

# White, black and green: racialising Irishness in Victorian England

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'Race', wrote the anatomist and popular ethnologist Robert Knox in 1850, 'is everything: literature, science, art, in a word, civilization, depend upon it.'<sup>1</sup> Challenging the environmental and monogenetic explanations of human origin and difference that had dominated racial thinking in Britain in the first half of the century, Knox revised and elaborated older typological, polygenetic theories of race for the Victorians. His 'new sense' of race was less 'new' in its scientific detail than its comprehensive explanatory reach, its assertion that political and social explanations of intra-national and international conflict were redundant in the face of the determining, and unchanging, effects of racial difference and its equally natural corollary, racial antagonism. Races were fixed and immutable in known historical time in Knox's view, and he believed that each race was unique both in its character and its physiology. While he refused to order them hierarchically, it is perfectly clear from the attributes with which he endowed them that his own 'Saxon' or, as he preferred to call it, 'Scandinavian' race was top of the heap.

*The Races of Men: A Fragment* (1850) was a compilation of the lectures given by Knox at the 'Philosophical and Popular Educational Institutions of England', in Newcastle, Birmingham and Manchester in the mid-forties.<sup>2</sup> While *Races of Men* certainly reinforced the case for Saxon superiority and Saxon hatred of the 'Negro' and the 'dark races' more generally, its most provocative claims focused on the difference and disunity among the white races. In hindsight, he argued, the theories advanced in his lectures should be read as a prescient forewarning of the 1848 revolutions – a prediction of 'the coming war of race against race, which has convulsed Europe during the last two years.'<sup>3</sup> For at the core of Knox's displacement of political or national struggles with the rationale of race, was the reinterpretation of British and European conflicts as wholly racial in origin and effect. The opening chapters of *The Races of Men* led with the unyielding distinction and innate hostility between Saxon and Celt, whether the 'Caledonian' Celt of northern Scotland or those of France or Ireland. Dismissing environmental arguments for the development or alteration of racial

1 Robert Knox, *The Races of Men: A Fragment* (Philadelphia, PA, 1850) p. 7. This first American edition appeared in the same year as the English and has been reprinted in facsimile by Mnenosyne Publishing, Miami, FL). 2 Knox, *Races of Men*, p. 22. 3 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

types as tired and discredited theories favoured by 'utopians' and 'universalists', Knox argued for the self-evidence of the immutability of racial physiology and character. 'To me', he insisted, 'the Caledonian Celt of *Scotland* appears a race as distinct from the Lowland Saxon of the same country, as any two races can possibly be: as negro from American; Hottentot from Caffre; Esquimaux from Saxon.'<sup>4</sup> 'Transplant him', Knox continued, 'to another climate, a brighter sky, a greater field, free from the trammels of artificial life, the harnessed routine of European civilization; carry him to Canada, *he is still the same*; mysterious fact.' These Celtic emigrants, whether French, Scots or Irish, gave pioneers a bad name, as being 'without self-reliance; without confidence. If you seek an explanation ... go back to Ireland, and you will find it there: it is the race.'<sup>5</sup> The Irish Celt presented the worst example of Celtic personality. 'Is Ireland civilized?' Knox asks his implied 'English' audience rhetorically, early on in his introductory chapter, expecting a simple no.<sup>6</sup> 'I appeal to the Saxon men of all countries whether I am right or not in estimate of the Celtic character. Furious fanaticism; a love of war and disorder; a hatred for order and patient industry; no accumulative habits; restless, treacherous, uncertain: look at Ireland.'<sup>7</sup> Emigration is no solution: the Celt remained 'a slave in mind' even in the free United States ... for the Celt does not understand what we Saxons mean by independence'.<sup>8</sup>

The address to 'we Saxons' was at the heart of Knox's appeal to the common-sense prejudices of his provincial English audience. Constructing himself proudly as a Saxon from the Scottish lowlands, Knox, once one of the most popular anatomy lecturers in Edinburgh, had been brought low by the Burke and Hare scandal and, perhaps, by his own idiosyncratic views on religion and medicine.<sup>9</sup> His post gone, he left for London and made a second career in the forties, at once riding and leading the newly prominent conservative turn in racial thinking, a turn that in part followed from the ending of colonial slavery, but can by no means be reduced to its effects. Ireland, at the end of the decade, was at least as urgent a matter to the English as the economic state of the West Indies and its newly free population. Knox's brand of racial thinking provided a biological explanation for the condition of Ireland, exculpated the English from any blame for its starving poor, and, through its denial of any form of social amelioration, encouraged a kind of political nihilism towards Ireland as well as toward Celtic Europe (France) and the more distant outposts of empire. Knox's view of his favoured Saxons was deliberately amoral and unsentimental, designed to shock and flatter at once. Their attachment to freedom, for one thing, was entirely selfish: 'No race perhaps – (for I must make allowances for

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18. <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21. <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10. <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27. <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21. <sup>9</sup> See Adrian Desmond, *The Politics of Evolution: Morphology, Medicine, and Reform in Radical London* (Chicago, IL, 1989) pp. 77–81, 388–9 and *passim* for a good synoptic account of Knox's rise and fall in medicine. His place in British racial theory is better analysed in Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1800–1960* (Basingstoke, 1982), and in Robert J.C. Young *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London, 1995).

