

# Two versions of home and abroad from the Peninsular Campaign: *Vandeleur* and 'The Burial of Sir John Moore'

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In Irish writing, the state of being abroad, and the encounter with foreign culture, are both frequently associated with ideas of deprivation and disadvantage. Emigration, exile, punitive transportation, offer the rubric under which the Irish are seen at a distance; and to these we might also add absentee landlordism. These became established as stereotypes in Irish writing in English during the nineteenth century, ranging from the popular level of verses such as those by Ada Lady Dufferin, author of 'The Emigrant's Farewell', through to the biographical depictions of the Irish modernists such as Joyce and Beckett as artists in exile.

But the idea of 'abroad' serves not just as a motif of deprivation but as one of imaginative resource – witness the case of Thomas Moore's orientalist poetic fantasy *Lalla Rookh* (1817) and James Clarence Mangan's poetic 'translations' a couple of decades later. Abroad can also provide a removed and neutral arena in which to situate narratives that want to avoid too much exposure to the tensions of the Irish-English relationship, as in some of Charles Lever's novels, such as *The Daltons* (1852), *The Dodd Family Abroad* (1854), and *One of Them* (1861). And in Gothic and vampire fiction by Irish writers, from Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1817) to Le Fanu's 'Carmilla' (1872)<sup>1</sup> and Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), the Mediterranean world and central Europe serve as keys to a disturbingly exotic and uncanny condition in which to play out psychological situations with a bearing on political and cultural tensions at home. As a young nineteenth-century poet, Yeats commenced his career with *Mosada* (1886), a dramatic poem set among the Moors; much later in his career, of course, he famously envisaged an imagined expedition overseas in 'Sailing to Byzantium'.

I list these examples simply in order to suggest that the literary concept of 'abroad' can combine the conventional motif of exile with an enabling resource. Various questions might arise from consideration of these texts. When a nineteenth-century Irish writer imagines the expatriate condition, what is the corresponding concept of the home which is left behind, the 'this-ness' which defines the 'otherness' of abroad? What use is made of the notion of being abroad when defined with reference to Ireland, particularly in the period just after the Act of

<sup>1</sup> A novella included with four other stories in J.S. Le Fanu *In a Glass Darkly* (London, 1872).

Union which gave a distinctly political cast to the concept of the homeland? This was also a period before the strong motif of exile had fully established itself in Irish writing in English, as the theme did not gain full prominence until the increase in mass emigration later in the century. Does the concept of going or being abroad differ in Irish literature from what is found in, say, English writing? I would suggest that it does, in that there is a distinct genre of travel writing in the nineteenth-century English tradition. This was fuelled by a mix of exploration, evangelism and exploitation, as is shown by works such as Frances Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832), George Henry Borrow's *The Bible in Spain* (1843) – not really a work of evangelism – and Robert Louis Stevenson's *An Inland Voyage* (1878) and *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes* (1879). The genre is sufficiently prominent in nineteenth-century English writing to warrant a dedicated chapter in the *Oxford History of English Literature*.<sup>2</sup> Travel writing is characterised by an awareness of a materially secure home-based readership, whereas the literature of exile longs for a home that it creates in the imagination.

The answers to these various questions are outside the scope of this article. The concentration here is on just two early nineteenth-century Irish texts, each with a bearing on the Peninsular Wars. One is the poem by Charles Wolfe, 'The Burial of Sir John Moore at Corunna', famous throughout the nineteenth century and still known today. The other is *Vandeleur*, an anonymously-authored novel which merits rather better than the neglect in which it has languished since its publication.

The novel *Vandeleur* occupies two of the three volumes published as *Tales of Military Life* in 1829; its author is unknown, although it has been persistently but implausibly associated with William Maginn. The title page *Tales of Military Life* describes it as written by the author of *The Military Sketch Book*, which had appeared two years previously. The earlier, and therefore the later work also, has been tentatively but certainly erroneously attributed to Maginn.<sup>3</sup> Whoever the author was, and it is not certain that the author was Irish, the novel shows a sustained engagement with what was, at the time of publication in the 1820s, fairly recent Irish and European history. As an 'authorless text' telling a story that moves across national boundaries, the uncertainties in identifying the author throw into relief questions about how we categorise home and abroad.

