

Voicing rebellion in Victorian fiction: towards a textual commemoration

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The nineteenth century was particularly insistent on the necessity for historical continuity and historical remembrancing: public monuments were erected in great number, public ceremony came to occupy an important place in political life, festive commemorations of public figures and important occurrences grew in number, size and symbolical importance, and old traditions were assiduously cultivated, revived or even invented.

Joep Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination: Patterns in the Historical and Literary Representation of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), pp. 6-7.

The notion of 'remembrance' articulated by Joep Leerssen envisages the public declaration of a past (and idealised) national identity as the basis for a reassertion of a prescribed collective identity in the present. Crucially, it implies a cultural process of remembrance that is dynamic, avoiding the limitations of an antiquarian mummification of the past, and engaging national history with the modern evolution of national identity. The literary (and in the case of this chapter, the novelistic) fashioning of Irish history and identity can be seen as part of this process of remembrance and correlative commemoration. Prose fiction will be seen to stand as an important cultural arena within which the revival, celebration, and invention of tradition can be witnessed. Thus a particular case in point, George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859), will be viewed as a text within which the remembrance (rememberance) of an Irish insurgency becomes the active commemoration of Irish identity more generally. This textual analysis is to be situated within a broader examination of the awkwardness inherent in the treatment of Ireland in Victorian literature and culture. Overarchingly, this discussion will be framed by a consideration of wider-ranging debates about the textual and discursive positioning of Irishness in the construction of British/English identity, to which we turn first.

Within a wider (self) fashioning of identity, the processes of remembrance and commemoration rely implicitly on a sanctified narrative of national history as the basis for past, present and future action. Hence, for example, moments such as the 1798 uprising can be situated within an ongoing discursive realisation of the relationship of Irishness to British/English-ness. This is central to the consideration of the imagining of Irishness within the colonial/post-colonial environment. For, it taps into a prominent tendency within post-colonial critical discourse(s) towards

configuring the national, group experience as a collective narrative. This is implicit, for instance, in the title of Homi Bhabha's *Nation and Narration* (1990). This configuration of national identity highlights the role of narrativising, the ability to narrate a group experience, as fundamental. It is, on the one hand, part of what Edward Said calls 'the method colonised people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history'.¹ Reciprocally, history as narrative can be suppressed, or else loaded against the active acknowledgement and participation of subordinate groups. The power of control over the development and emergence of such competing national narratives is thus a key political struggle: 'the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism'.² It is a conflict over the extent to which emergent and emerging national narratives can take their place both *in*, and indeed in some cases *as*, the national consciousness.

This focus on the narrativity of the national experience has precipitated post-colonial revisions of the canon of western literature, where fictions are seen as narrations of imperialist ideology. This has occurred at the level of (meta)fiction, and also at the level of critical discourse. The former is typified by Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), whilst the latter is evident, for instance, in the reworking of *Mansfield Park* in Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) and Franco Moretti's *Atlas of the European Novel* (1998). The intention of these revisions has been, it would seem, to reinscribe the suppressed national narratives of subordinated native cultures onto the landscapes of canonical works. For the most part these are ideologically ironed-out terrains that stubbornly refuse to acknowledge their imperialist implications. Hence Rhys' narrative of the first Mrs Rochester, and the detailed and groundbreaking critiques of the imperialist foundations of the social structure of Jane Austen executed by Said and Moretti.

Evidently, the imperial project identified as the subtext of such selected canonical fiction is of a very particular kind. It is the grand western empire of the African, Caribbean, and American kind, supplemented by the penal settlements of Australia and the vague orientalised Others of the East. It is the empire of the wider world; a pan-global, pan-continental collective of conquered territories and coerced peoples. Noticeably, this perception of empire tends to underplay the entirely domestic nature of the imperialist relations that existed between England and its neighbours. This includes Scotland and Wales, but most particularly (and for the purposes of this chapter *solely*) places the spotlight on the historical position of Ireland. Indeed, the conspicuous absence of Ireland within most post-colonial reworking of the canon of English literature, and nineteenth-century fictions especially, is a curious one. Occasionally, in critical texts such as Cairns' and Richards's *Writing Ireland* (1988), Terry Eagleton's *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (1995), or Leerssen's *Remembrance and Imagination* (1996), an attempt is made to develop the Irish dimension of western canons. However, the appearance of such revisions has been relatively rare. For the most part Ireland is the silent Other of a dominant

1 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London, 1994), p. xiii. 2 *Ibid.*

British empire, both within fictions themselves and within the critical discourses that have declared it their mission to emancipate the colonised. It is a silence that reveals the inherently uncomfortable relationship between Ireland and a wider British, and more specifically English, ideology of national identity.³ This is an ideology that has represented Ireland either in distinctly hostile, or, at the very least, deeply partisan ways.⁴

The problematics of the textual positioning of the politics of Ireland within nineteenth-century English writings are, because of the formalised imperial nature of Anglo-Irish relations during the historical period, fundamental. Such textual positioning is to be the eventual focus of this chapter, culminating in an attempt to mark out the parameters of a post-colonial revision of George Eliot's *Adam Bede* in light of the political aftermath of the 1798 rebellion. More generally, however, the Victorian treatment of Ireland within fictional discourse will be seen to offer an implicit acknowledgement of the dangers of Irish insurgency and an accompanying attempt to neutralise this revolutionary potential. The frame for this discussion is the historical process of self-fashioning a dominating British/English identity, and the ways in which Ireland, especially Irish political uprising, has been marginalised by these codifying practices.

