the scene in turn stands as an indirect indictment of landlordism at its most inhumane:

In one house of good appearance – that is to say, it had a window and a chimney – an old man lay dying. He was a living skeleton; his bones had in some places pierced the skin. By his side stood his daughter and her husband. 'He has eaten nothing for three days. He cannot take the boiled Indian meal, and we have nothing else to give him, and we had to get that on credit from the shop. No, we have no milk to give him; we sold the cow to pay the rent at Christmas, as we were threatened with eviction.'<sup>233</sup>

The following year Gonne published an article entitled 'The Evicted Tenants' in the *United Irishman* and here again it is clear from her indignant words that in her eyes it is the landlord who is the author of the most appalling misery:

Liberty is sweet – ah, yes; even liberty to starve and to shiver with cold, as so many of the evicted tenants will do this winter in their miserable huts by the roadside – huts not fit even for animals to lie in – as they watch with sad, hungry, yearning eyes the bit of land which *was* theirs, which *is* theirs, if justice and right were not a mockery in Ireland under English rule. They watch their land, in some cases gradually sinking back into the waste from which their patient toll had reclaimed it, the little house which was their home falling into decay because the landlord has decreed that the hearth fire should be extinguished.<sup>234</sup>

A person who had both witnessed scenes of such pathos and publicly expressed such sentiments as the above would be highly unlikely to ever speak of the landlord class in the way Augusta Goold does in the passage from *Hyacinth* just discussed, which explains Hyacinth's amazed reaction to what she says. It would appear, then, that

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<sup>233</sup> The article was published on 10 March 1898. Karen Steele, *Maud Gonne's Irish Nationalist Writings 1895 – 1946*. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2004), 119 – 20.

<sup>234</sup> The article was published on 9 December, 1899. *Ibid.*, 129.

here, in the context of a *roman-a-clef*, Birmingham is purposefully using the fiercely anti-landlord figure of Maud Gonno to paradoxically strengthen the pro-landlord utterances of her fictional counterpart, Augusta Goold. For with seemingly genuine support for the landlord coming from such unlikely quarters, it would appear that the cause is well worth fighting for, especially when one considers that even the staunchest critics of this class are actually earnest champions of it. This is an example of Hannay, as opposed to Birmingham, as a literary ventriloquist, tendentiously speaking through certain characters in order to make his own point and thus it is a variation of Hannay's previously discussed habit of occasionally halting the narrative in order to preach at the reader, though here the authorial intervention is somewhat subtler. However, the interruption is by no means negligible as here a character delivers a speech which comes as a surprise to the reader, because of what we already know and expect of the character in question.

It could, of course, be claimed that the above feature of Birmingham's fiction is nothing more elaborate than poor novel writing, but the fact that the novels under analysis in this thesis are effectively political interventions under the guise of fiction renders that objection redundant as in these novels artistic considerations are always subservient to Birmingham's primary objective, which is political commentary. In these novels, then, as we have just seen, that commentary, which is normally in support of the Protestant cause in Ireland, often occurs when either narrative or characters are subjected to Hannay's intervention or manipulation.

#### **x. War, Trinity College & the Church of Ireland**

Now let us return to the Boer War, which, as explained above, is one of the many wars in the novel which points towards the denominational and cultural division in Irish society at the time. The involvement of two Irish Protestant institutions in the fight against the Boers is mentioned in *Hyacinth* and although their participation in the cause is not dealt with in detail by Birmingham, their role in the war is powerfully suggestive of their relationship with the figure of the landlord in this novel.

In chapter four Timothy Halloran, a journalist and ex-seminarian, explains how those opposed to the Boers have been successful at raising a considerable sum for their war



fund: “There isn’t a Protestant church in the country where the parsons don’t preach “Give, give, give” to their people Sunday after Sunday. And what’s the result? Why, they have raised thousands of pounds.” (H, 44) When one also considers the presence among the volunteers of “undergraduates of Trinity” (H, 107),<sup>235</sup> a historical understanding of these two anti-Boer establishments highlights their close association with the Ascendancy:

Two institutions with which the ascendancy was closely connected were strongholds of southern unionist opinion. One was Trinity College, Dublin, whose students lost no opportunity to provoke the Irish pro-Boers; the other was the Anglican Church of Ireland, then under the leadership of the celebrated Primate William Alexander. In 1893 he had visited the Cape and had been much feted by Cecil Rhodes whom he greatly admired. As for the Boer cause, Alexander firmly asserted it to be ‘as bad a cause as ever men were misguided into.’<sup>236</sup>

The phalanx of the Ascendancy, Trinity College, Dublin and the Church of Ireland, united by strong anti-Boer sentiment, is powerfully emblematic of the intimate

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<sup>235</sup> The anti-Boer sentiment in Trinity is conveyed at several points in *Hyacinth*. For example, in the second chapter Hyacinth is invited to a students’ prayer meeting at which there will be special prayer “for the success of the British arms.” (H, 23) When Hyacinth announces his divergence from the fervent stance taken by those at the meeting, he is asked incredulously: “You don’t mean to tell me you are a Pro-Boer, and you a divinity student?” (H, 28) It is at this point that Hyacinth begins to realize that those associated with the Church of Ireland are expected to adopt a particular political attitude to England, and, of course, this determines their relationship with Irish nationalism: “[i]t had not hitherto struck Hyacinth that it was impossible to combine a sufficient orthodoxy with a doubt about the invariable righteousness of England’s quarrels. Afterwards he came to understand the matter better.” (H, 28)

<sup>236</sup> Donal P. McCracken, *op. cit.*, 103. McCracken continues by quoting a poem by the primate, entitled ‘Is the War the only thing that has no good in it?’, which is startlingly tolerant of the horrors of war, even going so far as to suggest that war is admirable and may ultimately have a divine source. The first two stanzas are as follows:

They say that ‘war is hell’, the great accursed,  
The sin impossible to be forgiven –  
Yet I can look beyond it at its worst,  
And still find blue in Heaven.

And as I note how nobly natures form  
Under the war’s red rain, I deem it true  
That He who made the earthquake and the storm  
Perchance makes battles too!

*Ibid.*, 103 – 104. The original source is: Rev. J. Douglas Borthwick, *Poems and Songs of the South African War: An Anthology*. (Montreal, 1901), 81 – 83.

relationship between all three both historically and as they are depicted in *Hyacinth*. Now, having dealt with the Ascendancy in some detail in this chapter, it remains to resume our previous discussion of the other two parts of the above phalanx: Trinity College and the Church of Ireland. To begin with, however, as we shall see, for the next part of the novel the Church of Ireland and the university are inseparable, due to the presence of the Divinity School within the college, and thus, for the remainder of this section, both institutions will be examined together, until our discussion moves to the period after Hyacinth finally leaves the college to begin his working life.

In the novel Trinity's near hysterical allegiance to the Crown is portrayed in unambiguous terms, thus emphasizing the gap between the university and the rest of the country, as discussed above. Trinity's loyalism is especially apparent when the Lord Lieutenant visits the college, at which point "the students seized the chance of displaying their loyalty to the Throne and Constitution", offering an enthusiastic rendition of 'God save the Queen' immediately after the visitor has been shown the Book of Kells. (H, 30)

Later Tim Halloran's point to Hyacinth about the Church of Ireland seamlessly links that institution to Trinity's political outlook, as just outlined above: "'Your Church is ruled by old women who think the name of Englishman the most glorious in the world. You preach loyalty, and I believe you pray for the Queen in your services.'" (H, 49) Furthermore, a remark by the chairman of the Protestant Unionist party (H, 26) at a prayer meeting in Trinity attended by Hyacinth underlines the anti-national link between both institutions: the speaker, a Dublin clergyman, condemns the Boers and states that England, on the other hand, is "the pioneer of civilization", making it clear that "all good Christians ought to pray for the success of the British arms." (H, 26 – 27) However, it is in the figure of Dr Henry, the divinity professor, that Trinity College and the Church of Ireland merge and dissolve into each other. Through Dr Henry we come to realize how the two institutions in question, in their equally anti-nationalist worldviews, are removed from the national life which surrounds them and thus here again the novel reflects the great withdrawal of the Church of Ireland from Irish politics, as discussed earlier in this chapter.



To begin with, Dr Henry's opening remarks here on the Catholic Church give a clue about the historical figure on which his character is based: "'We have proved,' (...) 'that the Roman claims have no support in Scripture, history, or reason. Our books remain unanswered, because they are unanswerable. We can do no more.'" (H, 50) These words suggest that Dr Henry is based on the Rev. George Salmon, appointed Regius professor of divinity in the college in 1866, and who published a challenge to a specific Catholic dogma in 1889 entitled *The Infallibility of the Church*.<sup>237</sup>

Hannay was keenly aware of Salmon's position on papal infallibility, as is made clear in his autobiography:

Shortly before I took my degree I entered the divinity school for two years' special instruction in theological subjects. When I entered the school Dr. Salmon was Regius Professor (...). It was my privilege to listen to the last series of lectures on the Infallibility of the Church, and I think those lectures produced a permanent effect upon my mind. I could never escape from the logic with which Dr. Salmon dealt with the pretensions of those who maintained the infallibility either of the Pope, General Council or indeed anyone else. The lectures were afterwards published and I re-read them again in later life with the same rather terrified delight with which I listened to them. I have never seen any answer to the arguments which Salmon produced.<sup>238</sup>

The novel's treatment of the Catholic Church will be dealt with later in this chapter, but for now it is sufficient to note that the above extract from *Pleasant Places* leads us to the inescapable conclusion that the character of Dr Henry is based on George Salmon. Furthermore, the above allusion in the novel to Salmon's text on papal infallibility is an example of Protestant hostility towards Catholicism which is markedly milder than that evident in the opening chapter of *Hyacinth*, with its depiction of the aggressive tactics of the new reformers. Hence, the implicit mention of Salmon's book is a subtle indication of the Church of Ireland's growing reluctance to directly confront an increasingly powerful Catholic Church as now the battle is

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<sup>237</sup> George Salmon, *The Infallibility of the Church*. (London: John Murray, 1923).

<sup>238</sup> *Pleasant Places*, 45 – 46.



confined to the pages of a treatise, as opposed to the previous theological battlefield of Connemara.

The significance of Salmon as the inspiration for the character of Dr Henry becomes apparent when considering Hyacinth's issue with the Irishness of the Church of Ireland. Henry's first response is a historical and theological one:

'We might offer the Irish people a Church which they could join,' said Hyacinth.

'We do. We offer them the Church of St. Patrick, the ancient, historic Church of Ireland. We offer them the two Sacraments of the Gospel, administered by priests duly ordained at the hands of an Episcopate which goes back in an unbroken line to the Apostles. We present them the three great creeds for their assent. We use a liturgy that is at once ancient and pure. The Church of Ireland has all this, is beyond dispute a branch of the great Catholic Church of Christ.'  
(H, 50)

However, it soon becomes clear that Hyacinth's dispute with the Church of his upbringing is not theological in nature and as he discusses the matter with Dr Henry he is suddenly confronted with the wall of his teacher's political intransigence:

'It may be all you say,' said Hyacinth, 'but it is not national. In sentiment and sympathy it is English and not Irish.'

'I know what you mean,' said Dr. Henry. 'I think I understand how you feel, but I cannot consent to the conclusion you want to draw. There is no real meaning in the cry for nationality. It is a sentiment, a fashion, and will pass. Even if it were genuine and enduring, I hold it to be better for Ireland to be an integral part of a great Empire than a contemptible and helpless item among the nations of the world, a prey to the intrigues of ambitious foreign statesmen.'

(...) '(...) Don't mix yourself up with your new friends too much. You will ruin your own prospects in life if you do. There is nothing more fatal to a man among the people with whom you and I are to live and work than the suspicion

of being tainted with Nationalist ideas. You can't be both a rebel and a clergyman.' (H, 50 – 51)<sup>239</sup>

The views expressed here by Henry about the Church of Ireland are reminiscent of the theme in *The Seething Pot* of the apparent irreconcilability of Protestant landlordism and nationalism. Thus, again, we are reminded of the close relationship between the Church of Ireland, in the context of Trinity College, and the landlord, all of these institutions being antithetical to the nationalism of early twentieth century Ireland. As well as this, Henry's above dismissal of the growing nationalism of the time serves to underline the Church of Ireland's increasing alienation from the life around it. Such a policy would, historically, inevitably accelerate the Church's already diminished influence on Irish affairs, a trend reflected in the novel, as we shall soon show. Furthermore, Henry's desire to see Ireland as part of a great empire takes an unexpected twist towards the end of the novel, when, as we shall see, a very different type of empire is envisaged, by another character. For now, however, it is necessary to point out that Henry's notion of being contaminated by nationalism and the alleged mutual exclusivity of the latter and the Church of Ireland, are probably references to Salmon's opposition to Douglas Hyde's proposal that the Church of Ireland should adopt political nationalism;<sup>240</sup> as a staunch political conservative, Salmon "considered

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<sup>239</sup> There is a very similar conversation between the same two characters later in the novel. Here, despite the manifest logic of Hyacinth's argument, Dr Henry reasserts, in more vivid terms, that the reality is that a nationalist, regardless of his abilities, categorically cannot be a clergyman. The importance of the British Empire, and by implication Ireland's place within it, is again stressed:

'I have a very high opinion of your abilities, Conneally – so high that I should not like the Church to lose your services. At the same time, you are not at present the kind of man whom I could possibly recommend to any Irish Bishop. Your Nationalist principles are an absolute bar to your working in the Church of Ireland.'

'I wonder, sir, how you can call our Church the Church of Ireland, and in the same breath say that there is no room for a Nationalist in her. Don't the two things contradict each other?'

(...) 'My dear boy, I'm not going to let you trap me into a discussion of that question. Theoretically, I have no doubt you would make out an excellent case. National Church, National spirit, National politics – Irish Church, Irish nation, Irish ideas. They all go excellently together, don't they? And yet the facts are as I state them. A Nationalist clergyman in the Church of Ireland would be just as impossible as an English Nonconformist in the Court of Louis Quatorze. (...) Put off your ordination for three years or so. (...) Mix with the bigger world across the Channel. See England and realize what England is and what her Empire means. (...) long before the three years are over, you'll have come to see that what you call patriotism is nothing else than parochialism of a particularly narrow and uninstructed kind.' (H, 77)

<sup>240</sup> Robert Welch, *op. cit.*, 508.

it his duty to oppose Irish home rule, which he was convinced would be disastrous.”<sup>241</sup>

All of this considered, what is important to remember here is the enormous impact that Salmon had on many of those around him, not least of all Hannay himself:

It was in Trinity College (...) that I came into connection with a man who influenced me profoundly. This was Dr. Salmon, then Regius Professor of Divinity and afterwards Provost. It has been my good fortune to meet many able men during my life, many who have won high places through their intellectual power, or who, perhaps because of the same gift, have won nothing. Of all of them I place Dr. Salmon first for sheer power of mind.<sup>242</sup>

When one considers that Salmon was appointed professor of divinity shortly before disestablishment in 1869 and was then appointed provost of Trinity in 1888, it is not difficult to see him as a highly important figure at a crucial time for the Church. His impressive abilities as a teacher leads McDowell to conclude that he “was certain to have immense influence on his students, and through them on the church at large.”<sup>243</sup> His influence, in fact, can to some extent be detected in Birmingham’s presentation of the Church of Ireland in *Hyacinth*, especially in that Church’s unwillingness to reconcile itself with nationalism, and this demurral even extends to the actions of the titular hero, particularly in his eventual retreat from nationalism to the comforts of matrimony, as we shall see below.

#### **xi. Ballymoy: church and canon**

Birmingham’s description in *Hyacinth* of the Church of Ireland church in Ballymoy, Co. Mayo, where the eponymous protagonist begins his working life, is a reminder of his earlier depiction of Trinity College in all its stern aloofness from the life around it. Here again we are presented with an edifice which is both itself and a metaphor for an institution, an institution, as suggested here, which has removed itself from Irish life

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<sup>241</sup> H. C. G. Matthew & Brian Harrison, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), Vol. 48, 728.

<sup>242</sup> *Pleasant Places*, 39.

<sup>243</sup> R. B. McDowell, *op. cit.*, 17.



in order to decline in peace: “[a] little aloof stands the Protestant church, austere to look upon, expressing in all its lines a grim reproach of the people’s life. Beyond it, among scanty, stooped trees, is the rectory, grey, as everything else is, wearing, like a decayed lady, the air of having lived through better days.” (H, 137 – 38).

Later there is a description of the interior of the church and its congregation, all of which amounts to an even more dismal vision of degeneration:

On Sunday, the third day after his arrival in Ballymoy, Hyacinth went to church. He could hardly have avoided doing so, even if he had wanted to, for Mrs. Quinn invited him to share her pew. There was no real necessity for such hospitality, for the church was never, even under the most favourable circumstances, more than half full. The four front seats were reserved for a Mr. Stack, on whose property the town of Ballymoy stood. But this gentleman preferred to live in Surrey, and even when he came over to Ireland for the shooting rarely honoured the church with his presence. A stone tablet, bearing the name of this magnate’s father, a Cork pawnbroker, who had purchased the property for a small sum under the Encumbered Estates Court Act, adorned the wall beside the pulpit. The management of the property was in the hands of a Dublin firm, so the parish was deprived of the privilege of a resident land agent. The doctor, recently appointed to the district, was a Roman Catholic of plebeian antecedents, which reduced the resident gentry of Ballymoy to the Quinns, a bank manager, and the Rector, Canon Beecher. A few farmers, Mr. Stack’s gamekeeper, and the landlady of the Imperial Hotel, made up the rest of the congregation. (H, 148)

The permanently half-empty church, rarely visited by the absentee landlord, the external management of the property and the consequent lack of a resident land agent, all represent a grim depiction of rural Protestant diminution, strikingly exemplified by the fact that the Quinns, the rector and a bank manager now constitute the local social elite; some farmers, a gamekeeper and a landlady making up the remainder of a dwindling Church of Ireland population. The above depiction of decline is an accurate representation of a trend within the Protestant population in rural Ireland at the time, as Alan Acheson shows:

Primate Alexander spoke in 1900 of 'the melting away of the church population' in many rural districts, Crozier in 1912 of the loss of resident clergy, the closure of churches, and the church's 'dwindling population' outside of north-east Ulster. Of his visitation of Tuam diocese in 1911, Crozier observed that in parishes 'where, a few years ago, our people numbered in hundreds, now they have diminished to a few score or even less.'<sup>244</sup>

Added to the above, the previously quoted passage from the novel appears to denote that at least part of the explanation for such social atrophy can be attributed to the Encumbered Estates Court Act, which in this case has allowed the son of a pawnbroker to purchase the property on which the town is built. The Encumbered Estates Acts of 1848 and 1849 were framed to assist the disposal of insolvent Irish estates in the aftermath of the Great Famine. Between 1849 and 1857 three thousand estates, totalling five million acres, were transferred, many of which were bought by speculators.<sup>245</sup> L. J. Proudfoot describes the dramatic transformation which ensued from the high social mobility of the landowning class during this period, a transformation which inevitably entailed decline for some:

This mobility involved both advancement, as successful merchants, industrialists and tenant farmers sought to enhance their social status through land purchase, and decline, as indebtedness periodically forced the owners of estates of all sizes to shed land and, sometimes, status. The latter process reached its apotheosis in the enforced post-Famine sales of bankrupt landed property in the Encumbered Estates Court and Landed Estates Court.<sup>246</sup>

What the above extract from *Hyacinth* implies is that society deteriorates without the traditional resident landlord, whose presence confers prestige on his locality, an idea that is, of course, characteristic of Birmingham. Soon afterwards the novel re-examines the politics of the institution symbolized by the above ecclesiastical building, as we shall see.

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<sup>244</sup> Alan Acheson, *op. cit.*, 226.

<sup>245</sup> D. J. Hickey & J. E. Doherty, *op. cit.*, 141.

<sup>246</sup> B. J. Graham & L. J. Proudfoot (Eds), *An Historical Geography of Ireland*. (London: Academic Press, 1993), 226.



Later in the same chapter Hyacinth laments the Church's misdirected energy when he discovers that it is devoting considerable money and manpower to its missionary societies in a bid to proselytize abroad. This brings us back to the opening chapter and its description of a Church which energetically promoted itself in Ireland, albeit in an often unwelcome manner. Now, however, the Church appears to have averted its thoughts from Ireland and Hyacinth contrasts what he sees as this potent but misguided missionary zeal with the refusal of the Church to play a role in the evolution of the nation at its doorstep: "[t]he utter helplessness of its Bishops and clergy in Irish affairs, the total indifference of its people to every effort at national regeneration, had led him to believe that the Church itself was moribund." (H, 157) With this in mind Hyacinth proposes an alternative course of action: "What we ought to do is throw our whole force and energy into the work of regenerating Ireland. It is possible for us to do this, and we ought to try." (H, 159) This reluctance on the Church's part to involve itself in national affairs, already seen in Dr Henry's conversations with Hyacinth, is also detectable in Canon Beecher's hope that Hyacinth will not pass such overtly political sentiments on to his daughters: "I think it is better for them to drop their pennies into missionary collecting-boxes, and leave the tangled problems of Irish politics to those better able to understand them than we are." (H, 159)

It is Canon Beecher's opinion of Augusta Goold, however, whom he "evidently regarded as almost beyond the reach of the grace of God" (H, 150) and the conversation which follows after her name is mentioned, that really uncovers his politics and, to some extent, the political loyalties of the Church of Ireland at the time. As the canon imparts his thoughts on the scripturally ordained "duty of loyalty and the sinfulness of contention with the powers that be" (H, 153)<sup>247</sup> it becomes clear that he

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<sup>247</sup> Later, when Hyacinth, who has just declared his desire to marry Canon Beecher's daughter, tells the canon that Augusta Goold has offered him work on the *Croppy*, "the organ of the extreme left wing of the Nationalist party" (H, 211), the canon's response again demonstrates his steadfast loyalty, coupled with his extreme aversion to nationalism: "I do not like the cause you mean to work for or the people you call your friends. I would rather see my daughter's husband doing almost anything else in the world. I would be happier if you proposed to break stones upon the roadside. You know what my political opinions are. I regard the *Croppy* as a disloyal and seditious paper, bent upon fostering a dangerous spirit." (H, 211) It should be noted, however, that shortly afterwards the canon generously concedes that Hyacinth's political position is not only sincerely held, but that he is fully entitled to take such a stance and, most significantly, that he may even in fact be closer to the truth than the canon:



believes in the virtue of political fidelity in itself, which necessitates a passive obedience, notwithstanding the nature of the government and its impact on the Church:

‘the Church to which you and I belong is loyal still, although the Government has robbed us of our property and our position, and although it is now allowing our people to be robbed still further.’

‘You mean by the Disestablishment and the Land Acts?’

‘Yes. I think it is our great glory that our loyalty is imperishable, that it survives even such treatment as we have received and are receiving.’

‘That is very beautiful,’ said Hyacinth slowly. ‘I see that there is a great nobility in such loyalty, although I do not even wish to share it myself. You see, I am an Irishman, and I want to see my country great and free.’ (H, 154 – 55)

Such unwavering loyalty is an accurate representation of the historical facts, as is demonstrated by Acheson’s account of the Church’s politics during the period in question:

Loyalty to the Crown was a unifying factor in the Church of Ireland until the mid-20th century. Thus the General Synod sent an address of loyal greeting to Queen Victoria at her Diamond Jubilee in 1897. (...)

Support for the Union with Great Britain also united the Church of Ireland during the long-Protestant retreat before the Great War. (...) Although the first leaders of the Nationalist Party were churchmen – Isaac Butt was the son of a

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‘I am sure – quite sure – that you are honest, and believe that your cause is the right one. I recognize, too, though this is a very difficult thing to do, that you have every right to form and hold your own political opinions. It seems to me that they are very wrong and very mischievous, but it is quite possible that I am mistaken and prejudiced. In any case, I am not called upon to refuse you my affection or to separate you from my daughter because we differ about politics.’

Hyacinth breathed a great sigh of relief. He looked at the Canon in wonder and admiration. It had been beyond hope that a man grown grey in a narrow faith, a faith in which for centuries religion and politics had been inextricably blended, could have risen in one clear flight above the mire of prejudice. (H, 212)

Canon Beecher, then, unlike Canon Johnston in *The Seething Pot*, is prepared to admit that righteousness is not confined to his side of the political debate: “‘I am ready to believe that in the contest of which our unhappy country is the battleground a man may be either on your side or mine, and yet be a follower of Christ.’” (H, 213)

Donegal incumbent and Charles Parnell was a Wicklow landowner – their church exhibited virtually unanimous opposition to their political objective. The special sessions of the General Synod in 1886, 1893 and 1912 – the years in which the three Home Rule Bills were introduced – revealed a reawakening of the ‘sense of danger’ of 1689 – 91; it was reinforced by the ugly agrarian violence which attended the Plan of Campaign in 1879 – 81. While most churchmen believed that self-government would not be in Ireland’s material interests, their opposition was driven rather by the emotional fear that Protestants would be imperilled under Home Rule. This fear united bishops, clergy and laity, and initially gave common cause to church people in every province. The Home Rule issue, in short, provided a focus for the mounting unease within the Church of Ireland over the transformation of Ireland’s social and political landscape, and the concomitant threat from the Catholic revival which began around the 1880s.<sup>248</sup>

Within the context of the novel, the above dialogue between Hyacinth and Canon Beecher is of further significance as it is a reminder of the “Protestant party” of chapter four, which has been “steadily loyal to England and to the English Government” (H, 38), despite the self-destructive nature of such political faithfulness. Furthermore, the previously discussed link between the Church of Ireland and the leaders of that Protestant party – the gentry (H, 38) – is reiterated at this point in the novel as it is shown that both the Church and the gentry share an unwillingness to detach themselves from their senseless loyalty to Britain, thus refusing to play a role in early twentieth century Irish politics; indeed, though both have lost their property and position, they slavishly continue to honour the thief who stole from them.

The above conversation between Hyacinth and the canon continues with the clergyman’s spiritual alternative to Irish nationalism:

‘I suppose,’ said the Canon, ‘that it is very natural that we should love the spot on earth in which we live. I think that I love Ireland too. But we must remember that our citizenship is in heaven, and it seems to me that any departure from the

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<sup>248</sup> Acheson, *op. cit.*, 224 – 25.

laws of the King of that country dishonours us, and even dishonours the earthly country which we call our own.’

Hyacinth said nothing. There flashed across him a recollection of Augusta Goold’s hope that some final insult would one day goad the Irish Protestants into disloyalty. Clearly, if Canon Beecher was to be regarded as a type, she had no conception of the religious spirit of the Church of Ireland. But was there anyone else like this clergyman? He did not know, but he guessed that his friends the Quinns would think of the matter in somewhat the same way. It seemed to him quite possible that in scattered and remote parishes this strangely unreasonable conception of Christianity might survive. After a pause the Canon went on:

‘You must not think that I do not love Ireland too. I look forward to seeing her free some day, but with the freedom of the Gospel. It will not be in my time, I know, but surely it will come to pass. Our people have still the simple faith of the early ages, and they have many very beautiful virtues. They only want the dawn of the Day—spring from on high to shine on them, and then Ireland will be once more the Island of Saints – *insula sanctorum*.’ He dwelt tenderly on the two words. ‘I do not think it will matter much then what earthly Government bears rule over us.’ (H, 155 – 56)

Thus Irish nationalism – rejected in similar terms, as we have seen, by Dr Henry earlier in the novel – is now replaced, in the canon’s mind at least, by the alternative of national spiritualization. Though the canon’s thoughts here may seem eccentric and fey, they suggest the post-disestablishment Church of Ireland’s retreat from the sphere of politics to the arena of purely ecclesiastical matters.

## **xii. Bildungsroman: Moran**

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, *Hyacinth* is a *Bildungsroman* and this aspect of the novel is relevant when dealing with the issues already discussed, as the eponymous hero, in his journey throughout the text, acts as an embodiment of the issues and difficulties facing the Church of Ireland and Protestantism generally during the period in question. Most significantly, Hyacinth’s story is defined by his inability



to interact properly with the Ireland which is taking shape around him and this, along with his protracted withdrawal from national affairs, is representative of the pattern established by Irish Protestantism at the time, as already discussed.

In the opening chapter of *Hyacinth* we are told that the titular character was christened “after a great pioneer and leader of the mission work.” (H, 12) The figure in question is Hyacinth Talbot D’Arcy,<sup>249</sup> an evangelical Church of Ireland clergyman who was associated with the Second Reformation and the Irish Church Missions and was an active and popular missionary around Clifden. D’Arcy helped to set up a number of missions in various places and was respected for his charitable work during the Great Famine.<sup>250</sup> Hyacinth Conneally, however, like his father before him, ultimately fails to engage successfully with Irish society in the way that his historical namesake did, and thus even his name is a constant ironic reminder of what he doesn’t accomplish during his journey in the novel.

Before discussing Hyacinth’s journey in the novel, however, it is firstly necessary to examine the significance of his geographical origins. The fact that Hyacinth comes from the West of Ireland seems conspicuously relevant when one considers one aspect of the intellectual climate of the period in question. For at a time when there was a growing tendency, principally promoted by the writers of the Literary Revival, to exclusively equate the West of Ireland with authentic Irishness, *Hyacinth* offers, through both the titular character and his father, a vision of the Church of Ireland in Connemara which is both impoverished and Gaelic-speaking. The significance of this is clear when we consider that the novel thus offers a portrait of Protestantism which is in no way conventional and, if anything, has closer affinities to the peasantry of the Revival than to the Ascendancy of the *Big House* novel. Furthermore, Hyacinth’s intimate knowledge of his native surroundings is underlined in a passage which immediately follows his departure from Trinity. On his way into Carrowkeel he sees lights:

from fires seen through the open upper section of cottage doors. He could almost tell whose the cabins were where they shone. The scene inside rose to

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<sup>249</sup> (1806 – 1874).

<sup>250</sup> D. J. Hickey & J. E. Doherty, *op. cit.*, 104.

the imagination. A man with ragged clothes and a half-empty pipe is squeezed into the stone nook beside the blazing turf. The kettle, hanging from its hook, swings steaming beside him. The woman of the house, barefooted, sluttish, in torn crimson petticoat and grey bodice pinned across her breast, moves the red cinders from the lid of the pot-oven and peers at the browning cake within. Babies toddle or crawl over the greasy floor. (H, 78 – 79)

Shortly afterwards Hyacinth enters his home and what we are given is not a conventional description of a rectory; in fact, there is little to distinguish it from the previously imagined cabin scenes:

it was with a sense of deep shame that he found himself noticing the squalor of his home. The table was stained, and the books which littered half of it were thick with dust and grease-spotted. The earthen floor was damp and pitted here and there, so that the chairs stood perilously among its inequalities. The fine white powder of turf ashes lay thick upon the dresser. The whitewash above the fireplace was blackened by the track of the smoke that had blown out of the chimney and climbed up to the still black rafters of the roof. (H, 80)

Later Hyacinth recalls “the cracked delf and huddled sordidness of his old home” (H, 147) and such poverty, coupled with the setting of the West of Ireland and the use of the Irish language, along with Hyacinth’s nationalism, all form a potent cocktail which would appear to be Birmingham’s robust riposte to D. P. Moran’s then recent attempts to philosophically separate the two religious traditions in order to dismiss everything beyond what he deemed Irish Ireland.