my Saxon descent,) – no race perhaps exceeds them in an abstract sense of justice, and a love of fair play; *but only to Saxons*. This of course they do not extend to other races.<sup>10</sup> Empire, in Knox's brutal secular logic (his atheism set him apart from his age), could not be rationalised as a civilising mission, or only to the extent that it resulted in the extermination of other races and the unimpeded spread of an exclusive Anglo-Saxon empire. There were no loopholes through conversion or intermarriage. Religion was a property of race; for Knox, Catholicism was natural to the character of the Celt. Nor could interbreeding succeed in diluting or changing the characteristics of race where culture and education would inevitably fail. In persons of mixed race the 'stronger' racial type would prevail. But in any case the results of such unions, Knox thought, counterfactually, were often sterile. Miscegenation as a means of making a 'new' composite race was genetically doomed: 'Nature produces no mules, no hybrids, neither in man nor animals.'<sup>11</sup>

In the 1840s when, as Raymond Williams has argued, the English saw no solution to the social and political problems of their time, Knox's brutalist biologism, more crude rhetorical assertion than supported argument even by the standards of nineteenth century ethnology, did have an appeal. Perhaps more important, for few contemporary thinkers followed it literally, it marked an outer limit of racial logic which defined a more ethically troubled and confusing centre, altering the spectrum of debate and upping the ante for the explanatory power of racial thinking. In the ongoing discussion among historians today about whether and/or how the Irish were racialised by the English in the nineteenth century, it is important to emphasize how very available and au-courant the discourse of race had become in Britain at mid-century, both as an alternative to and a support for political arguments about policies at home and abroad.<sup>12</sup> A highly self-conscious rhetoric of race as the central element of both selves and others dominates the period. A much softer, much more idealized version of the Anglo-Saxonism espoused by Knox was increasingly adduced as the defining element of Englishness, but it was, confusingly, often complemented by something that was equally part of contemporary common sense and that wholly contradicted his thesis – a pan-European discourse of whiteness. Indeed as Knox points out early in his book, the monogenetic theories of his powerful adversary, James Cowles Prichard, who dominated British racial theory in the first half century, made race too exclusively a black and white thing, so that 'on the mere mention of the word race, the popular mind flies off to Tasmania, the polar circle, or the land of the Hottentot. Englishman [*sic*] cannot be made to believe, can scarcely be made to comprehend, that races of

<sup>10</sup> Knox, *Races of Men*, p. 47. <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53. <sup>12</sup> For a fascinating, provocative analysis both of the debate about whether or how the Irish were subjected to a racial discourse, and the question itself, see Luke Gibbons, 'Race against time: racial discourse and Irish history' in Catherine Hall (ed.), *Cultures of Empire: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Manchester, 2000) pp. 207–23.

men, differing as widely from each other as races can possibly do, inhabit, not merely continental Europe, but portions of Great Britain and Ireland'.<sup>13</sup> Knox's project was to 'race' white Europe, to raise its differences once and for all to the same level of contemporary consciousness as the black-and-white paradigm he rejected, and in this aim he partly succeeded. Yet whiteness in the sense he addressed it, that is as a deeply embedded concept, the default of the blackness with which, as he said, the very word 'race' was associated, was a category that could exclude or include the Irish depending on its deployment. When exclusive it often resorted, although with major impediments, to the alignment of Irishness with one or another of the 'dark races'; when inclusive it disengaged the Irish from them. The Irish became the object of both these racialising terms; were caught, indeed, in their incommensurability. So too, however, were those that chose to use them.

In this essay I want briefly to explore some of the complicated, contradictory ways in which Ireland and Irishness was racialised in the writing and thinking of two of the period's popular social critics, the Reverend Charles Kingsley (1819–75) and Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), suggesting the ways in which Ireland and the Irish present both a unique problem and an opportunity in their celebration of the Anglo-Saxon and their dreams of a Saxon nationality that was, in another of Knox's grandiloquent predictions, 'about to be the dominant race on earth.'<sup>14</sup>

Buried in the *Letters and Memories* of the Reverend Charles Kingsley, published by his wife Frances in 1876, the year after his death, on a page headed 'Ireland and the first salmon' is a disturbing – and disturbed – passage from a letter Kingsley wrote to her in July 1860 while holidaying with a friend in County Sligo. After proudly retailing his fishing exploits – 'I have done the deed at last – killed a real actual live salmon, over five pounds' ('a new and long coveted experience' according to Frances) – the letter's tone of boyish elation shifts to one of gothic horror. His pleasure in his retreat to the 'lovely' grounds of Markree Castle would be unalloyed, he confesses, except for the reminder of the poverty he had witnessed en route:

But I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country. I don't believe they are our fault. I believe there are not only many more of them than of old, but that they are happier, better, more comfortably fed and lodged under our rule than they ever were. But to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours[.]<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Knox, *Races of Men*, p. 25. <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15. <sup>15</sup> Frances Kingsley (ed.), *Charles Kingsley: His Letters and Memories of his Life* (2 vols, London, 1891), II, 111–12.