This is evidenced, for example, by the remit of the various British (cultural) studies courses that exist both in Britain and abroad. Since their inception the central critical debate within British studies, British cultural studies, and cultural studies more broadly, has been about the nature and definition of 'culture'. Whether working through the Arnoldian paradigm, or else via Williams, Hoggart, Leavis, or even Gramsci, Althusser, Foucault et al., much has been said, and much more will, no doubt, be said again about the varying status of particular cultural products. Such debates are the staple diet of British cultural studies courses both in Britain and in the rest of the world.⁵ However, the debate about the problematic nature of British identity, 'Britishness', has been rather less explicit within these courses. 'Britishness' is often either an assumed term, or is collapsed into a broad church Englishness, or else taken to be a catch-all label for any 'cultural' activity that occurs in 'Great Britain'. For instance, in his article 'The Study of Popular Culture

³ The apparent slippage between 'English' and 'British' is acknowledged. It is articulated in full recognition of both the coherences and the incoherences of what has become known as 'Britain'. What is being signified by the use of 'British', more particularly, is an institutionalised, official identity that centres on England, but which is dominant in national discourse throughout the islands of Great Britain. The tendency towards the interchangeability of 'British' and 'English' is a reflection of such a dominance. ⁴ See David Cairns and Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture* (Manchester, 1988) for detailed discussions of the dual strategies of 'simianisation' and 'Celticism'. ⁵ These include an M.Litt. in 'British Cultural Studies' at the University of Strathclyde, the University of Michigan programme in 'British Studies', an M.A. in 'British Cultural Studies' at Sheffield Hallam University and the M.A. in 'British Studies' at the Nicholas Copernicus University, Torun (Poland).

within British Cultural Studies' John Storey remarks how there is 'little difficulty' in addressing the object of study. However, he then goes on to collapse 'British culture' into 'culture' more generally, to talk of Williams and Fiske, and never actually addresses the issue of 'Britishness' at any stage.⁶ In this sense 'British culture' becomes, to coin Roland Barthes, 'what gets taught'; this is the meta-critical, self-fulfilling prophecy of British cultural studies.

This tendency to shy away from the controversies of historicised debates about 'Britishness' is further evident in the remit of the North American *Journal of British Studies*, which articulates a concern with the 'significance of British culture in Britain itself and in areas of the world previously contained within the ambit of the British Empire – ranging chronologically from the Middle Ages to the present'.⁷ Here assumptions are made about the coherence and cultural homogeneity of British identity that are not fully problematised and, moreover, there is an inherent implication that questions of identity, especially the crucial question of definition, have been resolved. Similarly, the primary aspiration of the British Council assumes, rather than critiques, the product that it exports: 'to demonstrate the innovation, excellence and cultural diversity of British arts to overseas publics, media, opinion-formers and successor generations'.⁸ Not only can such aspirations be regarded as politically dubious (an issue for another day), but it would surely seem reasonable for the Council to at least acknowledge that there are some unresolved issues concerning notions of 'Britishness', if indeed it is to be exported to 'opinion-formers and successor generations'. Any attempt to define a homogeneous, authentic notion of British identity must be seen as fundamentally flawed. Clearly, within a post-colonial discursive framework 'the whole *notion* of authenticity, of the authentic . . . experience, is one that comes to us constructed by hegemonic voices'.⁹

The only way to proceed with the historico-cultural relocation of Irishness is to ask new questions of old subject matters. As Sneja Gunew has said:

what one has to tease out is what is *not* there. One way of doing this . . . is to say: But look, this is what is left out, this is what is covered over; this kind of construction is taking place, this kind of reading is privileged; and then to ask, What readings are not privileged, what is not there, what questions can't be asked.¹⁰

Part of the strategy of reading 'what is *not* there' relies on an awareness of the relationship and interrelation between the prescribed narrative of the dominant,

⁶ John Storey, 'The Study of Popular Culture within British Cultural Studies' in *European English Messenger*, 3 (Autumn 1994), p. 47. ⁷ See <http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/JBS/brief.html>. ⁸ See, for example, <http://www.britcoun.org>. ⁹ Sneja Gunew, 'Questions of Multiculturalism', in Sarah Harasym (ed.), *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (London, 1990), p. 61. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*

colonising national identity (akin to what Jameson has called the 'master narrative'¹¹) and the silenced narrative(s) of subordinated, colonised national groups that have been ironed out of the official history.