Birmingham’s awareness of Moran’s campaign is evident in the novel as at one point in the text, while Hyacinth is living in Ballymoy, a controversy erupts because of the appointment of a Protestant stationmaster at Clogher. The actual source of the consternation, however, is not so much the appointment of John Crawford, the man in question, but rather how the issue was dealt with by a particular paper:

a leading weekly newspaper, then at the height of its popularity and influence, was just inaugurating a crusade against Protestants and Freemasons. The case of



John Crawford became the subject of a series of bitter and vehement articles. It was pointed out that although Roman Catholics were beyond all question more intelligent, better educated, and more upright than Protestants, they were condemned by the intolerance of highly-paid officials to remain hewers of wood and drawers of water. It was shown by figures which admitted of no controversy that Irish railways, banks, and trading companies were, without exception, on the verge of bankruptcy, entirely owing to the apathy of shareholders who allowed their interests to be sacrificed to the bigotry of directors. (H, 184)

The anti-Protestant crusade conducted in “bitter and vehement articles”, along with the emphasis on the sectarian injustice suffered by Catholic workers, all clearly point towards D. P. Moran’s articles in his weekly paper *The Leader*, founded in 1900. In fact the novel is peppered with some of Moran’s more notorious phrases, such as “West Britons and ‘Seonini’” (H, 109), while at one point Father Moran claims: “‘I don’t hold with all this bully-ragging in newspapers about “sour faces’”” (H, 93 – 94).<sup>251</sup> Most significantly in relation to this novel, Moran argued that Ireland consisted of two civilizations: the Pale and the Gael, and that “[t]he foundation of Ireland is the Gael and the Gael must be the element that absorbs.” Thus, at the core of Moran’s philosophy was an imagined dichotomy between the Anglo-Irish and the native Irish, manifesting itself in his vehement detestation of the former, ironically just as a number of that class were making earnest efforts to participate in the affairs of the country.<sup>252</sup>

All of the above, of course, has wide implications when considering the overall purpose of both *Hyacinth* and the other novels by Birmingham from this period, but if it demonstrates anything it is Birmingham’s tireless attempts to clear a way for meaningful Protestant involvement in the governance of the country, whether that entailed participation by Trinity College, the Church of Ireland or the landlord. What it also shows, obviously, is Birmingham’s subtlety as a writer and his ability to include serious political ideas between the covers of a work of fiction. Specifically, however, in the context of *Hyacinth*, such background helps to explain the tension

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<sup>251</sup> The expression “Sour-face” is also used by Mr. Dowling once he discovers Hyacinth’s religion (H, 170).

<sup>252</sup> F. S. L. Lyons, *Ireland Since the Famine*. (London: Fontana Press, 1985), 232 – 33. Henceforth this book will be footnoted simply as F. S. L. Lyons, *Ireland Since the Famine*.



embodied by the character of Hyacinth in the novel: on the one hand Hyacinth strives to challenge Moran's dismissal of the Irishness of Protestants, while on the other hand his story eventually confirms Moran's ideas of the time, especially in Hyacinth's gradual withdrawal from Irish politics, as we shall see.

### **xiii. Bildungsroman: withdrawal – failed messiah & rejector of Cathleen**

The first indication that Hyacinth's commitment to his country will eventually be replaced by less demanding concerns occurs after his father prophesies that an Armageddon will soon take place on Irish soil. After his initial enthusiastic response to his father's vision, Hyacinth finds himself wishing for "a life of peaceful monotony, a place to be quiet in, where no high calls or imperious demands would come to threaten him." (H, 86) Later in the novel Hyacinth finds just such a place in the person of Canon Beecher's daughter, Marion, in whose company Hyacinth feels as if he is in a "quiet wood", as opposed to what he feels when writing for the *Croppy*, which he describes as like being in "a heated saloon where people wrangled." (H, 177) As he begins to spend increasingly more leisure time with the Beechers it becomes clear that he will soon permanently relinquish his active nationalism for the comforts of domesticity and an unperturbed life. Like Sir Gerald in *The Seething Pot*, Hyacinth is now aware of the inevitability of such a transition and, like the hero of Birmingham's first novel, Hyacinth is equally cognizant of his squandered potential. The most notable difference between Birmingham's treatment of this particular transitional phase in the lives of both characters is that in the case of Hyacinth, as he observes a tranquil rural scene during a day spent boating with the Beechers, the reason for such a change is imputed, by the narrator, to an Arnoldian understanding of the Celtic character as susceptible to enchantment and merely temporary passions:

A deep sense of monotony and inevitableness settled down upon Hyacinth. He came for the first time under the great enchantment which paralyzes the spirit and energy of the Celt. He knew himself to be, as his people were, capable of spasms of enthusiasm, the victim of transitory burnings of soul. But the curse was upon him – the inevitable curse of feeling too keenly and seeing too clearly to be strenuous and constant. The flame would die down, the enthusiasm would vanish – it was vanishing from him, as he knew well – and leave him, not

indeed content with common life, but patient of it, and to the very end sad with the sense of possibilities unrealized. (H, 181)<sup>253</sup>

Thus, though Hyacinth is conscious of “his own feebleness of will and his falling away from great purposes” as his life is “wrapt round again with softer influences” (H, 182), he dramatically and permanently turns his back on any commitment to Ireland during what loosely approximates to an exorcism conducted by Canon Beecher. As the latter prays with Hyacinth, asking that Christ remove love from the young man, as he has, in his politics, embraced a gospel of hatred, it is when the canon asks for the memory of the cross to be eradicated from his mind that Hyacinth reacts:

Hyacinth wrenched his hand free from the grasp which held it, and flung himself forward across the table at which they knelt. Except for his sobs and his choking efforts to subdue them, there was silence in the room. Canon Beecher rose from his knees and stood watching him, his lips moving with unspoken supplication. At last Hyacinth also rose and stood, calm suddenly.

‘You have conquered me,’ he said. (H, 214 – 15)

Though Hyacinth’s decision to reject his nationalism is now final, he is nevertheless acutely aware that he has probably been compelled to make a great betrayal and may from now on, despite his newfound acceptance of God, be forced to live very basely (H, 215). Furthermore, though he looks ahead with great satisfaction and comfort both to his future life with Marion and his work as a clergyman, he is haunted by what he has abandoned in order to achieve such contentment:

Yet there kept recurring chill shudderings of self-reproach. Something within him kept whispering that he had bartered his soul for happiness.

‘I have chosen the easier and therefore the baser way,’ he said. ‘I have shrunk from toil and pain. I have refused to make the sacrifice demanded of me.’ (H, 220)

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<sup>253</sup> Bernard Shaw’s then recently produced *John Bull’s Other Island* may be relevant here, because of that play’s elaborate response to Arnold’s discussion of the Celtic and Saxon characters.

The above reference to sacrifice underlines the fact that Hyacinth's decision to embrace a life of quiet and uncomplicated domestic bliss entails renouncing any potential he might have had as a messianic saviour of his country. Earlier in the novel there is a passage which strongly conveys Hyacinth's belief in his high, sacrificial calling and his rejection of this messianic role leads instead to a crucifixion by guilt; his writhing, twisting limbs being the price he pays for such a decision:

Sometimes, waking very early in the morning, he became vividly conscious of his own feebleness of will and his falling away from great purposes. The conviction that he was called to struggle for Ireland's welfare, to sacrifice, if necessary, his life and happiness for Ireland, was strong in him still. He felt himself affected profoundly by the influences which surrounded him, but he had not ceased to believe that the idea of self-sacrificing labour was for him a high vocation. He writhed, his limbs twisting involuntarily, when these thoughts beset him, and often he was surprised to discover that he was actually uttering aloud words of self-reproach. (H, 182)

Near the end of the novel, Hyacinth, conscious that he has turned his back on "the heavy shadow of Ireland's Calvary" (H, 221), compares his tortured patriotism to that of Christ and by implication suggests that he is now a failed messiah:

But surely Christ understood. Words of His crowded to the memory. 'When He beheld the city He wept over it, saying, O Jerusalem, Jerusalem!' Most certainly He understood this, as he understood all human emotion. He, too, had yearned over a nation's fall, had felt the heartbreak of the patriot. (H, 221)

The above proliferation of religious imagery in the context of nationalism, culminating in what amounts to Hyacinth's belief in his messianic vocation to be sacrificed for Ireland, all points towards a particularly intriguing aspect of the novel, first identified by Terence Brown.<sup>254</sup> Drawing on Vivian Mercier's argument that a number of the writers of the Literary Revival came from evangelical backgrounds

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<sup>254</sup> 'The Church of Ireland and the Climax of the Ages' in: Terence Brown, *Ireland's Literature: Selected Essays*. (Mullingar: The Lilliput Press, 1988), 58 – 63.



which they rejected in favour of the new religion of Irish nationalism,<sup>255</sup> Brown shows that such a phenomenon is encapsulated in Hyacinth's story as the novel progresses and indeed there is much in the text to support such a theory. For example, near the beginning of the novel Hyacinth's reaction on hearing Mary O'Dwyer recite one of her nationalist poems indicates that he already believes that he has encountered something sacred, so much so that applause or words of praise seem inappropriate: "[i]t seemed to him that the verses were too beautiful to speak about, so sacred that praise was a kind of sacrilege." (H, 36). Later Hyacinth's growing antipathy to theology, along with his distaste for both the religion and society of Trinity College, all lead him towards a greater attachment to his nationalist friends' quasi-religious nationalism; as it becomes increasingly apparent that he will not now be ordained, he instead finds a substitute for his faith in the "passionate devotion" of republicanism, as explicitly indicated here:

The unwelcome attention of the students whose friendship he did not desire, and his increasing dislike for the work he was expected to do, led him to spend more and more of his time with Augusta Goold and her friends. He found in their society that note of enthusiasm which he missed in the religion of the college. He responded warmly to their passionate devotion to the dream of an Independent Irish Republic. He felt less conscious of his want of religion in their company. (...) What he found in their ideals was a substitute for religion, a space where his enthusiasm might extend itself. He became, as he realized his own position clearly, very doubtful whether he ought to continue his college course. It did not seem likely that he would in the end be able to take Holy Orders. (H, 74)

Another instance of nationalism operating as a substitute faith occurs near the end of the novel, just as Hyacinth is vacillating between the call of nationalism and the quieter life of Ballymoy, to which he has grown accustomed; here Goold becomes the apocalyptic angel of an Armageddon on Irish soil, which briefly but powerfully draws him away from the faith which has been nurtured in him in his new surroundings:

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<sup>255</sup> Vivian Mercier, 'Victorian Evangelicalism and the Anglo-Irish Literary Revival' in: Peter Connolly (Ed.), *Literature and the Changing Ireland*. (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1982), 59 – 101.

The figure of Augusta Goold rose to his mind. She flashed before him, an Apocalyptic angel, splendid and terrible, trumpet-calling to the last great fight. He forgot in an instant the Quinns and their trouble. The years of quietness in Ballymoy, the daily intercourse with gentle people, the atmosphere of the religion in which he had lived, fell away from him suddenly. He sat absorbed in an ecstasy of joyful excitement until the jangling of Canon Beecher's church bell recalled him to common life again. (...) he rose without hesitation and went to take his part in the morning service. (H, 202)

An actual example of nationalism functioning as a surrogate for religious faith can be found in the well known words of John Millington Synge, himself the product of a strictly evangelical household: “[s]oon after I had relinquished the Kingdom of God I began to take a real interest in the Kingdom of Ireland. My patriotism went round from a vigorous and unreasoning loyalty to a temperate nationalism and everything Irish became sacred.”<sup>256</sup> If Synge's experience was part of a larger pattern, as Mercier suggests,<sup>257</sup> what the above extracts from the novel demonstrate is Birmingham's impressive perspicacity in terms of the subtleties of the politico-religious landscape of the time, especially when one considers that the phenomenon in question did not come to critical attention until 1979.<sup>258</sup> In the specific context of *Hyacinth*, however, the above two passages appear to serve the double purpose of reflecting an aspect of secular Protestant nationalism of the time, while also underlining the difficulties, specifically from Hannay's perspective, of simultaneously being a believing member of the Church of Ireland and a nationalist: initially Hyacinth's nationalism replaces his religious faith and eventually, after the 'exorcism' already mentioned, his political commitment to Ireland is supplanted by a renewed faith; the implication here is that the Church of Ireland and nationalism cannot normally form a meaningful relationship and clearly this has repercussions for the landlord as well, as is apparent in *The Seething Pot* and elsewhere in Birmingham's fiction.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Andrew Carpenter (Ed.), *My Uncle John: Edward Stephen's Life of J. M. Synge*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 53.

<sup>257</sup> Vivian Mercier, *Modern Irish Literature – Sources and Founders*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

<sup>258</sup> Mercier outlined his theory, mentioned above, in a lecture delivered in 1979. Terence Brown, *op. cit.*, 58.

<sup>259</sup> Another example of the apparent mutual exclusivity of the Church of Ireland and nationalism occurs during a conversation between Canon Beecher and Hyacinth. Just before the latter is spiritually renewed, the Canon challenges him:



Hyacinth's rejection of nationalism is further emphasized by his decision to leave Ireland to look for work as a curate in England, where "it might be easier (...) to forget his hopes and dreams for Ireland." (H, 219) Hyacinth is chided for this complete volte-face in a poem entitled 'Eire to H. C.', written by Mary O'Dwyer and published in the *Croppy* shortly after Hyacinth's ordination in England:

'Out across the sad, soaked curragh towards the sea,  
Striding, striving go the men,  
With their spades and forks and barrows toil for me  
That my corn may grow again.

'Ah! but safe from blast of wind and bitter sea,  
You who loved me – Tusa fein –  
Live and feel and work for others, not for me,  
Never coming back again.

'Yes, while all across the curragh from the West  
Drifts the sea-rain off the sea,  
You have chosen. Have you chosen what is best  
For yourself, O son, and me?' (H, 243)

The title of the above poem, suggesting, as it does, that the speaker is a personification of Ireland addressing Hyacinth, immediately brings to mind the figure of Cathleen ni Houlihan, already mentioned, as we have seen, in Birmingham's first novel. Furthermore, when one considers that at one point in *Hyacinth* Father Moran speaks about his desire as a young man to fight for "the Poor Old Woman" (H, 102) and that at another stage Augusta Goold, based on the historical Maud Gonne, is said to have made a "regal appeal" to an audience (H, 59) and then later is described as "a woman fit to be a queen – a woman who is a queen, the queen of the heart of Ireland" (H, 126), it is difficult not to see here a barely disguised reference to a play by

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'But I *know* this – God is love, and only he who dwelleth in love dwelleth in God.'

'But I do love: I love Ireland.'

'Ah yes; but He says, "Love your enemies."'

'Then,' said Hyacinth, 'I will not have Him for my God.' (H, 214)



Birmingham's exact contemporary, which was first produced only four years before the publication of *Hyacinth*.

W. B. Yeats's *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, first performed in Dublin in 1902 with Maud Gonne in the title role, presents the female personification of Ireland as the Poor Old Woman who manages to entice Michael Gillane away from his fiancée, family and material comforts in order to fight for Ireland in the 1798 rebellion. In the final line of the play Michael's sacrifice has transformed the old woman into "a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen."<sup>260</sup>

The significance of the above possible connection between this part of the novel and Yeats's play is obvious when one considers that the dramatic work, which had an immediate, electrifying and lasting effect on audiences when it was initially performed,<sup>261</sup> unambiguously communicates the notion that the true sign of a committed nationalist is his readiness to abandon everything and everybody for the cause of Ireland. This is, of course, the exact opposite of what eventually happens at the end of Birmingham's first two novels, in which both protagonists ultimately renounce their nationalism for a peaceful life of domesticity. When one takes into account Birmingham's implicit allusions to Yeats's play, it can be seen that such references stress the fact that both Sir Gerald and Hyacinth have unquestionably failed as nationalists; though they both certainly encounter hardships during their respective journeys, both are ultimately decidedly unheroic in their retreat from the struggle for Irish freedom and their ignominious withdrawals convey Hannay's concern that both the landlord and the Church of Ireland were either unwilling or unable, due to external circumstances, to pursue the goal of Irish independence.

#### **xiv. The new Ascendancy**

*Hyacinth*, however, is not just a story about another failed Protestant nationalist as in the novel's portrayal of the Catholic Church there is a strong suggestion that such

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<sup>260</sup> W. B. Yeats, *The Major Works*, edited with an introduction and notes by Edward Larrissy. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 220. Future references to this publication will be footnoted simply as W. B. Yeats, *The Major Works*, followed by the relevant page number.

<sup>261</sup> In 'Man and the Echo', Yeats, thinking of the possible impact of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* on the Easter Rising of 1916, asks: 'Did that play of mine send out/Certain men the English shot?' 'Man and the Echo' was published in 1939 in the collection entitled *Last Poems and Two Plays*. *Ibid.*, 179.

Protestant inability to directly and positively engage with the political issues of the time will ultimately see the ascendancy of the majority Church. Referring, in chapter four, to the previously mentioned two opposing political parties which have dominated Irish politics since the Act of Union, the narrator has the following to say about the Catholic party:

The Roman Catholic party has been led by ecclesiastics, and has always included the bulk of the people. (...) They have pulled the strings of a whole series of political movements, and made puppets dance on and off the stage as they chose. (...) They have kept one object steadily in view, an object quiet as selfish in reality as that of the aristocracy – the aggrandisement of their Church. For this they have been prepared at any time to sacrifice the interests of Ireland, and are content at the present moment to watch the country bleeding to death with entire complacency. The leaders of this party enter upon the twentieth century in sight of their promised land. They possess all the power and nearly all the wealth of Ireland. If the Bishops can secure the continuance of English government for the next half century Ireland will have become the Church's property. Her money will go to propagating the faith. Her children will supply the English-speaking world with a superfluity of priests and nuns. (H, 39)

The unadulterated anticlericalism of this passage should be seen as part of a tradition of literary anticlericalism which was especially evident in Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century, George Moore's *The Untilled Field*, published just three years before *Hyacinth*, being a notable example. Another collection of short stories being written at the time but not published as a complete volume until 1914 was Joyce's *Dubliners*, which, though more temperate in tone than the often hysterically anticlerical collection by Moore, still singles out the influence of the Catholic Church as one of the reasons for national paralysis. The most significant writer, however, in this context is the relatively obscure Filson Young, whose *Ireland at the Cross Roads*, published in 1903, contains sentiments which appear to be echoed in the above extract from *Hyacinth*. At the beginning of a chapter entitled 'Holy Ireland' he describes, as Birmingham does above, a victorious Church, thriving in the midst of an otherwise vanquished country:



The great unfading inheritance of Ireland is her religion. It has outlived her warlike traditions, it has conquered her paganism, it has stifled her romantic spirit, it has smothered her worldly ambitions; and to-day, the narrowest and least advanced form of Catholicism, it burns with a great nervous and wasting vitality in the frail body of the country. They who were unconquerable, the Church has conquered; they who were ungovernable, it has governed.<sup>262</sup>

Later in the same chapter, referring to the steeples of the then newly built churches, Young describes what he elsewhere calls the parasitical nature of such edifices, all of which is conveyed in merely different words in the above passage from *Hyacinth*, claiming, as it does, that the Church's sole and avaricious preoccupation is its own "aggrandisement" and that it has a callous lack of concern for the country:

I can never see these tall spires, but I think of them as the conductors of the people's energy and substance, drawing it up to themselves and discharging it into the clouds. The shillings of the people, cheerfully given to God instead of the nourishment of their bodies, have raised the fabric of these chapels. (...) so that it is not alone of stone and mortar that these temples are built, but of peoples' lives and substance.

(...) The priests drain the people of their money, partly because they are obliged to do so in order to keep their organisations going at all, and partly because of the utterly remorseless greed of the Church as a whole. (...) and so cottages and cabins crumble and rot away, and the churches rise and increase in numbers.<sup>263</sup>

Finally, also in the same chapter, Young comments on the popularity of religious vocations in Ireland at the time, a point mentioned at the end of the passage under discussion from *Hyacinth*:

And the chapels themselves are not the only parasites on the community. One of the curses and drags upon the life of Ireland is the religious vocation. The

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<sup>262</sup> Filson Young, *Ireland at the Cross Roads: An Essay in Explanation*. (London: Grant Richards, 1903), 62.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 74 & 83.



monasteries and nunneries prosper and increase, choking and interfering with the circulation of labour and of industry in the country. The moribund desire to save one's soul and one's self from the world, encouraged by the well-organised machinery of the Church, fills the convents to overflowing. The clear, young, running life of the country is diverted at a thousand points, and turned into these stagnant reservoirs of arrested activity.<sup>264</sup>

Having taken into consideration the influence of Young on this part of the novel, the extract in question from *Hyacinth* is of further significance as, unlike the collections by Moore and Joyce, it is written from an Irish Protestant perspective and thus delineates the empowerment of the Catholic Church in almost apocalyptic terms. In the above quoted lines from the novel we are presented with an institution with a massive following which can and does exert immense political influence and which is on the verge of complete domination and virtual ownership of the country, a country in which it has no interest, apart from what it may extract from it in order to pursue its own self-serving objectives. Furthermore, it is no accident that here Birmingham describes the Church in vampiric terms, for the Church that is "content at the present moment to watch the country bleeding to death with entire complacency" gradually emerges in the novel as a malignant, new Ascendancy and this is, from a Protestant vantage point, the best imaginable reason to strive to find a secure place in the unfolding national situation before it is too late.<sup>265</sup>

Though not in itself an apocalyptic vision, the growing temporal power of the Catholic Church is even evident in the kindly figure of Fr Moran, as he tells Hyacinth of the dramatic power shift which has occurred during his own lifetime:

'Faith, the times is changed since I was a young man. I can remember when a priest was no more thought of than a barefooted gossure out of a bog, and now there isn't a spalpeen of a Government inspector but lifts his hat to me in the

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<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 74 – 75.

<sup>265</sup> Later in the novel Hyacinth's dejected thoughts on the Irish situation reiterate the claim that the Catholic Church will soon tyrannize the country: "[o]ver all was the grip of a foreign bureaucracy and a selfish Church tightening slowly, squeezing out the nation's life, grasping and holding fast its wealth. No man any longer made any demand except to be allowed to earn what would buy whisky enough to fuddle him into temporary forgetfulness of the present misery and the imminent tyranny." (H, 194)

street. Oh, a note from me will go a good way with the Board, and you'll not miss the chance for want of my good word.' (H, 93)

Later, Hyacinth mentally casts doubt on Augusta Goold's hope that one day the Irish aristocracy will lead the country towards freedom and here also the power struggle between Protestantism and Catholicism is described, first explicitly mentioned in chapter four, as quoted above; here, as before, there are anxious thoughts regarding the tyranny which could one day be exercised by an increasingly powerful Church:

He turned her words over and over in his mind. They recalled, as so many different things seemed to do, his father's vision of an Armageddon. Amid the confusion of Irish politics this thought of a Protestant and aristocratic revolt was strangely attractive; only it seemed to be wholly impossible. He bewildered himself in the effort to arrange the pieces of the game into some reasonable order. What was to be thought of a priesthood who, contrary to all the traditions of their Church, had nursed a revolution against the rights of property? or of a people, amazingly quick of apprehension, idealistic of temperament, who time after time submitted themselves blindfold to the tyranny of a single leader, worshipped a man, and asked no questions about his policy? How was he to place an aristocracy who refused to lead, and persisted in whining about their wrongs to the inattentive shopkeepers of English towns, gentlemen not wanting in honour and spirit courting a contemptuous bourgeoisie with ridiculous flatteries? In what reasonable scheme of things was it possible to place Protestants, blatant in their boasts about liberty, who hugged subjection to a power which deliberately fostered the growth of an ecclesiastical tyranny? Where amid this crazy dance of self-contradictory fanatics and fools was a sane man to find a place on which to stand? How, above all, was Ireland, a nation, to evolve itself? (H, 111 – 12)

The potentially tyrannical power of the Catholic Church, as suggested in the above passage, is also conveyed by Birmingham in his description of certain buildings in the novel, as the next section will show.

## xv. Churches

In *Hyacinth* the buildings of the Catholic Church, so distinct from the previously discussed description of the Church of Ireland church in Ballymoy, suggest a brash confidence and an intrusiveness which appears to embody the spirit of an invigorated Church at the time:

There is a workhouse, in Ballymoy as everywhere else in this lost land the most prominent building. There is a convent, immense and wonderfully white, with rows and rows of staring windows and a far seen figure of the Blessed Virgin, poised in a niche above the main door. There is a Roman Catholic church, grey-walled, grey-roofed, and unspeakably hideous, but large and, like the workhouse and the convent, obtruding itself upon the eye. It seems as if the inhabitants of the town must all of them be forced, and that at no distant date, either into religion or pauperism. (H, 137)

Filson Young is again relevant here as he may have influenced this particular description of Ballymoy and its buildings, as a few years before the publication of *Hyacinth* he declared:

The traveller walking or driving across the wastes of that empty land will nearly always find that the first thing to break the monotony of the horizon is a spire or tower; and when he arrives at the desolate little huddle of cabins or cottages that makes a town, he will find, dominating and shadowing it, the Catholic Chapel.<sup>266</sup>

Unlike Birmingham in the above passage from *Hyacinth*, however, Young goes beyond the unprepossessing exteriors of such churches and describes their interiors, in all their hideous luridness:

The ugliness is inevitable, for Irish art is a Pagan and not a Christian art, and the ugliness of the churches in Ireland is revolting to the healthy sense. The

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<sup>266</sup> Young, *op. cit.*, 72.



sickening images, with their gaudy paintings of pink and blue, the wounds gushing crimson paint, the Virgins under their hideous canopies of Reckitt's blue, the prophets in vermillion and purple, the glare and blaze of cheap and hideous decorations that enshrine the mysteries of the Mass – what are they but the ugly expression of an ugly kind of disease?<sup>267</sup>

Such a markedly negative portrayal of the Catholic Church, in the above extracts from the novel in particular, should be seen in the context of the bitter anti-Catholic sentiment which was a feature of the period in question. Many reasons could be offered to explain such rancour, but the novel incidentally suggests one in its reference to the then recently deceased Pope Leo XIII, on whom Augusta Gould's Protestant butler invokes "a nightly malediction" (H, 117 & 118). In 1896 Leo XIII's bull, 'Apostolicae Curae', declared the invalidity of Anglican orders,<sup>268</sup> which was naturally an affront to many Church of Ireland clergy and laity at the time and afterwards. However, this was one of many reasons for the sectarian enmity of the period, as Horace Plunkett demonstrates in his summation of the reasons for such animosity in Ireland at the time:

The Ritualistic movement and the struggle over the Education Bill in England, the renewed controversy on the University Question in Ireland, instances of bigotry towards Protestants displayed by County, District, and Urban Councils in the three southern provinces of Ireland, the formation of the Catholic Association, the question of the form of the King's oath, and, more remotely, the protest against clericalism in such Roman Catholic countries as France and Austria, have one and all helped to keep alive the flame of anti-Roman feeling among Irish Protestants.<sup>269</sup>

A brief discussion of just one of the above factors will give an indication of at least part of the reason for such anti-Catholic acrimony during the period, a phenomenon which is conspicuously reflected in the novel in places, as we have seen.

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<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>268</sup> E. A. Livingstone, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Second Edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 33 & 338.

<sup>269</sup> Plunkett, *op. cit.*, 99.

In 1902 the Catholic Association of Ireland was formed, its establishment evincing, according to R. F. Foster, “the ascendancy of a sectarian frame of reference.”<sup>270</sup> The Association’s official objective was to obliterate those aspects of Protestantism “which form a powerful network of hostile influence, always operating in restraint of the Catholic, Celtic and therefore genuinely native element in our country.”<sup>271</sup> The following year this “rabidly anti-Protestant” organization caused considerable controversy as a result of its use of boycotting as a tactic and Archbishop Walsh of Dublin was forced to publicly condemn the action. Many people, however, speculated that he had been reluctant to issue such a censure. In the sermon which he preached at the time, he used as his text: ‘Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His justice, and all these things will be added to you.’ According to Bowen, “[s]ome observers wondered if the ‘things’ did not refer to the temporalities still in the hands of the Protestants.”<sup>272</sup>

Another aggressive Catholic organization which was coming to prominence at the time was the Ancient Order of Hibernians, which bore some similarities to Orangeism. From the 1880s the Order became increasingly significant in Ulster and from 1904 it began to spread throughout the country.<sup>273</sup> Such activity can be seen as indicative of a noticeably energetic early twentieth century Catholic Church, as described by F. S. L. Lyons:

It is not always realized how active and ubiquitous the Catholic Church was in the generation before the First World War (...). That generation, in fact, experienced something like a popular religious revival. Thus, for example, devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, intermittent earlier in the century, was greatly stimulated by the Apostleship of Prayer which was vigorously preached from 1887 onwards by the Jesuit, Father James A. Cullen. The magazine of the movement, *Messenger of the Sacred Heart*, rapidly acquired a large circulation and was used by Father Cullen to promote temperance as well as prayer. Many

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<sup>270</sup> R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600 – 1972*. (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 453.

<sup>271</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>272</sup> Desmond Bowen, *op. cit.*, 314.

<sup>273</sup> R. F. Foster, *op. cit.*, 432 – 33.

took the pledge against drink and in 1901 the Pioneer Total Abstinence Association was founded to carry the work still further.<sup>274</sup>

Such a renewed, vibrant and omnipresent Church, with the proclivity of some of its organizations for belligerence, is frequently reflected in the novel, as we have seen; the final chapters, however, render the Church in a more extreme and perhaps unexpected manner, as the final part of this chapter will show.

### xvi. Empire & victory

Towards the end of the novel the convent at Robeen is lavishly decorated for a festival and significantly two flags fly above the gateway: the Crowned Harp and the Union Jack, while the three colours of the United Kingdom flag are everywhere in evidence (H, 222). Mr Justice Saunders, who has not failed to notice such a display of loyalty, is assured by a nun that “‘Surely (...) the Church must always be loyal’”, while of clerical firebrands she insists: “‘It will always be easy to keep them in order when the time comes. (...) But the Church – Can the Church fail of respect for the Sovereign?’” (H, 228 – 29) When this ostentatious display of loyalism, especially the above final question, is considered in conjunction with a thought which, shortly afterwards, is shown to form in the mind of the chief secretary as he is leaving the convent, it is possible to make an interesting speculation about the source of inspiration for the Robeen festival, as depicted in the novel.

At the above point in the text we see that the chief secretary, Mr Chesney, believes that for sufficient remuneration the Irish bishops “‘would assert before the world that the Irish people were faithful servants of the Sovereign; for a good lump sum down they would undertake to play ‘God Save the King’ or ‘Rule, Britannia’ on the organ at Maynooth.’” (H, 236) This latter thought would appear to signify that the above portrayal of the convent’s ostensible loyalism, which takes place on “‘a brilliant July day” (H, 221), is an implicit reference to the effusive reception at St Patrick’s College, Maynooth, in 1903, for Edward VII, who was paying a state visit to Ireland in July of that year:

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<sup>274</sup> F. S. L. Lyons, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland 1890 – 1939*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 79 – 80.



For the reception, the college refectory was decorated with his *Britannic* majesty's racing colours and with engravings of two of his favourite horses (...). Monsignor Gerald Molloy (...), the rector of the university, gave an address of welcome. From an Irish point of view, the whole episode, including the unpriestly nature of the decorations, was an offensive demonstration of the Church's willingness to be subservient to the English Crown.<sup>275</sup>

The Church, as presented in *Hyacinth*, however, is not content merely to express its devotion to the Crown, but rather has imperial plans of its own, as is seen after the last guest has left the convent and the Reverend Mother has been assured of further financial support from the Congested Districts Board. At this point she begins to envisage her house attracting novices from wealthy backgrounds and thus she has "a vision of almost unbounded wealth." (H, 233) With this money she contemplates her future plans and it is here that the Church emerges as an expanding and conquering empire, working in tandem with the British Empire:

Grandiose plans suggested themselves of founding daughter houses in Melbourne, in Auckland, in Capetown, in Natal. (...) She saw how her Order might open schools in English towns. (...)