*Vandeleur* takes Dublin as its starting point, and Dublin at a particular and crucial moment at the start of the nineteenth century. The Emmet rebellion is

2 P. Turner, *English Literature 1832–1890 Excluding the Novel* (Oxford, 1989). 3 The misattribution occurs in the *Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, ed. George Watson, 4 vols (Cambridge 1941), and various library catalogues. William Maginn, born in Cork in 1791, was one of the leading magazinists of the 1820s and 30s, writing for *Blackwood's*, and editing *The Representative*, *Fraser's*, and the *London Magazine*. Maginn's work – that which is identifiably his – has not yet had the considered treatment it deserves, although there have been various accounts of his progress, alternately lamenting his dissipation and admiring his liveliness. The most recent is T. Eagleton's essay 'Cork and the Carnavalesque' in *Crazy John and the Bishop and Other Essays on Irish Culture* (Cork, 1998).

described in its opening chapters, with a vivid description of the streets of the city on 23 July 1803. The Robert Emmet initiative is treated with a certain measure of sympathy, not through shading it with pro-Nationalist feelings but by treating it as a romantic frolic. The book steers a middle course on Irish politics, with strong anti-Orange sentiments expressed. After the first six chapters, the action moves to Bath, and then the army regiment with which most of the characters are associated sets sail for Lisbon and the Peninsular war. As Ostin, one of the protagonists, follows on a later vessel, he encounters the boat bringing back the body of Sarah Curran, Emmet's beloved, to Ireland.

*Vandeleur* anticipates the military novels of Charles Lever, *Charles O'Malley* (1841), *Jack Hinton the Guardsman* (1843), *Tom Burke of Ours* (1844), which began to appear the following decade. Lever's novels are told more episodically, and in the first person. They provided a voice for the exploration of Ireland, generally as seen by an outsider who is brought into contact with Ireland by his posting. Largely humorous in intent, they mix the military novel with travel writing, with Ireland becoming the territory travelled to and characterised. Arguably it was this tendency to treat Ireland as an exhibit, as much as the stage-Irishness of the humour, which irritated some Irish readers. *Vandeleur*, on the other hand, takes Ireland, and a number of Irish military characters, as its point of departure, and then moves the action abroad.

The Peninsular War, as the principal land action of the campaign against Napoleon, provided the major foreign theatre for military engagement at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Since the French revolution and the Napoleonic wars, opportunities for travel on the continent had been interrupted. While it is not suggested that they enlisted in the army with the object of seeing the world, military service offered the context in which Irishmen and Englishmen, real or fictional, might visit the European mainland in the early years of the century.

*Vandeleur* is a revealing exercise in literary development. The Preface tells how the narrator has spent the greater part of his life in military service and as a result has met a wide range of people of all moral states. This breadth of experience in human nature is the ostensible justification for his writing the stories – a justification that was to be used also by Samuel Warren for his much more popular *Passages from the Diary of a Late Physician* (1832), another career-based compendium of fictional tales. But it is equally the case that military service provided a sort of society in which the immediate demarcations are not those of class, property and ideology, so much as they are those of the ranks and duties peculiar to the army. With the large Irish presence among the personnel in all ranks, army society provided a restricted forum in which national differences, while still noticeable, were accidental rather than essential.