Applying such a methodology to the remit and subject field of British (cultural) studies syllabuses is in itself highly revealing. For instance, the exclusively contemporary focus of the majority of these courses can be seen as deeply suggestive. There is certainly no inherent justification as to why such a focus should be typical. Yet, in concentrating on the post-war decades the effect, in terms of conceptualising decolonisation, is to ensure that the overriding focus is on the landmasses of Africa and the Caribbean. There is an implied reluctance to come to terms with the historical and domestic dimensions of the British empire, central to which is the debate over the position of Ireland. The question of Ireland is deferred, not answered, by such a strategy of silence. British studies/British cultural studies needs not only to consider what 'culture' is, but it must also ensure that the 'British' attached to it becomes a fully meaningful descriptor, rather than a broad, bland, depoliticised genericism with no particular significance or meaning except in relation to the export of an idealised, sanitised heritage. The awkward, unaddressed silence of the implicit Irish dimension of British experience is inherent in any attempt to historically locate 'Britishness'. For, at almost every stage of history Ireland and Britain (and especially England) are intertwined. As Robert Kee has argued: 'since "Irish" was an identity which had for so long existed only within the framework of the British Empire, that framework was part of the identity.'¹² Indeed, the historical position of Ireland is a fundamental and outstanding challenge to the imagined community that is British/English-ness.

The critical vocabulary of Sneja Gunew can be employed, in light of this, as part of an ongoing strategy of empowerment. It offers itself as a catalyst to a concerted strategy to 'read the Irish' into cultural texts that do not make its presence explicit, to ask the questions about 'what is left out, what is covered over'. This methodology complements a more inclusive disciplinary concern with Irish history and culture under British rule, the intention of which is to deny the confinement of Ireland and Irish national identity to the status of what Frantz Fanon has called a national culture 'under colonial domination'. For, a national culture in such circumstances 'very quickly becomes a culture condemned to secrecy', marginalised or even silenced.¹³ Evidently this is the present state of affairs, apparent from the position of Ireland within British academic disciplines. The imbalance needs to be redressed. Crucial, within this schema, are periods of uprising and rebellion. The details of 1798, 1848, 1867, 1916 all loom large. Such moments of uprising mark the

11 F. Jameson, Foreword to Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. xix. 12 Robert Kee, *The Green Flag: A History of Irish Nationalism* (London, 1987), p. 4. 13 Frantz Fanon, 'From The Wretched of the Earth', in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (Hemel Hempstead, 1993), p. 46.

attempts of a colonised people to claim their own history, to write their own narrative(s) (or at least to impact upon the evolution of the master narrative). They are, as such, fundamental to our understanding of the interaction of power and narrativity.

Prominent historical moments of insurgency are crucial in the process of forming group/national identity; they provide fissures in the dominant ideological landscape and in so doing reveal the tension and conflict beneath. The (non)representation of such moments of Irish history by English writers, in this case particularly canonical (that is, ideologically sanctioned) writers of fiction, illustrates the complex interaction between colonised and coloniser at the level of fictional discourse. This serves to highlight the compound of influences striving to fashion the suppressed national identity of Irishness during the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, the period of official, institutional domination. Thus, there is evident potential for a further post-colonial consideration of the fashioning of British and English identity in the study of the Irish dimension of Victorian fiction. It is this to which we turn now.

In the case of Victorian writers of fiction there were many apparent difficulties inherent in the task of representing the contentiousness of Ireland for a mainstream English audience. They were confronted with either a broad-based cultural hostility towards the Irish (based on various religious and ethnic prejudices) or else a pervading apathy amongst the English reading public for any Irish-related subject matter. For Harriet Martineau, not untypically, Ireland came to be seen as tiresome:

the world is weary of the subject of Ireland; and, above all the rest, the English reading world is weary of it. The mere name brings up images of men in long coats and women in long cloaks; of mud cabins and potatoes; the conacre, the middleman, and the priest; the faction fight, and the funeral howl. The sadness of the subject has of late years increased the weariness.¹⁴

The middle-class readership, particularly that of the magazines, desired comfortable (and comforting) stories of English domestic life to read in front of their domestic hearths. There was not to be the slightest suggestion of anything improper. The controversies of Catholic Emancipation, corn law repeal, and the Famine had made Ireland increasingly contentious. By the 1850s it was a subject either to be ignored, or at the very least politically neutralised. Hence, the evident reluctance, and lack of success, of nineteenth-century English novelists who explicitly engaged with Irish politics. As Anthony Trollope was honest enough to acknowledge, after the abysmal commercial failure of his first two novels, *The Macdermots of Ballycloran* (1847) and *The Kellys and the O'Kellys* (1848), success in

¹⁴ Harriet Martineau, 'Condition and Prospects of Ireland' in *Westminster Review*, 8 (January 1853), p. 35.

England was not to be achieved by fiction that dealt with the politics of Ireland so conspicuously.

Trollope learnt this lesson well, and it is no coincidence that his later Irish-flavoured novels are prime exemplars of how a successful English novelist could incorporate Ireland into his work without unduly affecting its commercial viability. On the one hand, it could be made a marginal aspect of the overall schema, as with *Phineas Finn* (1869) and *An Eye for an Eye* (1879). In *Phineas Finn*, for example, the political resonance of Finn's resignation over the Irish land acts is undermined by the fact that this resignation ultimately brings about the telos of the romance-narrative, seeing him return to Ireland and marry his Irish sweetheart. As such the principle that brings about the romantic resolution is inevitably made more incidental. Furthermore, the Fenian invasion of Canada in May 1866, as a site for Irish insurgency, is directly denied by Finn himself. When asked if he had seen the news of the raid he replies: 'Yes, I have seen it, but do not believe it.'¹⁵ Hence its political potential is contained and ultimately suppressed.