(...) What she, a humble nun, had done others would do. A countless army of missionary men and women marching from the Irish shore would conquer the world's conquerors, regain for the Church the Anglo-Saxon race. Once in the far past Irish men and women had Christianized Europe, and Ireland had won her glorious title, 'Island of Saints.' Now the great day was to dawn again, the great race to be reborn. (...) For this end had the Church in Ireland gone through the storm of persecution, suffered the blight of the world's contempt, that she might emerge in the end entirely fitted for the bloodless warfare. (H, 234)

It is at this point that the novel subtly circles back to its beginning and thereby emphasizes the dramatic shift in power which the text carefully delineates. To understand the import of the above passage, we need to return to the Second Reformation, with which the novel began. When the success of the nineteenth century

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<sup>275</sup> Don Gifford & Robert J. Seidman, *Ulysses Annotated: Notes for James Joyce's Ulysses*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 361.

crusade had reached its peak, Lord Grey expressed his belief that: “[t]he authority of the British crown is at this moment the most powerful instrument, under Providence, of maintaining peace and order in many extensive regions of the earth, and thereby assists in diffusing among millions of the human race the blessings of Christianity and civilization.”<sup>276</sup> This use of the empire as a means of propagating British values, both spiritual and temporal, was a fundamental aspect of the philosophy of the Second Reformation, as Bowen explains:

What the missionaries brought from England was not only English Evangelicalism, but an extension of British culture and civilization (...). It was difficult to disassociate the English Evangelical ‘spiritual’ message from English cultural imperialism and the social blessings which the ‘mother country’ wanted to export to this important part of the Empire. (...) What the ICM found in practice was its primary spiritual crusade devolving into a mission which would serve principally the secondary cause of British cultural imperialism.<sup>277</sup>

This historical background becomes germane to the end of the novel when one considers that what actually unfolds in the Reverend Mother’s mind, as quoted above, is a Catholic crusade, intent on proselytization, in which the British Empire is utilized in a way reminiscent of the relationship between it and those who instigated and prosecuted the Second Reformation. However, this particular “army of missionary men and women” will parasitically use the empire, vampirically transforming its host in order to multiply itself, until such time as it has regained “for the Church the Anglo-Saxon race.” In fact, when the above vision is analysed, taking into consideration its references to warfare and a conquering army, it becomes clear that it is being presented as the possible outcome of the war which Aeneas Conneally predicted earlier in the novel. Thus the novel comes to a conclusion by intimating that a future is now possible which would never have been even conceivable in the mid-nineteenth century; now, as the novel represents the reality of early twentieth century Ireland as seen from a Protestant perspective, we are shown an apocalyptic vision of absolute Catholic hegemony.

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<sup>276</sup> Quoted in Bowen, *op. cit.*, xii.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 252 – 53.



The notion of an Irish Catholic Empire pre-dates the publication of *Hyacinth* and can be seen, for example, in the previous century in the diary of Cardinal Manning, who in 1882, while reflecting on the influx of Irish emigrants to England earlier in the century, commented on the “Irish occupation in England”, which he believed to be part of a Catholic plan to produce an “Empire greater than the British.”<sup>278</sup> Later, in the twentieth century, in words reminiscent of the Reverend Mother’s above vision of the future, Don Boyne, reflecting on his time in St Patrick’s College, Maynooth, wrote exultingly about an infinite procession of priests leaving that college, as if they were an imperial army intent on world colonization:

The slowly moving line of priests down through the College Chapel is never-ending; it goes into the four provinces of Ireland; it crosses the seas into neighbouring England and Scotland, and the greater seas into the Americas and Australia and Africa and China; it covers the whole earth; it goes wherever man has gone, into the remotest regions of the world; it is unbroken, it is ever renewing itself at the High Altar in Maynooth.<sup>279</sup>

Terence Brown elucidates this phenomenon of early twentieth century Irish Catholic expansionism, which had imperial qualities, and his explanation helps to show the significance of the Reverend Mother’s vision in *Hyacinth*:

For many Irish men and women the church was an international institution which allowed their small country a significant role on a world stage. This sense of belonging to a worldwide religious community was curiously linked to the internationalism of Irish nationalist feeling in the early twentieth century. For the phrase “the Irish race” that resounds through many nationalist utterances in the first two decades of the century was understood to refer not only to the inhabitants of the island but to the “nation beyond the seas,” “the Greater Ireland,” that vast number of Irish Catholic men and women scattered abroad (...) who comprised an Irish diaspora. Indeed, it may not be unjust to see in both Irish nationalism and Catholicism of the period an effort to provide a

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<sup>278</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 229.

<sup>279</sup> Don Boyne, *I Remember Maynooth*. (London: Longmans, Green, 1937), 28 – 29. Quoted in: Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922 – 2002*. (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), 26.



counterweight to the international vision of British imperialism. If Britain had its material empire, the Irish could assert their dignity in terms of a patriotism and a Catholic spirituality which both transcended the island itself. Nationalist and Catholic propaganda of the period often echoes the rhetoric and tones of Victorian and Edwardian imperial celebration.<sup>280</sup>

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By the end of the novel it would appear that a new clerical class of the kind indicated in the previously discussed passage regarding the “Roman Catholic party” has emerged, to replace their ecclesiastical counterparts, as Father Moran informs Hyacinth in the final chapter:

‘And as you are a minister, it’s likely to be third-class you’re travelling. Times are changed since I was young. It was the priests travelled third-class then, if they travelled at all, and the ministers were cocked up on the cushions, looking down on the likes of us out of the windows with the little red curtains half-drawn across them. Now it’ll be Father Lavelle there, with his grand new coat that he says is Irish manufacture – but I don’t believe him – who’ll be doing the gentleman.’ (H, 249)

When one considers that the nineteenth century priest Patrick Lavelle, with the encouragement of Archbishop John MacHale, “played a leading role in combating the evangelical new reformers”,<sup>281</sup> it seems likely that Birmingham’s choice of name in the above extract is not arbitrary, suggesting, as it does, that the Catholic counter crusade begun in the mid nineteenth century has now culminated in absolute victory.

### **xvii. Conclusion**

Thus *Hyacinth* examines the Church of Ireland’s transformation from an aggressively successful Church at the beginning of the novel to a withered institution by the end. As the novel moves towards its conclusion the Church of Ireland is portrayed as being

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<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>281</sup> Hickey & Doherty, *op. cit.*, 267.

increasingly marginalized by its more powerful, ambitious and politically shrewd ecclesial counterpart, which at the end of the text emerges as the new Ascendancy, ostensibly supporting Britain and in turn being supported by it, a role once played by the gentry. The eponymous hero, as a Church of Ireland ordinand and later as a clergyman, represents the Church's abstract interest in Ireland, which is seen as worthless due to an unwillingness to substantively contribute to the political and cultural concerns of the country at the time. In this context George Watson's words on the historical novel are pertinent. Referring to the fiction of Walter Scott, which Hannay greatly admired, Watson states that "some characters are historical in a plain sense, others in a symbolic: carrying, like Captain Waverley, the burden of an historical choice in their minds and conduct."<sup>282</sup> Hyacinth, like Sir Gerald in *The Seething Pot*, is one of those symbolically historical characters, who perceives the aforementioned burden, temporarily carries it, but is ultimately wearied by it and thus lets it drop from his grasp, thereby rendering his Church and its associated institutions redundant in the new political dispensation.

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<sup>282</sup> George Watson, *The Story of the Novel*. (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1979), 92.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *I. Benedict Kavanagh*

#### i. Synopsis

The novel begins with the death of Benedict Kavanagh, former Parnellite MP, Land War leader and the father of the titular character. Before he dies Kavanagh *pere* entrusts his four year old son, who is motherless and illegitimate, to the care of a clergyman called Mr Quigley.

The setting then shifts to the house in Fitzwilliam Square of the philanthropist and widow Lady Beauford, who is hosting a dinner for both her son, Charles, a law student, and Canon Hamilton, a staunch Orangeman. Quigley calls to the house to ask Lady Beauford to admit Kavanagh *filis* to an orphanage, as the child's father had requested. However, at this point it emerges that the boy is the son of Lady Beauford's only daughter, Mary, who left her husband and lived in France with Kavanagh *pere*. Initially Lady Beauford wishes to keep her grandchild but her son, Charles, who is soon to marry the daughter of Lord Telltown, a peer in the House of Lords, is concerned about the scandal that may ensue. The canon then intervenes and offers to bring the boy up as his own.

Charles Beauford, wishing to become an MP, begins to focus his attention on a soon to be vacated Northern seat and increases his chances of election by currying favour with the Orangemen of the constituency. Benedict, who is now a teenager, listens enthusiastically to one of Charles's speeches and the latter sees to it that the boy is employed as a clerk in the Dunbeg branch of Jeffars and Digby, a firm of land agents.

During his time in Dunbeg, Benedict stays in the house of Mrs Mary Finlay and there he shares lodgings with Mr Doyne, secretary of the local branch of the Gaelic League, and Mr Evans, a Welsh Protestant who works as a dental assistant. Soon Benedict takes an interest in the poetry of Swinburne and reads some of the latter's poems to



Doyne, whom he begins to befriend. In turn Doyne reads a selection of Irish legends and translations of Gaelic poetry to Benedict and soon the latter meets Fr O'Meara, a priest who formerly established the local branch of the Gaelic League and who has recently left the town. After attending a few Gaelic League classes Benedict develops a passionate interest in the language, though he is warned by the local rector, Mr Adamson, not to consort with members of the League and he eventually receives notice from his employer that he is to leave Dunbeg and begin work in the Dublin office of the firm.

Four years elapse and the action resumes in 1906 in Dublin, where Benedict is living in the house of a Mrs Brett, which he shares with Mr Dunne, a medical student, and two solicitors' apprentices: Mr McCracken and Mr Daly. In the capital Benedict, who has repudiated religion and morality, gambles and enjoys the city's nightlife, but still has a desire to do more with his life. Then, after a night of extravagance spent with his housemates, he receives word that Canon Hamilton is gravely ill and he travels to the rectory in Killard, in the province of Ulster, where he has spent a total of two days during the previous three years; on his arrival he is informed of the canon's death.

Soon afterwards Benedict goes through a packet of papers left for him by the clergyman. A letter advises him that he must speak to the Beaufords if he wishes to be informed about his mother, while documents pertaining to his father are included in what the canon leaves for him. These documents show that Benedict's father was both an advocate of Home Rule and a follower of Parnell during the early phase of the land agitation. Benedict, who has been brought up by the anti-Home Rule Canon Hamilton to believe that all nationalist politicians are potential killers and that the Land War was a wicked conspiracy involving only larceny and murder, is now filled with excitement as he reads the above material and he soon begins to identify with his father's rebelliousness. It is at this point that Benedict comes across a transcribed poem which offers a vision of a future Ireland in military triumph and this literary work gives him an insight into his father's motives, while also ecstatically inspiring him to commit himself to Ireland.

Before the canon's funeral Charles Beauford, now a barrister and MP, tells Benedict that Lady Beauford, who has not seen him since he became Canon Hamilton's ward,

now wishes to meet him on his return to Dublin and, furthermore, Charles assures Benedict of their support.

While travelling back to Dublin by train Benedict sees a priest reading *An Claidheamh Soluis*, the weekly paper of the Gaelic League. It soon transpires that the priest is the above mentioned Fr O'Meara and that he is going to Dublin to meet Patrick Doyne, whom Benedict shared accommodation with in Dunbeg. Benedict is given Doyne's address and he visits him the following evening and, along with Fr O'Meara, they both attend a Gaelic League meeting, to which Benedict, who is neither an Irish speaker nor a member of the League, is welcomed. At the meeting Benedict notices the presence of a number of Protestants and the amicable relations between them and Fr O'Meara is noted by Benedict.

Shortly afterwards Benedict visits Lady Beauford, who tells him about his mother and the facts related to his upbringing, while also informing him that it is the Beaufords' desire that he live as a Christian and a gentleman. She tells him that she owns a property with a shooting lodge in Galway, which was originally intended to be bequeathed to his mother, but, now that she is dead, it is to be given to Benedict. At this point Benedict concludes that he must choose between his father's passionate patriotism and Christianity, or else reject both.

Benedict then visits Charles Beauford's house near Bray and meets both his wife and her sister, Agatha Bently. Charles discusses with Benedict the details of the property he is about to be given, while also disclosing that he had been observing Benedict during his time in Dunbeg and that it was his association with the Gaelic League which necessitated his transfer to Dublin. At this point the professional and social cost of involvement with the League is made clear to Benedict, but, notwithstanding this, Benedict is prepared to make the sacrifice and thus he refuses Charles's offer to secure a job for him as the anti-Gaelic League Lord Telltown's private secretary, despite the fact that such a post would eventually lead, at least, to the position of Resident Magistrate.

Despite his principles, however, Benedict is temporarily seduced by the Beaufords' luxurious way of life and he begins to question his own standards until Mrs Beauford



shows him a poem by his father which had been published in a magazine forty years previously. This is the same poem that Benedict had earlier found in manuscript form among his father's papers and the text once again transforms him and he leaves the house in an altered state.

A week later Benedict is in Carrowkeel to see his property and to meet Fr O'Meara, from whom he hopes to receive advice regarding how he should serve Ireland. When he meets Fr O'Meara the latter tells Benedict that as a result of the efforts of the previous parish priest, Fr Moran, the local community has been regenerated and all because that priest discovered how to contribute towards Irish society, which involved encouraging sobriety, Irish customs and the speaking of the Irish language. Fr O'Meara stresses the importance of promoting the acquisition of basic skills such as carpentry, all of which instil an attitude of self-reliance and self-respect in the people. In this context the priest asks Benedict to become part of this community, to befriend these people and be an ennobling presence among the peasant proprietors who represent the new power about to be established in the country. Benedict accepts this role and the novel concludes with the appearance of Hyacinth Conneally, the Church of Ireland minister of Carrowkeel, who converses with Fr O'Meara in Irish. Finally, as the tide comes in and changes the appearance of the strand, the text finishes with symbolism which is redolent of unity and optimism for the future.

## **ii. Introduction and historical context**

Unlike the two novels already discussed in this thesis, *Benedict Kavanagh* is not a consistently rich text demanding extensive analysis and for this reason it will be examined as part of this chapter, which will also include a discussion of *The Northern Iron*. Between *Hyacinth* and *Benedict Kavanagh* there is a clear shift from intensely political and sometimes controversial literature to what is partly lighter, popular literature with a sometimes conciliatory thrust. Evidence of this change is to be detected even before the novel begins, in fact, in Birmingham's note to his Irish readers which mentions the "acrimonious controversy" surrounding his previous novels, as well as the "abuse poured" on them. With some bitterness he states that in the immediate aftermath he "suffered for a short time from a fear that I had been guilty of exaggerating the grotesqueness of the baser side of Irish life. I now know



that neither I nor anyone else could be guilty of such exaggeration.” Thus, as the *Playboy* riots from exactly the same period seemed to paradoxically confirm what the protesters sought to reject, Birmingham’s first two novels ultimately had the same effect. The novelist continues in the above note, however, with the statement that “there is another side of Irish life which is not base”<sup>283</sup> and thus a gentler novel is prefaced.

All of this considered, *Benedict Kavanagh* still requires serious critical treatment due to its thematic preoccupation with the Gaelic League and because of Hannay’s serious and controversial involvement in that organization. Furthermore, the novel virtually acts as a historical document in that it conveys the fervent excitement and optimism of the period in which it was written: a time of immense, revolutionary change, which still seemed remarkable to Birmingham approximately thirty years later:

A history of Ireland during the first decade of the present century would be an interesting book. During that period idealism took possession of the minds and souls of our younger men. Even those of us who had lost “the golden heritage” of youth, felt the coming of the new spirit, like a fresh morning breeze, stirring the fetid atmosphere of some room where men have sat all night. Everything that came afterwards had its origins in those ten years. The fevered rebellion of Easter week, 1916; the years of sulky resentment which followed its suppression; the inspiration of the young poets of the brief and brilliant literary renaissance; the fervour of the language revivalists; the sudden dawn of political hope which came with the discovery of the Sinn Fein policy – all had their beginnings in those ten years.

Perhaps someone will write that history soon, before the generation which saw the visions has wholly passed away. I have neither the knowledge nor the temperament for such a work.<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> George A. Birmingham, *Benedict Kavanagh*. (London: Edward Arnold, 1907), 7. All future references to this novel will be cited parenthetically as, for example, (BK, 7).

<sup>284</sup> *Pleasant Places*, 177.

In many ways, however, Birmingham's third novel *is* that history, in fictional form, probably not thought of as such by the older Birmingham because *Benedict Kavanagh's* rendering of the atmosphere of the era must have been produced only half-consciously, written as it was by a writer who was saturated with the visions and idealism of the time. One chapter in particular, as we shall see, encapsulates the ardent excitement and seismic change of the period and, as a result of this, it at least undoubtedly merits inclusion in any serious anthology of Anglo-Irish literature covering the years in question.

Succinctly, *Benedict Kavanagh* is about the effect of the literature and language of Ireland on its eponymous character, who has been brought up by a staunchly Orange clergyman and who, during the course of the novel, transfers his emotional attachment from English to Irish culture. In particular it explores the negative social consequences for Protestants at the time who became members of the Gaelic League, while also underlining how that organization transcended religious differences. Finally, by the end of the novel, Benedict, unlike Sir Gerald and Hyacinth of the previous novels, turns his back on a life of sequestered comfort and instead commits himself to the community around his property in Galway, sacrificially offering himself for the sake of the new Ireland which is then on the eve of monumental transformation.

### **iii. Interiors and characters**

The novel begins by introducing and thereby contrasting the main figures associated with Benedict's early life and upbringing. Starting with his father, who is on his deathbed as the novel commences, we are told that "Benedict Kavanagh was one of the ablest followers of the great leader who had defied the traditions and outraged the dignity of the English Parliament; one of the men who had led a helpless peasantry in their struggle against apparently overwhelming odds." (BK, 13) This man, who was "passionately hated and as passionately loved" (BK, 13) is the father of the titular character and thus we are presented with Benedict's immediate family background and then left to wonder – as we initially wondered about Sir Gerald in *The Seething Pot* – if he will inherit such politics.



Furthermore, the room in which Kavanagh dies – a “commonplace bedroom of a cheap Dublin lodging-house” (BK, 9) – is rendered in some detail in the very first paragraph of the novel and though initially seemingly insignificant, it soon becomes clear, as we shall see, that such apparently inconsequential information in fact subtly grows in importance as the narrative progresses:

The floor was more than half covered with a cheap carpet, whose originally abominable colouring had faded or worn to an unobtrusive drab. The paint on the wash-handstand was chipped off in places, but a decent basin and jug stood on it. The bedstead was an iron one, and its paint also had peeled and chipped off in small patches. A mattress of woven wire, visible now beneath the tossed blankets, gave promise of a certain comfort in repose. There were two chairs, sound chairs with cane seats, and a chest of drawers with a looking-glass on top of it served as a dressing-table. Its drawers shut very imperfectly, and were hard to open without upsetting the looking-glass. A lamp stood on a small table beside the bed, a cheap lamp, through the bowl of which the oil oozed, making a damp surface, so that tiny black insects crawling to the light stuck there and died. A small fire burnt in the grate feebly, as if somewhat ashamed of being there. (BK, 9)

Such a makeshift and shabby room, distinctly lacking in any luxury, is in sharp contrast to the first, brief description of Lady Beauford’s comfortable house in Fitzwilliam Square. Here “the dinner-table, with old silver on it, and delicate china, was very pleasant to sit at. (...) Lady Beauford was careful to keep a good cook, and had money enough to buy the best delicacies which the Dublin markets offered.” (BK, 15) It is into this house that the four year old Benedict is briefly brought after the death of his father and it becomes immediately obvious that, unlike the child’s father, the inhabitants of this house prize appearance, whether it be in the dining room or in society at large. Indeed, the importance, in this household, of one’s place in society is underlined when Lady Beauford expresses her willingness to rear Benedict: her son, Charles, dissuades her in an effort to eliminate the possibility of any associated scandal preventing his imminent marriage to Lord Telltown’s daughter. The Beaufords and their manner of living become important in Benedict’s life later in the novel, but for now it is necessary to discuss the character of Canon Hamilton, also



present in the house that night and the remaining figure of importance in Benedict's early life as it is this clergyman who brings the child up until the novel focuses on his journey towards maturity.

Not long after we are introduced to the character of Canon Hamilton, we are left in little doubt as to his politics, while we are also given some explanation for his conservatism:

The Canon was a clergyman of a type already becoming rare in the Church of Ireland in 1885. The younger son of a gentleman of some property in the North, he had been presented while still a young man to the living of Killard. There he ministered for many years to a parish inhabited by farmers, most of them Orangemen. He had passed through the storm of the disestablishment, and lived to view with horror the land war of the 'eighties and the struggle for Home Rule. (BK, 16)

Shortly afterwards we are told that the canon belongs to a class and generation, now open to ridicule, "who held the disestablishment of the Church to have been instigated by the devil, and found in the letters of the name Gladstone the number of the beast." (BK, 17) This is not, in fact, simply an instance of extravagant humour on Birmingham's part, but may actually be based on something which Hannay heard his grandfather once say, just fifteen years before this part of the novel is set. As Canon Hamilton has a landed background, so too Hannay's grandfather was "a member of an old though scarcely distinguished Anglo-Irish family", but it is what the older man once said to Hannay's father which is significant here:

I remember another after-dinner discussion, a long one, between my father and my maternal grandfather, William Wynne, rector of Moira. (...) the subject this time was the disestablishment of the Irish church, just accomplished by Mr. Gladstone. My grandfather was of the opinion that the number of the Beast in the book of Revelations worked out, if the figures were properly understood, to the name William Ewart Gladstone. He took the letters of the great statesman's name, gave them numerical value, and, as well as I can recollect, added them together and arrived at the conclusion that the Liberal leader who had laid

profane hands on the ark of the covenant was the beast foreseen by St. John, who set his evil mark on the foreheads of men.<sup>285</sup>

Thus Canon Hamilton's extreme political outlook was not exceptional for his historical generation, but the novel clearly points out that he is quickly becoming an anomalous figure amongst a new generation of clergy:

Once a year he came to Dublin and sat a silent, dignified figure in the Synod Hall at Christ Church. He was beginning to feel a little lonely now at synod time. Each year he missed some familiar face. A new generation guided the councils of the Church. New men fussed about the corridors, greeting each other heartily, him respectfully. (BK, 16)

The fact that the canon represents the political values of a former era is memorably emphasized in the most important chapter in the novel, which will be discussed below, but here it is necessary to consider that, despite the clergyman's apparent embodiment of bygone values, it soon becomes evident that at least some of those values have not lost their currency amongst the younger generation, as Charles shows in his comments on Benedict's father. With regard to Kavanagh *pere*, in fact, Charles and the clergyman are seen to be of exactly the same mind, underlining the conservatism which will imbue Benedict's upbringing and early manhood, even after the death of Canon Hamilton, after which, as we shall see, he will be in contact with Charles Beauford for some time:

'I [Charles] cannot help also realising that the boy is the son of a consummate scoundrel. (...) Benedict Kavanagh was a blackguard. He was one of the worst, because one of the ablest, of the gang of politicians who have plunged this country into an abyss of abominable crime. The deaths of the gentlemen who are murdered and the deaths of the unfortunate peasants who are hanged for murdering them ought to be laid to the charge of men like Benedict Kavanagh. You cannot, simply cannot, wish my mother to acknowledge that man's son as her grandson.'

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<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 – 6.

The Canon hesitated. His political creed taught him to regard the people's leaders in the land war as just such men as Charles Beauford described. He himself used words like Charles's words in speaking about them. (BK, 26)

These, then, are the people who constitute Benedict's background and all of them – his father, the Beaufords and Canon Hamilton – represent values, some of which he will absorb, some reject and others which he will finally embrace as he moves into maturity later in the novel.

#### iv. From Killard to Dunbeg

Benedict, brought up by Canon Hamilton, the head of all the Orange lodges in his neighbourhood (BK, 201), lives among Orangemen who dread the “vaguely-apprehended tyranny of the Church of Rome. They believed in their hearts that a new inquisition would be established in Ireland if the protecting power of England were withdrawn from them; or, if not literally the thumbscrew and the rack, a hardly less terrible bullying of them and of all who professed their creed.” (BK, 41) Again, one of Hannay's childhood memories is relevant here, in particular his recollection of the anti-Catholicism of the Orangeism of that time, as communicated to him by someone who is in fact mentioned by name later in the novel: “One of my earliest recollections is of a lesson I received from a very aged but still indomitable clergyman, Dr. Drew, who in his day was the leader of the North of Ireland Orangemen. (...) Dr. Drew took me on his knee and taught me to say over and over again: “No Pope, no Priest, no surrender, Hurrah.””<sup>286</sup> Benedict, however, finds himself part of a very different community when he begins his working life in Dunbeg and soon, though warned against socializing with Catholics by the local manager of Jeffares and Digby – Mr McCreery – he refuses to observe such advice, while also attending the local branch of the Gaelic League.

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<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. Shortly after being informed of the death of Canon Hamilton, Benedict is told that the clergyman was of the same standing as “old Dr. Drew of Belfast.” (BK, 157) Furthermore, the chant “No pope, no priest, no surrender!” appears towards the end of the novel, when Benedict remembers Canon Hamilton uttering these words to a cheering crowd (BK, 211). Birmingham explains the possible genesis of the above slogan in his autobiography: “[t]he words, so we believed, were the cry of the ‘prentice boys of Derry when they shut the gates of their city against the approaching army of King James and then through a long siege defended it, unaided, against the most famous professional and experienced soldiers of the time.” *Pleasant Places*, 4.



Shortly after Benedict's arrival in Dunbeg he is invited to the local rector's tea-party and the invitation alone causes Mr Evans, one of his housemates, to accuse him of associating with the upper classes and, furthermore, we are told that "Mr. Doyne [Benedict's other housemate] was also shy of Benedict's unexpected grandeur." (BK, 66) After he returns from the rectory it is obvious that he has alienated himself from those with whom he lives, who give him a cool reception on his return. The reason for this response is explained in the novel in terms of the perception of the Church of Ireland as a self-consciously elite social institution with the ability to socially elevate those it deems fit to befriend, while simultaneously possessing the power to humiliate those it chooses to exclude:

In reality, they [Benedict's housemates] were neither surly nor offended, but proud. Benedict had been invited to tea at the Rectory, had moved, as they thought, on equal terms with men and women of a class which deemed itself superior to the rest of people in Dunbeg. Neither Mr. Doyne nor Mr. Evans was admitted to the local tennis-club or invited to 'Town Tea' parties. They did not, indeed, specially crave for such social recognition, but they resented the suggestion of inferiority implied in their exclusion. They believed that Benedict (...) would, because of the position conferred on him by an invitation to this party, look down on them. (BK, 72)

Immediately afterwards the sensitivities at the heart of the above specific incident are applied to the broader national context. Here the seemingly trivial differences between political parties and Churches are summarily dismissed to expose the core of the issue, which is the assertion of superiority by such groups in society:

The force of the passions to which social distinctions give rise in Ireland has never been properly appreciated by the philosophers who have kindly undertaken to reason, in newspapers and elsewhere, about the condition of the country. Men and women do not hate each other because some of them accept the decrees of the Council of Trent and others do not, or because some hold that a Church is no Church without Bishops, while others regard mitres and lawn sleeves as a useless kind of ecclesiastical extravagance. Political differences may separate chief friends for a few weeks at election times, but enduring

estrangements do not spring from divergence of opinion about the advantages of a Parliament in College Green. In Ireland a curious national history has created a class distinction which almost exactly corresponds to the lines of religious and political cleavage. Men of one particular creed and party claim – have indeed been almost forced to claim – a position of social superiority to everybody else in the country. The bitterness born of this claim is more potent in reality than either religious or political differences to keep Irishmen estranged from each other. It is possible to forgive a man for believing in the infallibility of the Pope. It does not seem possible to think kindly of him when he assumes that he is a gentleman and you are not. Unfortunately, the example set by one class has been imitated by every other. It will some day be recognised that the almost unintelligible quarrels of Irish local and national politics are often caused, always embittered, be the desire of one class to assert its equality with another. (BK, 73)

Here we are reminded of the exclusionary vision of Moran's Irish Ireland movement, as discussed in the previous chapter, as well as the traditional prejudices of the Protestant Ascendancy and its Church. This paragraph serves another function, however, as it immediately precedes Benedict's introduction to the Gaelic League, that organization which Hannay often publicly claimed and which the novel explicitly shows to be above the petty distinctions of politics and religion.

It is, however, Benedict's prejudices regarding the League, absorbed during his upbringing, which are firstly revealed by the narrator, underlining the real suspicions which the organization evoked in the minds of many Protestants at the time, a fact which personally affected Hannay and which he in turn sought to confront, as we shall see later:

He [Benedict] had heard of the Gaelic League. Vague rumours of its doings had reached Killard and Canon Hamilton's rectory. Benedict's mind was impressed with the idea that it was a new form of the United Irish League, that it aimed at shooting landlords and extirpating Protestants. It seemed to him suitable enough that its members should present illuminated addresses to priests. All priests, he

believed, were liars, and whenever opportunity offered, tyrants and bullies. (BK, 59)

#### **v. From England to Ireland: from Swinburne to O'Growney**

As a result of the above preconceptions, it is not surprising that, while in Dunbeg, Benedict initially immerses himself in the poetry of an English poet whose work has little if anything to say about Irish culture. Previously discovering Algernon Charles Swinburne in a magazine, in which he had found a poem by him which fascinated and attracted him because of the “extraordinary sweetness of the melody, and (...) the vehement notes of self-assertion and rebellion” (BK, 74), Benedict then acquires a copy of Swinburne’s *Songs before Sunrise*, first published in 1871. The poems which constitute *Songs before Sunrise* express the poet’s support for Mazzini’s struggle for Italian independence and the effect that this poetry by an Englishman has on Benedict should be remembered when we consider his subsequent discovery of a poem by his father, which we will discuss later:

In a few minutes he [Benedict] was enthralled, intensely excited, outside himself with sheer joy at the rush and fall of melodious words. He read on, poem after poem, not pausing to seek for thought or meaning. He entirely forgot the stiff misery of the tea-party and the strange coldness of his companions. He passed into another world, lived a life of hot emotion, like the emotion created by Berlioz’ music sweeping out from the strings and wood and brass and drums of an orchestra.

Mr. Doyne returned from his Gaelic League class. (BK, 74)

Clearly these poems have a dramatic emotional impact on Benedict and thus begins one of the principal themes of the novel: the power inherent in literary texts and the manifestation of this force in the reading process. In fact, as the novel later reveals, Benedict’s capacity to be transported by certain texts was evident when he was much younger, a point which is indicated when he recollects his private response to certain biblical verses, as, later in life, he listens to them being read aloud for Lady Beauford:



‘Awake, awake, Deborah: awake, awake, utter a song: arise, Barak, and lead thy captivity captive, thou son of Abinoam.’

Benedict knew the chapter well. He had read it often, attracted by the fierce poetry of the blood-thirsty prophetess.

(...) Benedict was stirred, as he always had been stirred since he first remembered reading them, by the words about the horses prancing and their broken hoofs.

‘At her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay down: at her feet he bowed, he fell: where he bowed, there he fell down dead.’

He listened to the girl’s even, gentle tones. He watched the refined and spiritual face of the old lady in the chair before him. Both were entirely serene. What did they understand of this ecstasy of triumph over a fallen foe? He understood it, and could feel it. (BK, 210 – 11)<sup>287</sup>

In the previous passage about Swinburne’s poems the point is unmistakably made that reading them is purely self-indulgent escapism and the significance of Doyne’s entry at this particular moment soon becomes apparent. At this point Benedict reads one of Swinburne’s poems to Doyne in which “the poet invokes the various nations, asking each of them the question of the Hebrew prophet, ‘What of the night?’” (BK, 75) This is a reference to Swinburne’s ‘A Watch in the Night’, in which England, France, Italy, Germany and Europe are called on by the speaker,<sup>288</sup> but it is Doyne’s reaction to the poem which is most telling here: “‘It’s what I sometimes feel about Ireland. Why didn’t he write another verse, ‘Ireland, what of the night?’” We ought to give our answer to the question too. We’ve a better right to it than any of the others, for the night has been longer and darker for us.’” (BK, 76)

Doyne’s question here is a reminder of two related cultural events which occurred in Ireland during the late nineteenth century. Firstly, Yeats’s famous attack on the literary criticism of Edward Dowden, then professor of English literature at Trinity

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<sup>287</sup> The two biblical quotations are from chapter 5 of the Book of Judges, verses 12 and 27 respectively.