The peculiarities of dialect had recently been introduced into fiction in English, particularly by Walter Scott but starting perhaps with Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*. Since then, it had been mostly speech patterns and accents that departed from the perceived standard that were shown in print, and Hiberno-English was a frequent feature. But in *Vandeleur* we get an instance of the Irish

striking back, with southern English speech targeted. Raftery is an Irish groom who has Anglicised himself to the extent of changing his name to 'Rafty' and speaking with newly acquired vowels: 'Schoolmeastau, give us none of bog-launin heau'. 'Bog-learning' is, of course, a specific rejection of Irishness.<sup>4</sup> The brief phonetic transcription of a consciously affected English accent captures the dropping of the 'r's and the intrusive diphthongs on vowel sounds, with short [a] being rendered as [e]. It is a reminder that an Irishman going abroad might do more than simply change location; he might also change the mannerisms, idioms and characteristics which identify him as Irish. In fact, the main plot of *Vandeleur* reflects this, with its conventional plot of a displaced heir in which it emerges that the true Vandeleur has been supplanted by a rascally cousin. Redmond Allan, whom we met in the early chapters in the action surrounding Emmet's rebellion, and who subsequently turns up fighting on the French side in Spain, is the true Vandeleur. This kind of thing is the stock matter of fiction; nevertheless, questions regarding identity cluster around the actions of Redmond during the Peninsular campaign when, motivated by humanity rather than patriotism, he switches sides at will. They also serve to give a particular colouring to issues of allegiance and homeland, at a time when the Irish homeland had been constitutionally redefined.

The campaign of Sir John Moore's army is in the background of *Vandeleur*, as is also Wellington's campaign. The hardships endured by Moore's army on the retreat to Corunna are glossed over in the novel, but there is a description of his burial. This had become a famous episode, already memorialised in Charles Wolfe's earlier poem, 'The Burial of Sir John Moore at Corunna', and the description in *Vandeleur* closely parallels that of the poem. It may be written in imitation of the poem, or it may be that both shared a contemporary report of the event as a common source for their material.

Charles Wolfe himself was born in 1791, the son of Theobald Wolfe of Kildare, the same from whom Wolfe Tone took his name. Wolfe spent his teenage years in England, where he was schooled, and returned to Ireland in 1809 to study at Trinity College Dublin. He became a clergyman, had various livings in Ulster, and died in 1823, still in his early thirties. By 1842 there had been eight editions of his works, comprising his sermons and poetic compositions, but there is really little of interest other than 'The Burial of Sir John Moore'. While his memorialists and enthusiasts assert that he would have produced more and greater poems had he lived, this would appear to be a polite and pious aspiration. Anyway, one good poem is already more than most people achieve.

Charles Wolfe's poem is an instance of a specific moment and place abroad being imagined from a specific reference time and place in Ireland and it provided a defining literary image of that war. The piece belongs to that class of poems

<sup>4</sup> The 1811 *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* confirms that the prefix 'bog' was a dismissive description of things Irish. *Lexicon Balatronicum. A Dictionary of Buckish Slang, University Wit, and Pickpocket Eloquence* (London, 1811), s.v. Bog Lander, Bog Trotter, Bog Latin.

which enjoyed immense popularity for a time, and constitute the single work for which its author is remembered, if at all. The poem was written in Ireland, and first published in the *Newry Telegraph* in 1817; it achieved prominence when taken up soon afterwards in one of the first numbers of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. The poem was widely known from then right through until the end of the nineteenth century. It was translated, its authorship was variously claimed and disputed, it was parodied, spurious versions of it circulated, and it secured a firm place in both Irish and English anthologies. It was included in Samuel Lover's *Poems of Ireland* in 1858, and in F.T. Palgrave's canon-making *Golden Treasury of the Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language* in 1861. Later it appeared in the four-volume *Cabinet of Irish Literature* (1895) edited by Charles Read. It was also included by more programmatic anthologists around the turn of the century, part of whose purpose was cultural definition. In 1900, as well as appearing in Quiller-Couch's *Oxford Book of English Verse*, it was also in Brooke and Rolleston's *Treasury of Irish Poetry*, and Yeats' *Book of Irish Verse*. Thereafter, however, its currency waned. The temper of both Irish poetry and war poetry changed dramatically during the second decade of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the poem still enjoys a vigorous life in school texts and occasionally as a recitation; as such it probably ranks alongside Kipling's 'If', Milton Hayes' 'The Green Eye of the Yellow God', and Robert Service's 'The Shooting of Dan McGruce'. This is illustrious company, in that they have all entered a wider public consciousness than have most other poetical works. These last three were all written in the early twentieth century, a hundred years or so after 'The Burial of Sir John Moore', but it was at just about this time that Wolfe's poem exchanged respectability for popularity.