On the other hand, if not made marginal Ireland was neutered as a site for political contestation, represented so as not to undermine the dominant political and cultural values of the English reading public. This is apparent in *Phineas Redux* (1874). Not only is Phineas Finn purged of his inconvenient Irish bride before the narrative even commences, allowing him an easier passage back into English political life, but Irish politics is also effectively purged from the novel. Thus, the actual historical controversy during the period in which *Phineas Redux* is set, concerning Irish church disestablishment (leading to Gladstone's bill of 1869), is displaced by the fictional saga of the controversy surrounding a supposed disestablishment of the Church of England. The same strategy of containment is also evident in both *Castle Richmond* (1860) and *The Landleaguers* (1883). Notably in the former Trollope prefaces his story with a meek request that he may be permitted to use Ireland as his subject matter, acknowledging Irish novels as 'drugs in the market'.¹⁶

The traits of what might be called the incidentalising of Ireland, and especially Irish-centred rebellion, are evident in the work of other Victorian novelists. The climax of Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), for instance, focuses on the 1780 'No Popery!' Gordon Riots whilst choosing to overlook the fact that these riots, these moments of socio-cultural insurgency, carried with them an inherent nationalist bias. This manifested itself in a broad-based anti-Irish feeling, notably with the burning of effigies of St Patrick. This Irish dimension is also conspicuous by its silence in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844), where the controversy of O'Connell's campaign for the repeal of the Union becomes merely the backdrop for a satirical attack on political hypocrisy in America. The political impact of the associated rallies and demonstrations, allied to the inherent nationalist sentiment that fuelled O'Connell's campaign, is avoided. As such both Dickens and Trollope, two of the

¹⁵ A. Trollope, *Phineas Finn* [1869] (London, 1985), p. 664. ¹⁶ A. Trollope, *Castle Richmond* [1860] (Oxford, 1985), p. 1.

most notable of George Eliot's literary peers, can be seen to have made little attempt to contextualise Irish politics, and Irish political uprising, within the wider political framework of mid-century Anglo-Irish relations. Irish national identity becomes an almost incidental, symbolic manifestation of Otherness.

The case of Eliot herself is equally, if not more, problematic. There is no ongoing Irish dimension to her fiction that reflects her own sympathetic attitude towards Ireland and its people. Her relationship with Ireland has been critically ignored largely because the only manifest occasion on which Ireland features within the Eliot canon is in *Adam Bede*, when Hetty Sorel is informed that 'the Loamshire Militia's gone to Ireland'.¹⁷ Therein Ireland appears an almost incidental aspect of the plot-narrative. Eliot required a means by which the character of Arthur Donnithorne could be removed from her textual England. This was necessary so that the abortive relationship between Hetty Sorel and Adam Bede could be resurrected, and thus he joins the local militia and is posted to Ireland. The sense of his departure is all that is emphasised within the narrative and Ireland is discreetly erased from the consciousness of the text. Therein a particular interpretation of events is prescribed. According to Terry Lovell this is typical of the realist text:

the classic realist text is closed. The meanings which it generates are fixed and limited and depend on the reader's acceptance of the position offered by the text . . . the constituted reader is passive, the consumer of pre-given meanings, not their active creator.¹⁸

For Lovell, when the reader accepts the dominant position offered by the text, 'the text performs its ideological role', and as such the apparent textual harmony of rural England is maintained.¹⁹

However, the textual silencing of Ireland in *Adam Bede* belies the fact that Eliot herself articulated sympathy for Ireland, and in particular the Repeal agenda. Her

¹⁷ George Eliot, *Adam Bede* [1859] (London, 1985), p. 423. Subsequent references to this text will be given in parentheses within the text. After the publication of *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1878), George Eliot began to prepare for the writing of her eighth novel. Set during the period of the Napoleonic Wars, it was to be a story with a distinctly Irish flavour. The Irishness of the projected plot-narrative is indicated by Eliot's copious note-taking from the first three Irish-centred volumes of W.E.H. Lecky's *A History of England in the Eighteenth Century* (1878), concentrating largely on the legislative restrictions facing Catholics who wished to marry Protestants. According to William Baker ('George Eliot's Projected Napoleonic War Novel: An Unnoted Reading List.' in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 29 (1975), 453-60) it was a shift towards Ireland arising out of the conspicuous Fenian activity of the 1860s and 1870s. See 'Notebook: Containing Poems, Part of a Novel, and Arithmetical Questions': British Library ref. (M627), in addition to the Yale George Eliot Notebook, a copy of which can be found in the British Library, reference M890. In the latter there is a section entitled 'notes for a projected novel'. ¹⁸ T. Lovell, *Picture of Reality: Aesthetics, Politics and Pleasure* (London: BFI, 1980), p. 85. ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