<sup>288</sup> Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Songs before Sunrise*. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1883), 30 – 37.

College and a figure mentioned by Birmingham in his autobiography,<sup>289</sup> highlighted the imperative of focussing on Anglo-Irish writing, as opposed to the literature of the neighbouring island. Initially published in the *Dublin University Review* in 1886, the year before Hannay took his degree in modern literature,<sup>290</sup> the controversy must have established in Hannay's mind the cultural dichotomy represented by the two parties in the controversy; Yeats proclaimed:

It is a question whether the most distinguished of our critics, Professor Dowden, would not only have more consulted the interests of his country, but more also, in the long run, his own dignity and reputation, which are dear to all Irish men, if he had devoted some of those elaborate pages which he has spent on the much bewritten George Eliot, to a man like the subject of this article [Samuel Ferguson].<sup>291</sup>

It was as a result of this paucity of interest in Anglo-Irish literature that Yeats ultimately established the National Literary Society in Dublin in 1892, which aimed to encourage Irish readers “to look on Ireland rather than England as the epicentre of cultural value.”<sup>292</sup> The first president of the Society was Douglas Hyde, who, shortly after its foundation, delivered the most famous speech of his career to the Society,<sup>293</sup> part of which seems particularly relevant when considering Doayne's response to Swinburne's poem, as quoted above.

Towards the end of his address, entitled ‘The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland’, after discussing the main areas to be concentrated on with a view to de-anglicization, Hyde spoke about what he termed “the principal point of all”:

That is the necessity for encouraging the use of Anglo-Irish literature instead of English books (...). Every house should have a copy of Moore and Davis. In a word, we must strive to cultivate everything that is most racial, most smacking

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<sup>289</sup> *Pleasant Places*, 45. Dowden was one of three judges who assessed Hannay's ability to preach extemporarily during his time as a divinity student in Trinity College.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>291</sup> Quoted in: P. J. Mathews, *Revival: The Abbey Theatre, Sinn Fein, the Gaelic League and the Co-operative Movement*. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2003), 13.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, 13 – 14.

of the soil, most Gaelic, most Irish (...). On racial lines, then, we shall best develop, following the bent of our own natures; and, in order to do this, we must create a strong feeling against West-Britonism, for it – if we give it the least chance, or show it the smallest quarter – will overwhelm us like a flood, and we shall find ourselves toiling painfully behind the English at each step (...) reading the same books, only months behind them (...) following *them* in our dress, literature, music, games, and ideas, only a long time after them and a vast way behind. We will become, what, I fear, we are largely at present, a nation of imitators, the Japanese of Western Europe, lost to the power of native initiative and alive only to second-hand assimilation.<sup>294</sup>

The implication of Hyde's assertion here, that a rejection of English culture and a simultaneous immersion in Irish culture, which includes Anglo-Irish literature, will then lead to the growth of Irish initiative, is borne out in the novel under discussion when one considers Benedict's response to the poetry of Swinburne. The reading of that poetry, at least in the case of Benedict, results in a temporary solipsistic state, while the poems are also responsible for the evocation of intense emotions, which then have no outlet afterwards. Doyne, alternatively, offers Benedict something very different, which eventually leads to the latter's identification with the Irish cause so that, by the end of the novel, as we shall see, he has committed himself to an initiative which will have a beneficial impact on those around him in his new surroundings in Carrowkeel. For now, however, it is necessary to consider what Doyne shares with Benedict, as a substitute for the English poetry which the eponymous hero has been reading.

Doyne, in his frequent conversations with Benedict after the above quoted incident, "read him scraps of old Irish legends, or sometimes translations of Gaelic poems." (BK, 77) Furthermore, he discusses the local branch of the Gaelic League, of which he is the secretary, and in his description of those who are studying the language he implicitly presents at least a partial solution to the previously discussed problem of class distinction which has cleft Ireland for so long:

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<sup>294</sup> Douglas Hyde, 'The Necessity for de-Anglicising Ireland' in *The Revival of Irish Literature: Addresses by Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, K.C.M.G., Dr. George Sigerson, and Dr. Douglas Hyde*. (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1894), 159 – 60.



They were of various classes. Some were very grand, sons and daughters of leading shopkeepers, young men in bright brown boots and neat tweed clothes, young women in gay blouses and skirts cut fashionably. Others, mere assistants, drapery salesmen, and milliners, were not less fine in their apparel, but meeker in demeanour, more diffident. Others again, belonged to a lower social level still. Such were telegraph messengers, carters, and even domestic servants. All provided themselves with O'Growney's text-books. All struggled together. (BK, 77)

The above vision of inclusiveness is strengthened later when it is made clear that the Gaelic League welcomes everyone, regardless of their religion, and thus Benedict is introduced to an organization which is oblivious to both class and creed and which unites everyone through the common goal of learning Irish. Furthermore, the mention of O'Growney's textbook is relevant here as it is the first of a number of Irish texts which will exert a powerful and practical influence on their readers; here O'Growney's book unites disparate classes and creeds in their pursuit of the acquisition of the Irish language and everything which that may entail, while later we will see the personal repercussions for Benedict after he reads a poem by his father.

#### **vi. Language**

It is soon revealed that Doyne is full of the zealotry of Hyde in his opposition to certain forms of entertainment which some of the members of the local Gaelic League branch wish to organize: "[h]e pointed out that English songs, parodies of Irish melodies, and representations of drunken Irishmen were not likely to promote the Gaelic revival." (BK, 79) Then, in pursuit of higher cultural standards, he and some others establish themselves in a new home. Out of this context of renewed purity Doyne tells Benedict "more and more of the Irish legends" and, most significantly, Benedict's emotional attachment begins to shift from English to Anglo-Irish literature when he discovers the poetry of Mangan "and found in his word music melody not less intoxicating than Swinburne's." (BK, 79) Furthermore, Benedict also starts to acquire some Irish phrases. Thus begins the titular character's initiation into Irish literary and linguistic culture, the import of which only becomes apparent later in the

novel, when, as we shall see, all of this ultimately determines the course of his later life.

Soon the learning of Irish, for Benedict, moves from being a merely superficial exercise to the point where the phrases he learns take “hold of him in a wholly inexplicable manner” (BK, 80) and thus the activity no longer involves him neutrally mastering the elementary aspects of Gaelic but rather, mysteriously, it begins to lead to him being possessed by something more than the language. He is soon attending an Irish class and, after an inauspicious beginning, it is when Doyne repeats the phrase “[t]he blessing of God and Mary on her” (BK, 83) that Benedict has a new, revelatory insight into the language:

Mr. Doyne slowly repeated the benediction. Benedict felt curiously thrilled. The emotion which had touched him when he learned to greet Doyne with the words ‘God bless you!’ returned to him, rapt him, lifted him up. Religion itself, the actual communing of the soul with the eternal, affected him very little. The invocation of the name of God stirred him no more than it did in the prayers which Mr. Adamson read ponderously in the church. An appeal to the Virgin Mary in English would have awakened the prejudices of his education. But this Irish blessing, he understood it when Doyne repeated it slowly, the special form of the name Mary which the language had consecrated to the sole use of the Mother of God, the simplicity with which it was uttered, called up in him a sense of high romance. He felt the extraordinary destiny of the Gaels, was conscious of their age-long isolation, their continued refusal to accept an alien civilisation, their patient adherence to a creed which for ages was counted a badge of inferiority. (BK, 83)

This passage makes it clear that in the Irish language Benedict has found a substitute for his earlier interest in the poetry of Swinburne, for now he is “curiously thrilled” and elevated by the native language of Ireland, as opposed to the words of a contemporary English poet. Furthermore, in a way that bears a resemblance to Hyacinth’s temporary replacement of Christian faith with nationalism, discussed in the previous chapter, the religiously indifferent Benedict now finds a compelling spirituality contained in the Irish language. This language, which is referred to here in



terms of its capacity to bless and consecrate, does not, however, convert Benedict to the faith which forms part of its fabric, but instead instils in him “a sense of high romance”, a state of mind which will be further intensified by his reading of a poem by his father, to be discussed later. Related to this future development is the fact that this spirituality, Benedict now realizes, is part of the broader story of the Irish race as the language reaches back to their noble, persecuted past, while also pointing towards their future, or “extraordinary destiny”, all of which, because of his exposure to the Irish language, Benedict now begins to empathize with; again, the crucial significance of this emerging identification with Ireland will become clearer when, by the end of the novel, Benedict eventually decides to commit himself to the new Ireland, as we shall see below.

After the above passage the novel’s meditation on the language continues and soon it becomes evident that some of what is being expressed here is part of the wider then contemporary context of Revivalist thinking, specifically as set forth by W. B. Yeats:

The genius of the people was in the language he listened to. The great world had not heard it for centuries. Science, philosophy, history, scholarship, theology itself, have spoken in other tongues. All that the modern world counts worth saying has been said, and no one word of it in this strange tongue which lingers on the lips of the peasantry along the desolate seaboard of the West. Yet among these people, preserved for them in their language, preservable by no other means except their language, dwells faith, the wonderful clear faith of the child, that belief in the reality and immanence of the eternal for which the great world sighs and craves in vain. Apologetic theologians, wooing science to be kind to them, look for it, and do not find it. Churches grow gorgeous and magnificent, art hypnotises the worshippers within them, but this faith is far away. The world missed it, passed it by, despised it once, and since then cannot find it. It abides here shrined in a language that the world has never heard, among a people whom no one has understood, who have not cared to explain themselves. And along with faith there linger other things – the high emotion of great romance, a splendid indifference to small material matters, a lofty vision of life, a serious courtesy. (BK, 83 – 84)



Here again the concept of Gaelic as a repository of the essence of the race is conveyed, but now the language is also described in terms which present it as a partially submerged counterbalance to the then dominant forces of modernity. The faith which is at the heart of this alternative, native system cannot be that of any of the main Christian traditions, including Catholicism, as, the extract states, it is not to be found in either theology or church buildings. This is a faith that most of the world has lost and which now lies concealed in a tongue which few outside Ireland can comprehend. The references in the passage to the peasantry of the West of Ireland immediately bring to mind one of the preoccupations of the Literary Revival and, furthermore, the above idea that such people preserved in their language a pre-modern spirituality is strongly reminiscent of Yeats's belief that Ireland of the period still retained vestiges of an ancient religion which had been largely overrun by Christianity and science. The other values inherent in Gaelic, as suggested by the paragraph in question, are also a reminder of Yeats's dichotomy between a spiritually-orientated Celtic Ireland and an industrial and materialistic England,<sup>295</sup> though again here the emphasis is on the secular nature of what the language has to offer: "the high emotion of great romance, a splendid indifference to small material matters, a lofty vision of life, a serious courtesy." As we shall see, Benedict will gradually come to embody these features of the language towards the end of the novel, but even now it is evident that, as a result of his contact with Gaelic, a path has already been discovered which will inevitably lead to his complete identification with his native country: "[s]trange feelings crowded in upon Benedict, and excited him tumultuously. A phrase formed itself upon his lips. 'It is the language of my heart.'"(BK, 84)

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<sup>295</sup> This contrast is also suggested at one stage in Birmingham's autobiography:

Even my limited knowledge of the language made Ireland a more interesting country to live in than it was before, if only on account of the joy of interpreting place-names. (...) It was a special pleasure to find an island off the coast of Galway, of which the Irish name means the Island of Souls (how exquisite and beautiful!) but which was marked on the Admiralty chart as Sole Island. It seemed to me then – but I am not so sure about it now – that these two translations of the same name were typical of the two nations, the Irish with their thoughts on the immortal part of man, the English with minds which jumped at once to the thought of fried fish.

*Pleasant Places*, 187.

## **vii. The Gaelic League, Protestants & leadership**

*Benedict Kavanagh's* preoccupation with the Gaelic League is a reflection of the status of that organization in Irish society just at the time that the novel was being written. The League, as a major facet of the cultural nationalism of the period, was one among many other associated organizations which received an increase in membership between 1900 and 1905, as a result of "the dousing of Irish hopes of political autonomy by the coming to power of a Conservative administration firmly committed to the Union."<sup>296</sup> Specifically with regard to the Gaelic League: between 1900 and 1906, the number of branches increased eightfold from 120 to 985, all of which were principally, though not exclusively, based in the cities and towns, and although precise figures are difficult to determine, estimates have been made of membership soaring to 75,000 during the peak years around 1906,<sup>297</sup> when the novel was written. During this period the League established itself as an important phenomenon in Irish life as it:

became the first major Irish-centred urban popular movement. In the early years of the twentieth century, it took over the traditional Lord Mayor's Procession in Dublin, mobilizing up to 500, 000 people (...).

(...) Such was the prestige of the League that Redmond, the leader of the Irish parliamentary party, offered Hyde in 1904 a choice of twenty seats as an MP but without success.<sup>298</sup>

Hyde's leadership of the League is itself noteworthy, particularly because of his close association with the Church of Ireland, both as a member and as the son of a clergyman of that Church. Thus, as both founder and leader of the League, Hyde embodied the possibility of serious Protestant engagement with a highly significant and vibrant aspect of Irish cultural nationalism. In this regard Declan Kiberd notes the significance for Protestants of the temporary implosion of political nationalism just at the time of both Hyde's important lecture, mentioned above, and the foundation of the

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<sup>296</sup> John Hutchinson, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State*. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 280.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, 178 – 79.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.



Gaelic League the following year, in 1893: “[t]he fall of Parnell, and subsequent split in the Irish Parliamentary Party at Westminster, may have left a number of unionists and landlords feeling free to express a cultural (as distinct from political) nationalism.”<sup>299</sup> Furthermore, specifically in relation to what the League appeared to offer Protestants at this time, Mathews explains its attraction: “[i]n the aftermath of the Mahaffy/Atkinson affair (...) the Church’s attempt to institute a Catholic Irishness was being challenged by the rapidly growing Gaelic League. By imagining Ireland as an essentially Gaelic nation, the League effectively opened up the category ‘Irish’ to all religions on the island.”<sup>300</sup> This claim by Mathews is supported by David Miller’s suggestion that “[s]ome Protestant nationalists undoubtedly hoped that the language would replace the Catholic religion as a primary symbol of Irish nationality. They longed for a means of identifying with the Ireland of the Catholic majority while nurturing the hope of eventually bringing their own co-religionists into the national fold as well.”<sup>301</sup>

The above notion that the native language could act as the index of Irish nationality can be traced back to the thinking of Eoin MacNeill, “the architect of the Gaelic League”:<sup>302</sup>

Exploding the Milesian myth of origins as a construct of early Christian annalists, he demonstrated that the Celts were a comparatively recent arrival (c. 400 BC) in Ireland, were a mixture of races (...). Dismissing with disdain any attempt to identify the Irish in racial terms, he showed that the name Celt was a linguistic classification, and argued hence that language was the life-line of the nation.<sup>303</sup>

Naturally such an understanding of the language was of considerable importance to at least some of those outside the majority faith and indeed by 1899 the League had positively established itself even among the Protestants of Belfast, where, in a full meeting-hall, there was a call for the teaching of Irish in schools:

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<sup>299</sup> Declan Kiberd, *op. cit.*, 140.

<sup>300</sup> P. J. Mathews, *op. cit.*, 46.

<sup>301</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 159. The quotation is from: David Miller, *Church, State and Nation*. (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1973), 38.

<sup>302</sup> Hutchinson, *op. cit.*, 120.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.



All classes and creeds were represented at the gathering. The first resolution was proposed by an MA of Trinity College. Nationalists and Unionists, Protestants and Catholics, were equally earnest in their advocacy of the language – the Protestant Bishop of Ossory wrote in open approval of “a platform on which all lovers of our dear native land could meet as nationalists in the truest sense of the word”.<sup>304</sup>

Such Protestant interest in the League is mentioned by Birmingham in his autobiography:

The Gaelic League very soon promoted me to undeserved honour, making me a member of the central governing board (...). While I was a member I did my best to serve the league by writing in its defence and speaking (though only in English) in places where perhaps other members would scarcely have got a hearing. The Queen’s University in Belfast seemed an unlikely place for Gaelic League propaganda to succeed, but I remember speaking at an enthusiastic meeting there, in which Lord Castletown and Mr. Francis Biggar took the chief parts.<sup>305</sup>

Such historical Protestant participation in the League is reflected in the novel both in Benedict’s interest in the organization and in a reference to the presence of a number of Protestants in the Dublin branch (BK, 190). Furthermore, if Benedict’s Orange upbringing now renders him an incongruous figure in such a setting, another statement from Birmingham about the League soon alters this impression; the reference here to the named individual seems all the more relevant when one notes that he is in fact mentioned at one point in the novel: “[a]t one time it used to boast that Dr. R. R. Kane had given some sort of blessing to the Irish language, and no man was ever more fervently Orange than Dr. R. R. Kane.”<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>305</sup> *Pleasant Places*, 185.

<sup>306</sup> *An Irishman Looks at his World*, 164. Shortly after he is informed of the death of Canon Hamilton, Benedict is told that the clergyman was of the same standing as “Dr. Kane, the Grand Master.” (BK, 157)

Such Protestant involvement in the League, especially that of Hyde, inevitably carried remarkable political symbolism for many Protestants at the time, pointing, as it did, towards the possibility of Protestant leadership in the new Ireland which was then gradually emerging. Specifically in the case of Hyde, the latter's intervention had something of the aura of a Protestant messiah to the native Irish, as Kiberd implies: "[a]s the priests had once done, so now he – a Protestant gentleman-scholar – assumed leadership of a people whose traditions had been so disrupted that they were estranged from their very environment."<sup>307</sup> Indeed, Hannay himself, in a letter to Hyde in 1907, communicated his conviction that Hyde was potentially on the verge of wielding national power in Ireland: "[y]ou have, in my humble opinion, the chance of becoming a great Irish leader."<sup>308</sup>

The squandered opportunity of Protestant leadership during this period continued to occupy Birmingham's mind even a decade and more after the appearance of *Benedict Kavanagh*, as can be seen in a section on the Gaelic League included in his non-fiction book *An Irishman Looks at his World*, published in 1919. Here he looks back at the then recent history of that organization and offers his opinion on how the fate of the Irish aristocracy might have been very different if they had embraced the sentiments of the League:

If the Irish Unionist aristocracy had accepted the ideal of the Gaelic League ten years ago they might to-day occupy a position like that of the Scottish Highland gentry. They might be the leaders of a nationalism comparable to that of the Highlands, a nationalism independent of political party. The opportunity was theirs. They might have grasped it.<sup>309</sup>

As Birmingham was writing *Benedict Kavanagh*, however, as has been demonstrated above, such leadership still seemed tangibly near, the hope manifesting itself in fictional terms in Benedict's eventual decision to take a leadership role in his new community in Carrowkeel; as will be discussed below, the part which Benedict chooses to play in the nascent Ireland of the early twentieth century can be traced

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<sup>307</sup> Declan Kiberd, *op. cit.*, 148.

<sup>308</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 149.

<sup>309</sup> *An Irishman Looks at his World*, 172.

back to his introduction to the Gaelic League, the Irish language and Anglo-Irish literature.

Returning to the public reaction to the Gaelic League at the time during which the novel was written: as has already been stated, the text, written just at the exact moment when the League was at its zenith in Irish society, reflects this position in its sustained treatment of the organization. Such treatment, however, is as comprehensive as it is sustained as the novel also conveys the complexity of the reception of the League in Irish society at the time. For example, Mr Adamson, asked by Mr McCreery to speak to Benedict, warns the latter not to continue his friendship with Doyne because of Doyne's membership of the League: "an intimacy with a man like Mr. Doyne will have to be reported to your superiors." (BK, 90) Later the repercussions of participation in the League are made explicit when it emerges that Benedict's employers have intervened because of his association with the League and consequently he is moved from Dunbeg to Dublin. Furthermore, at another point, Benedict is forced to choose between his membership of the League and an attractive job as Lord Telltown's private secretary.

Thus, despite the organization's seemingly irresistible appeal at this time, historically the League elicited notable aversion from some, specifically within the Church of Ireland, as Birmingham records in relation to a controversy surrounding Hyde:

It happened that he was attacked with some vigour in *The Church of Ireland Gazette*, a paper which was at the time strongly Tory and anti-Nationalist in its policy, and ready to attack anyone suspected of Nationalist sympathies. I did not know Dr. Hyde personally and was not in any way connected with the league; but the attack struck me as unjust. I wrote in defence of Dr. Hyde. (...) There followed a long and acrimonious correspondence and I became more suspect than ever, not only in my own parish, but in the Church generally.<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>310</sup> *Pleasant Places*, 183 – 84.



The personal consequences for Hannay of his association with the League were not, however, simply confined to hostile public letters and the damaging of his reputation in the Church of Ireland; in one instance he was directly spurned by one in his cure:

I called on one of my leading parishioners and met him by chance, at the door of his house. Without shaking hands with me or speaking any word of greeting he asked me bluntly whether I was still a member of the Gaelic League. I replied that I was. Without another word, he stepped back into his house and shut the door in my face.<sup>311</sup>

Such Protestant antipathy to the League is explained by Hutchinson:

Most Protestants had early on been suspicious of the League as an anti-Protestant front, designed to isolate Ireland from the Empire and to replace the Protestant with a Catholic Ascendancy. Moran's partially successful mass agitation on behalf of the Catholic Association in 1903 (which compelled the Great Southern and Western Railway Company to introduce competitive examinations) seemed to confirm their fears. The result was not only the withdrawal of most Protestants from the League but a growing hysteria in Protestant society, which crystallized in a counter-organization. Protestant fears were later further heightened by anti-British fervour whipped up by the Temperance and Literature crusades.<sup>312</sup>

Thus, when the above historical context is considered, *Benedict Kavanagh's* sympathetic treatment of the Gaelic League may be read as a Church of Ireland clergyman's attempt to justify the League to those members of his Church who would have had grave reservations about that organization at the time. Furthermore, as we shall see, the conclusion of the novel offers, in the figure of Benedict, the tantalizing prospect of Protestant leadership in early twentieth century Ireland, a position of authority, however, which will only be realizable, the novel suggests, if Protestants of

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<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>312</sup> Hutchinson, *op. cit.*, 181. The counter-organization not named in the quotation is the Society for the Protection of Protestant Interests (1904). *Ibid.*, 193.



in it like the exultation of Deborah the prophetess over Jael's deed. It culminated in a description of the gathering to a final triumph of all the men who had ever lived and died for Ireland. Their bodies rose, maimed from prison burying-grounds, from the clay of battle-fields; worn with long travel from graves in distant lands, out of the deep sea, or fameless from forgotten resting-places near cabins in the bog-land. Souls, like flaming tongues, came to the bodies neither out of heaven nor hell, but from the bare, spacious halls which are beneath the mountains of the land. There, some for years and some for centuries, these souls had lit the still faces of the Tuath-de-Danaan warriors while they slept, and flickered restless through the ranks of the waiting horsemen of the Sidh. Now they gathered, heroes reincarnate, with noise of scabbards, spurs, and bridle steels, with clamour of trumpets and trampling of iron hooves, to join the shouted invocation of their Queen country in her glory. (BK, 174)<sup>313</sup>

This stunning vision of a national resurrection, of a future Ireland in military triumph; the imagery of fire and equine warfare, all of which follows, as quoted above, Benedict's realization that his father and others had defeated the Irish gentry, had shown a subversive spirit in the British Parliament and had thus achieved an incomplete victory over the British Empire, is all strongly reminiscent of Yeats's great poem 'The Valley of the Black Pig', first published in 1896:

The dews drop slowly and dreams gather: unknown spears  
Suddenly hurtle before my dream-awakened eyes,  
And then the clash of fallen horsemen and the cries  
Of unknown perishing armies beat about my ears.  
We who still labour by the cromlech on the shore,  
The grey cairn on the hill, when day sinks drowned in dew,  
Being weary of the world's empires, bow down to you,

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<sup>313</sup> The connection between Benedict's father and the reference to Deborah and Jael is made explicit later in the novel when Benedict reflects on his father's patriotism: "a fierce life, with burning love and burning hate in it; a life full of consuming bitterness and rare ecstasies of exultation; a life in which a man might now and then sing the song of Deborah the prophetess, praising the Jael who should drive a nail through some tyrant's skull." (BK, 218)



Master of the still stars and of the flaming door.<sup>314</sup>

Yeats's potent creation of a comprehensive vision of Irishness, from its ancient beginnings to its victory in the future, still exerts a mesmeric influence on the reader, as the above poem does on Benedict, as we shall see. Indeed, 'The Valley of the Black Pig' must have been all the more compelling for Hannay and his contemporaries when it was initially published, given the very different political circumstances in Ireland at the time, and it seems likely that all of this is being reflected in the later description of Benedict's reaction to the above poem, to be discussed below. Furthermore, the reference at the end of the passage from the novel to "their Queen country in her glory" may be an allusion to another, then more recent work by Yeats which famously electrified audiences just a few years before the publication of *Benedict Kavanagh*, as the following will show.

Already discussed as a possible background text in relation to *Hyacinth*, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, first performed in Dublin in 1902, ends with the stirring declaration – seemingly echoed in the above line from Birmingham's novel – which describes the transformation, as a result of insurrection, of the Poor Old Woman: "I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen."<sup>315</sup> If, as already discussed, *Benedict Kavanagh* is often concerned with the sometimes dramatic effect of texts on their readers, then the connection between the novel and *Cathleen ni Houlihan* is more apparent when we consider the remarkable and well documented impact of Yeats's play on audiences at the time, as outlined below.

Shortly after the first production of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, Arthur Griffith, while lauding those who had then just launched the Irish National Theatre, commended "a theatre where the spirit of our country can speak straight to our souls, rouse every noble emotion and rekindle the fires to patriotism, as Mr Yeats has done in "Cathleen Ni Houlihan."<sup>316</sup> Furthermore, Stephen Gwynn memorably recounted that "[t]he effect of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* on me was that I went home asking myself if such plays should be produced unless one was prepared for people to go out to shoot and

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<sup>314</sup> W. B. Yeats, *The Poems* edited by Daniel Albright. (London: Everyman, 1994), 83.

<sup>315</sup> W. B. Yeats, *The Major Works*, 220.

<sup>316</sup> The comments were published in *United Irishman*, 12 April 1902. Quoted in Hutchinson, *op. cit.*, 193.

be shot. (...) Miss Maud Gonne's impersonation had stirred the audience as I have never seen another audience stirred."<sup>317</sup> Added to this, for the Republican revolutionary P. S. O'Hegarty the play was "a sort of sacrament", while Constance Markievicz recalled, during her imprisonment for her part in the 1916 rising, that for her the play had been "a sort of gospel."<sup>318</sup> Finally, much later, in 1948, J. J. Horgan, a moderate nationalist commentator, noted the effect of the play's conclusion:

No more potent lines were ever spoken on an Irish stage. All our hopes were in that answer, it had an echo in every heart. It symbolised and rekindled that flame of romantic revolutionary nationalism which was to consume so many of its devotees and which has not even yet been quenched by the healing waters of freedom and experience. Poets have much to answer for.<sup>319</sup>

Poets indeed are accountable for more than just the literary products of their imaginations: they are, at least to some extent, also indirectly responsible for the influence they have on any reader of their work, a point which must have been considered by many after the early productions of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, as discussed above. Thus it seems likely that *Benedict Kavanagh*, written only a few years after the initial, remarkable reception of Yeats's play, consciously reflects such a dramatic response to that work of literature, specifically in the novel's description of the influence of the above poem on Benedict. In this regard notice, for example, that shortly after Benedict has read the poem in question it inspires his commitment to Ireland, which, by the end of the following passage, is described in terms that suggest the traditional marriage vows, thus emphasizing the strength of his new emotional attachment to the country of his birth:

Benedict panted as he read the lines. He understood suddenly the great motive of his father's life. The land war had been an episode, an accident, at best a means to a great end. Beyond the dust and confusion of the fight lay quite

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<sup>317</sup> Quoted in: A. Norman Jeffares & A. S. Knowland, *A Commentary on the Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats*. (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1975), 30.

<sup>318</sup> Quoted in: G. J. Watson, *Irish Identity and the Literary Revival: Synge, Yeats, Joyce and O'Casey*. (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 297.

<sup>319</sup> Quoted in: Terence Brown, *The Life of W. B. Yeats: A Critical Biography*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2001), 136.



clearly the object of it all. His father had been one of those whose life had been smitten into brightness for a while and then shrivelled by the love of Ireland. Even as he read Benedict knew that to him too the inspiration had come. The delirium had possession of his brain. For better or worse, in success or failure, he must love Ireland and live for her. (BK, 175)

Thus the literary text, though it sets his imagination ablaze, does not direct Benedict into a specific sphere of activity, but nevertheless it powerfully impels him towards work of some kind, which, for Benedict, will present itself to him towards the end of the novel, as we shall see. Furthermore, the poem in question, like the Irish language earlier in the novel, leads Benedict to a greater understanding of an aspect of Irish nationalism, and thus at this point he is both emotionally and intellectually equipped to commit himself to Ireland. For now, however, what is of most significance is Birmingham's description of Benedict's surroundings after he has read the above poem:

The flame of the lamp on the table shot up suddenly, flickered, and disappeared. But it was not dark. The twilight of dawn met the twilight of sunset in the short June night. He rose and flung open the window. The stillness, save for the cornrake's cry, was complete, and the air was marvellously sweet. While he stood drawing deep breaths the rooks in the near trees began to call to one another. Then a single shrill note from a blackbird waked the woods. Another and another followed, and then snatches of song. Soon, taking heart from these, a thousand birds shouted joyfully. Quivering high trills mingled and reached up to surpass each other, voices in a fugue of inexpressible magnificence. The day was coming with its splendour and its sunlight and its life. Out of the dim twilight the birds hailed it. (BK, 175 – 76)

Here the extinguishing of the lamp's flame clearly represents the recent death of the canon, whose corpse is overtly referred to immediately after this passage, but the emphasis of the passage is unmistakably on the new life of a new, June day; even the month is significant here as the summer solstice occurs in June and thus that month brings the longest day of the year: that point in time when day dominates and night is reduced to its minimum duration. Furthermore, the opening of the rectory window and



the gradual crescendo of the dawn chorus, sung by a variety of different kinds of birds as night recedes and the day awakens, is all richly symbolic of the dramatic awakening of the country at the time the novel was written, as mentioned by Birmingham years later in his autobiography and as discussed towards the beginning of this section. These, then, are Ireland's songs before sunrise, as opposed to those of a poet from the neighbouring island; even the three references to the twilight seem significant here, suggestive, as they are, of the Celtic Twilight. Furthermore, the symbolic references to Irish culture in the above passage are plain when one considers the imagery being used, which is strongly evocative of the images associated with the newspaper of the Gaelic League, *An Claidheamh Soluis* (The Sword of Light), soon to be mentioned in the novel, as we shall see. Finally, the infectious, exultant optimism and sense of grand unity that the above dawn chorus suggests will be a prominent feature of the end of the novel, as we shall see below.