Because there was some early confusion about its authorship, which generated mild controversy and resulted in details being offered by witnesses, something is known of the background to the poem's composition. The central event occurred during the opening stages of the peninsular war, a decade earlier than its composition. In the winter of 1808, troops under John Moore had retreated from Madrid to Corunna on the north-west coast of Spain. There they fought a holding action against the pursuing French forces before making an embarkation on to the waiting ships. In that last battle the commanding officer Moore was killed. He was buried just before the last of his troops embarked. The source text for the popular knowledge of the event is a description of his funeral, written by Robert Southey and printed soon after the event in the *Edinburgh Annual Register* for 1808:

The body was removed at midnight . . . A grave was dug for him on the rampart there, by a body of the 9th regiment, the aides-du-camp attending by turns. No coffin could be procured; and the officers of his staff wrapped the body, dressed as it was, in a military coat and blankets. The interment was hastened; for about eight in the morning, some firing was heard, and the officers feared that, if a serious attack were made, they should be ordered away and not suffered to pay their last duty.<sup>5</sup>

Wolfe, while a student at Trinity some years later, came across the periodical passage and began versifying it almost immediately.

Many of the details of the poem self-evidently have their origins in the language of that short paragraph of prose description. The mention of the rampart, the haste, the shooting, all find their way into Wolfe's verses.

Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note,  
As his corse to the rampart we hurried;  
Not a soldier discharged his farewell shot  
O'er the grave where our Hero we buried.

We buried him darkly at dead of night,  
The sods with our bayonets turning;  
By the struggling moonbeam's misty light  
And the lantern dimly burning.

No useless coffin enclosed his breast,  
Not in sheet nor in shroud we wound him;  
But he lay like a Warrior taking his rest  
With his martial cloak around him.

Few and short were the prayers we said,  
And we spoke not a word of sorrow;  
But we steadfastly gazed on the face that was dead,  
And we bitterly thought of the morrow.

We thought, as we hollowed his narrow bed  
And smoothed down his lonely pillow,  
That the Foe and the Stranger would tread o'er his head,  
And we far away on the billow!

Lightly they'll talk of the Spirit that's gone  
And o'er his cold ashes upbraid him, -  
But little he'll reck, if they let him sleep on  
In the grave where a Briton has laid him.

But half our heavy task was done  
When the clock struck the hour for retiring:  
And we heard the distant and random gun  
That the foe was sullenly firing.

Slowly and sadly we laid him down,  
 From the field of his fame fresh and gory;  
 We carved not a line, we raised not a stone,  
 But we left him alone in his glory.

A misunderstanding of the prose description contributed to one of the poem's most prominent details, that of the burial taking place at night. In fact, the body of Moore was taken to the citadel at midnight, to lie there while a grave was prepared. The actual burial did not take place until after daybreak.

The poetic version conjures up a scene that is composed of negatives and absences – no memorial cenotaph, no funeral music, and the prospect of his being left alone the next day as his troops are taken to the sea. This catalogue of negatives is given to lament the actual lack of ceremony, although, by mentioning them, the catalogue introduces retrospectively the images of honour due to the dead soldier. The motif of absence contributes also to the de-localisation of the poem. Were it not for the title, with its careful specifying of the name of the dead general and the place at which the scene is enacted, there would be nothing to situate the poem. Moore is referred to in generic terms of praise: 'Hero', 'warrior', 'Spirit that's gone'; the French appear as 'the enemy', 'the Foe' and 'the Stranger'. The poem is written largely in the first person plural ('We buried him darkly', 'Our Hero') but the nature of this community referred to is not specified. The voice of the poem could be aligned with the troops under Moore's command, or – with more dramatic immediacy – with those who were members of the burial party. On the other hand, the 'we' might extend to include all those in whose interests Moore was fighting and gave his life, and who participate imaginatively in the actual and poetic obsequies.