personal interest in Ireland was stimulated by a liberal desire to bridge the divides, religious, economic and cultural, between the Protestant English and the marginalised Catholic-Irish population. This liberal ideal was an encapsulation of her wider humanitarian ethos allied to a more direct republican sympathy. She displayed her support for the cause of Irish nationalism, for instance, by attending a pro-Repeal speech by O'Connell on 18 March 1844.²⁰ Her more general humanitarian concern for a people decimated by famine is expressed in a letter to Mrs. Henry Houghton, in which Eliot wrote of her simple wish 'that by this time Henry [Houghton] is come back with good news about Ireland'.²¹ However, here the humanitarian impulse predominates, and no attempt is made to deliberate on the political ramifications of the Famine to any extent.

It was in a much later letter, to the wife of Richard Congreve in April 1868, that Eliot most openly articulated her own political position *vis-à-vis* Ireland. Celebrating Dr Congreve's essay 'Ireland', she wrote: 'All protests tell, however slowly and imperceptibly, and a protest against the doctrine that England is to keep Ireland under all conditions was what I wished to be made.'²² The essay she valued so highly supported the cause of Irish republicanism, rejecting the interference of England as coloniser. Congreve begins the essay by acknowledging the 'real ground for that discontent and disaffection 'amongst the Irish towards the English.'²³ He urged the 'reconstitution of Ireland, as a self-existent state', no longer to 'assimilate her to ourselves, to mould her into our image, or retain her in her present inharmonious connection with ourselves'.²⁴ His fundamental critique was of the Union itself: '[this] so-called Union of England and Ireland . . ., constituted by difference of race and religion', illustrated the 'patent undeniable fact that it never has been, in any fairly approximate degree even, a union'.²⁵ He believed that the dissimilarities between the Irish and English people, disparities of essential national constitution, could never provide for harmony and accord.

Further to the political interest Eliot showed in Irish history, Ireland was in fact the subject of rigorous and detailed research prior to the writing of *Adam Bede*. The tightly organised chronology was born out of deliberate planning, making the historical context far from coincidental. The copious research that underpinned the novel provided Eliot with a profound knowledge of the historical context of her novel.²⁶ She studied in great detail England and Ireland during the years

²⁰ Eliot, 'To Sara Sophia Hennell', Foleshill, 3 March 1844 in Gordon S. Haight (ed.), *George Eliot Letters*, 9 vols. (London: Yale UP, 1954), vol. 1, p. 172. ²¹ Eliot, 'To Mrs. Henry Houghton', London, 2 October 1852 in *ibid.*, vol. 8, p. 62. ²² Eliot, 'To Mrs. Richard Congreve', London, 17 April 1868 in *ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 430. ²³ Richard Congreve, 'Ireland', in *Essays: Political, Social, and Religious* (London, 1874), p. 179. ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 186. ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 189. ²⁶ The two most prominent textual sources in her notebooks for the novel are the *Annual Register*, and the *Gentleman's Magazine*. For instance, the 1798 edition of the *Register* provided her with information on English political and military action in Ireland, and the 1799 edition proudly introduced her to 'resolutions, in favour of an union, [that] have been unanimously agreed to' ('Chronicle', 3). Meanwhile, pieces such as the 'list of claimants in

1798–1801, ranging from snippets as seemingly trivial as contemporaneous meteorological reports and descriptions of aristocratic birthday celebrations to more overtly political material.²⁷ Leerssen's notion of the way in which 'literary texts float like icebergs in a sea of discourse, are nine-tenths submerged in a larger discursive environment', an environment 'out of which they have crystallized and into which they melt back', is significant here.²⁸ For, it is possible to see such a coherent programme of wide-ranging historical and political research as a fundamental element of the discursive shaping of the novel. As a consequence, it is rather difficult to argue that Irish history and politics were insignificant to the overall development of the fictional narrative, and not to see the novel as immersed in the wider discursive environment within which it was formed. Thus, Ireland may appear to be subordinated to the romance-narrative, with Arthur Donnithorne's posting to Ireland standing as a means of removing him from the fictional Hayslope. However, Eliot's own familiarity with the period of English and Irish history within which the novel is set, and her ongoing resolution to confront matters of contention within her fiction, make it highly unlikely that any allusion to Ireland would be so incidental.²⁹

A reassertion of the subordinated narrative of Irish uprising that runs parallel to the timescale of the novel is therefore necessary, for it facilitates a re-reading of the overt fictional narrative in light of this implicit narrative of Irish history. This offers fresh insight into the ideological implications of the novel, providing for an allegorical reading of the fictional events. For *Adam Bede* begins in June 1799, amidst the aftermath of the 1798 rebellion, and is situated within the context leading up to the Act of Union. The solitary, apparently innocuous, reference to Ireland in *Adam Bede* cannot help, in this light, but be contentious. It is seemingly incompatible with the author's espoused interest in Irish politics, and poses questions as to why George Eliot was not more vocal in articulating her own perception of the Irish political situation within her fiction. Was her apparent silence a sign of a fundamental lack of conviction belied by her private claims of support for Ireland? Was