Politically and psychologically incoherent – guilt, fear and shame denied and avowed in almost the same breath – this passage by Kingsley, the Christian Socialist, novelist and social critic, is often cited by modern commentators as a shocking instance of mid-Victorian racial thinking, one in which, as it were, Irish and Africans are tarred with the same brush. The oxymoron of ‘human chimpanzees’ places the Irish in that unthinkable category caught between the animal and the human – the stuff of fantasy or nightmare, its gothic implications deepened when Kingsley confesses that the dread such monstrosity induces is as much due to their whiteness – the ineradicable sign that they are his fellow creatures. More interesting than its blatant racism however, is the way in which this passage highlights the difficulty of resolving the category confusion that the Irish poor induce by aligning them with what contemporary ethnologists called ‘the darker races’. Luke Gibbons, for example, reads this passage as a key instance of the psychic operation of the visually driven discourse of difference which is thrown ‘into disarray’ when the ‘otherness’ and ‘alien character’ of the ‘native population’ ‘did not lend itself to visible racial divisions’.<sup>16</sup> For, as historian of science Nancy Leys Stepan has argued, Victorian anthropology ‘had become, by mid-century, above all a science of the visible, physical body as it manifested itself in the marks of racial distinction’, and these, she suggests, worked primarily as a ‘contrastive concept’ that relied largely on a binary difference between dark and light.<sup>17</sup> This hegemonic view is, indeed the one against which Knox was arguing. Kingsley’s outburst, above all his childish wish that the Irish were black so that his unwilling response, an insupportable mixture of helpless sympathy and deep aversion, might be mitigated, simplified and distanced by clearer distinctions and hierarchies of race, both points towards the appeal of that contrastive idea of race, and its uneasy application to the Irish.

Yet that very lack of fit with the contrastive concept that results in the ambiguities of racial difference as applied to Irishness, were as useful as they were potentially unsettling to those Victorian Britons who chose to think of themselves as English, and who were interested directly or indirectly in redefining what it meant to be ‘English’ or ‘British.’ A colour-coded binary principle might be the dominant framework of racial thinking at mid century, as Stepan and others have persuasively argued, yet it was, for the self-identified English, consistently interrupted by the example of the Irish, as Kingsley’s visual crisis with its phantasmagoric representation of the Irish rural poor suggests. The racial superiority of the Saxon, implied, as in Knox, or explicit, as in Kingsley and others, was impossible to make accurately through the difference of skin alone, and yet of all the visual signs of difference – hair, features, body shape and size – skin colour had become the leading and the indelible marker. Whiteness as the cutting edge of supposed otherness makes Ireland and the Irish indetermi-

<sup>16</sup> Luke Gibbons, ‘Race against time’, p. 207–8. <sup>17</sup> Nancy Leys Stepan, *Picturing Tropical Nature* (Ithaca, NY, 2001).

nate referents in redefining Englishness and/or Britishness in terms of a racial imaginary, for, just as the Irish could dismissively be aligned with Africans – ‘black-lead them and put them over with the niggers’, in one impatient and not wholly ironic sally by Thomas Carlyle – an alignment meant to contract the racial limits of English sympathies – they could also, at convenient moments, be sympathetically appropriated. Carlyle could also, as we shall see, construct the Irish as the symbolic other whose inclusion, because of their whiteness, bound a newly imagined racial nation together.<sup>18</sup>

The nation, as Linda Colley points out, can be imaginatively construed as an organic and undifferentiated whole as against external rivals or enemies, while still remaining, in the minds of its subjects, a collectivity internally riven by hierarchies of all kinds. A ‘growing sense of Britishness’ in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Colley writes, did not mean that ‘other loyalties’ were ‘supplanted and obliterated’. ‘Identities are not like hats,’ she adds, ‘Human beings can and do put on several at a time.’<sup>19</sup> Humans also, we might add, play fast and loose with identities – their own and others. Less like costume perhaps and more like wild cards which can take on value and suit to aid the player in a game of identities, Ireland and the Irish often have radically contingent functions in which definitions and distinctions of class and gender, as well as religion and race play a part. Kingsley presents only one example of the sleight of hand through which both Ireland as a place and as a subject both shore up and undermine a brittle masculine identity, and it is his case which I will pursue initially.

Charles Kingsley had a colonial background which strongly conditioned his views of the Irish and of Britain’s political role in Ireland. Kingsley’s life-long love affair with all things Anglo-Saxon was the ground of his attitudes towards race and empire. These found their most notorious expression in his very public support for Governor Eyre’s brutal handling of the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica in the mid 1860s, but they were beliefs that were immanent in all of his work including his fiction.<sup>20</sup> Kingsley’s mother, although brought up in England, was West-Indian born, the daughter of a judge in Barbados who was himself the last of five generations of West-Indian property owners. In the parlance of the day she might be considered, by birth at least, a white Creole – although quickly transposed to English soil. Her ‘stock’, to use the archaic, racially freighted lan-