The one term of specificity in the poem occurs in the line where the burial party is implicitly described as composed of Britons: 'In the grave where a Briton has laid him'. The term 'Briton' was probably the most inclusive term available to Wolfe. Historically it referred to the pre-English Celtic inhabitants and, as the OED records, it came into vogue during the eighteenth century after the Act of Union of England and Scotland; when it was pressed into service as an inclusive term for Scots and English. In 1817, soon after the Irish Act of Union, it had an additional usefulness in eliding difference; although it would not be long before difference was reinstalled, and the term 'West Briton' for Irishman joined that of 'North Briton' for Scotsman – the latter without the pejorative Anglo-Irish shading that the former designation later acquired.

What we see in the publication history traced earlier is a negotiation between Britain and Ireland, which is quite familiar. There is an equivalent negotiation in the actual text between a here and a there – a lost homeland and a foreign abandonment. The poem was subsumed into a British consciousness. Arguably, this started when the poem was taken up by Scottish and English publications; it was attributed to Byron, and it eventually achieved the apotheosis of inclusion in

Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*. At one stage in the nineteenth century two spurious verses were added, in which there is an insistent Englishness which only points up the studied vagueness of Wolfe's writing.

By Englishmen's feet when the turf is trod  
On the breast of their hero pressing,  
Let them offer a prayer to England's God -  
To him who was England's blessing.<sup>6</sup>

As against this English cast, the suggestion has been made that there is a distinctively Irish turn of phrase in the last line of the fifth stanza, 'And we far away on the billow', which reproduces an identifiably Irish construction (*Agus sinn i bhfad ar an fharraige*). To this could be added the observation that 'far away on the billow', equates to the Irish *thar lear* (over the sea, on the water) as an expression for 'abroad', and the term 'Stranger' for the enemy might also have an Irish provenance.

But these are no more than hints and turns of phrase, which suggest, not surprisingly, the ghost of an Irish diction in poetry in English. By suggesting and at the same time evading the particularities of allegiance, while imaginatively exploring an abroad which remains largely unopposed to and unrelated to a homeland, Wolfe's poem manages to be an Irish poem of expatriation which is universalist and inclusive, if not unionist, in effect. It suggests that individual worth transcends national placing, and that expatriation and death abroad are deprivations which can be redressed—at least partly—through poetic commemoration. As such 'The Burial of Sir John Moore at Corunna' has more in common with say, Rupert Brooke's sonnet 'The Soldier' ('If I should die, think only this of me . . . There is some corner of a foreign field that is for ever England') or Yeats' 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death' than it has with the Irish Victorian poems and ballads of emigration and exile of the intervening period. And, as with the more popular pieces mentioned earlier, there seems to be an affinity with poems from the early twentieth century.

An echo of the peninsular campaign has persisted into modern Irish poetry. In Seamus Heaney's short sequence 'Singing School', at the end of the volume *North* (1975), his poem 'Summer 1969' describes spending that summer abroad in Madrid as the troubles break out in Belfast in his homeland. The painting he contemplates in the cool of the Prado Gallery is Goya's painting of the 'Shootings of the Third of May', showing the executions carried out by the occupying French troops. It serves as a reminder of the challenge to an artist's response in times of national

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in 'Memoir and Remains of Charles Wolfe', *Dublin University Magazine*, 20: 120, November 1842, pp. 618–34.



crisis. But the comparison that the painting prompts is not a historical one with the Peninsular War but, as the poem's title suggests, a poetic one with Easter 1916 in Dublin and Yeats' poem of that name. That in itself is an indication of a distance travelled.