Ireland, who suffered in the rebellion, summer 1798' (32), found in the September issue of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, and specific material featured in 1798 issues of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, including 'State of Protestants and Catholicks [sic.] in Ireland' (58: 2, 572–573), fully acquainted Eliot with detailed specifics of the rebellion. This was supplemented by political articles in the *Annual Register* (1799), such as 'View of the Nature and System of the Society of United Irishmen, as fully established in Ireland', and 'Progress of the Society of United Irishmen, in Ireland, till the Period of the Rebellion'. Eliot's notes for *Adam Bede* can be found in both the Yale Notebook and also the 'Folger Notebook': M.a.13 Notebook Labelled 'Miscellaneous Quotations' ca. 1850, c5.1411 British Library ref. (M892). 27 The notebooks for *Adam Bede* include citations from 'Interesting Intelligence from Various Parts of the Country', *Gentleman's Magazine* 69 (January 1799), and 'Domestic Occurrences', *Gentleman's Magazine* 69 (February 1799), plus a range of J. Holt's 'Meteorological Diaries', spanning the period July–December 1799. 28 Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination*, p. 2. 29 Note her contentious treatment of Jewry in *Daniel Deronda* (1876).

it a sign of a hesitancy or timidity? Or else was it merely a case of artistic *ennui*? Finding definitive answers to such questions is difficult. However it does invite a more deductive strategy of reading that can attempt to read the novel as much for what it does not explicitly say, as for what it does. *Adam Bede* does not explicitly engage with Anglo-Irish politics, but it can be situated within an overarching metanarrative of Anglo-Irish history; once situated in this way, the explicit development of the fictional narrative might be seen to have just such a hidden, allegorical dimension.

It is perhaps more than a coincidence, for example, that Arthur Donnithorne acts as a catalyst, within both the fictional narrative and the parallel narrative of Anglo-Irish history, to the union of incompatible partners. On the one hand he fights with a militia in the post-1798 unrest. On the other he leaves Hayslope so as to precipitate the union of Hetty Sorel and Adam Bede, a marriage that is (from a republican perspective) dogged with the same bad fortune as that between Ireland and England. When Arthur Donnithorne leaves Hayslope for Ireland, he does so with what are apparently altruistic motives: 'though I have been unable to resist the longing to be near you', he writes to Hetty Sorel, 'I have felt all the while that your affection for me might cause you grief. I ought to have resisted my feelings. I should have done so, if I had been a better fellow than I am; but now, since the past cannot be altered, I am bound to save you from any evil that I have the power to prevent' (*Adam Bede*, 378). At last, or perhaps at least, the full impropriety of their illicit union has made itself apparent to him. He recognises that the social chasm that divides them will never be bridged: 'I know that you can never be happy except by marrying a man in your own station' (*Adam Bede*, 378). In terms of temperament there seem to be acute similarities between them, notably their shared egotism. Yet in other more practical ways, notably their social position, they are entirely incompatible.

After writing this letter Donnithorne departs for Ireland in a (self)conscious attempt to force Hetty into a union with Adam Bede. His presumption is that her affections can be so easily diverted, and that what he wishes most for her will undoubtedly occur. This is reiterated towards the end of the novel when he returns to England from Ireland after the death of his father. As the new squire he is energised with all number of plans about the ideal of rural life that he will preside over. His intention is to fulfil the role of the beneficent patriarch, and part of this beneficence comes in his surety of the union between Hetty and Adam. He feels no guilt, only pride, in his role in bringing this about. He is unaware of the consequences of his previous actions, notably the emotional and psychological violence done to Hetty by his instruction to marry Adam Bede. Adam was the man to whom she was more suitable, Arthur had insisted, despite the fact that she did not love him. Donnithorne's initial departure is thus intended to assist the union of what are quite clearly incompatible partners, Hetty and Adam. This runs parallel to the implied narrative of Arthur's engagement with the unrest resulting from the 1798 rebellion, unrest precipitating the Act of Union. So, at the same time as he

intends to leave Hayslope to bring about the union of Hetty and Adam, he goes to Ireland to play his part in bringing about the union of Ireland and England. As such, the relationship between Adam and Hetty may be interpreted as a correlative of that between England and Ireland. Arthur's role is that of a catalyst whose chief purpose is to develop the relationship between two parties who need particular encouragement.

Within this schema Adam stands as the epitome of the English national character. He is 'a Saxon, and justified his name' (*Adam Bede*, 50), a character who personifies all that is good and noble in the English race. The magistrate Townley remarks on this to Mr Casson when he says how 'we want such fellows as he to lick the French' (*Adam Bede*, 61). At the same time, Adam's dominant characteristics are now, the narrator recognises, largely 'obsolete' (*Adam Bede*, 209), the England he represents is one of the past rather than of the future. This is evident when he sits absent-mindedly in Bartle Massey's schoolroom waiting for the schoolmaster to conclude his teaching for the evening. It is noted how, 'from the place where he sat, he could make nothing of the old map of England that hung against the opposite wall'. The reason for this, we are told, is that 'age had turned it of a fine yellow-brown, something like that of a well-seasoned meerschaum' (*Adam Bede*, 278). Just as is the case with the 'yellow-brown' map that has become disfigured with age, the vision of England that Adam personifies is now also blurring out of recognition.