<sup>18</sup> Cited, but without reference, by Francis Hackett, *Ireland: A Study in Nationalism* (New York, 1919), p. 227. <sup>19</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, CT, 1992) p. 6. <sup>20</sup> My discussion of Kingsley is greatly indebted to Catherine Hall, *Civilizing Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Cambridge, 2002), especially pp. 438–40. She neatly summarizes his career and its contradictions: ‘Anglican clergyman, anti-Catholic, Cambridge professor, one-time Christian Socialist, heavily influenced by Carlyle and yet an admirer of Mill, enthusiast for cleanliness and sanitation, a lover of England, author of those paeans of praise to English masculinity, *Westward Ho!* and *Hereward the Wake*, supporter of the South and of Eyre, antagonist of women’s campaigns for the vote, Kingsley was complex figure’, p. 438.

guage of one of Kingsley's twentieth-century admirers, Elspeth Huxley, might be as 'solid and respectable' as Kingsley's father's 'sound old landed Cheshire' roots, but was presumably open to the common prejudice that Europeans long established in the colonies risked moral and physical degeneration.<sup>21</sup>

Unlike contemporaries such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who came to view her father's West Indian connection as a shameful inheritance, the sign of her family's complicity with slavery and imperialism, Kingsley admired from a safe distance his grandfather's 'tales of the West Indies, of the bravery and self-possession of white folks in the face of danger, of the romance of imperial conquest'.<sup>22</sup> Late in life, in 1869, he realized a long-held desire and visited the West Indies with his daughter, a visit that, predictably, confirmed his already settled views that blacks were inherently inferior, and, if human, barely educable, but which equally rewarded the romantic dreams of his childhood in his exuberant and boyish pleasure in the landscape, its fauna and flora.<sup>23</sup> Reading Kingsley on the West Indies, the source and structure of his colonial imagination emerges: its naïve hyperbole and pleasure in nature was joined to, perhaps even enhanced by, its desire for a strictly observed social order based on what he understood as biological inequality.

Seen through the lens of this long-held vision of a tropical, colonial 'paradise', in which 'nature' was ordered to delight but never threaten the European, the near hysteria that Ireland's contradictions induced in him, becomes more legible. For example, in his letter home, he used the verb 'killed' instead of 'caught' for his exploit with the salmon, and the next day he reported he 'killed' five more. His Irish holiday takes on the character of an imperial, possibly sub-Saharan, adventure – big game hunting rather than fishing seems the heightened analogy here – and one which, perhaps, by association leads him back to the image of 'chimpanzees', and hence the troubling absence of melanin in the skins of the Irish poor. But the fantasy of the hunter on safari cannot be sustained. Indeed, the more Kingsley tried to lessen his horror by wishing away the anomaly produced by his oxymoronic 'human chimpanzees', the more becomes wrong with his imperial scenario. Almost immediately a critical piece of political reality intervenes, one which suggests that the formal difference between the

**21** Elspeth Huxley, *The Kingsleys: A Biographical Anthology* (London, 1973), p.7. See Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) for the best known fictional representation of European degeneration in the West Indies. **22** Hall, *Civilizing Subjects*, p. 439. **23** See *Ibid.*, pp. 439–40. Kingsley's *At Last: A Christmas in the West Indies* (2 vols, London, 1871) is, like so much of his work, full of contradictions. Kingsley's belief that the 'Negros' were better suited to Catholicism, for the 'mere Negro ... can no more conceive the true meaning of an average Dissenting Hymn book, than a Slavonian of the German Marches a thousand years ago could have conceived the meaning of St Augustine's confessions.' The argument that 'Negros' could only be taught Christianity through their 'senses' is argued at length by a fictional Catholic priest, *At Last*, 226–30. But Kingsley stops just short of Knox's argument that Catholicism is a permanent effect of racial character; his argument is still developmental.

governance of Ireland and the rest of Britain's overseas empire was a central element of Kingsley's distress. His defensive comments highlight the fact that he believed that the Act of Union and direct rule made the condition of Ireland and the Irish an intimate and agonistic moral responsibility for British subjects. Ireland was an indissoluble part of Britain whose continued economic plight, thrown into stark relief by the relative prosperity of England in the eighteenth-fifties, could by many be ascribed to British policies and practices before, during and after the Famine. Answering this accusation as if the dehumanized Irish poor had spoken it, Kingsley explicitly rejects its genocidal and anti-humanitarian implications – 'there are many more of them than of old, they are happier, better, more comfortably fed and lodged under our rule than they ever were' – an assertion that he immediately contradicts with the evidence of his own eyes: 'But to see white chimpanzees is dreadful.' Seeking a refuge from his painful feelings in a parallel world where the game hunter's healthy macho pleasure in 'killing' lesser species protects him from false sympathies, and where whiteness is an unambiguous mark of difference and hierarchy not the sign of human contiguity, he attempts to re-enter the colonial fantasy. 'If they were black, one would not feel it so much', a move which seems to exacerbate rather than dispel his horror, forcing him to acknowledge an unwilling, even terrifying, consanguinity: 'but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours'.