Birmingham concludes this remarkable chapter by contrasting the above descriptions of new life and hope with a symbolic depiction of the corpse of Canon Hamilton:

Outside Canon Hamilton's room he paused. A dead man lay within, a good man, who had been brave and strong. Now he lay dead. Benedict shuddered. An impulse which he could not understand made him open the door of the room and enter it. The light was very dim inside, but he could discern the figure on the bed, rigid, quite still under the white coverings. The shouting of the birds came loud through the open windows. Full-voiced life rushed forward into rapturous exultation, careless, forgetful of the dead, leaving dead men to bury their dead. Yet the man who was gone had acted no ignoble part, had spoken the truth, and battled fearlessly. But he was gone. He had grown old, had stiffened in his gait, become dull of hearing and dim-eyed. Now he was dead, and the new life, vocal through a thousand throats, beating the air till it throbbed, cared nothing for him, left him shrouded in his dark room. (BK, 176)

Here the distinction between light and dark, life and death, present and past, is evident and, as the confident birdsong of the new day throngs the chamber of death, it is beyond doubt that the canon and his politics are being resolutely relegated to the past;

everything has now changed, including Benedict himself: “[f]eelings and emotions of an immense and almost terrible kind had taken possession of him.” (BK, 179)

### **ix. Language, unity and visions**

Shortly after all of the above emotional drama, while travelling back to Dublin, as Benedict searches for direction in his life, which has recently been without elevated purpose, he struggles to recall “one burst of unselfish devotion” (BK, 182) from his life so far. At this point he suddenly recollects the moment when “a fine feeling had stirred him” (BK, 182), that is, when Doyne began to teach him Irish: “he remembered, the phrases he heard had made a strange appeal to him. The words were from the language of his heart.” (BK, 182) Soon he is talking to a priest whom he has noticed reading a copy of *An Claidheamh Soluis* “the weekly organ of the Gaelic League” (BK, 183) and when it emerges that the priest, Father O’Meara, knows Doyne and is on his way to visit him in Dublin, Benedict remembers Doyne’s “quiet enthusiasm for the Irish language (...). It seemed to him now that it might be possible to share such enthusiasm, and that he also might be able to live for an idea as Patrick Doyne did.” (BK, 186) As he talks to Fr O’Meara Benedict remembers “the strange fascination of the ancient tongue” and he begins to feel himself “coming under the spell of the spirit of the Gaelic.” (BK, 187)

In the following chapter, in which Benedict goes with Doyne and Fr O’Meara to a Gaelic League meeting, Benedict is quickly struck by the League’s, and ultimately the language’s, ability to bring together, in an almost surreal manner, Irish people from different parts of the country and from different religious traditions:

Afterwards Benedict learned that several of those who greeted Father O’Meara were Protestants. Two young girls (...) were the daughters of a Presbyterian farmer in County Down. They of all seemed most pleased to meet the priest, and Father O’Meara spoke to them words which Benedict could not understand, but which brought dancing joy into the girls’ eyes. It was wonderful that such fellowship could exist anywhere between persons whose creeds were as far asunder as the poles, most wonderful when it existed in Ireland. (BK, 190)



It is within this context that Benedict hears a song sung in Irish, which moves him and many others around him. Though he cannot understand the words he is conscious of its expression of hope and soon he imagines that it offers a vision of paradise, a vision which, as we shall see, will culminate in the imagery at the very end of the novel:

A third verse followed, and Benedict felt that eyes in his soul had been opened and he saw. He stood on high ground and there was beneath him barren land and up against it broke the salt sea. Lean beasts went to and fro picking scanty grass. Men and women, toiling endlessly, gathered meagre harvests; piled dripping wrack on stone altars to burn as sacrifice to the spirit of desolation, and the salt breath of their deity blew green smoke, pungent, sour blankets of it, flat across the fields. He stood on high ground and over the barren land and the breaking sea he saw the sun set and the red clouds gathered round it. And there, in the light, lay quite clear the islands of the blest; no phantoms but realities, far more real than the sea-soaked land or the present toil on it. He knew that the men who made the song had seen what he saw, had seen and believed. He knew that the haggard peasants who sang the song by their cabin firesides saw too; saw and believed and lived by their faith. (BK, 191 – 92)

Later in the evening Benedict meets the president of the branch, O'Murchadha, whose thoughts about the revival of the language are to some extent a reflection of the ideas of Hyde, as expressed in his previously discussed lecture on de-Anglicization. However, it is what O'Murchadha says about the emboldening of national character which is particularly significant here as it becomes a prominent theme for the rest of the novel and was, in fact, a topic which specifically preoccupied Hannay, as we shall see. O'Murchadha tells Benedict: “[I]et’s get Irishmen with self-respect enough to be proud of being Irish (...); men too proud to let themselves be bullied and frightened by big talk and loud shouts. Give us men and the politics will take care of themselves.” (BK, 195) O'Murchadha explains that “[w]e are making character” (BK, 196), with the aim of producing “[a]n educated democracy. Men who can think, and who will not be afraid to speak and act.” (BK, 196) The next chapter of the novel extends this emphasis on national character building when Benedict sees that what O'Murchadha has just said on the matter is echoed by both Fr. O'Meara and Doyne (BK, 199 – 200 & 203 – 204). Most significant in this regard is what Fr O'Meara says



to Benedict in relation to the recently emasculated Protestant aristocracy and their potential if they are prepared to embrace the culture of their country:

There are many men of the kind Ireland wants among your Protestant aristocracy. But for the most part these seem to be sore at the loss of their power and privileges. They do not see yet, but after a while I am sure that the best of them will come to see, that they can have a far better kind of influence if only they will show themselves to be Irishmen. Instead of a precarious and hateful sort of privilege that depended ultimately on the bayonets of a foreign people who have not even been faithful to their own allies here, our gentry, by proclaiming themselves Irishmen, can only become leaders of thought and action. They will then have a power which cannot be taken from them because it will be – how is it that the English poet expresses the thought? – broadbased upon the people's will.” (BK, 204)

The importance of all of the above only emerges towards the end of the novel, as we shall see, but before that Benedict is tested prior to his eventual decision to take a role in the construction of the new Ireland of the early twentieth century.

#### **x. Back to the Beaufords**

In the next chapter of the novel Benedict visits the elderly and infirm Lady Beauford at her house in Fitzwilliam Square. After the novel's sustained emphasis on youth and Ireland's culture and future, Lady Beauford's residence now represents, in marked contrast, a bygone, restrained and aged world which could just as easily be English rather than Irish. Thus, as Benedict enters this house he is virtually walking back in time, so soon after seeing visions of the future:

A decorous and elderly maidservant led him through the hall and up two flights of stairs. The house was gloomy and silent. Thick, soft carpets and heavy curtains deadened all sound. The furniture in the hall was of old mahogany, nearly black, and shining with much polishing. On the walls hung old prints of pictures famous many years ago. There was one – it caught his attention because he had seen it before – of a railway station from which a train was

about to start. (...) Beside this was another, obviously by the same artist, representing a scene at an English race-meeting. These were in flat, smooth gilt frames. All the way up the stairs pictures similarly framed were hung. Benedict was conscious that they, with the dark furniture, thick carpets, and staid maidservant, harmonised in producing an impression on his mind. He moved through the stale atmosphere of a life lived fifty years before, was among ideals and ways of thought old enough to be incomprehensible to a hurried world; not old enough to be sanctified by the reflections of pious historians. (BK, 209)

The above print of the train about to depart, but forever frozen in the act of doing so, symbolizes the lack of action associated with this way of life. In fact, luxurious and polished as everything is, the dark, silent interior has something of the odour of death about it as it appears to represent a retreat from the enthusiasm and activity which has been a feature of much of the novel until now.

Lady Beauford, however, has something to offer Benedict, and, as we shall see, what he finally vows to do with this gift at the end of the novel will completely remove him from the type of life lived by the Beaufords. Telling Benedict that both she and her son ““want you to have a good place in life. We want you to live as a gentleman, to move as an equal among our friends”” (BK, 214), she informs him that she is about to make him the owner of property belonging to her in Galway. Then, after thanking Lady Beauford, Benedict leaves, wondering precisely how he should devote himself to Ireland:

Then fresh bewilderment beset him. He could understand and realise the emotion of his father’s life, but he could not see the way to live it. What to do, to say, to hope for the Ireland of his love? What golden thread was there to guide him through the tangled woods of strife and prejudice? The love was in him and the desire to serve, but the way of service was utterly obscure. (BK, 218)

A few days later Benedict visits Charles Beauford’s house near Bray and he is almost seduced by the opulent lifestyle which he sees there, described as “an extremely good and beautiful way of living” and, furthermore, it is in these surroundings that “[f]or

the first time he had come under the spell of the ritual of a rich man's life." (BK, 228) Now, as a result of the Beaufords' help, Benedict is aware that this type of society could become a normal part of his life and thus he is now being allured by an alternative to a life of sacrifice, as Sir Gerald and Hyacinth were successfully tempted in Birmingham's earlier fiction.

Charles discusses with Benedict the details of the property which is now Benedict's. The latter is informed that negotiations for its sale to the tenants have been in progress for some time and that the eventual outcome will be that he will retain the shooting lodge, along with eighty acres of demesne, which, after a further financial settlement, he may, if he wishes, let to tenants; all of this will more than double Benedict's present income. During this conversation Charles reveals that he had been monitoring Benedict during his time in Dunbeg and that it was his involvement in the Gaelic League which precipitated his move from there to Dublin. Furthermore, he is warned that if he values his future career and an elevated position in society he will need to avoid the League: "If you want to get the sort of job I mean, if you want to belong to a decent club and live as a gentleman among gentlemen, you must admire the Gaelic League from a distance, and a very considerable distance too." (BK, 232) Charles's advice here reflects the previously discussed suspicion provoked by the League in some quarters at the time, a reality, in fact, which Hyde encountered: "Society ladies on meeting Hyde would whisper to friends that "he cannot be a gentleman because he speaks Irish.""<sup>320</sup> In this context Charles then offers to secure for Benedict the post of private secretary to Lord Telltown, Charles's father-in-law, and he informs Benedict that because of Lord Telltown's position as a peer in the House of Lords, Benedict may, if he takes the job, look forward to eventually becoming at least a Resident Magistrate. However, when Benedict hears that Lord Telltown would not countenance his private secretary being a member of the League he is uninterested in the job and thus begins Benedict's rejection of the life now being offered to him.

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<sup>320</sup> Kiberd, *op. cit.*, 138.



## **xi. Renewal and rejection**

Shortly afterwards Benedict receives the inspiration to leave the above setting and begin his patriotic journey and, again, it is a text which galvanizes him into action. This final literary stimulus is anticipated twice shortly beforehand. Firstly there is Mrs Beauford's reported reaction to a book of poems by a "minor bard (...) with a perfectly impossible Irish name." One poem in particular, which begins "Is there hope in you yet? Any hope? Any hope?/Or is only sorrow in you for the land of our love?""", affects her to the extent that "Every time she says it she becomes a rabid Nationalist, wants to wave a green flag or murder an Englishman." (BK, 225)<sup>321</sup> Furthermore, not long afterwards the dangerously transformative power of texts is mentioned by Agatha Bently, Mrs Beauford's sister, when she decides not to play from a particular book of Irish songs, which she describes as:

genuine music of the Gael, done up to suit modern ears and the piano. But no, I won't give you that. There's a weird fascination about the things. They might corrupt our Unionist principles. Mr. Kavanagh is young and impressionable, and Eva has a Nationalist poem waiting for him. I'll run no risks. But this is music too, and it's Gaelic – Scotch Gaelic; the nice comfortable sort of Gaelic that one can sentimentalise over without getting up to feel patriotic or absurd. (BK, 234 – 35)<sup>322</sup>

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<sup>321</sup> Mrs Beauford, however, would appear to be constitutionally fickle as she has the ability to switch political sides with alarming alacrity; here her sister describes an effective antidote to the previously mentioned book of poetry:

I make a collection of a few of those queer country papers out of which the dear dad cuts little bits of news to send over to England, so as to let them know how wicked we all are. I bring them to Eva, and read out all the resolutions I can find passed by the different Boards. When I've finished she'd rather hear "Rule Britannia" than any other poem ever written, and actually goes about the house humming the bit about never, never, never being a slave, just as if she was a full-blooded Briton herself. (BK, 226)

The point still holds, however, that even here the novel is commenting on the influence wielded by texts, be they literary or journalistic.

<sup>322</sup> The point about the songs' ability to corrupt Unionist principles is a reminder of the political transformation experienced by both Hannay and his wife after they had read yet another type of text, in this case some of the texts of Irish history: "[w]e took to reading Irish history, a fatal thing for anyone to do who wishes to remain a sound unionist." *Pleasant Places*, 182 – 83.

Then, just as Benedict is about to surrender to the charms of his surroundings and the mode of life they represent, Mrs Beauford shows Benedict a poem which she has found in an old magazine; the poem is forty years old, is signed 'Benedict Kavanagh' and Benedict instantly recognizes it as the previously discussed poem which he had discovered in manuscript among his father's papers earlier in the novel. Benedict's second reading of the poem reignites the passions which it had originally provoked, though here nationalism's biblical inheritance is given more emphasis, so much so that a reference to the nationalism of Christ effectively apotheosizes patriotism:

He was going over again the words which had moved him so violently when he first read them in the Rectory at Killard. Now, as then, they appealed to him as an imperious call to a life of endeavour, of stress, of sacrifice. He felt again, more powerfully even than before, the passionate love of Ireland which burned in his father's verse. This is a kind of love which defies analysis or explanation. (...) It seeks less than any other love. (...) It finds expression best in the sad songs of the poets of defeated peoples, and comes to its richest fruit in the deaths of gibbeted prisoners and captains in lost fights. But no defeat or manner of death, no reviling or painful hatred, can quench it or break its force. Moses felt it still though the people for whom he lived were remembering the fish they ate freely in Egypt and the cucumbers and the melons – felt it though they cursed him for the deliverance he had wrought, reckoning fleshpots more desirable than liberty. Christ felt it when He wept over Jerusalem – felt it though He saw the priests, His priests, draw back their lips and bare their teeth in hate of Him. It was strong in Him even while the shrieks of the blinded mob rang through Pilate's judgement hall, demanding a cross for the King. (BK, 237 – 38)

The above mention of Christ's patriotism implicitly elevates all other patriotism – "a life of endeavour, of stress, of sacrifice" – to messianic proportions. Furthermore, both biblical figures referred to here – Moses and Christ – were, of course, renowned leaders, and thus it is fitting that the novel concludes with the theme of sacrificial leadership, as the remainder of this section will demonstrate.



## **xii. Change, sacrifice and integration**

After Benedict leaves the Beaufoords' house the following chapter finds him in Carrowkeel where he has come to see his new property and to talk to Fr O'Meara, specifically to seek direction regarding his urge to serve Ireland. It is, however, a rapidly changing country which Benedict now inhabits, a point which is accentuated when we compare the society represented at the end of the novel with a description of rural life from much earlier in the text.

In chapter six of the novel, shortly after Benedict arrives in Dunbeg, to begin work as a land agent's clerk, there is a description of those who come to the office of Jeffares and Digby. Though initially pathetic in its depiction of those who struggle to pay rents with borrowed money, along with those who have no financial means to meet the regular payments, the passage also indicates that such a system of land ownership is coming to an end as the estates of the social elite are gradually passing into the hands of those who will soon no longer owe rent to anybody:

Here, after the autumn fair, came prosperous farmers with rolls of dirty notes, paying rent. Here, later on, came the less fortunate, crossing the road from one or other bank with borrowed money, also to pay rent. Here, later still, came widows and gaunt men, those who could not even borrow, bringing instead of rent sad tales of heifers smitten with red murrain, or fine bullocks hauled maimed out of bottomless bog-holes. Here of late were displayed ordnance survey sheets with estates outlined red, farms marked off from each other, shaded spaces noted as bog, a highroad and many bohireens clearly shown. Piles of agreement-forms ready stamped for signing stood on the clerk's desk, for already estates were being sold and bought. (BK, 56 – 57)

Now, near the end of the novel, as the purchase of such estates has become prevalent, Benedict is called on to play a particular role within this context. So soon after a life of comfort and high society could have been his, Benedict is now presented with a very different proposition, which will entail considerable sacrifice:



Would you [asks Fr O' Meara] be willing to live here among these people? Remember that you will have no educated men to speak to except me, if you care to count me, and one other. You will be cut off from many pleasant things. You will only now and then be able to go away to hear good music, see pictures and plays. You will miss the stimulus of clever talk about great matters and exciting events. Your interest will become narrowed as time passes. You will grow to be in one way a smaller kind of man than you might have been – smaller intellectually, of less culture. Are you in a position to count the cost of such sacrifice, and having reckoned, will you make it? (BK, 244)

Benedict, unlike Sir Gerald and Hyacinth of the previous novels, accepts the sacrifice and immediately Fr O'Meara describes the consequences of Benedict's decision by explaining the responsibilities which will still weigh on Benedict even after he sells the property which has recently been given to him by Lady Beauford. In the following passage Fr O'Meara contends that though Benedict's role as landlord will soon cease, he will not then be absolved of all further duties to his former tenants or indeed to his country. Instead, the nature of his position in relation to those around him will fundamentally change, from that of master to equal, with the spirit of mutual affection being at the heart of the new, liberated relationship:

'You tell me that you intend to sell this property of yours to the tenants at once. You realise what this means for them. They become by the stroke of a pen independent men. They enter at once upon a new kind of life full of possibilities of development and success, but holding also the chance of utter failure. You understand this. But do you also realise that your responsibility towards them and towards Ireland does not cease when your sale is effected? You have not owned this property for long. It is only a few days since you accepted it as a gift, and in a few weeks more it will have ceased to be yours. But when you accepted it you accepted along with it a great responsibility, a load of duty. You do not get rid of the responsibility when you sell. The form of it is changed, but the thing itself is on you still. You cease to be a landlord over these tenants of yours. You must become instead their friend.'

'But how can I be their friend?'

‘As their landlord such a relationship between you and them would have been impossible. The miserable history of the last thirty years forbids such a thing. There has been too much suspicion sown and too much hate has ripened. But as their neighbour, as a brother farmer – for you must learn to till the land you keep – you may in time become their friend. If you love them they will in the end love and trust you.’ (BK, 244 – 45)

Thus Benedict, in his acceptance of this role is now the antithesis of Lord Gauntly from earlier in the novel. Described variously as a potentate (BK, 86) and one who, among the social classes of Dunbeg, “must be reckoned a class by himself” (BK, 89), it is Lord Gauntly’s hermeticism which is stressed in this earlier passage from the novel. Removed from the reality of the town and surrounding area which he owns, he rarely interacts with the people of the area, contributing in no way to their lives, apart from when he is directly asked, and then it is only monetary assistance which he provides:

He owns the town and the greater part of the country round about – so much of it that he lives in awful isolation. The magnitude of his possessions has created round him a kind of social solitude. He invites Mr. and Mrs. Adamson to dinner at rare intervals, for he is a nobleman with a strong sense of what is due to the clergy of his church. Otherwise he does not interfere in the life of the town. Occasionally deputations wait on him for subscriptions, which he gives, or with impossible requests, which he gravely promises to consider. It has always been doubtful whether the fiery resolution which popular bodies pass about him reach his ears at all, or whether he is conscious of the bituminous abuse with which minor politicians attempt to bespatter him in their speeches. (BK, 86)

Thus, Lord Gauntly from earlier in the novel, who is a metaphor for the increasingly socially isolated Irish gentry of the early twentieth century, is now, at the end of the novel, replaced by Benedict, who has committed himself to a close relationship with his local community and thus the novel, unlike *The Seething Pot* and *Hyacinth*, concludes on an optimistic note, pointing towards Protestant integration, rather than withdrawal.

### **xiii. Plunkett**

From a historical perspective the sentiments of the above extract from the novel concerning Benedict's future role are strongly reminiscent of the ideas of Horace Plunkett as published in 1908 in the previously discussed *Noblesse Oblige*. In the latter publication Plunkett shows that, instead of the early twentieth century being a moment of defeat for the gentry of the country, the opportunities for the landed elite to demonstrate their leadership qualities in the new Ireland of the time were manifold:

The altered situation will give rise to a demand for a kind of leadership other than that needed for a politico-agrarian agitation; and again the people will follow the leaders they think will serve them best.

(...) A people, generally admitted to be intellectually gifted, will not be insensible to the obvious advantages a rural community must derive from a certain number of men possessed of education, wealth, leisure, and opportunity for study and travel.

(...) Nor is a democracy with notably aristocratic proclivities likely to dispense with an element of leadership, which would be helpful in solving the problems of its very existence, because these leaders would mostly belong to what is called the upper class. The rural population will choose as their new leaders those who have the knowledge and the capacity required to grasp the essentials of their problems, and to bring to their solution wide information and sound, practical common sense.

(...) The provision of machinery will be useless without motive-power. That power must arise among the people themselves; and it must be stimulated and directed by those who are in daily and habitual contact with the people. No Government Department in Dublin (...) can have the same influence on country people as their own natural leaders who live among them. It is here that the



great opportunity for the resident gentry, and the not very numerous class of strong farmers, is to be found.<sup>323</sup>

Then, in a manner reminiscent of how the fictional Fr O'Meara, as quoted above, described the altered position of the formerly landed elite, Plunkett urges the gentry of the time – now no longer landlords and no longer the objects of antagonism – to commit themselves to helping, as equals, their former tenants:

The country gentlemen of Ireland have largely ceased to be landlords; and the ground of antagonism between them and the farmers is passing away. Their interests are no longer opposed; on the contrary, the interests of both classes are the same.

The abolition of landlordism, so far from destroying the usefulness of the Irish gentry, really gives them their first opportunity, within the memory of living men, to fulfil the true functions of an aristocracy. They have ceased to be the masters; they are no longer dealing with dependants. My appeal to them is that they should recognize this fact, and take their new position as men who, working among others in a rural community, have by their wealth and education special advantages which they desire to use for the common good; and I assure them that for men who are willing and qualified to take that position it will be open.<sup>324</sup>

Towards the end of *Noblesse Oblige*, after quoting Thomas Drummond's famous rebuke to the magistrates of Tipperary, who had asked the government to restore order in the county,<sup>325</sup> Plunkett implies that Drummond, who was undersecretary for Ireland at the time, made a pronouncement in 1838 on the duties of the landlord which had perhaps an even more urgent relevance for that class at the beginning of the twentieth century:

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<sup>323</sup> *Noblesse Oblige*, 9, 10, 11, 24 & 25.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>325</sup> M. A. G. O Tuathaigh, *Thomas Drummond and the Government of Ireland 1835 – 41*. O'Donnell Lecture. Delivered 15 December 1977 at University College, Galway. National University of Ireland.

It is sometimes felt that the relevance of Drummond's famous *dictum* – that property has its duties as well as its rights – has, so far as the class to which it was addressed is concerned, been legislated away. In my view new duties – or I would rather call them opportunities – are emerging from the present social revolution which far exceed in interest and importance those appertaining to the former relation of landlord and tenant. But the performance of these new duties, or the seizing of the new opportunities, will demand not only a different but a far higher set of qualities than the landed gentry have yet brought to bear on our national life.<sup>326</sup>

Plunkett concludes by outlining the consequences for the gentry of active participation in the new social order:

I have endeavoured to indicate the great part which we, the resident gentry, are called upon to play, not only for its successful inauguration, but also for its continued progress. Shall we rise to the occasion?

In the choice we must make, the future of our class in Ireland is involved; on this choice will depend the world's judgment of our historic character and our present worth. If we have any public spirit, or even self-respect – if we have any pride in those from whom we sprang, any concern for those who will come after us – we shall not let judgment go by default. We were originally placed by force of arms in a position to exercise a commanding influence upon our country, and we have been maintained in that position mainly by external power. It is charged against us – and we cannot deny the *fact* – that we have failed up to the present so to identify ourselves with the national life as to establish our influence upon the only sure foundation – popular goodwill, what is our excuse? The blame must either have been in ourselves or in the system. If in ourselves, it was not from want of capacity, for we have given to the service of the British Empire every quality that the service of Ireland now demands. If it was in the system, that hindrance will soon have passed. And in the passing there will

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<sup>326</sup> *Noblesse Oblige*, 35.

come to us, if not the first, most assuredly the last, opportunity of showing that we stood ready, had the occasion served, to do our duty by our country.<sup>327</sup>

Thus the fictional Benedict – who, as discussed in the previous section, was witnessing a rapidly changing social context in which he would inherit responsibility, though not the traditional role of the landlord – had his real counterparts, just at the time of the novel's publication, in the many former Irish landowners who were being confronted with an identical situation. Furthermore, as Plunkett promised, as quoted above, that there were leadership opportunities for those from his class who would commit themselves to their local communities, so too Benedict's ultimate decision to serve those in his neighbourhood will be both self-sacrificing and self-empowering, as we shall see.

#### xiv. Future

In the penultimate chapter of the novel, the enormous transference of land from landlord to tenant is explored in some detail as Fr O'Meara outlines to Benedict the national repercussions of such change. At this point the priest describes the profoundly serious consequences of the revolution which is taking place and his analysis concludes with the chilling notion that the new proprietors of the land will be entrusted with the welfare of the country and that if such people lack the appropriate character for such an awesome task then Ireland is destined to witness its darkest days to date, leading to a catastrophe of national proportions:<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, 37 – 38.

<sup>328</sup> This appears to be an echo of Larry Doyle's sentiments in Act Three of Bernard Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island*, published in 1904. Doyle, in conversation with Matthew Haffigan, Father Dempsey and others, contrasts the new peasant landowners with the landlords of the past:

But I tell you plump and plain, Matt, that if anybody thinks things will be any better now that the land is handed over to a lot of little men like you, without calling you to account (...), theyre mistaken.

(...) Do you think, because youre poor and ignorant and half-crazy with toiling and moiling morning noon and night, that youll be any less greedy and oppressive to them that have no land at all than old Nick Lestrangle, who was an educated travelled gentleman that would not have been tempted as hard by a hundred pounds as youd be by five shillings? Nick was too high above Patsy Farrell to be jealous of him; but you, that are only one little step above him, would die sooner than let him come up that step; and well you know it.

(...) Is Ireland never to have a chance? First she was given to the rich; and now that they have gorged on her flesh, her bones are to be flung to the poor, that can do nothing but suck the



Do you not realise that Ireland's future is in the hands of these peasants who are buying their fields? All over the country they are buying and becoming free men. In their hands for the future will be the responsibility of the conduct of public business. Their representatives will levy rates, spend money. Already the management of part of the education of the country depends on them. It is for them to start schools like that one across the bay, to find instruction for themselves and their sons in better ways of farming, to found libraries. Do you not see that for four-fifths of Ireland everything depends upon them? If they are lazy, thriftless, selfish; if they are content to give over the business of the country to the care of shallow demagogues; if they come to regard corruption and shams and lies as natural, inevitable features of public life; if they themselves refuse to think greatly, patriotically; then the final ruin of Ireland must be something far completer and more hopeless than any of her misfortunes in the past. But if they have friends, not masters or governors, but friends, who themselves feel high things and live in the light of great hopes, who hate baseness, and will not let the canker of it eat the heart out of our public life, then our people will rise to their opportunities. Then we shall have the foundation of our nation noble, the men who drive spades into the brown earth, the women who rear babies in the cottages. If these are noble all will be well with us. (BK, 245 – 46)

Such a warning is all the more compelling when it comes from the character of a Catholic priest, especially as the speaker has just shortly beforehand claimed that the priests “are of the people as no other educated men are, and know them as no one else can.” (BK, 243) For this reason these words are imbued with an even greater sense of urgency for former landlords than Plunkett's exhortations in *Noblesse Oblige*, for it is not just themselves that the gentry must save, according to O'Meara, but the country itself from possible ruination. They can do this, as O'Meara suggests above, by infusing the coming dispensation with nobility and hope.

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marrow out of her. If we cant have men of honor own the land, lets have men of ability. If we cant have men with ability, let us at least have men with capital. Anybody's better than Matt, who has neither honor, nor ability, nor capital, nor anything but mere brute labor and greed in him, Heaven help him!

John P. Harrington, *Modern Irish Drama*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 164 – 65. Shaw dispenses with apostrophes in this play.

Benedict, however, protests and asserts that it is the priests who must lead the people, not him. Father O'Meara's response is one of the most interesting passages in all of Birmingham's fiction about the landlord. In the past, he recounts, the clergy sometimes regrettably became involved in politics, but it is Fr O'Meara's wish that, in the new Ireland, they will steer clear of anything outside their sacerdotal duties. He then places the responsibility of the role of disinterested friend of the people on Benedict, urging him to supervise, assist and edify the political activity of those who are now being newly empowered, a responsibility which Benedict movingly accepts:

'You [says Fr O'Meara to Benedict] want to place us [the Catholic clergy] in a position neither good for us nor them. We are, or ought to be, God's ambassadors to men. We are, no, but we ought to be, their teachers in the great truths of eternity. In the long struggle that is nearly past now many of us were driven, some, I fear, gladly, but some unwillingly, to take part in fierce, mundane strife. The people had no other disinterested friends. They asked us to help them. How could we refuse? But it was not good, not right. Questions are before us still, questions to be argued, fights to be fought. The dust of these conflicts ought to be kept out of the sanctuary. The hands of the priest who sacrifices should not reek with a fighter's sweat. Let God's priests stand apart a little way, to comfort and absolve, to offer the supreme sacrifice upon the altar, and to pray, always to pray. It is for you who are not a priest to go into the fields and work, into the battles and fight, into the life of politics national and local, and to see to it that the work is well done, the fight fought bravely, the life lived nobly. "Is there no more than that?" you ask. Why, the honour I offer you is so great as to be intolerable.'

'An intolerable honour! A writer in a book I once read says he finds a sense of the intolerable honour laid upon her in the face of the Virgin as Botticelli painted her.'

'I have never read that book, or, if I have, I missed the phrase you quote. The thought is new to me. But I accept it as a parable. To you and men like you, with your fine, free training and your great traditions, to you it is given to travail in birth pangs for our people till a great nation is born, to bring forth and nurse at your breasts men, Irishmen. Will you count the intolerable honour a thing to be spurned?'



‘I ask no more,’ said Benedict slowly, solemnly, ‘than to have my part of it.’  
(BK, 246 – 47)

The above passage is particularly remarkable because of the arrestingly powerful image of the gentry giving birth to and suckling the new nation. Here a startling metamorphosis is adumbrated as we watch the autocratic patriarch transform into the maternal guardian and, to add to the almost ineffable potency of the symbolism, Benedict’s comment regarding what one writer – Walter Pater in fact – said of the face of the Virgin<sup>329</sup> further heightens the significance of what is being said here by suggesting that the gentry must now take the place of the predominantly Catholic image of the Madonna, thus replacing the clergy as the principal moral influence on the people. Furthermore – in a reminder of the previously discussed passage which immediately follows Benedict’s reading of his father’s poem in the Beaufords’ house – as Benedict now accepts the role which the priest has just described, Fr O’ Meara warns him that his new position will involve Christlike suffering, the Passion being unmistakably suggested here, especially in the reference to the hostile mob, along with the final question about rising after falling:

‘What you mean for good will be taken for evil. The truth you speak will be distorted into lies. You will not win cheers, or not often, but instead of them, reviling. (...) You will find that the people you love will not always love you; that at times, often, your name will be for a hissing and a reproach to them. (...) Dare you go on speaking the truth when those who love lies curse you and the mob shrieks at you?’

(...)(...) Have you courage to rise again after you have fallen?’ (BK, 247)

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<sup>329</sup> Benedict’s reference to one writer’s perception of “the intolerable honour” on the face of Botticelli’s Virgins is an allusion to a collection of essays, first published in 1873, by Walter Pater. At one point in the book Pater discusses Botticelli’s paintings of the Madonna in the following terms:

For with Botticelli she [the Virgin Mary] too, though she holds in her hands the “Desire of all nations,” is one of those who are neither for Jehovah nor for His enemies; and her choice is on her face. (...) Her trouble is in the very caress of the mysterious child, whose gaze is always far from her (...). Once, indeed, he guides her hand to transcribe in a book the words of her exaltation, the *Ave*, and the *Magnificat*, and the *Gaude Maria* (...). But the pen almost drops from her hand, and the high cold words have no meaning for her, and her true children are those others, among whom, in her rude home, *the intolerable honour* came to her.

Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd, 1910), 56 – 57. Italics in final line are mine.



Thus Benedict will be both Madonna and Christ to his people, both mother and messiah.

#### xv. The effect of the League

Fr O'Meara's above emphatic rejection of any role for the clergy in contemporary or future political matters in Ireland is a fictional projection of a very real hope which Hannay revealed at the time and later, a hope which he believed the Gaelic League would eventually make possible. In a letter to Douglas Hyde he comments on the effect which the League was having on those Catholics associated with it, an effect, which, as we shall see, is at least partly suggested in the novel:

The Gaelic League propaganda has the extraordinary effect of making men of the people subjected to it. The moment a man becomes a genuine Leaguer he wants to assert his independence. He asserts it in the first instance in the direction of nationality i.e. He refuses to admit the right of the English to govern us. He asserts it in the second instance against the local control of "all forms of human activity" exercised by the Roman priests. We are of course non-political and non-sectarian but we are creating a spirit in Ireland which will fiercely assert the rights of human liberty against state and church alike.

Of course there is the possibility that the spirit of the League may so far permeate the ranks of the Roman clergy that they may be willing to give up their present monstrous claims and accept their proper and really divine position as the priests of God. I willingly and joyfully admit the existence of men among the priests who have realised their proper ideal and are living for it, I admire and could almost worship such men. I would go all lengths to save them from being tried too highly.

Thus, as mentioned above, Fr O'Meara's above condemnation of clerical involvement in the politics of the time would seem to reflect Hannay's conviction that the League would ultimately diminish the influence of the Catholic clergy in Ireland. In this way Fr O'Meara declares what Hannay hoped would happen and what is seen to be happening in the world of the novel, as indicated shortly beforehand in the text: the

priest begins by describing the people of the area, a point which seems initially to be inconsequential, but it is of vital importance when considering how Hannay's beliefs about the Gaelic League undoubtedly influenced the novel's conclusion. Referring to a couple who are passing by at the time, Fr O'Meara says "[t]hey have brave, steady eyes – the man especially. People who have such eyes have self-respect. No one has bullied them or will or can. Those two, the man and the woman, are not afraid of anyone." (BK, 241) The priest then explains that this fearlessness in the people can be ascribed to Father Moran, the previous parish priest, who encouraged the speaking of Irish in the area.

In the above context it is noteworthy that even more than a decade after the publication of *Benedict Kavanagh*, in *An Irishman Looks at his World*, Birmingham was still underlining the change stimulated by the League within many of those Catholics who became members at the time: "[i]t [the Gaelic League] even had little skirmishes with priests now and then, displaying the courage of men who have quite made up their minds that they are not going to be afraid – a very high kind of courage, for nothing is more difficult than to be brave when you are frightened."<sup>330</sup>

Mathews's summary of the main Gaelic League controversies from the period elucidates Birmingham's reference to the organization's "little skirmishes" with some Catholic clergy:

The first sign of tension between the Gaelic League and the Catholic Church manifested itself in 1902 when 'An Claidheamh Soluis attacked priests for their reluctance to allow Irish to be taught. For example, it named Father White of Arainn, who had told his parishioners to speak to him in English if they wanted him.' Later, in 1905, a distinctly local dispute betrayed underlying tensions between the two groups and developed into a national issue. The parish priest of Portarlinton, preaching in church, was vigorous in his condemnation of mixed-sex classes organized by the League. 'A public protest in church, the expulsion of the parish priest and curate from the League, the foundation in the neighbourhood of a rival, clerically-controlled, branch of the League, an appeal

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<sup>330</sup> *An Irishman Looks at His World*, 163.

to the local bishop all led ultimately to accusations of anti-clericalism against the League executive.’ This episode illustrated very clearly the threat felt by the Catholic Church from the Gaelic League. The language revival movement, after all, was one of the first nationally organized groupings outside the Catholic Church to exercise considerable control over social intercourse.<sup>331</sup>

All of the above is of undeniable importance in the context of *Benedict Kavanagh* as now, by the end of the novel, we can see that the League serves a double function: not only does it open the gateway into Irish culture for Benedict and his class, while also consequently offering a position of leadership to those who, like Benedict, become immersed in native culture, it also, simultaneously, operates as a counterbalance to the power of the Catholic clergy at the time, the latter notion being reflected, as we have shown, in Hannay’s thoughts on this matter, as well as being suggested in the novel.

#### xvi. The end

The novel concludes, uncharacteristically for Birmingham at this point in his writing career, on a note of unambiguous optimism. After Fr O’Meara and Hyacinth Conneally – now “the Protestant minister of Carrowkeel” (BK, 252) – speak to each other in Irish and then eventually walk away together, the novel finishes with the following symbolic depiction of joyful unity as the seething pot of Birmingham’s first novel gives way to a gentler and more hopeful vision:

Benedict still stood gazing at the bay which lay clear in the moonlight. Far out he saw a long white line of water, and behind it the dark sea drawing in – the clean salt sea, drawing irresistibly in to flood the basin at his feet. Already the whole stretch of the sand was wet, and broad pools lay upon the surface of it – pools that had not been there before. Now they were everywhere to be seen. They were small and separated far from each other; but they were growing larger. The foremost wave of the flowing tide had not reached them. The water in them was not far from it, but had risen mysteriously, oozing through the sand. There seemed no reason why a pool should be in one spot and not in another,

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<sup>331</sup> P. J. Mathews, *op. cit.*, 26.



here rather than there, for the whole strand was level. Yet the pools appeared, some of them near the coming tide, some far up beside the dark belt of stones. They gleamed in the moonlight, pools of silver water, still, with no ripples on them. But they spread, steadily conquering yard by yard of the moist sand. Now one and another of them, spreading, touched, joined, were made one, and afterwards spread more swiftly still. They took strength from their union, and courage from a sense that the great ocean itself was coming to their aid.

Benedict turned at last, and went back along the road. He knew that in a few hours the whole bay would be full. The sun would rise and shine. The waves would dance and flash and leap and break, glittering, shimmering, laughing with glee and irrepressible gladness right up to the extreme verges of the land. (BK, 256)

Thus, at last, Benedict's previously cited paradisal vision, evoked earlier in the novel by the song sung in Irish, now begins to physically take form around him.

### **xvii. Conclusion**

In conclusion, after reading all of Birmingham's fiction up to and including *Benedict Kavanagh*, it becomes evident that these first three novels constitute a trilogy on two levels. Firstly, characters from *The Seething Pot* reappear briefly or are at least mentioned in *Hyacinth*. For example, Sir Gerald and his wife are to be found at the festival at Robeen convent in *Hyacinth* and the second novel also contains references to John O'Neill. Then, by the end of *Benedict Kavanagh*, we are reacquainted with the titular character of the previous novel, and are informed that he has since become the rector of Carrowkeel.

Secondly, and more importantly, we also notice, by the end of the third novel, that although a broadly similar pattern governs all three, something highly significant, which occurs at the end of *Benedict Kavanagh*, radically alters the pattern. All three novels are about Protestant protagonists who earnestly endeavour to engage with the Ireland of the time, but, in the case of both *The Seething Pot* and *Hyacinth*, the heroes ultimately fail in their attempts to participate in the affairs of the period and instead –

like their fathers before them – they accept lives of sequestered domestic comfort by the end of both texts. *Benedict Kavanagh*, however, although it is also about a Protestant character who, as the novel progresses, wishes to commit himself to Ireland, does *not* end in failure. Finishing on a much more hopeful note, the novel concludes by showing that Benedict accepts that sacrifices will follow after he decides to lead those in his local community, so that finally he evolves into a potentially successful messiah.

Benedict's success, as opposed to the withdrawal of his two earlier counterparts, is, the novel makes explicitly clear, as a result of his contact with both the Gaelic League and Anglo-Irish literature, two aspects of Irish culture which make possible for Benedict what was impossible for Sir Gerald and Hyacinth. Specifically in relation to the League, Benedict discovers an organization which was remarkably inclusive for the period, with no attention being paid to members' politics or religion. This depiction of the League is a fictional representation of Hannay's experiences of and publicly stated views on this organization at the time and therefore, in writing his third novel, it is as if Birmingham introduced into his literary laboratory a cultural substratum which would permanently alchemize the hero who touched it. Thus, in this novel, both the language and the literature of Ireland, along with the agricultural theories of Horace Plunkett, all act as wide gateways through which anyone may pass, the avenue beyond the gates leading to full integration and the possibility of Protestant leadership in the Ireland of the early twentieth century.

## II. *The Northern Iron*

### i. Synopsis

The setting of *The Northern Iron* is Antrim around the time of the 1798 rebellion and the novel contains a mixture of fictional and historical characters. Birmingham begins by introducing the figure of the Rev. Micah Ward, the widowed Presbyterian minister of Dunseveric and a supporter of the United Irishmen, and his son, Neal. The latter has a friend named the Hon Maurice St Clair, whose father is the magistrate Lord Dunseveric, also a widower and a former commander of the North Antrim Volunteers.

At the beginning of the novel Maurice and his sister, Una, along with Neal, come across a brig off the coast and they are requested to bring it ashore by its captain, Hercules Getty, from Pennsylvania. Soon it emerges that one of those on the ship is Donald Ward, Micah's youngest brother, who has been away from Ireland for twenty five years; Donald had been involved in agrarian protest before leaving for America, where, under General Nathaniel Greene, he fought the British in North Carolina during the War of Independence. Back at Dunseveric Manse Donald meets his brother, who discusses the plans of the United Irishmen with him; some of those involved include members of Micah's congregation. Afterwards Neal is asked by his uncle to compile a list of those in the neighbourhood who could be relied on to take part in an imminent armed insurrection.

Neal is invited to Dunseveric House for dinner, though he is now conscious that he will soon have to fight both Lord Dunseveric and his son, Maurice. In Dunseveric House he meets Lord Dunseveric's sister-in-law, Estelle, Comtesse de Tourneville, who lived in Paris before escaping from there during the Reign of Terror. During the meal Captain Twinely of the Killulta Yeomanry calls to ask for Lord Dunseveric's assistance, as a Justice of the Peace for the county, in arresting five local people believed to be plotting an armed rebellion; their arms are also to be confiscated. Lord Dunseveric refuses to arrest two of the suspects, namely: Neal, because he believes him to be innocent, and Micah, partly because he is sure that, even if he is a rebel, he is too old to present any danger. Lord Dunseveric agrees, however, to search the



minister's meeting house for cannon supposed to be hidden there. Meanwhile, Neal is certain that James Finlay, a local United Irishman who harbours a grudge against him, is the informer who is responsible for all of this.

At the meeting house Lord Dunseveric discovers that Neal, who managed to warn his father and uncle of the yeomen's arrival, has been bound and injured and furthermore he sees that both his daughter, Una, and his sister-in-law, the Comtesse, have been captured by a trooper. After all three are freed Lord Dunseveric orders the immediate hanging of the man involved and this is carried out. Afterwards four cannon are discovered in the meeting house.

The attention of the Wards now fastens on James Finlay, the previously mentioned suspected informer. At this point Finlay is in Belfast, where he has gone as Micah's agent, bearing letters from the minister for some of the leaders of the impending rebellion. For this reason Donald, accompanied by Neal, decides to go to Belfast to find Finlay. Soon Donald and his nephew meet James Hope, a weaver, who reveals that Finlay has been in contact with him. Hope is now told that Finlay is a spy and he tells Donald and Neal to find the innkeeper Felix Matier after they arrive in Belfast as he allows his property to be used as a meeting place for rebels.

The following morning Hope decides that he must go to Aeneas Moylin's house in Donegore as Finlay has also been in contact with him; Moylin is a Catholic who has persuaded the Defenders of Down and Armagh to participate in the forthcoming rebellion. Neal accompanies Hope on his journey and when they arrive in Donegore they tell Moylin of Finlay's intentions.

Afterwards Neal arrives in Belfast to find a number of dragoons rioting outside Felix Matier's inn and he notices the presence of his uncle amongst those fighting the soldiers. Neal becomes involved and is consequently injured. At this point the authorities, who are particularly anxious to capture Neal, offer a reward for his apprehension and thus Donald insists that his nephew remain confined to Matier's inn for a week.

Meanwhile the news that the United Irishmen in Wexford have begun their rebellion places pressure on the northern leaders to act as well. Several meetings are held and then Robert Simms, the general of the northern United Irishmen, loses his nerve and resigns his position. Simms is replaced by Henry Joy M'Cracken, who plans to attack Antrim and Down. During this time James Finlay, who is now allowing ammunition to be stored in his house, invites the rebel leaders to confer with him in Aeneas Moylin's house, with a view to having everyone captured.

Neal and Hope go to Finlay's house to collect cartridges which they had previously stored there and they then hide on Cave Hill for the night. The following morning Neal, following his uncle's orders, travels to Aeneas Moylin's house in Donegore, where he finds, along with his uncle and the owner, Felix Matier, James Bigger and two others, all of whom are armed. James Finlay arrives and he is taken to a churchyard vault, where he is charged with informing against his fellow United Irishmen; he is eventually killed. Just at this time the Killulta yeomen arrive at Moylin's house and capture Neal, but his uncle rescues him; Moylin's house is burned and everyone flees the scene.

The following morning Neal and Donald go into Antrim to buy food and drink for the party of rebels. In the town Neal meets Maurice, who is there with his father because a magistrates' meeting has been scheduled there for that day. Both Maurice and his father inform Neal that the rebels' plan to attack the town is no longer a secret.

Despite the mounting doom that envelops the rebels, Donald leads his party to join M'Cracken's before their combined attempt to attack Antrim. Neal informs M'Cracken that their plans are now known to the enemy, but M'Cracken decides to proceed regardless, placing Neal under the command of Hope. During their initial attack on the English troops in Antrim Neal notices Lord Dunseveric and his son on the opposing side and he takes them as prisoners in an effort to ensure their safety. Afterwards, however, the rebels flee when their initial success turns to possible defeat and Neal is forced to surrender to Captain Twinely.

After Neal has been brought to Antrim, Lord Dunseveric asks General Clavering not to hang him, but Clavering is determined to see Neal executed. Despite this, Neal,

who has by then been imprisoned, is later secretly released by Maurice. As a result of this a search for Neal is quickly undertaken, but Lord Dunseveric asks Maurice to arrange for Neal's escape from the country.

On his way back to Dunseveric, from where he will escape on Captain Getty's brig, Neal meets Hope, who tells him that Donald Ward, Felix Matier, Aeneas Moylin and many more are now dead. Though Neal is still willing to fight, Hope persuades him to return home and he does so, arriving there after just over a week's absence. Once home Neal is told that his father is now in a Scottish prison and as the yeomanry approach the manse Neal takes cover in a nearby coastal cave.

Soon afterwards, with the help of the Comtesse, both Maurice and Una collect Neal from the cave and bring him to the brig and then Neal leaves for America, promising to return for Una, whom he loves.

By the end of the novel it is 1800 and M'Cracken, among others, has been hanged. Neal, who is now financially secure as a result of inheriting his uncle's share of a shipping business in Boston, returns to Ireland and is shortly to be married to Una. While back in Ireland Neal encourages both Hope and Micah, who has since been released from prison but who has been replaced as a minister, to return with him to America, but neither man now wishes to leave his native land. Instead the novel concludes with Neal receiving a joint blessing from Micah and Hope, before he returns to America with Una, while Hope looks forward to a possible future uprising.

## **ii. Introduction and historical context**

*The Northern Iron*, like *Benedict Kavanagh*, does not lend itself to an examination of the length required for either of Birmingham's first two novels. To some extent it offers a relatively pedestrian fictional treatment of the 1798 rebellion and, as will be noticed, large parts of the novel may be ignored without doing any injury to a proper analysis of it. However, despite this, *The Northern Iron* demands considerable attention when one reads it with its original political context in mind as it, more than any of the other previously discussed novels, is radically transformed when viewed from a historicist perspective and thus the novel is a classic example of an often



apparently unremarkable text which must actually be seen as a highly significant political intervention for its time in 1907.

Specifically, as we shall see, the devolution crisis of 1904 and 1905 needs to be taken into account when reading *The Northern Iron*, after which it becomes clear that this text, written by a Church of Ireland clergyman from Belfast, which presents a sympathetic portrayal of the Northern Protestant involvement in a rebellion which had occurred just over a century before publication, is a highly provocative response to the Ulster Unionists' vehement opposition to any form of Home Rule at the time of the novel's first appearance. This is a text which repeatedly emphasizes the historical unity of Irishmen in their opposition to English rule, notwithstanding their different religious affiliations and regardless of whether they were from Northern or Southern Ireland. Thus, the highly political nature of the novel quickly becomes apparent when one considers that it first entered the public arena at a time in the twentieth century when the eventual partition of the country was being gradually foreshadowed. In this regard, Hannay's correspondence with Robert Lindsay Crawford needs to be mentioned, as do Hannay's later interventions on the Home Rule debate, specifically in the form of his contribution to a book on the topic in 1911, as well as his speech in favour of Home Rule, delivered at the General Synod of the Church of Ireland in 1912. Finally, this section will conclude with a brief discussion of *The Red Hand of Ulster* as that novel deals explicitly with the slightly later Northern reaction to the issue of Home Rule, when the Unionist response in Ulster was both more coordinated and determined than it had been during the earlier devolution crisis.

Finally, *The Northern Iron* differs significantly from Birmingham's first three novels in that its time setting is over a century removed from its period of composition. In this regard it shows the influence of the historical fiction of Sir Walter Scott, whom Hannay greatly admired, and indeed this influence on the text was noted by a number of contemporary reviewers, one suggesting that Micah Ward was based on a character in Scott's *Old Mortality*.<sup>332</sup> However, to state that *The Northern Iron* is an example of historical fiction is not merely to make a point about genre, as it is Birmingham's

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<sup>332</sup> *Inisfail*, March, 1908.

particular selection of the events of 1798 which is important here, especially when the political context of the novel's publication is considered.

### iii. Literary context and contemporary reaction

To begin with, though this is related to the political issue just mentioned above, *The Northern Iron* needs to be seen in its immediate literary context, specifically in terms of the fiction about the rebellion which had just been published. In this regard William Buckley's *Croppies, Lie Down!*, published in 1903, is significant; *The Irish Times*, in its review of *The Northern Iron*, compared it to Buckley's novel, in which the rebels "were transfigured saints, and the loyalists a happy compound of Judas Iscariot and Lynchehaun."<sup>333</sup> The crucial difference between the two novels is, of course, that Buckley's novel deals with the rebellion in the South, whereas Birmingham, while equally sympathetic in his depiction of the rebels, deals exclusively with the insurrection as it unfolded in the North and for this reason the *Freeman's Journal* described it as a "companion tale" to Sir R. Keightley's *Pikeman*, though the latter concentrates on activities in County Down, while *The Northern Iron* confines itself to Antrim.<sup>334</sup>

Despite what one might regard as the blatant political overtones of such a novel at such a time, of the nearly fifty reviews of it published in Ireland, England, Scotland and the United States, startlingly few detected in it anything more than a novelist's presentation of part of the story of 1798.<sup>335</sup> *The Northern Whig*, for example, in grand myopic tones, declared "[w]hatever the worth of "The Northern Iron", it is not a political pamphlet", yet curiously the title of the review was "'The Seething Pot" in '98", a reference, of course, to Birmingham's first novel, which he described himself as little more than a political tract. *The Northern Whig*, however, insisted that in the new novel Birmingham did not "spoil his pictures by taking his colour from modern politics."<sup>336</sup> In contrast, a limited number of reviewers were notably more perceptive. *The Outlook*, for example, stressed that, as a result of Birmingham's manipulation of

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<sup>333</sup> *The Irish Times*, 22 November, 1907.

<sup>334</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 30 January, 1913.

<sup>335</sup> There are forty nine reviews of the novel in Birmingham's press cuttings book from the period. MS (TCD) 3432.

<sup>336</sup> *The Northern Whig*, 7 December, 1907.



the history of the rebellion, Ireland at the time was shown to have been united, despite geographical and religious differences:

the treatment of the subject is still coloured by the attempt to show that there are no serious questions of difference between the Protestant Ulstermen and the Roman Catholic population of the rest of Ireland. This strange illusion forms the basis of the whole story, which presents, in consequence, a curiously ill-proportioned picture of many aspects of the Irish rising. (...) the particular moral which the author seeks to impress upon his readers' intelligence is that a complete union of hearts has always prevailed between Ulster and the other Provinces.<sup>337</sup>

*The Church of Ireland Gazette* was more specific in terms of what it disliked about the novel. Stating that both the general topic of the rebellion and Birmingham's treatment of it were inherently political, it listed aspects of the insurrection which Birmingham had chosen to ignore, thus suggesting that his sympathetic portrayal of the rebels was truly the stuff of fiction; history, the reviewer warned, at least from a Unionist perspective, told a very different story about a divided, as opposed to a united, Ireland:

we must affirm that we dislike the political tone of Mr. Birmingham's new book (...) which will be resented by Churchmen and Unionists. It would seem quite sufficient for Mr. Birmingham to reply that his new book is a historical novel, and that he is dealing with history, not politics. This is, unhappily, an insufficient justification. The rebellion of 1798 is still a subject of politics, rather than of Irish history. In his book (...) Mr. Birmingham represents the insurgent leaders as with halos of sanctity round their heads, while the Northern loyalists, the officers, the yeomen, the English generals, the loyal magistrates, are all sons of Belial flown with insolence and wine, who by deliberate outrage, plunder, and ravishment have driven the long-suffering Ulster Presbyterians into rebellion. (...) When the time came, as a matter of fact, most of the Presbyterians preferred the English bonds to the horrors of Scullabogue Barn

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<sup>337</sup> *The Outlook*, 18 January, 1908.



and the Irish Republic under Father Murphy at Wexford. Protestant and Roman Catholic Irishmen, who were supposed by the credulous leaders to be allies for Ireland's salvation, fired on each other in Lord Moira's Park. So it was, and ever will be.<sup>338</sup>

*An Connarrac*, on the other hand, underlined the positive significance of the novel, especially with regard to what it might convey to Protestants at the time, and the resultant effect it might have on them. This novel, the reviewer declared, because of its exclusive emphasis on the Protestant participation in the rebellion, was a reminder to contemporary Protestants that their Northern ancestors were part of a nationalist pantheon which included those slaughtered at Vinegar Hill in the South: “[f]or those of the Protestant Church in Ireland “Northern Iron” will have a lesson deep in its significance. Every character of any importance in the book is a Protestant, and their faith in Ireland then was as undoubted and as stern as that of the gallant Wexfordmen.” Then, after citing one of the final passages from the novel, which dwells on the unity of all Irishmen as envisaged by Tone and Neilson, a unity which is then symbolized by a reference to the names of twenty prisoners of different faiths, all of which are inscribed on a lexicon presented to Micah during his imprisonment in Scotland (NI, 318), the reviewer, with such a notion of national unity in mind, contends that Birmingham's novel could have an impact on events then unfolding: “[a]nd in helping towards that longed for realisation in our time Mr. Hannay's book (...) will go far indeed.” The review concludes with the exhortation: “seek to grasp the significance of it. This book marks another stage in the journey towards self-realisation in Ireland.”<sup>339</sup>

Furthermore, *The Positivist Review* stressed that Birmingham's novel exposed the gap between early twentieth century Ulster Protestants and their republican forebears. Again the reviewer referred to Vinegar Hill, while also emphasizing how the text brought into then current Northern Protestant consciousness the militant republicanism which was its historical inheritance, though many at the time might have preferred to forget such an incongruous legacy. In conclusion, as in the review in *An Connarrac*, the reviewer argued that the end of the novel inspired the aspiration

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<sup>338</sup> *Church of Ireland Gazette*, 21 December, 1907.

<sup>339</sup> *An Connarrac*, January, 1908.

that a unified patriotism, which would transcend religious differences, was a real future possibility:

It is sad reading for a Nationalist – not because the men of the age failed, but because their sons have turned away from the glorious path the fathers trod. The National movement, which everywhere else emerged from the trials of the nineteenth century with undiminished strength, here, in this north-eastern corner of Ireland, experienced in the defection of the Ulster Presbyterians its one serious loss. The finding of the cannon buried under the pulpit in the Presbyterian Meeting House, the boys and girls dancing to the tune of “Ca Ira” in the main street of Antrim, the blacksmiths making pikes openly within a few miles of Belfast seem far enough off in time – much further than Vinegar Hill and Wexford; but it is well to be reminded that such things once were. (...) The days of pike and cannon are gone; but it may be the days are coming when the love of country shall transcend the differences of creeds.<sup>340</sup>

W. P. Ryan, in the *Daily Chronicle*, also commented on the importance of the novel’s presentation, of a historical Presbyterian nationalism, through, for example, the figures of McCracken and Orr, all of which was particularly helpful at a time in the early twentieth century when many young Northern Presbyterians were beginning to challenge the conventional relationship between their religion and Unionism:

To-day, when many young Presbyterians of the North are discovering (as many Irish Catholics are discovering in another way) how insidiously religion has been used as a dividing ground to the detriment of the national idea, it is specially interesting to study the sane far-seeing mind of their forefathers of the days of McCracken and William Orr.<sup>341</sup>

Finally, a review in *Sinn Fein* mentioned the perceived imminence, at the time, of national unity and the consequent significance of Birmingham’s novel at a moment of such expectation: “[i]t would seem as if we were on the verge of a national union and that now a word of information, a word of friendship, would be of avail. Mr.

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<sup>340</sup> *The Positivist Review*, 1 February, 1908.

<sup>341</sup> *Daily Chronicle*, 14 December, 1907.



Birmingham has undertaken to say the timely words."<sup>342</sup> Such a concept of national unity was indeed on Hannay's mind even a few years before he wrote *The Northern Iron*, as is evident in his correspondence with T.W. Rolleston and Lindsay Crawford in 1905.

#### iv. Unity and radicalism

On 14 March, 1905 Hannay received a letter from Rolleston, which called for a political fusion of Northern and Southern Ireland:

If only the Northern democracy would come in then we should see an Ireland to be proud of (...) The thing seems so obvious that it seems to me if one could get twenty Orangemen around a table and put it before them, they would go out new men with a mission and the North would be ours. I wonder would it not be possible in the strictest secrecy and quietness to get together some such gathering and talk to it?<sup>343</sup>

Later, on 29 May of the same year, Hannay wrote to Lindsay Crawford, the Grand Master of the Independent Orange Order, conveying Rolleston's suggestion and stating that: "I have the possible union of the two Irish democracies (...) deeply at heart."<sup>344</sup> Two years later, in Birmingham's fourth novel, there would be an attempt, in the form of historical fiction, to encourage such a political union and indeed, as has already been mentioned, *The Northern Iron* concludes with an emphasis on the union of all Irishmen, regardless of creed. However, in the early twentieth century, in order

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<sup>342</sup> *Sinn Fein*, 21 December, 1907.

<sup>343</sup> Rolleston to Hannay, 14 March, 1905. Hannay Papers, TCD MS 3454, 183. Thomas William Hazen Rolleston (1857 – 1920) founded the *Dublin University Review*, of which he was editor from May 1885 to December 1886. While in London he was the first honorary secretary of the Irish Literary Society, from 1892 until 1893, and was joint editor of the *New Irish Library*. He returned to Dublin as secretary to the Irish Association in 1894 and was leader-writer on the *Dublin Daily Express* as well as correspondent of the *London Daily Chronicle* (1898 – 1900). For the next five years he acted as organizer to the Department of Agriculture. In 1908 he settled in London, where he reviewed for the *Times*. Henry Boylan, *A Dictionary of Irish Biography*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1998), 382. Hannay came to know Rolleston while the former was curate of Delgany. In his autobiography Hannay describes Rolleston as a poet and Greek scholar who was "greatly interested in the beginning of the literary renaissance in Ireland." Furthermore, Hannay acknowledges that it was Rolleston who introduced him to the poetry of W. B. Yeats and encouraged him to read Standish O'Grady. Hannay renewed his acquaintance with Rolleston after the publication of *The Seething Pot. Pleasant Places*, 60 & 160.

<sup>344</sup> Hannay to Crawford, 29 May, 1905. Hannay Papers, TCD MS 3454, 195a.



to align the predominantly Protestant and increasingly Unionist Ulster with the nationalism which was rapidly consolidating across the rest of the country at the time, it was imperative for Birmingham, in his fictional treatment of the 1798 rebellion, to offer a sustained exploration of late eighteenth century Northern Protestant radicalism, including militant nationalism, and this quickly becomes one of the main preoccupations of the novel. In this regard, as early as the third chapter, for example, when Lord Dunseveric is asked by his sister-in-law, who lived in Paris until the Reign of Terror, to tell her about the “Irish Jacobins”, she is informed that they are “mostly Presbyterians, dour, pig-headed, fanatical Republicans, who want to get an army of your French friends over to help them.” (NI, 42) Such radicalism, according to the novel, may be traced back to some of the political literature of the period, as shown below.

#### v. Radical writers

Early in the novel Maurice St Clair, incensed as a result of the manner in which Captain Getty has just addressed him, afterwards speculates indignantly: ““I suppose he’s a specimen of the Republican breed. That’s what comes of liberty and equality and French Jacobinism and Tom Paine and the Rights of Man.”” (NI, 17) Although Getty is American the reference to Paine has an Irish significance also and, in fact, the specific mention of Paine’s *The Rights of Man* introduces the theme of political radicalism, which will be developed throughout the novel.

Paine’s text of 1791 defended the French Revolution just one year after Edmund Burke had fiercely condemned it in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Furthermore, *The Rights of Man* conveyed Paine’s republican and anti-monarchical views and thus, during this period, Paine gained “enormous symbolic significance for Irish radicals.”<sup>345</sup> There were more than likely seven Irish editions of the first part of *The Rights of Man* in the year of its initial publication and Paine’s friend, Romilly, reported that at this time the impression which *The Rights of Man* “has made in Ireland is, I am informed, hardly to be conceived.” Furthermore, it received unprecedented exposure in a number of newspapers, including the *Belfast Newsletter*,

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<sup>345</sup> David Dickson, ‘Paine and Ireland’ in: David Dickson, Daire Keogh & Kevin Whelan (Eds), *The United Irishmen: Republicanism, Radicalism & Rebellion*. (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1993), 136.

and, according to a Belfast bookseller, by early 1792 *The Rights of Man* had been “read perhaps more universally than any pamphlet during the present century”, all of which explains why, at the time, Tone claimed that it had become the Koran of Belfast.<sup>346</sup> By the end of 1792 the writer himself, like a number of other historical figures in Birmingham’s novel, as we shall see, was transformed into a martyr in the public mind: “the cult of Paine as martyr in the cause of liberty and equality was taking shape. (...) His September flight to France and his December trial *in absentia* were covered extensively in the Irish press.” For all of these reasons Dickson’s point about the ultimate political impact of Paine’s text later in the decade is difficult to refute: “*The Rights of Man* therefore helped to prepare the ground which the United Irishmen were to till.”<sup>347</sup>

Other radical writers associated, at least implicitly, with the 1798 rebellion are mentioned elsewhere in the novel. For example, when Neal is confined to Felix Matier’s inn he is told by Peg MacIlrea that if Matier ““says his prayers at all (...) it’s to them twa graven images.”” (NI, 132) Soon afterwards Neal discovers that the images referred to here are busts of Voltaire and Rousseau, material symbols of the radical French thought which was then penetrating Ireland:

These were strange household gods for a Belfast innkeeper to revere. Neal, gazing at them, slowly grasped their significance. He had heard talk of French ideas, had seen his father shake his head over the works of certain philosophers. He knew that there was an intellectual freedom claimed by many of those who were most enthusiastic in the cause of political reform. (NI, 132 – 33)

Then, shortly afterwards, Neal looks at a selection of books from Matier’s shelves and here the point is made that such texts were not unique to this particular library at the time:

There was a volume of “Voltaire,” Tom Paine’s “Rights of Man,” “The Vindiciae Gallicae” by Mackintosh, Godwin’s “Political Justice,” Montesquieu’s “Esprit des Lois,” and a volume of Burns’ poetry, not long out

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<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*, 138, 335 & 140.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, 142 & 140.

from a Belfast printer. Neal already knew Godwin's works and the "Esprit des Lois." They stood on his father's bookshelves. (NI, 136)

Such references to radical writers and the influence which they may have had on some of those associated with the 1798 rebellion is a continuation of the more elaborate exploration of the effect of literary texts on the eponymous character of *Benedict Kavanagh*, as discussed in the previous section; the relevant texts in *The Northern Iron*, however, are not always obvious. For example, in the second chapter, just before Neal is included in a wide-ranging discussion between his uncle and father about agrarian protest, the American and French Revolutions and the plans of the United Irishmen, there is a reference to passages by Josephus, which Neal had been transcribing that morning (NI, 31 – 34). When one considers that Josephus was a general who recorded an eyewitness account in his *Jewish War*, of the events leading up to the Jewish revolt against the Romans in AD66, a rebellion which he partly led, one begins to appreciate both Birmingham's playful reference here and its significance in the broader context of the literature which was at least partly responsible for fomenting political rebellion in Ireland in 1798. All of this, of course, has an added relevance in a novel which, at the time of publication, was attempting to exert some control over political events as they were unfolding in early twentieth century Ireland. Thus, in *The Northern Iron*, we are presented with references to a series of actual texts which were politically influential in the past, while all such references are contained in a text which itself was written with clear political intent, as the above reviews show.