Adam thus represents an idealised traditional England. He is the archetypal English *man*, displaying all the historically sanctioned qualities. He is generous, honest, hardworking, disciplined, and trustworthy. However, he also has a crucial weakness. He has a tendency to perceive people and events in relation to their appearance, failing to show sensitivity to the potential depths beneath. Because of this he is captivated by Hetty Sorel, a young woman with a beguiling surface, and appears to be unaware that, at another level, she is entirely unlike the person he *knows*. He entirely misreads her, which precipitates both her, and for a short while his, downfall. It is a weakness made clear in the aftermath of Arthur Donnithorne's departure to Ireland:

as the weeks went by and he saw her always looking pleased to see him – turning up her lovely face towards him as if she meant him to understand that she was glad for him to come – and going about her work in the same equable way, making no sign of sorrow, he began to believe that her feeling towards Arthur must have been much slighter than he had imagined in his first indignation and alarm. (*Adam Bede*, 398)

At first the narrator attempts to defend Adam for his misreading of Hetty, claiming that his deep love for her 'came out of the very strength of his nature, and not out of any inconsistent weakness' (*Adam Bede*, 399). However, once the calamity of Hetty's situation becomes evident, and she is imprisoned awaiting

execution, this defence is effectively given up. Adam admits his stubbornness, his tendency to be overly harsh and unforgiving, and castigates himself for his failure to accurately interpret the events that have occurred. As a result he feels complicit due to his failure to prevent the awful fate that now awaits Hetty. His crime is his own failure to empathise with others, and his tendency to conflate his own wishes and desires with those of others around him. He displays his own kind of blinkeredness, even arrogance, assuming that what he most wants necessarily accords with the desires of others.

Adam and Arthur thus represent conflicting, yet paradoxically complementary aspects of a past Englishness. Whereas Adam personifies an idealised notion of the old value-system, Arthur Donnithorne represents the old social-system, the last vestiges of the squirearchy. His family history is one marked by privilege and patronage, and Eliot makes it clear just how easily and readily this privilege is abused. Donnithorne may be a rather too familiar literary type, the inconsiderate aristocratic young man who deflowers and shames the innocent country-girl, but this does not detract from the implications of his characterisation *vis-à-vis* class and national identity. He is pre-eminently an Englishman and to a greater or lesser extent his sins are those of his class and his nation. He is a representative of an acquisitive, colonial notion of England.

Eliot's dual personifications of Englishness are responsible for Hetty Sorel's downfall. It is she who suffers most as a consequence of their ill thought-out actions, and it is she who is sentenced to death, a sentence that was subsequently commuted to one of transportation. She suffers the sexual and emotional affront of a dominating masculine English figure. Therein she bears at least some relation to the image of the woman-victim depicted in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Gaelic poems, poems that make sexual exploitation a metaphor for political exploitation in the lives of women such as Kathleen ni Houlihan. The political judgement Eliot appears to make is that just as this union between clearly incompatible peoples should have been anathema to all concerned, so too can the union between England and Ireland be viewed. It is a union that promises nothing positive for anyone, with the burden of suffering falling on the feminine-Irish. The imperial English tendencies desiring union, associated most closely with the character of Arthur Donnithorne but also evident in a more benign form in Adam Bede, are the primary catalyst to the ensuing disaster. Without these, Hetty Sorel's feminine fantasies of romantic social mobility would never have been more than fantasies.

The complicity of Arthur and Adam in Hetty's downfall might, within this allegorical reading of the novel, be read as George Eliot's own acknowledgement that England must accept a significant portion of the blame for contemporaneous events in Ireland. This would identify the English response to 1798, and even the union itself, as historical errors on a grand scale. This does not, however, necessarily see the English nation as beyond salvation. For, through the positive characterisation of Adam Bede Eliot can be seen to deny that England is to blame *per se*,

more that specific English individuals are responsible. Hence, her implication that the landed and languid aristocracy (that is, the landlords, represented by Donnithorne) have caused much of the strife and hardship in Ireland, whereas her own hallowed social class, represented by Adam Bede, are less to blame – if not entirely exonerated. Their crime is essentially one of ignorance, or inaction, rather than direct neglect and abuse. Fundamentally, Eliot's artisan class is made up of decent people, with noble intentions, even if at times they are a little misguided.