Kingsley's engagement with Ireland and the Irish poor, should not be construed as a simple set of binary racial antagonisms; the Irish are always, in this passage and elsewhere in his writing, a shifting term which cannot be accommodated to a simple division of self and other. Indeed his attempt to imagine the Irish as black leads Kingsley into a paradox that threatens sanity. For the critical last word of this passage – 'ours' – which should represent the secure Anglo-Saxon identity of the dominant English culture – Knox's 'we Saxons', the racial category that Kingsley and so many others thought was alone capable of democratised self-rule – had become, through the hystericised logic of his letter, biologically as well as politically joined to the sub-human. Whiteness was no longer a purist refuge but a contaminated category.

Violence pervaded such English representations of the Irish, yet it is often moot as to who is responsible for it. Kingsley's boastful phallic mastery of the salmon, for example, may be understood as a kind of transparent, semi-pathetic compensation for his political helplessness and disavowed guilt in relation to the degradation he had seen, but a less sympathetic interpretation might see his serial murder of the big fish as a harmless enactment of a more sinister, barely suppressed wish, a final swift and Swiftian solution, robbed of its irony, to the 'problem' of Ireland.

Ireland and killing, yoked to questions of social justice, hovered also over Kingsley's relationship to public issues involving class and racial antagonisms. For all his supposed security in his Englishness, Kingsley was particularly thin-skinned when his provocative public postures proved unpopular with the

masses, and the Irish in another role, as murderers rather than victims could conveniently be drawn in as third term in such controversies. When, in 1866, Kingsley appeared at a dinner in Southampton for loyal supporters of Governor Eyre, he was attacked by both local demonstrators and the press. He expressed anger and bewilderment at being 'cursed' for standing up for 'my noble friend, ex-Governor Eyre of Jamaica ... cursed for it, as if I had been a dog, who had never stood up for the working man when all the world was hounding him (the working man) down in 1848-49'.<sup>24</sup> Here Kingsley used his very qualified defence of Chartism in the late forties as a reproach to his plebeian detractors in the mid-sixties, a reproach which implicitly criticized the rebellious English poor for making common cause with non-white rebels, and which, through the double metaphor of 'dogs' – as bestialized victim (himself) and baying hunter (the government of the 1840s) – suggests how easily hunter and hunted could change places in his paranoid rhetoric. Revolutionary violence was an international network, a ghastly, racially freighted, global fraternity. In his 'Letters to Chartists', Kingsley criticizes the 'unnatural alliance' of physical force Chartism with revolutionary Irish nationalism, and asks rhetorically: 'What brotherhood ought *you* to have with the 'United Irishmen' party, who pride themselves on their hatred to your nation, and recommend schemes of murder which a North American Indian, trained to scalping from his youth would account horrible?'<sup>25</sup> The Irish become the rogue element in a racialised spectrum of violence and potential violence. Irish revolutionary practices are represented as beyond the pale of even the racial/cultural difference that distinguishes the warrior customs of heathen North American Indians from those of whites. At one level the brotherhoods of vengeful violence or pacific resistance are above – or indeed below – race or ethnicity; at another, the introduction of the North American Indians as a comparator reduces violence itself to a racial attribute.<sup>26</sup>

In his fascinating study *The Infection of Thomas de Quincey*, which explores de Quincey's demonisation of the oriental, John Barrell argues that the introduction of a 'third term' is a characteristic move in nineteenth century racial discourse producing a rhetorical and psychic structure which strategically places a 'that' between 'the here' (the self) and 'the other' – the 'that', a kind of 'other' which 'can be made over to the side of the self – to a subordinate position on that side – only so long as a new, and a newly absolute "other" is constituted to fill the discursive space that has thus been evacuated.'<sup>27</sup> We can see this strategy at work in Kingsley's attempt to solicit Chartists on behalf of his version of radical reform. In his address, Kingsley enjoins the Chartists to remain on the side of Christianity, pacifism and order – his side – which he

<sup>24</sup> Kingsley, *Letters and Memories*, vol. 2, 195. <sup>25</sup> Kingsley, *Letters and Memories*, vol. 1, 125.

<sup>26</sup> See Gibbons, 'Race against time' for a discussion of the racial association of Ireland with North American Indians, rather than people of African descent. <sup>27</sup> John Barrell, *The Infection of Thomas de Quincey: A Psychopathology of Imperialism* (New Haven, CT, 1991) p. 10.

represents as that of the 'radical reformer' as against the 'hell broke loose' 'madness' of revolutionary Ireland, an Ireland conflated with, but in 'unnatural' excess of, the innately savage Indian. The difficulty of this attempted appropriation and pacification of Chartism is highlighted by Kingsley's need to threaten the Chartists with two discrete but linked versions of absolute otherness – Irishmen and Indians. We might see his later rage at working-class opposition to Eyre as generated in part by the retrospective failure of his rhetorical attempt to separate Anglo-Saxon workers from an imagined political alliance with black or Indian subjects, his failure to control in fact, the relations of affiliation and antagonism within the nation and the empire in spite of his perceived superior place in their hierarchies. At different moments, therefore, Ireland could occupy different positions in Kingsley's imperial imagination. It could be a kind of composite nightmare, the 'hell' of imagined retributive revolt of different kinds of oppressed or marginalized peoples – North American Indians, Africans and West Indians – even the very Anglo-Saxon workers with whom he had, however tentatively and patronizingly, made common cause. Or, conversely, as in the passage from his Sligo letter, it could represent a people so degraded and destroyed by their rulers that their abjection provokes horror rather than sympathy, and the recognition of complicity in their plight triggers his relegation of the Irish peasantry to a space beyond the boundaries of the human. When this does not alleviate his distress, they must – in fantasy – be eradicated.<sup>28</sup> Kingsley's final image of Ireland in his visit of the 1860s, one of death and mourning, eerily represents this fantasmatic act as already accomplished. Through his 'English eyes' he sees the country as a wholly depopulated – a 'land of ruins and of the dead' – a vision which, in relieving his anxiety about their liminal racial and human status, ironically allows the Irish to be returned to the ranks of the human, embraced in absentia through a hackneyed elegy to their 'ruined cottages' and 'unroofed hamlets.'<sup>29</sup>