#### **vi. Liberty: past and present**

If there was an intellectual backdrop for the 1798 rebellion there was also a political one which was equally international and, early in the novel, the Irish insurrection is placed in such a global setting and thus the rebellion in Ireland is shown to have been at least partly the product of political convulsions in America, France, Italy, Poland and England:

In 1798 talk of death in battle or death on a scaffold moved even the youngest and most careless to serious thought. The world was full then of the kind of



ideas for which men are well content to die, for the sake of which also they did not hesitate to shed blood. The Americans had set mankind a headline to copy in their Declaration of Independence. The French wrote Liberty with huge red flourishes which set the heart of Europe beating high. Italians were proclaiming a foreign army the liberators of their country, while Jacobins growled fiercely against the Pope. Kosciusko, in Poland, organised a futile revolution, and fell in the cause of national freedom. Even phlegmatic Englishmen caught the spirit of the times, hated intensely or worshipped enthusiastically that liberty which some saw as an imperial goddess for the sake of whose bare limbs and pale, noble face death might be gladly met; while others beheld in her a blood-spattered strumpet whirling in abandoned dance round gallows-altars which reeked with human sacrifice. (NI, 21 – 22)

What needs to be considered here is how this eighteenth century international context was echoed at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the novel was written. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Boer War attracted considerable attention in Ireland, where its eruption, just at the end of the nineteenth century, was to have “a seismic effect on the Irish cultural and political landscape.”<sup>348</sup> Mathews describes the repercussions of that war in Ireland as follows:

The outbreak of the Boer War on 11 October 1899 provided a perfect opportunity for Irish nationalists to advance their cause subliminally as public opinion divided predictably between unionist supporters of the war and nationalist critics of it. (...) As the newly united [Irish Parliamentary P]arty took on its pro-war opponents in the House of Commons it displayed a spirit and purpose not witnessed since the Parnell heyday. However, if the war created a space for the parliamentarians to regroup, it also precipitated the emergence of a new non-clandestine separatist politics with the formation of the Transvaal Committee – the pre-cursor of Sinn Fein – in September 1899. What is important about this development is that, for the first time since the Act of Union, radical Irish nationalists visibly rejected English foreign policy and began to formulate an independent attitude to the South African War. (...) these

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<sup>348</sup> P. J. Mathews, *op. cit.*, 66.

nationalists were of the belief that Ireland's destiny lay outside the empire as an independent sovereign nation.<sup>349</sup>

Thus, here we have an example of a foreign war which had a pronounced impact on Irish politics at around the time that *The Northern Iron* was written and for this reason the novel's description of the immediate global context of the 1798 rebellion, as quoted above, would have had an obvious significance in early twentieth century Ireland. The above passage from the novel, however, mentions numerous late eighteenth century upheavals around the world and, indeed, such a pattern of international unrest was also prominent at the beginning of the twentieth century. For example, the six year Cuban War of Independence ended in 1901, to be shortly followed by the declaration of the Republic of Cuba, independent of Spain, in 1902. The next year, after a separatist uprising, Panama gained its independence from Colombia. Furthermore, in 1905, in response to a revolution, tsarist Russia was forced to concede certain political demands, in particular the establishment of a Duma the following year, though peasant revolts continued for the following two years. During the same period India, with which Ireland had long-established close ties as a result of many Irishmen finding work in the Indian civil service, was also in a state of unrest: the decision to partition Bengal in 1905 was met with violent opposition and, separately, the Muslim League was founded at the end of 1906. Added to all of this, Persia, at this time the scene of violent protests against Western influence, witnessed the development of a constitutional movement in 1905, which succeeded in its demand for a constitution in 1906. Upheaval continued, even as Birmingham's novel was published: in Romania there was a peasants' revolt in 1907.<sup>350</sup>

Thus the world at the beginning of the twentieth century was as intent in its search for liberty as it had been in the late eighteenth century, but it is the effect of such modern events on Birmingham's Ireland which is relevant here, a point reflected in the novel. Immediately after the above passage about the late eighteenth century international context, the impact of such worldwide events on Ireland at the time is stressed: "Ireland in those days was intellectually and spiritually alive. Men were quick to feel

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<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>350</sup> Jan Palmowski, *A Dictionary of Contemporary World History from 1900 to the Present Day*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), *passim*.



the influence of world-wide ideas, and in Ireland the love of liberty glowed brightly.” (NI, 22) With regard to the political developments in Ireland just before the novel was published, a detailed examination of this period will show that there was a relatively modest but nevertheless controversial movement towards greater independence in Ireland at this time, a fact which underlines the deeply political nature of the novel, as we shall see.

### vii. Devolution and Griffith

F. S. L. Lyons describes the heightening of nationalist sentiment in Ireland shortly before the novel's publication: “[t]he revolutionary tradition of 1798, the tradition which pointed to Ireland's destiny as an independent sovereign republic, celebrated its centenary in 1898 and inevitably there was great excitement. (...) A new generation had been reminded of an old faith and the lesson was eagerly absorbed.”<sup>351</sup> Soon afterwards the Boer War began and it, as we have seen, contributed to the intensification of nationalism in Ireland during this period. A slightly later political development, however, has a more direct relevance to *The Northern Iron* when we consider that this particular controversy ultimately strengthened Ulster Unionism and thus increased the division between the Northern province and the rest of the country.

In August of 1904 the Irish Reform Association published a preliminary report advocating devolution, which would involve enhanced local government, a measure which had already been introduced as a result of the Irish Local Government Act of 1898. A second manifesto was issued the following month, this time with the help of Sir Anthony MacDowell, the undersecretary at Dublin Castle who had previously worked in the Indian Civil Service. The document in question “looked forward to the creation of financial and legislative councils for Ireland, to be endowed with considerable powers of local government and the ability to raise and spend certain categories of revenue. This was still not Home Rule, but it was a considerable step in that direction.”<sup>352</sup> Despite this, however, intense hostility to the scheme followed immediately, especially in Ulster, where an Ulster Unionist Council (UUC) was formed with the aim of amalgamating the principal organs of Northern Unionism, in

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<sup>351</sup> F. S. L. Lyons, *Ireland Since the Famine*, 247 – 48.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.



particular the local constituency associations and the Orange lodges, “with a view to consistent and continuous political action.” The UUC, which was officially constituted in March 1905, “at once became the rallying-point of the more intransigent Unionists.”<sup>353</sup>

Thus we can appreciate the political significance of *The Northern Iron*’s sustained and sympathetic depiction of eighteenth century Presbyterian radicalism, specifically when we consider its publication just at a time when Northern Protestants were becoming increasingly aggressive in their united opposition to any form of Home Rule. In contrast, at the end of the eighteenth century, the novel stresses, liberty was embraced by “the farmers and lower middle classes of the north-eastern counties” (NI, 22) and there then follows a condensed history of this period, which highlights the attempt at the time to unify all Irishmen, regardless of their confessional affiliations:

The position was a strange one. The landed gentry, who themselves, a few years before, claimed and won from England the independence of their Parliament, grew frightened and drew back from the path of reform on which alone lay security for what they had got. The wealthier merchants and manufacturers, satisfied with the trade freedom which brought them prosperity, were averse to further change. The Presbyterians and the lower classes generally were eager to press forward. They had conceived the idea of a real Irish nation, of Gael and Gall united, of Churchman, Roman Catholic and Dissenter working together for their country’s good under a free constitution. (NI, 22 – 23)

The pertinence in Birmingham’s time of such references to the 1782 constitution is clear when one realizes that in 1904 Arthur Griffith published *The Resurrection of Hungary*, which advocated a twentieth century restoration of Grattan’s Parliament. Birmingham, in fact, later commented on the widespread impact of this pamphlet at the time,<sup>354</sup> the source of which can be traced back to a series of articles by Griffith published earlier in 1904 in *United Irishman*, summarized by Mathews as follows:

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<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>354</sup> *Pleasant Places*, 189.

The kernel of the strategy was to restore the constitution of 1782 which gave rise to Grattan's parliament. By evoking the Renunciation Act (passed by the English parliament in 1783) which held that for all time Ireland could only be bound by laws enacted by the King and parliament of Ireland, Griffith argued that the Act of Union of 1800 was illegal and that the 1782 constitution was still legally binding. The way was clear, argued Griffith, for elected Irish representatives in Westminster to withdraw and set up a national parliament in Ireland.<sup>355</sup>

Clearly the ideas propounded here are identical to those articulated by Hannay in 'A Neglected Chapter of Irish History', thus emphasizing the intimate connection, as seen by Hannay and others, between the political issues of the early twentieth century and some of the events dealt with in *The Northern Iron*. However, even before this time, in 1899, in the very first issue of his paper *United Irishman*, Griffith affirmed his retrospective support for both the 1798 rebellion and Grattan's patriotism: "[l]est there might be a doubt in any mind, we will say that we accept the nationalism of '98, '48 and '67 as the true nationalism and Grattan's cry "Live Ireland – perish the Empire!" as the watch-word of patriotism."<sup>356</sup> This was a time, then, when the present often looked to the past for inspiration and thus it is not surprising that a highly political novel from this period would be set exclusively in the past.

In relation to Griffith, when one considers the above information, it is not surprising that Hannay held the former in particularly high regard. Later, in his autobiography, Birmingham recalled Griffith, with whom he was personally acquainted, and here he outlines his involvement in Griffith's movement of the period, while also underlining his own attempts to remind his co-religionists of their nationalist ancestry, a cause which he would embrace again in *The Northern Iron*, though in that novel, as we have seen, his focus would be on historical Presbyterian radicalism:

In all this seething new life I had little or no part, except that of a deeply-interested spectator, but I did make some effort, through articles in the press and

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<sup>355</sup> P. J. Mathews, *op. cit.*, 119.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, 251 – 52 & 248. The issue of *United Irishman* referred to is that of 4 March, 1899.

occasional speeches, to explain to my Unionist friends what Arthur Griffith's position was and what he was aiming at. (...)

My hope was that the men of my own race and creed might be induced to remember that their grandfathers were great Irishmen, filled with the spirit of nationalism; that their loyal reliance on England was a futile thing, since all English parties were equally likely to let them down, that by throwing themselves into the new nationalism they might win security, honour and power in the Ireland of the future.<sup>357</sup>

Hannay's obvious interest in Irish politics at the beginning of the twentieth century is, as already argued, reflected in his fictional account of the 1798 rebellion, though the novel is also a further example of Birmingham's attempt to influence then contemporary politics, an endeavour which, as just shown in the above extract, was not confined to his literary imagination.

#### **viii. Presbyterian radicalism**

Returning to the novel: immediately after the passage quoted above, there is a description of the shift from peaceful reform to violent radicalism on the part of the "Presbyterians and the lower classes" and thus we are provided with the historical background for the action which will soon unfold in the novel. Of particular interest here is the reference to secret societies, a point which will be developed shortly afterwards in the text:

But it soon became apparent that the reforms they demanded would not be won by peaceful means. The natural terror of the classes whose ascendancy or prosperity seemed to be threatened, the bribes and cajoleries of British statesmen, turned the hearts of those who ought to have been leaders from Ireland to England. The relentless logic, the clear-sighted grasp of the inevitable trend of events, and the restless energy of men like Wolfe Tone, changed a party of constitutional reformers into a society of determined revolutionaries. Threats

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<sup>357</sup> *Pleasant Places*, 191.



of repression were answered by the formation of secret societies. Acts of tyranny, condoned or approved by terror-stricken magistrates, were silently endured by men filled with a grim hope that the day of reckoning was near at hand. Far-seeing English statesmen hoped to fish out of the troubled waters an act of national surrender from the Irish Parliament, and were not ill-pleased to see the sky grow darker. Everyone else, every Irishman, looked with dread at the gathering storm. One thing only was clear to them. There was coming a period of horror, of outrage and burning, of fighting and hanging, the sowing of an evil crop of fratricidal hatred whose gathering would last for many years. (NI, 21 – 23)

At least some of the seeds for such a period of horror, the novel appears to suggest, were set a few decades before 1798 as, shortly after the above passage, when Donald Ward enters his brother's house, the housekeeper, Hannah Macaulay, enjoins him to: ““have done with your old work. We've no more call for Hearts of Oak boys, nor Hearts of Steel boys, nor for burning ricks, nor firing guns.”” (NI, 28) This aspect of Donald's past is expanded on by himself shortly afterwards and thus the theme of historical violent Presbyterian radicalism is developed as a backdrop for its culmination in the rebellion in Antrim, which is about to take place:

Story followed story of the doings of the Hearts of Steel and Hearts of Oak. Donald, as a boy, had taken his part – and that a daring part – in the fierce struggle by which the northern tenant-farmers gained fuller security and a chance of prospering a whole century before their brethren in the south and west, with the aid of the English Parliament, won the same privileges. Then Donald (...) told of his own share in the American War of Independence. Neal, listening, was thrilled with the stories of unequal battles between citizen soldiers and trained troops. He glowed with excitement as he came to understand the indomitable courage which faced reverse after reverse and snatched complete victory in the end. Donald dwelt much on the part which Irishmen had taken in the struggle, especially on the work of Ulster men, Antrim men, men of the hard northern breed, of the Presbyterian faith. (NI, 32)

There are three references to militant Presbyterian radicalism in the above passage, all of which require some explanation. To begin with, the Hearts of Oak was a short-lived late eighteenth century movement of agrarian agitation in Ulster, its significance with regard to Birmingham's novel lying in the fact that it was for a long time afterwards understood to be dominated by Presbyterians. Although James Donnelly argues this was a mistaken perception of the movement, he shows that at the time it was "plausibly asserted that the presbyterian schismatics known as Seceders (...) were disproportionately numerous among the Hearts of Oak" and later Lecky, like others before him, had referred to the Oakboy movement as "the protestant rising of the north."<sup>358</sup> Secondly, the reference in the above extract to the Hearts of Steel serves to further underline the theme of violent Presbyterian agitation. Here W. A. Maguire describes the actions and origins of this particular movement, some of which is alluded to in the passage in question from the novel:

Between the summer of 1770 and the close of the year 1772, large areas of rural Ulster were rendered ungovernable by the activities of the Hearts of Steel or Steelboys. Agrarian agitation was not new, of course – during 1763 Tyrone, Armagh and Monaghan had been similarly affected by the Oakboys – but apart from the more serious and more prolonged nature of the Hearts of Steel outbreak, which gave it a notoriety and importance of its own, and the curious fact that the agitators were presbyterians, it had this unique feature: its outbreak and the heavy emigration which followed its spread and suppression were almost universally ascribed to the wicked greed of a single great landowner, the fifth earl (later first marquis) of Donegall.

(...) Houses and haystacks were burned, cattle maimed, crops destroyed, forced contributions levied and murders committed.<sup>359</sup>

Such was Donegall's notoriety because of the above affair that afterwards not only was he blamed for the agitation itself, but additionally for "the emigration of

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<sup>358</sup> James S. Donnelly, Jr., 'Hearts of Oak, Hearts of Steel' in: *Studia Hibernica*. (Baile Atha Cliath: Colaiste Phadraig, No. 21, 1981), 7 & 17.

<sup>359</sup> W. A. Maguire, 'Lord Donegall and the Hearts of Steel' in: Ronan Fanning & David Harkness (Eds), *Irish Historical Studies*, (Dublin: The Dublin University Press Ltd and Healyset, September 1979, Vol. XXI, No. 84), 351 – 52.



thousands to America which followed it. By extension, he has even been blamed for the loss of the American colonies, since the exiles from Ulster played a very active part on the revolutionary side.”<sup>360</sup> Again, the above passage from the novel suggests such a connection between eighteenth century agrarian protest in Ulster and the later Irish involvement in the American Revolution, the significant link being the notable Presbyterian participation in both revolts. Furthermore, in the passage in question, the point is made that the Northern Presbyterian farmers were ahead of their Southern counterparts in terms of their enhanced rights as tenants, rights which they gained by force at the end of the eighteenth century rather than through Parliament a century later, as was the case in the South; Northern Protestants of the early twentieth century are thus being reminded of their impressive heritage.

#### ix. Micah: Porter

The theme of Presbyterian radicalism continues in the character of Micah Ward, described by Felix Matier as one of the best of ““the New Light men of the Ulster Synod.”” (NI, 138) The historical references contained in Micah’s character are somewhat obscure and thus demand considerable explanation. To begin with: after Lord Dunseveric has been asked to arrest the minister, which he refuses to do, he tells Neal: ““your father, in his writings, has attacked, and, in my opinion, slandered me personally.”” (NI, 56) He then confirms that he is referring to a series of articles published in the *Northern Star* under the title ‘Letters of a Democrat,’ which have been attributed to Micah. Then, immediately afterwards, we are informed that Neal indeed believes that “his father had attacked the landlord aristocracy with great bitterness, and he thought it likely that Lord Dunseveric had cause for complaint.” (NI, 56) All of this is, as we shall see, a brief but significant allusion to the historical figure of the Rev. James Porter, a Presbyterian minister whose literary radicalism led to his execution in 1798, an event which is mentioned at the end of the novel in the context of the other executions which took place at the time (NI, 318).

Porter, from Donegal, was a supporter of the United Irishmen, but it was what he published in the *Northern Star* in 1796 which is most significant for our purposes, as

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<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, 358.



this is what is obliquely mentioned in the novel, as quoted above; the relevant aspect of Porter's biography is given by William McMillan as follows:

He (...) served the rebel cause most assiduously as a contributor to the pages of the *Northern Star* newspaper. (...) he submitted a series of letters which soon became famous as the 'Billy Bluff' letters. In these the author (...) held up to public opprobrium the exactions of the Squirearchy from the peasants, and satirised the conditions then prevalent of spying, espionage and feudal tyranny. The characters in these letters were Squire Firebrand (representing the local Squire Mr Montgomery) who had in his employment Billy Bluff (representing Billy Lowry, the bailiff on Montgomery's estate) whose office it was to carry all the news to the Squire and to report on all suspected persons. The Squire's agent was Lord Mountmumble (representing Lord Londonderry, father of Lord Castlereagh). So popular were these letters that the peasantry committed large portions of them to memory. They were issued in a pamphlet which was reprinted in 1816, 1840 and 1868.<sup>361</sup>

When the rebellion began Porter was arrested and on "the unsupported evidence of a perjured renegade the minister of Greyabbey was condemned to death by hanging. His wife with her seven children went to Lord Londonderry to beg for his life. She was refused an interview. (...) Thus the execution took place in sight of his own home and Meeting House."<sup>362</sup>

After taking all of the above into consideration, it is clear that part of the character of Birmingham's Micah Ward can be traced back to the historical figure of Porter, though the comparisons between both are mainly confined to Micah's previously mentioned journalism, as well as his more general political radicalism. However, because Micah's character includes an albeit limited reference to Porter, the fictitious minister is also a reminder of the historical Presbyterian martyrdom associated with the rebellion in Ulster, an aspect of the uprising which will culminate in the novel in the numerous later references to William Orr, to be discussed below. With regard to

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<sup>361</sup> William McMillan, 'Presbyterian Ministers and the Ulster Rising' in: Liam Swords (Ed.) *Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter: The Clergy and 1798*. (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1997), 97 – 98.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

Micah, however, by the end of the novel, as we shall see, his character will also subsume another historical radical Presbyterian minister of the time, the Rev. William Steel Dickson. Dickson will be discussed later in this section, but for now it is essential to ponder the consequences of such historical references to radical Presbyterianism within the character of Micah.

#### x. Radical ministers

In a chapter about the involvement of Presbyterian ministers in the Ulster rising, William McMillan includes a list of “twenty-seven men, connected with the Synod and the presbytery of Antrim, all of whom were New Light in theology, and all of whom have been mentioned in different papers as being connected with the United Irishmen and the rebellion.”<sup>363</sup> He adds, however, that there were also at least three well known Old Light ministers who were found to be part of the insurrection. Along with these he also names one Reformed minister, two probationers and three licentiates, all Presbyterian and all of whom were in some way implicated in the rebellion.<sup>364</sup>

Such numbers are certainly considerable and for that reason Pieter Tesch’s point, made nearly two centuries after the rebellion, is important: “[c]ompared with the attention that has been paid in the last two hundred years to the priests in Wexford, very little is known about the role of the rebel Presbyterian clergymen of east Ulster.”<sup>365</sup> Such amnesia is particularly surprising when one realizes that the radicals were by no means all obscure ministers in their day: Samuel Barber, for example, the Moderator of the General Synod at the beginning of the decade, preached a sermon at the end of his term in June of 1791, in which he strongly supported the French Revolution, occasionally mentioned in the novel, as we have seen:

that nation [France] renowned in arts and arms will now be the refuge and asylum of the brave and good in every nation. Seated in the midst of Europe like a lily on a hill to shed Light, Liberty and Humanity all around. Happy Country!

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<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*, 85, 86 & 113.

<sup>365</sup> Pieter Tesch, ‘Presbyterian Radicalism’ in Dickson, Keogh & Whelan (Eds), *op. cit.*, 33.

where the rights of man are sacred, no Bastille to imprison the body, nor religious establishment to shackle the soul. Every citizen free as the thoughts of man.<sup>366</sup>

### xi. Orr

In chapter five of the novel Micah berates Lord Dunseveric for his loyalty to a constitution which serves to concentrate power in the hands of an aristocratic elite. Here what is notable is Micah's emphasis on the consequent exclusion and mistreatment of the rest of the population, especially those living in Ulster:

the constitution which gives the whole power of the country to a few proud aristocrats, which excludes three-fourths of the people from its benefits, which allows eight hundred thousand Northerners to be insulted and trampled on because they speak of emancipation, which uses forced oaths, overflowing Bastilles and foreign troops for extorting the loyalty of the Irish people. (NI, 84 – 85)

It is within such a context of injustice and persecution, especially as perpetrated in Northern Ireland, that Micah, responding to Lord Dunseveric's warning against the forthcoming rebellion, mentions William Orr, a name which will recur throughout the novel:

I might listen to you if I had not seen your armed ruffians break into our meeting-houses; if I had not in memory stories of burnt homesteads, outraged women, tortured men; you might persuade me if I did not know that to-night you have taken my friends, that you will drag them before unjust judges, and condemn them on the evidence of perjured informers, as you condemned William Orr. Human endurance can bear no more. Patience is a virtue of the Gospel, but it becomes cowardice in the face of certain wrongs. (NI, 86)

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<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.



William Orr is mentioned again in the following chapter, when we are briefly introduced to the rector of Antrim, Mr Macartney, who is said to have written a letter in an effort to save Orr from being hanged (NI, 97 – 98). Orr's execution, however, referred to explicitly at the end of the novel (NI, 318), is carried out regardless and later Hope tells Neal the story, which even in 1798, we are told here, had embedded itself in popular consciousness. Here, crucially, Orr's status as a martyr is noted, as is his totemic significance; furthermore, the point is made that Orr is the foremost representative of many like him who suffered a similar fate:

Hope repeated the story, which in those days hardly needed telling among the Antrim peasants, of the man whose name had become a watchword; so that men, seeking to revive failing enthusiasms, said to each other – "Remember Orr." It was a pitiful tale; a man marked down as odious by a powerful faction, spied upon, informed against, tried by prejudiced judges, condemned on the word of false witnesses, hanged. The same tale might have been told of many others then, but William Orr came first on the list of such martyrs, and even now his name is not wholly forgotten. (NI, 113)

The final phrase, which claims that at the beginning of the twentieth century Orr's story has not been entirely forgotten, to some extent justifies the preceding details which, along with the other references to him throughout the novel, all serve to reintroduce into popular, especially Protestant, thought a name of such former potency – "Remember Orr". Orr's immense former significance in Northern Presbyterian culture is easily demonstrated by a summary of the events surrounding his execution and his subsequent posthumous reputation.

William Orr was a Presbyterian farmer who lived near Antrim and who became a United Irishman at some point after 1794. In September of that year he was arrested and charged with administering the United Irish oath to two soldiers earlier that year. After being imprisoned for a year without trial his eventual court case in 1797 was more than likely orchestrated by the government in order to intimidate the New Light Dissenters, of which Orr was one. His execution was fixed for October of 1797 but was twice postponed, as new evidence emerged. Just over a week before his execution Dr Alexander Haliday wrote to Lord Charlemont, the governor of Armagh, stating

that every possible effort had been made to save Orr but that he feared he would hang “leaving behind a character without reproach...a broken-hearted wife and six helpless children”<sup>367</sup>; his martyrdom, it would appear, was being envisaged even before his death.

Orr was executed on 14 October 1797 and the details of this entire chapter of injustice and posthumous transformation, some elements of which are suggested in the previously quoted passages from the novel, at least for a while became part of Northern Presbyterian mythology:

After the rope had been placed around his neck he exclaimed, ‘I am no traitor. I die for a persecuted country. Great Jehovah receive my soul. I die in the true faith of a Presbyterian.’ As the bolts were withdrawn a huge sigh went up from the watching crowd, a sort of mingled pain and menace, which over the next seven months was to resolve itself into just two words – ‘REMEMBER ORR’. His dying declaration, which had been thoughtfully printed in advance, was widely distributed and found a place of honour in many a humble cottage. In it he denounced the way in which his trial had been conducted, and asserted his innocence, while making it perfectly clear that he was a United Irishman.

(...) A mourning card was circulated, ‘sacred to the memory of William Orr...an awful sacrifice to Irish freedom on the altar of British tyranny’. There was a brisk trade in relics, locks of his hair and what was alleged to be fragments of the hood in which he was executed. Gold rings were engraved with his name. Henry Joy McCracken was to wear one at the Battle of Antrim, and on the eve of his own execution he bequeathed it to his mother Ann.

(...) The Presbyterians had their martyr.<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> A. T. Q. Stewart, *The Summer Soldiers: The 1798 Rebellion in Antrim and Down*. (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1995), 45 & 48.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, 49 – 51.

Later, Orr's apotheosis was completed with the publication of William Drennan's 'Wake of William Orr', in which Orr is commemorated firstly as a paragon to be emulated:

Write his merits on your mind,  
Morals pure, and manners kind;  
In his head, as on a hill,  
Virtue plac'd a citadel.

However, in the following stanza his sacrifice and its intended consequence is compared to the crucifixion of Christ and its effect; both were young men of supreme virtue who died for the sake of unity: in Christ's case the unity of mankind, in Orr's case the unity of Irishmen:

Why cut off in palmy youth?  
Truth he spoke, and acted truth:  
"Countrymen, Unite!" he cried,  
And died, for what his Saviour died!

The poem concludes with an intimation of resurrection and thus the comparison between Orr and Christ is completed: as Christ's execution vanquished death, so the ending of Orr's life will usher in the beginning of a new age in Irish history:

Here we watch our brother's sleep;  
Watch with us, but do not weep:  
Watch with us, thro' dead of night –  
But expect the morning light.

Conquer Fortune – persevere –  
Lo! It breaks – the morning clear!  
The cheerful cock awakes the skies:  
The day is come – Arise, arise!<sup>369</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> William Drennan, *Glendaloch, and Other Poems*. (Dublin: William Robertson, 1859), 45 – 47.



Thus, the above historical and literary background offers some indication of the perception of Orr at the time of his execution and afterwards. With this in mind, then, the repeated references to Orr's name in Birmingham's novel have undeniable political connotations, the sympathetic reiteration of his name being an example of Birmingham provocatively reminding his early twentieth century Unionist readers of their heritage of radical martyrs.

### **xii. Then is now**

Just one page after the above passage from the novel about Orr, shortly after arriving in Donegore, Hope shows Neal the ancient fort after which the parish is named. As in the previously quoted extract about Orr, which at one point explicitly reaches out to early twentieth century contemporary readers, so too Hope's challenging words here seem to be applicable to the Ireland of the time of publication; here, those in Birmingham's day are being asked to consider their proud inheritance, to question, perhaps, their recent opposition to devolution and, it seems, to ignore the economic disparity between Northern and Southern Ireland at the time:

Here great men, warriors of the past, had their hill-top burial, and it may be fixed their fortress home. From this they looked over the country which they took and held by strength of arm and courage of soul. Are we a meaner race, men of a poorer spirit? Shall we not enter in and possess the land in our turn? All over the voice of liberty is heard now, clear and strong, bidding the people assert themselves and claim right and justice. Are our ears alone deaf to the high call? Has the pursuit of riches dulled our souls? Is the clink of gold and silver so loud in our ears that we can hear nothing else? (NI, 114)

Shortly afterwards Hope speaks about the injustice prevalent in the Ireland of his time and, significantly, he links the predicament of Southern Catholics with that of Northern Presbyterians, thereby highlighting the theme of unity, which the next part of this section will discuss. As in the above passage, however, much of what Hope says here appears to extend beyond the eighteenth century and seems directly related to the devolution controversy of around the time of the novel's publication:

But the people are slaves, actually slaves, not a whit better. Are nine-tenths of the people to be slaves to one-tenth? The thing is unendurable. Look at the Catholics in the south, men without representation, without power, without direct influence; men marked with a brand of inferiority because of their religion. Look at the men of our own faith here in the north. Our case is not wholly so bad, but it is bad enough. We have asked, petitioned, begged, implored, for the removal of our grievances. If we are men we must do more – we must strike for them. Else we confess ourselves unworthy of the freedom which we claim. They alone are fit for liberty who dare to fight for liberty. Think of it, Neal Ward, think. It is we, the people, digging in the fields, toiling at the looms, it is we who make the riches, who win the good fruit from the hard ground, who weave the thread into precious fabric. And we are denied a share in what we create. It is from us in the last resort that the power of the governing classes comes. If we had not taken arms in our hands at their bidding, if we had not stood by them, no English Minister would ever have yielded to their demands, and given them the power which they enjoy. And they will not give us the smallest part of what we won for them. ‘What inheritance have we in Judah? Now see to thine own house, David. To your tents, O Israel!’ (NI, 116 – 17)

Here the challenging tone of the previously quoted extract is intensified by Birmingham’s juxtaposition of the indignity suffered by Presbyterians with an indication of what is rightly theirs, which suggests that this passage, along with other aspects of the novel, operates, on one level, as a goad to Northern Presbyterian radicalism in the early twentieth century.