Furthermore, the Irish are not entirely exempt from Eliot's criticism. Hetty Sorel is not simply an innocent abused, and as such she does not entirely fit the paradigm exemplified by literary archetypes such as Dark Rosaleen. She contributes, even if unwittingly, towards her own downfall and in so doing may signal Eliot's own perception of Irish culpability in the unrest of 1798 and afterwards. Hetty's flighty egotism, her naïve self-centredness, is a marked flaw in her character. It is she who suffers from her personal rebellion, when she rejects the pressure of convention and public morality by throwing off the shackles of her impending union with Adam. Her personal insurgency precipitates her imprisonment and transportation. Interestingly, transportation was a typical punishment given for Irish political insurgency during the same historical period. According to R.B. McDowell, 'of those sentenced to death in 1798 [for mutiny or insurrection] at least one fifth and probably at least a quarter had their sentence commuted [to transportation]'.³⁰ Hetty is punished for an alternative form of uprising, and thus along with the '1,016 male [Irish] convicts [who] landed in Australia between 1800 and 1805', of whom 'approximately 325 were insurgents', came one Hetty Sorel of Loamshire, England.³¹

Ultimately, Eliot might be seen to imply, tragedy could have been prevented if the two essentially different elements, Arthur/Adam (England) and Hetty (Ireland) had remained apart. This becomes clear with the eventual union of Adam and the ex-Methodist preacher Dinah Morris. This is a marriage of the compatible, of the fundamentally alike. Eliot sets this relationship in the context of the aftermath of the Act of Union, after the abolishment of the Irish parliament and the establishment of the United Kingdom parliament in 1801. The romance begins in 'the first autumnal afternoon sunshine of 1801 – more than eighteen months after that parting of Adam and Arthur in the Hermitage' (*Adam Bede*, 517). This afternoon sunshine sees the natural elements concur with Adam's blossoming desire for Dinah, conferring the healthy prospects for a union between such eminently compatible partners. The wider political implication might be that the union of England and Ireland should be aborted, as was the prospective marriage of Adam and Hetty. It was only then that true harmony and accord could be achieved. Social and political cohesion comes about internally, within the national unit.

This ideal union between Adam and Dinah (sanctified personifications of

³⁰ R.B. McDowell, *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution 1760-1801* (Oxford, 1979), p. 676. ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 677.

England) was made practicable only after the banishment of Hetty Sorel (who might be seen to represent Ireland). Her removal precipitates a unity that is represented by an idyllic marriage and family life. The successful marriage indicates a possible conceptual parallel between the politics of the union and the ideology of marriage, a parallel that might provide the framework within which Eliot conveyed her own interpretation of recent Irish history. Therein, she may be seen as rejecting the match between the vulnerable and desired Hibernia (Hetty) and the dominating presence of John Bull (Arthur/Adam) as a match of dissimilar partners. This can be seen as denying the logic articulated by John Garwood, who validated the union through an analogy with a Victorian marriage of unequal, yet complementary partners:

the English labourer, with all his manliness and honesty, is often wanting in intellectual acuteness and in imaginative glow. In both these characteristics the Irish excel . . . I do think that a few rays of Irish imagination, a little more play of fancy, more exuberance of joyousness, and more brightness of hope, would greatly add to the happiness of our own poor . . . I would put more good sense into the Irishman, and more poetry into the Englishman.³²

For George Eliot this complementary relationship was fundamentally flawed by the imbalance, and dissimilarity, between the partners. For her, union, or marriage, could not be based on an inherent inequality between partners, it had to be an ideal of mutual co-existence within which each partner was socially, spiritually, and intellectually alike – sharing an inherently similar constitution. It is only through recognising this that Arthur Donnithorne is pardoned by Adam Bede, and thus Eliot. Furthermore, through their relationships with each other, via Hetty Sorel, the noble Adam and the errant Arthur both learn of the futility of the type of ill-conceived union they were once keen to uphold. If the allegorical reading of the novel is carried to its ultimate conclusion, the textual ending appears to be dominated by an ideal vision of national, and ultimately racial, purity. It is a vindication of Eliot's idealised vision of England, complete with family pet and warm, beneficent uncle. The nuclear coherence and unity of the Bede family marks the triumph of the Anglo-Saxon male over adversity, even to the extent that Arthur Donnithorne is gradually to be welcomed back into the fold. Hetty, as Ireland, is sent away to die. She is the only protagonist for whom there is no pardon.

Such a post-colonial remembrance of Irish national identity, and especially of a moment of Irish uprising and rebellion (in this case 1798 and its aftermath), can be seen to provide a typically Victorian commemoration. The problematic foreign

³² John Garwood, *The Million-Peopled City: or, One Half of London Made Known to the Other Half* (New York, 1853), p. 256.

Other is ostensibly denied the right to speak for itself within the overt fictional narrative. Nevertheless, it still manages to insinuate some kind of identity and history due to the inevitable inability of the dominant discourse of nineteenth-century Englishness to police itself in every aspect. The result of this is an implicit acknowledgement of the Irishness inherent in the historical fashioning of English identity. Robert Kee is right to point out that the institutional domination of Ireland by England has been so historically pervasive as to ensure that the colonising British 'framework' has impacted upon all feasible notions of Irishness. However, perhaps the more salient point is the reciprocal one; this historically fashioned Irish identity must also be seen as a crucial influence on the evolution of the imperial framework, creating a British/English identity that is energised and enlightened by the acknowledgement of its fundamental historical indebtedness. Therein, the commemoration of Irish history, and especially Irish insurgency, comes via the act of textual remembrance – the 'putting into the consciousness of' the self-proclaimed clear-headed Victorian English novel.