The convoluted violence towards the Irish poor in Kingsley's writing is overlaid, after 1848, with his denial of English responsibility for the worst effects of the Great Famine. Yet Ireland's hunger and anger, and the urge to erase it by finishing off the population for good and all, had a much longer history and is not restricted to Kingsley's idiosyncratic psychology. Indeed Kingsley's death wishes may have been prompted by similar genocidal sentiments that appear years earlier in the blunter rhetoric of Kingsley's friend Thomas Carlyle.

In two of Carlyle's 'Condition of England' polemics, *Chartism* (1839) and *Past and Present* (1843), the Irish are given cameo roles as degraded and/or murderous subjects. In *Chartism*, Carlyle acknowledges the long centuries of

<sup>28</sup> See John Barrell, 'Death on the Nile: fantasy and the literature of tourism, 1840–60', in Hall (ed.), *Cultures of Empire*, pp. 187–206, for a detailed analysis of this very common genocidal impulse in racial thinking in the period. <sup>29</sup> Kingsley, *Letters and Memories*, II, 112.

English injustice towards Ireland, an injustice deepened because, since God made all men, 'the Sanspotato is of the selfsame stuff as the superfinest "Lord Lieutenant"'.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, paradoxically the Irish 'brother man', who Carlyle sees fleeing to England at 'four-pence sterling' for the journey, are a residuum below any imagined 'Saxon' underclass – literally and figuratively a shadow lying across the nation:

Crowds of miserable Irish darken all our towns. The wild Milesian features, looking false ingenuity, restlessness, unreason, misery and mockery, salute you on all highways and byways. The English coachman, as he whirls past, lashes the Milesian with his whip, curses him with his tongue; the Milesian is holding out his hat to beg. He is the sorest evil this country has to strive with.<sup>31</sup>

This imagined encounter with the Irish *en masse* in the town and on the highways of Britain is fully as sinister and as bizarrely skewed as Kingsley's account of the abject figures who line the Irish roads. The treacherous yet somehow transparent mobility of 'Milesian features' – a reference to the mythical Spanish origin of the Irish that associates them with the racial others of southern Europe – turns misery and inferiority into a mute but provocative mockery of the implied reader, the English, the 'Saxon', 'you'. To this deliberate challenge the 'you' responds in the person of the coachman, a figure not restrained by middle-class timidity or false sympathy, with 'a lash and a curse', both regrettable, involuntary and somehow deserved. Yet Carlyle stops short of arguing that the deformation of Irish national character, its 'degraded and disordered' state as he sees it, can be attributed to racial difference, although something of such difference is implied in his emphasis on the 'government and guidance of white European men' that has so significantly and disgracefully failed to halt 'the perennial hunger of potatoes to the third man extant'.<sup>32</sup> Instead he insists that 'long centuries' of English misrule have resulted in 'oppression' that 'has gone far farther than into the economics of Ireland; inwards to her very heart and soul' so that the 'wretched Irishman' is 'Immethodic, headlong, violent, mendacious.' Once the effects of oppression are particularized and individualized, Carlyle can, on the one hand, advise individual reform or a final solution to which 'all just men, of what outward colour soever in Politics or otherwise' will agree: 'This cannot last, Heaven disowns it, Earth is against it; Ireland will be burnt into a black unpeopled field of ashes rather than this should last.'<sup>33</sup> As the passage goes on, and the Irish become more like animals and less like humans, the temptation to incinerate Ireland, reducing it to 'unpeopled' blackened ground increases. For the Irishman is not only 'sunk from decent man-

<sup>30</sup> Carlyle, *Chartism*, in Alan Shelston (ed.), *Thomas Carlyle: Selected Writings* (London, 1971) p. 169. <sup>31</sup> Carlyle, *Chartism*, p. 171. <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 168–9. <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

hood to squalid apehood', but, by pulling down wages threatens the Saxon native, whom he is driving out 'not by his strength, but by the opposite of strength' with the same fate, as he 'takes possession in his room', forcing the Saxon to emigrate. In their place 'abides he, in his squalor and unreason, in his falsity and drunken violence, as the ready-made nucleus of degradation and disorder.'<sup>34</sup> If English rule is starving the Irish, the Irish poor are getting their own back against the Saxon yeoman, in turn, degrading and dispossessing the rightful owners of English soil. It is not the fault of 'these poor Celtiberian Irish brothers, what can *they* help it? ... not a straight or joyful way of avenging their sore wrongs this; but a most sad circuitous one.' Carlyle's conclusion is that 'The time has come when the Irish population must either be improved a little or else be exterminated.'<sup>35</sup>