### **xiii. Unity**

The theme of historical Presbyterian radicalism is not the only focus of the novel, but rather is intertwined with the novel’s other major motif, which is the historical and aspirational unity of all Irishmen. The latter preoccupation manifests itself in chapter three when the normally comic Comtesse makes a serious point when she delivers an after-dinner speech which calls for the union of Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter, regardless of their political differences, under the common name of Ireland:



Long ago my fathers lived in Ireland and were *grands seigneurs* as my good brother, Lord Dunseveric, is to-day. They left Ireland for the sake of their faith and their king. They went to France; but I am not, therefore, French. I am Irish. (...) I ask you all to drink my toast with me. I propose – ‘Ireland.’ I, who am loyal to the old faith and the memory of the legitimate king, I will drink it. My lord, who is of another faith and loyal to another king, will drink it also. Mr. Neal, who has a third kind of faith, and is, I understand, not loyal to any king, will, no doubt, drink it. My friends – ‘Ireland.’! (NI, 47 – 48)

Later, while in Donegore, Hope, referring to the house of a landlord in the area, gives the recent history of the family. Here we are offered a glimpse of the transient social unity in Ireland which occurred just before the 1798 rebellion: “[o]n the lawn in front of that house a company of Volunteers used to meet for drill. The owner of the house, the lord of the soil, was their captain. In those days we had all Ireland united – the landlords, the merchants, and the farming people. Now it is not so.” (NI, 115)

Later, the theme of historical Irish unity finds its most compelling expression in a passage describing the army of rebels just before their attack on Antrim. Here the startlingly diverse nature of the army is singled out for comment:

There were men in the little army belonging to some of the finest fighting stocks in the world. There were descendants of the fiery Celtic tribes to whom Owen Roe O’Neill taught patience and discipline; who, under him, if he had lived, might well have broken even Cromwell’s Ironsides and sent the mighty Puritan back to his England a beaten man. Despised, degraded, enslaved for more than a century, these had yet in them the capacity for fighting. There were also the great-grandsons of the citizen soldiers of Derry – of the men who stood at bay so doggedly behind their walls, whom neither French military art nor Celtic valour, nor the long suffering of famine and disease, could cow into surrender. There were others – newcomers to the soil of Ireland – who brought with them to Ulster the traditions of the Scottish Covenantors, memories of many a fierce struggle against persecution, of conflict with the dragoons of Claverhouse. All these, whose grandfathers had stood in arms for widely different causes, marched together on Antrim, an embodiment of Wolfe Tone’s dream of a united



Ireland. Their flags were green, vividly symbolic of the blending of the Protestant orange with the ancient Irish blue. M'Cracken, with such troops behind him, might march hopefully. (NI, 206 – 207)

Thus, this army comprises Catholics whose ancestors fought under Owen Roe O'Neill, whose objective was to reverse the Ulster plantation and acquire complete religious liberty for Catholics. Along with these are the then relatively recently arrived Scottish Covenanters, but, in what is easily the most provocative historical reference in the entire novel, Birmingham also includes in this army of rebels the descendants of the Apprentice Boys, who, only just over a century previously had famously defended the walls of Derry against the forces of Catholicism and had thus immortalized themselves in the Unionist mythology of Ulster. All of these men, representing very different, even incompatible, strands of Irish history, are brought together here and thus Wolfe Tone's dream of a united Ireland is realized, at least in this army.

#### xiv. Siege

In order to appreciate the boldness of the above quoted extract one needs to consider what the Apprentice Boys have typically represented for Northern Protestants and then contrast this with what Birmingham does with this totemic memory. In this regard Jonathan Bardon summarizes this episode of Ulster history, the moment when the Protestants of that province appeared to hold the keys, not just to the city of Derry, but to the fate of Irish, English and Dutch Protestants as well:

From all over Ulster, Protestants poured into Derry carrying what they could and leaving only Enniskillen as an alternative refuge. In addition to a garrison of over seven thousand men, perhaps thirty thousand Protestants sought sanctuary in the city. In a very real sense, therefore, the fate of the Protestant settlement in Ulster depended on Derry's ability to hold out. If Derry fell then James would be ready to use Ireland as a base from which he could make an assault on

England to recover his throne, and Louis XIV would be one step nearer neutralising England and overrunning Holland.<sup>370</sup>

On 18 April 1689 King James, accompanied by his army, approached the walls of Derry, only to have his offer of terms answered with “cries of ‘No surrender!’ and a fierce and sustained barrage of shot and ball.” During the subsequent siege the defenders began to starve and were, at one point, forced to eat horse, cat and rodent flesh, as well as the meat of a dog which had been “fattened by eating the bodies of the slain Irish.” George Holmes recorded: “I believe there died 15,000 men, women and children, many of which died for want of meat. But we had a great fever amongst us and all the children died, almost whole families not one left alive.” Another survivor wrote that people “died so fast at length as could scarce be found room to interr them, even the backsides and gardens were filled up with graves, and some thrown in cellars; some whole families were entirely extinct.”<sup>371</sup>

Such details then became part of the memory of the eventual victory, thus intensifying the myth. Bardon describes the end of this part of Ulster history, as well as its immediate and long-term impact on Irish, especially Ulster, Protestants:

The siege of 105 days was the last great siege in British history, and the most renowned. ‘Oh! to hear the loud acclamations of the garrison soldiers round the Walls when the ships came to the Quay’, Ash wrote in his diary. ‘...The Lord, who has preserved this City from the Enemy, I hope will always keep it to the Protestants.’ For the Protestants of Ulster this epic defence gave inspiration for more than three centuries to come. For King William the steadfast refusal of Derry to surrender provided a vital breathing space in his war with Louis XIV in a campaign that had just begun.<sup>372</sup>

Following the centenary of the siege in 1790 a celebration of the city’s deliverance became an annual ritual<sup>373</sup> and later, in the nineteenth century, an organization called the Apprentice Boys of Derry was formed, in 1813, membership of which began to

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<sup>370</sup> Jonathan Bardon, *A History of Ulster*. (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1992), 153 – 54.

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*, 155 & 156.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*, 157 – 58.

<sup>373</sup> R. F. Foster, *op. cit.*, 147.

increase after 1889, when it was decided to permit branches to be established in other parts of Ulster.<sup>374</sup>

When one bears in mind all of the above historical background, it is not difficult to see that Birmingham, in his above inclusion of “the citizen soldiers of Derry” amongst the army of 1798 rebels, is appropriating the totemic memory of the siege, which had grown in importance for Northern Protestants over the centuries, and, instead of adding to it, he provocatively complicates it by suggesting that the descendants of those who fought and starved to save the city of Derry from the forces of Catholicism, over a century later fought alongside their Catholic countrymen in an effort to overturn English rule in Ireland. For this reason what Birmingham has done here with the siege of Derry can be compared to what he does earlier in connection with William Orr: as he sought to revive the former potency of Orr’s name, so now he attempts to complicate the memory of the siege of Derry and thus in both cases his intention would appear to be to remind Northern Protestants of their historical political radicalism in an effort to encourage them to reconsider their political stance at the time of the novel’s publication.

#### **xv. Micah: unity, Dickson and end**

The previously discussed references to unity in the text are later concentrated in the character of Micah Ward at the end of the novel, though there are signs earlier in the novel that Micah is a passionate advocate of the unity of all Irishmen. For example, in the second chapter Neal notices the unprecedented “passion and fierceness” with which his father speaks about “the wrongs which the northern Presbyterians and the southern Roman Catholics suffered” (NI, 33) and later the minister declares to Lord Dunseveric: ““I care for Ireland, but I mean Ireland, not for certain noblemen and gentlemen, but Ireland for the Irish people, for the poor as well as the rich, for the Protestant, Dissenter, and Roman Catholic alike.”” (NI, 84) However, it is the final image of Micah, which we are left with by the end of the novel, that underlines both his thorough commitment to such unity, as well as the general theme of the union of

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<sup>374</sup> Brian Lalor (Ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of Ireland*. (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2003), 36.



all Irishmen, which, as we have seen, is one of the principal preoccupations of the novel.

In the closing pages of the novel, after Micah has been released from prison in Scotland, he is found to be “reading lovingly for the hundredth time” (NI, 317) the following inscription on a Greek lexicon:

“This book was given to Rev. Micah Ward by his fellow-prisoners in Fort George, in witness of their gratitude to him for his ministrations during their captivity, and as a token of their admiration for his fortitude, his patience, and his unfailing charity.”

There followed a list of twenty names. Four of them belonged to men of the Roman Catholic faith, six of them were the names of Presbyterians, ten were of those who accepted the teachings of that other Church which, trammelled for centuries by connection with the State, hampered with riches secured to her by the bayonets of a foreign power, dragged down very often by officials placed over her by Englishmen, has yet in spite of all won glory. Out of her womb have come the men whose names shine brightest on the melancholy roll of the Irish patriots of the last two centuries. She has not cared to boast of them. She has hidden their names from her children as if they were a shame to her, but they are hers.

Thus far off in a desolate Scottish fortress, after the total failure of every plan, in the hour of Ireland’s most hopeless degradation, the great dream which had fired the imagination of Tone and Neilson and the others, the dream of all Irishmen uniting in a common love of their country, a love which should transcend the differences of rival creeds, found a realisation. (NI, 317 – 18)

The above references to Fort George and the list of names of men of various faiths is a subtle reminder of the imprisonment of the Rev. William Steel Dickson, who joined the United Irishmen in 1791 and “was undoubtedly a leading figure in the

movement.”<sup>375</sup> Dickson was, like Micah, arrested and imprisoned, initially in the Prison Ship in Belfast Lough and then in Fort George in Scotland.<sup>376</sup> Furthermore, even the list of twenty names of men of various religious faiths, which Micah reads at the end of the novel, can be found in Dickson’s description of his own imprisonment, in which he recalls writing a similar list himself. What is important to note here is that this part of his account stresses, just as the novel does, the Presbyterian presence among the rebels of 1798, while the list also emphasizes the unity of the different Irish religious traditions, as envisaged by many of the leaders of the rebellion, a vision which is also part of the spirit of *The Northern Iron*. Dickson recalls that, as a result of information in government papers:

the Irish insurrection was firmly believed, in Scotland, to be a *real Popish rebellion*. One of the gentlemen, who knew that Messrs. Tennent and Simms were Presbyterians, and having learned that I was a minister of that persuasion, in a low voice expressed his surprise that *we* would connect ourselves with *Papists*, and much more that *we* would be concerned in a *Popish rebellion*. Overhearing this, I interferred, and asked the gentleman, in a voice equally low, why he called the insurrection, in Ireland, “*a Popish rebellion?*” He answered pertly that “he did so, on the authority of government, and that it was *known to be a fact*.” I replied, that “such an assertion was one of the many falsehoods, by which the people of Britain were deceived and misled, in respect to Ireland.” (...) I withdrew, to a side table, and wrote our names, classed by our religious profession, as underneath.

Dickson then includes that list of names in his text, with each man’s religious affiliation: there are four Catholics, six Presbyterians and ten members of the Church of Ireland; the numbers correspond exactly to those on the list which Micah reads. Dickson then handed this list to the man with whom he had just been in conversation, now saying to him: ““please, Sir, to look at that; and then tell me what becomes of your Popish Rebellion, on your own supposition that government consider *us*, as the

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<sup>375</sup> McMillan in Swords (Ed.), *op. cit.*, 101.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*

most *guilty*, or most *dangerous* of its enemies?" (...) At any rate, during the remainder of their stay with us, *Popish Rebellion* was not even hinted at."<sup>377</sup>

Thus, Dickson's point about the Protestant involvement in the 1798 rebellion is subtly alluded to in the above passage about Micah Ward and in this way the two themes of Protestant radicalism and the unity of all Irishmen are given their ultimate emphasis. Finally, the novel ends with a prediction of further rebellion – which would historically occur in 1803 – though, as is frequently the case in the novel, there is also a sense here that Birmingham is addressing his Protestant contemporaries, reminding them of their history from which they have divorced themselves, while also endeavouring to scripturally shame them into political radicalism:

“Doubtless,” said Micah Ward, “such a blow will be stricken, but not in our time, James Hope. The fighting spirit is gone from us. The men are laid low or scattered or broken. The people speak about the ‘break.’ They call it well. ‘Shall iron break the northern iron and the steel?’ Yea, but iron hath broken us. It hath entered into our souls. And if one look unto the land, behold darkness and sorrow and the light is darkened in the heavens thereof.” (NI, 319)

## **xvi. Conclusion**

In conclusion, what makes *The Northern Iron* particularly fascinating is that its in-depth exploration of eighteenth century Presbyterian radicalism can be seen as Birmingham's attempt to influence Northern Protestants at the beginning of the twentieth century in the hope that they might unite with their Southern counterparts, as he hoped they would, at a time when it was becoming increasingly apparent that there would be concerted opposition to any form of Home Rule, from Northern Protestants especially, even if this stance appeared to be at odds with their relatively recent history. *The Northern Iron*, then, is a highly provocative reminder of a radical past which was becoming increasingly difficult to reconcile with a Unionist present; Unionist Ulster simply could not accommodate memories of rebel ministers and the martyred Presbyterian farmer William Orr. Hannay's interest in the topic of Home

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<sup>377</sup> Brendan Clifford, *Scripture Politics: Selections from the Writings of William Steel Dickson, the Most Influential United Irishman of the North*. (Belfast: Athol Books, 1991), 99 – 100.



Rule, however, continued beyond the realm of fiction a few years after the publication of *The Northern Iron*, as the next two sections will show.

### xvii. Home Rule

Four years after the publication of *The Northern Iron*, in 1911, Hannay contributed to a book entitled *Home Rule Problems*. Hannay's chapter lists the safeguards which he believed would protect a Protestant minority in a self-governing Ireland. In an argument which is identical to one articulated by a character in *Benedict Kavanagh*, Hannay begins by claiming that Protestants, in such a political dispensation, would form a very strong minority and would not therefore be the victims of clerical bullying.<sup>378</sup> On the other hand, he suggests, historically the union has actually had the effect of protecting the Catholic Church and not Irish Protestants. Furthermore, he maintains that the political power of the Catholic clergy is gradually weakening in Ireland, which thus renders them increasingly irrelevant to a Protestant minority. He then moves to what he believes to be the more serious threat of a future Irish Parliament which might choose to bully the Protestant minority. Hannay, however, diminishes the anxiety surrounding this issue by arguing that the principal problem facing such a Parliament would be the economy and that its first objective within this context would be to impose a land tax and thus a sharp division would arise, not between Protestants and Catholics, but rather between urban and rural Ireland and therefore religious bullying would not pertain in such a scenario; in fact – in a prospect which is reminiscent of the many references to unity in *The Northern Iron* – Hannay asserts that the issue of land tax would actually result in the union between both religious parties on either side of such a conflict.<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>378</sup> The passage in question from *Benedict Kavanagh* is as follows:

'I wish,' said Doyne, 'that you knew yourselves better. How is it that you don't see that neither we nor our priests could bully you even if we wanted to? You Protestants make up one fourth part of the population of Ireland. No injustice could be done to so powerful a minority in a country which was governing itself. The best security you can have for your freedom is your own strength. And you people who are always boasting of your courage and independence ought to recognise that you would not be an easy people to persecute.' (BK, 205)

<sup>379</sup> Rev. James O. Hannay ("George A. Birmingham"), 'The Religious Problem in Ireland' in: Basil Williams (Ed.), *Home Rule Problems*. (London: P. S. King & Son, 1911), 104 – 108.

Hannay's final argument focuses on the issue of education in an independent Ireland of the future. He reminds his English readers that at present Irish education is almost entirely ecclesiastically managed, with all of the Churches rigidly preventing elected or other bodies from any involvement in the control of education. Of this situation Hannay declares: "[t]his, of course, cannot continue. Whatever else you refuse to give us, you must give us some control over education." Again, he asks, rhetorically, if such a change could possibly lead to religious bullying, when the only logical result of such an intervention in the sphere of education would be the dilution of clerical power in the country and, yet again, such a situation would inevitably unite the various religious traditions, the only split being that between lay and ordained members of all the different faiths:

And in this defence of existing powers Protestants and Roman Catholic ecclesiastics will be in close alliance. They both hate the idea of popular control of education. Is that a situation which is likely to lead to religious bullying? Hardly. On the one side will be arrayed bishops of both Churches and the Moderators and ex-Moderators of the Presbyterian General Assembly, on the other side a lay democracy composed of members of all denominations.<sup>380</sup>

Hannay then concludes with a reflection on the movement towards unity between the different religious traditions, which he has witnessed over the course of almost thirty years in Ireland, in the North, the West and in the capital,<sup>381</sup> a trend only recently disrupted by the *Ne Temere* decree, which became effective in 1908. The ultimate political effect of the latter decree, Hannay claims, was that it strengthened Unionist resistance to any measure of Home Rule:

I have seen a great change take place. When I was a young man intercourse between Irish Protestants and Irish Roman Catholics was rare in every rank of society. We lived apart from each other. We very seldom met. We never talked about anything that mattered. This condition of things has absolutely passed away. There is now far freer intercourse, far more social intermingling in all

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<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>381</sup> Hannay's reference to twenty eight years of familiarity with Irish social life is explained by the fact that he received an English education until the age of seventeen. *Ibid.*, 109.



classes. We are beginning to know each other. This change has taken place in spite of the warnings and exhortations of the clergy of all kinds. From their own point of view the clergy were right in their objection to the gradual breaking down of the wall of division. The inevitable happened. Young men and young women who danced together, played together, perhaps debated together, came to want to marry each other. Then the trouble began. From the point of view of the statesman mixed marriages are the most desirable things possible. From the point of view of the ecclesiastic they are the least desirable. All the clergy opposed them. The Roman Catholic clergy forbade them except on terms impossibly humiliating to Protestants. Hence the notorious decree *Ne temere*. The promulgation of this decree was a determined effort to put a stop once and for all to mixed marriages. It became necessary, from an ecclesiastical point of view, owing to the fact that the increasing intercourse between Protestants and Roman Catholics was leading to a kind of tolerance which came perilously near being religious indifference. I think it is quite possible that the indirect consequence of the promulgation of the decree was foreseen by the statesmen at the Vatican. It could only have had the effect of reviving religious bitterness in its worst form. It was certain, when it was enforced, to put a weapon into the hands of Irish Protestant Unionists which they would use with considerable effect against Home Rule. This the Vatican must have foreseen, and since Rome has much to lose and nothing to gain by the establishment of an Irish Parliament, it is likely that the Pope's advisers view this result of their action with equanimity.<sup>382</sup>

Thus the unity of Irishmen, as depicted in *The Northern Iron*, now seemed imperilled by this new development, but, despite the Unionist fears which *Ne Temere* aroused in connection with the issue of Home Rule, Hannay persisted in his support for a self-governing Ireland; in fact, his most significant intervention on the matter came only one year after the publication of *Home Rule Problems*.

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<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*, 109 – 110.



### xviii. Synod

On 16 April 1912, the archbishop of Armagh chaired a special meeting of the General Synod of the Church of Ireland to discuss “the present Crisis in its relation to the welfare and responsibilities of the Church of Ireland.” In his address to those assembled he began by referring to the issue of Home Rule as a “crisis in our national and ecclesiastical history” which was “a matter affecting the very existence of our Church in this land.” He then put the meeting of 1912 in its historical context by reminding his audience that similar meetings had been convened in 1886 and 1898 and on both occasions “our Church spoke with no uncertain voice. At each of those meetings the most able and brilliant of our bishops, clergy, and laity raised their solemn protest against Home Rule, and, in God’s good providence, the clouds rolled by, and the national danger was averted. God grant us a like result in this year of grace, 1912!”<sup>383</sup>

The primate then impressed upon his listeners the fact that there was almost total unity amongst Irish Protestants on the issue of Home Rule, with over one million of them regarding “the prospect of Home Rule as disastrous to Ireland.” He then outlined the dangers for them of such a measure being introduced at the time:

Ireland never can become a nation while there is an agreement on all sides of the necessity for safeguards and restrictions to prevent the majority from tyrannizing over the loyal minority. Can any sane man, with the dignity and honour and welfare of his country at heart, honestly accept such a position of humiliation and national degradation?<sup>384</sup>

He then claimed that Ireland’s interests were best served by its position, at the time, at the heart of the British Empire, in which it had the privilege of at least partly “directing the destinies” of “almost one-fourth of the entire population of the world.” He continued: “[t]his is our present position; this is the heritage into which we have been born – freemen of the greatest Empire on which the sun has ever shone.” After

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<sup>383</sup> J. A. Maconchy (Ed.), *Journal of the Session of the General Synod of the Church of Ireland holden in Dublin AD MDCCCCXII* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co. Ltd., 1912), xlv – xlvi.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*, xlvi – xlvi.

this, his next question scarcely needed a reply: "Shall we surrender all this national greatness in order to become a petty province of England and Scotland, a humble vassal of Great Britain, a paid tributary of the Empire, an appendage or a colony of the Imperial Crown?" Quoting George Salmon's comments, made in 1893, the archbishop described Home Rule as "a Bill for the political annihilation of the Protestants of Ireland." Furthermore, he claimed that such political change would introduce anarchy, civil strife, the forced exile of Protestants and the spread of "blatant atheism."<sup>385</sup>

The archbishop of Dublin then proposed a resolution which was seconded. It was then supported by both the bishop of Kilmore and another and was thus passed. The resolution in question read as follows:

That we, the Bishops, Clergy, and Laity of the Church of Ireland, solemnly assembled in General Synod, and invoking the guidance and protection of Almighty God, hereby reaffirm our constant allegiance to the Throne, and our unswerving attachment to the Legislative Union now subsisting between Great Britain and Ireland. We make this declaration at the present crisis not as adherents of a party nor on behalf of a class, but as a body of Irishmen, representing more than half a million of Irish people, holding various political opinions, following different callings, and sharing at the same time a common desire for the honour and welfare of our native land.<sup>386</sup>

Only five members voted against the above resolution, Hannay being one of them, and his opposing speech was reported the following day in *The Irish Times*. Taking issue specifically with the resolution's reference to the "unswerving attachment" to the Union, Hannay reminded the Synod that disaster had been predicted before the disestablishment of the Church in the previous century, but time had since shown such prophecies to be mistaken and thus he pointed towards the possibility that the Synod might now, again, be guilty of another fallacy. He then argued, to audible objections, that the contemporary system of government consisted of "a bureaucracy, a body of officials, a very able and intelligent Mandarin class." The policies that were thereby

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<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, xlviiii – li.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*, li – lii.

produced were then “continually modified by the influence of Maynooth. Their actions were deflected by the eruptions of jobbing politicians.” Above these were the cynical English chief secretaries whose sole concern was the efficient operation of the machine just described. He then expressed incredulity that “any one was ever fool enough to bleed and die for such a system.” Thus the resolution’s affirmation of “unswerving attachment” was ridiculed by Hannay and, he stated, in passing it the Church was permanently binding itself “to a bureaucracy, a priesthood, not of their Church, and a guild of politicians – three witches who stirred the cauldron of their country’s destiny.”<sup>387</sup>

He then set about undermining the lofty language and sentiments associated with what stood behind such bureaucracy: “the Imperial Parliament, the “Mother of Liberty” and all that kind of thing.” Recently, he continued, from this august source, had come taxes to fund “a series of experiments in State Socialism.” Such social legislation was not wanted in Ireland and in any case the country could not afford it. Again he taunted those who had passed the resolution, claiming that it was strange that they had declared their resolute attachment to a Union which would annually:

lead them deeper into the mire of bankruptcy, providing what to them were no more than costly toys? Seeing that that was the way things were with them, the thing they ought to do was not to declare their unswerving attachment to the Legislative Union, now subsisting, but rather to say plainly that they meant at once to put an end to it, for gentlemen, the end of it was coming. Whether the particular bill before Parliament became law or not, the Legislative Union now subsisting was too grotesque and inconvenient to last for much longer. Surely it were better for them to take in hand at once the task of deciding how this Ireland of theirs may properly govern herself, than to be for ever dinning the ears of a world, which had grown not a little weary of them by continuing to shout “No, no, no” to every proposal made by anyone. (Hear, hear, and “No, no.”)<sup>388</sup>

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<sup>387</sup> *The Irish Times*, 17 April, 1912, p.8.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*



Thus, as the writer of *The Northern Iron* had stressed the indignity of a people with a proud inheritance who could not govern themselves, so now, just five years afterwards, the clergyman publicly defied the overwhelming consensus of his Church and voiced the same idea.<sup>389</sup>

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<sup>389</sup> Just a fortnight before Hannay made the above speech, his literary persona had already begun to respond to the Home Rule controversy, specifically in the form of a novel entitled *The Red Hand of Ulster*. R. B. D. French offers the following summary of the immediate political background relevant to the composition of that novel:

Public affairs in 1912 were dominated by the fierce party strife over the issue of Home Rule for Ireland and the prospect of armed rebellion in Ulster, perhaps even of civil war. *The Red Hand of Ulster* was written against a backdrop of rapidly developing events. On 2 April Hannay began to write the book. On 9 April, Easter Tuesday, the great demonstration was held at Balmoral, outside Belfast, at which the Unionist party committed itself finally to the cause of Protestant Ulster and the defeat of the Home Rule Bill. Three days later the Bill was published. (...) The book was finished on 9 June and published on 30 July.

George A. Birmingham, *The Red Hand of Ulster*. Introduction by R. B. D. French. (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1972), xi – xii & xiii. The central conceit of the novel – that the Ulster Unionists are so loyal that they eventually take up arms against Britain when the latter tries to impose Home Rule on Ireland – may be seen as an explicit form of the more muted satire at the heart of *The Northern Iron*. The two novels are similar in that they both attempt to expose the absurdity of Ulster Unionism at a time in the twentieth century when Home Rule was being repeatedly considered by many as the only equitable manner of resolving the Irish question. However, whereas *The Northern Iron* sought to remind Birmingham's Unionist contemporaries of their radical, republican past, *The Red Hand of Ulster*, on the other hand, merely satirizes what he saw as an absurd obsession with the Union, a preoccupation which was deepening rapidly as he wrote the novel and as he spoke against the Union during the Synod of 1912.

## Conclusion

If history is the attempt to retrospectively construct an image of the past, then the novels from the past are literary documents, handed on to us from a former era, which offer, in contrast, an immediate vision of the time out of which they come. Birmingham's early fiction functions in this way, in that it presents to us a comprehensive overview of Edwardian Ireland. In *The Seething Pot*, *Hyacinth* and *Benedict Kavanagh* the various different aspects of early twentieth century Ireland are depicted in a way that enriches a purely historical understanding of this period, and this is part of the value of this particular trilogy. In this regard John Wilson Foster's recent appraisal of the popular Irish fiction published between 1890 and 1940 is germane to Birmingham's rapidly produced early fiction, as considered in this thesis. Here Foster underlines the sociocultural and literary value of many of the often underrated novels from the period in question, thus challenging critical orthodoxies which would choose to ignore such work:

Any account of the popular novel must perforce include works that are interesting and worthwhile less for their literary merit than for the historical context of their popularity and for their social content. Such inclusion goes against the critical grain and requires a suspension of critical disbelief while priorities are rearranged. One outcome hard to avoid is an implied flattening out of literary merit. However, I believe that the social and at times literary pay-off makes this suspension worth the critical concession. An Oscar Wilde or Elizabeth Bowen, for example, is superior to a second-ranking writer such as Ella MacMahon or Katherine Tynan, and far superior to a third-ranking novelist such as Rosa Mulholland. Yet a prolific lower-ranking novelist (...) can across a plethora of texts generate an impressive wattage of social and cultural illumination.<sup>390</sup>

Birmingham's early novels, as this thesis has shown, also offer such an insight into the social and cultural life of Ireland, reflecting mainly Birmingham's impressions of the country from the time when he began his career as a novelist. Thus, the trilogy in

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<sup>390</sup> John Wilson Foster, *Irish Novels 1890 – 1940: New Bearings in Culture and Fiction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 19.

question constitutes a largely ignored record – in fictional form – of a highly important period in twentieth century Irish history.

As well as the above, this thesis has demonstrated that Birmingham's first four novels also operate on another level and this involves the attempted intervention on the novelist's part in the social, political and cultural climate of the period in question. In this sense they are not merely compelling records of a certain time in Irish history, but also instances of efforts to influence that time. In this regard *The Seething Pot*, as the first chapter of this thesis has shown, reflects Birmingham's sincere hope that the gentry would play a meaningful role in the new Ireland which was rapidly coming into being at the time. This first novel by Birmingham reveals a preoccupation – which was to last for many years afterwards – with the topic of landlordism, a theme which points to one of the main aspects of Protestant Ireland which both Birmingham and Hannay believed ought to act as a counterbalancing force to the power of the Catholic Church, then gradually emerging as an increasingly powerful presence on the Irish national stage.

Following his first novel, *Hyacinth*, as we have seen, also betrays an anxiety, from a Protestant perspective, of the growing ascendancy of the Catholic Church, though this time it is the Church of Ireland and its associated institution, Trinity College, Dublin, which come under scrutiny and, consequently, criticism. In this novel the staunchly Unionist position of both institutions is the matter under investigation. Furthermore, the attempt by the eponymous hero to play a role in national affairs ultimately ends in failure, itself a reflection of the aggressive separation of Protestant and Catholic Ireland which was being advocated by some in the Irish Ireland movement of the time, particularly D. P. Moran.

It is with *Benedict Kavanagh*, however, that Birmingham finally writes a novel which ends with the titular character having made a firm and empowering commitment to Ireland and, as this thesis has shown, it is Benedict's involvement in the Gaelic League which facilitates his eventual move towards active participation in his local community. Thus, this novel stresses the capacity of the League, together with Anglo-Irish literature, to open a gateway for Protestants into the Ireland of the time.



Finally, in addition to the above trilogy, Birmingham completed his series of literary exhortations with *The Northern Iron*. In this fourth novel, at first appearance at least, Birmingham has moved away from the Ireland of his own time. However, the text, despite its eighteenth century setting, had an important message for those who were becoming increasingly vociferous in their condemnation of any attempt to introduce even a measure of Home Rule at the time of the novel's publication. In this fourth novel, as in so many cases before and afterwards, Birmingham was provocatively reminding his Protestant contemporaries of their former patriotism, a patriotism which in this case extended all the way to militant republicanism.

After *The Northern Iron*, with the publication of *The Bad Times*, Birmingham demonstrated that he had by then, in his fiction, comprehensively dealt with the political and cultural issues of most concern to him as, in his fifth novel, as already stated, the subject matter is simply a combination of old themes, with the topics of landlordism and the Church of Ireland again being examined, as they had been in his earlier fiction. Afterwards, with the abrupt change of literary direction represented by the commercially successful *Spanish Gold*, Birmingham embraced a formula of light, comic fiction, which was to make him a hugely popular writer for the rest of his lifetime.

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Moses was little good to his people until he had killed an Egyptian; and for the most part a writer or public man of the upper classes is useless to this country till he has done something that separates him from his class.<sup>391</sup>

Yeats's words here, from 1901, are remarkably applicable to Birmingham's first four novels, for in those novels Birmingham consistently communicates the message that if his co-religionists do not want to be relegated to the periphery of Irish society, they must force themselves out of their cultural comfort zones and align themselves with the values of the Ireland then taking shape around them. In this regard Birmingham's

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<sup>391</sup> Quoted in Harrington, *op. cit.*, 417.

first four novels resonate with the voice of the preacher, their didactic impulse being a vestige of Victorianism.

In conclusion, Birmingham's early fiction, specifically the four novels discussed in this thesis, should now be given the attention that they so manifestly deserve. The early twentieth century Ireland from which they emerge is, for the most part, synonymous with artistic giants such as Yeats, Lady Gregory, Synge, Joyce and Moore. However, this thesis has demonstrated that the literary cartography of that era should now be reconfigured in order to acknowledge the important contribution of this unjustly neglected writer.

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