Two pages back, when extermination is first mooted, the rationale for the general razing of Ireland is the inability or unwillingness of its rulers to develop a policy that can confer social and economic justice. But by turning the effects of oppression into a national character that is a male figure of disorder and violence, and by emphasizing its capacity both to 'infect' and displace the English, Carlyle shifts his discussion into a new register, one in which the Irish are both helpless and culpable, their guilt imagined without detailing a single act of physical violence on their part. Their extermination at the hands of the English is the logical counter to the threat they pose by their very existence, their economic rivalry leaving the English poor no alternative but degradation, death or flight, and England itself razed and depopulated. Just as we seem to enter the land of ruins and the dead through the end logic of extermination, the argument takes an unexpected and interesting turn. For although Carlyle does seem to play a 'race' card, naturalising the character of the English, he does so as a way of drawing back from the selective genocide of his modest proposal and offering a different way of associating the English and Irish poor. His move to preserve the virtue of the Saxon from the contaminating degradation of the Irish also effectively undermines the supposed atavistic antagonism between Saxon and Celt, and thus weakens both parts of the double case he has offered for its brutal resolution.

Here, if not elsewhere, his argument most nearly approaches Knox's notion of immutable racial characteristics. The 'Saxon British' will not and cannot sink to the level of the Irish, for there is 'in these latter, thank God, an ingenuity which is not false; a methodic spirit, of insight, of perseverant well-doing; a rationality and veracity which Nature with her truth does *not* disown; – withal there is a "Berserkir rage" in the heart of them, which will prefer all things, including destruction, and self destruction to that.' This rage is importantly not negative but the very stuff of life, the sign of human superiority, of the liberal self's rejection of oppression: it is partly moralised as a 'genial central-fire' that

'deep-hidden' lies below the benign and pacific character of the English; a 'traditional method, composed productiveness ... justice, clearness, silence, perseverance, unhesitating, unceasing diligence, hatred of disorder, hatred of injustice, which is the worst disorder, characterise this people.' The English are naturally resistant, genetically immune to the absolute fall that has afflicted the Irish, but their common wretchedness means that 'With this strong silent people have the noisy vehement Irish now at length got common cause ... the wretchedness of Ireland, slowly but inevitably, has crept over to us, and become our own wretchedness.'<sup>36</sup> The antagonisms and differences Carlyle has constructed in the chapter, and the rhetorical violence they induce – from the vision of a burnt-over land of the dead to the melodrama of the coachman's whip biting into the face and body of Irish duplicity and insolence, to the blunt announcement of 'extermination' – is dissolved into a sympathetic identification between abused Saxon and abused Celt, who become a single wretched body, the stoic silent Englishman borrowing noise and vehemence from his unwanted 'brother man'. The war between the Saxon and the Irish is replaced with a monstrous hybrid warrior created from mutual misery and extremity. While Kingsley, in 1848, warned the Chartists away from an alliance with murderous and vengeful Irish revolutionaries, Carlyle a decade earlier goes much further by imagining the alliance as already accomplished – the Saxon's saving 'berserker rage' psychically and dangerously joined to the Irish spirit of disorder.

Structurally considered, *Chartism* is a rambling and discursive book. Chartism loses much of its historical specificity in its pages and becomes the alarmist symptom of a world diseased and wrongly ordered from top to bottom. In Carlyle it is always style, the use of figurative and affective language, that appeals and persuades in place of more systematic or logical argument. As John Plotz has argued persuasively, *Chartism* is a very well-made work in rhetorical terms. It is, as he says, successful in its aim to deligitimise and silence Chartist speech and action by representing their strategies as dangerous, their pain, however real, as madness and delirium, their demands as beside the point and their voice as an 'inarticulate roar'.<sup>37</sup> At the same time as silencing the Chartist Englishman, Carlyle wants to preserve, at all costs, the essential virtue of the Saxon type, as well as warning of his imminent destruction. Carlyle's negative depiction of the Irish plays a central and complex role in this figurative strategy, starting with the parodic appropriation of Daniel O'Connell's stock phrase 'Finest Peasantry in the World' as the savagely ironic title for the fourth chapter of *Chartism*, which focuses on the Irish. Carlyle's negative depiction of the Irish plays a central and complex role in this figurative strategy. The Irish immigrant poor, symbolically the principle of degradation, irrationality and disorder when merged with the native born Saxon, produces but does not essentialise a com-

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172. <sup>37</sup> See John Plotz, *The Crowd: British Literature and Public Politics* (Berkeley, CA, 2000).

positive figure of lower-class rebellion. From the spectre of this threatening hybrid and unnatural subject the virtuous Saxon can, through the alchemy of racial thinking, be separated out. Their racial residue of Saxon virtue, even the purer metal of their particular racial rage will survive untouched. While Carlyle argues that all men, including the degraded Irish are capable of some self-reform, his remaining hopes are focused on 'White-cliff, Albion';<sup>38</sup> indeed, 'The Irish population must get itself redressed and saved, for the sake of the English if for nothing else.'<sup>39</sup>

The racial representations and narrative in *Chartism* are often convoluted and contradictory, but this, I am arguing, is not a sign of Carlyle's confusion about the use of contemporary racial discourse, but a deliberate strategy of moving between paradigms, a strategy which implies, without fully acknowledging, that the level of degradation that the Irish poor sink to, is only in part an effect of their oppression. In *Chartism*, which contains perhaps Carlyle's most extended assault on the Irish, it does not suit his purpose to 'black-lead' them or put them over with the 'niggers', for 'niggers' to him are subhuman and deserve no compassion whatsoever. Instead the Irish become, by implication, a lesser type in the spectrum of human races within Europe – a racial geography defined through whiteness and masculinity, with the 'white European man' as its figure – and a type whose fate is too closely tied to that of England to warrant the always threatened extermination that is the fail-safe if 'reform' in all its senses becomes impossible.

Perhaps the real scandal of Carlyle's representation of the Irish in *Chartism* is less the revival of the tired caricature of national character with its racial clichés, but the wholly instrumental role that Ireland and the Irish play in a drama which so obviously cares only about the fate of the English. Whether emblematically monstrous or merely miserable, the Irish in Carlyle's writing in the late thirties and early forties are present 'for the sake of the English' rather than for themselves. In *Past and Present* he picks up on the much circulated story of a case that came up in the Stockport assizes in 1841 in which an Irish 'Mother and a Father ... arraigned and found guilty of poisoning three of their children, to defraud a "burial society" of some £3 8s. due on the death of each child: they are arraigned, found guilty; and the official authorities, it is whispered, hint that perhaps the case is not solitary, perhaps you had better not probe farther in that department of things.' Ventriloquising the English common-sense response – "Brutal savages, degraded Irish," mutters the idle reader of Newspapers' – Carlyle sees this incident as 'worth lingering on', since it is a classic example of English attitudes towards the Irish – 'the depravity, savagery and degraded Irishism being never so well admitted' – and a handy emblematic instance of the failure of British politics or economics to feed the poor. To rescue this hapless pair from the indifference of the thoughtless read-

ers he brings them into a racial, religious and national fold: 'In the British land, a human Mother and Father, of white skin and professing the Christian religion, had done this thing; they, with their Irishism and necessity and savagery, had been driven to do it.'<sup>40</sup> As in *Chartism*, Carlyle makes the Irish represent the 'savagery' of a degraded and desperate poor – throwing an implicit *cordon sanitaire* around the English. At the same time, for the Irish in England to serve as exemplars of the extremity to which the poor in general are driven they must be included within a generously configured racial, religious and political nation, both white and Christian. For all Carlyle's tactical contempt for the unexamined prejudice of the 'idle reader of Newspapers', the passage relies for its effect by appealing to just such prejudices. The implication is that if such a crime were committed by black subjects in Britain, it could only represent a wholly innate savagery, all but outside the community of the European human, and therefore not worth lingering on. At the end of *Past and Present* Carlyle uses another 'Irish' vignette plucked from the media to illustrate the violence that follows from the denial, on ethnic or religious grounds, of human fellowship. A poor 'Irish Widow' in Scotland, denied help from all the charitable institutions comes down with typhus 'and infected her Lane with fever, so that "seventeen other persons" died of fever there in consequence'. The 'seventeen other persons' are implicitly British – 'Nothing is left but that she prove her sisterhood by dying, and infecting you with typhus.'<sup>41</sup> The victims of failed sympathy, the Irish remain, in *Past and Present*, agents, however passive, of contagion and death.

These representations of the Irish and Ireland precede the two visits that Carlyle made to Ireland later in the 1840s, visits triggered by the somewhat surprising relationship struck up in 1845 between leading activists in the Young Ireland movement, who had approached Carlyle because they admired *Sartor Resartus* and saw Carlyle's critique of English rule as making him a likely convert to the cause of Irish independence. Carlyle's friendship with Charles Gavan Duffy, and their sojourns together in Ireland in September 1846 and the summer of 1849, focused Carlyle's attention on Ireland's fate and future in its own right, but the trips did little to shift his earlier views of the Irish, and nothing to persuade him that independence would help their situation; indeed, his class, religious and racially-bound authoritarianism was deepened by his experience, although a visit to Lord George Hill's model farm at the end of his second trip, offered a gleam of hope for the improvement of the country's agriculture which was one of the main elements in his hope for change.<sup>42</sup> The ever-present sight of impoverished men, women and children during his travels distressed him greatly. But his distress – triggered by observing the degrading

<sup>40</sup> Carlyle, *Past & Present*, in Shelton (ed.) *Thomas Carlyle: Selected Writings*, pp. 261–2. <sup>41</sup> Carlyle, *Past & Present*, p. 280. <sup>42</sup> See Fred Kaplan, *Thomas Carlyle* (Cambridge, 1983), chapter 13, for a brief account of these journeys and Carlyle's relationship to Young Ireland.

unproductive labour that the workhouse imposed on its inmates as well as the poverty – found, as ever, expression in the language of violence: it seemed better to ‘shoot a man rather than train him (with heavy expense to his neighbours) to be a deceptive human *swine*’.<sup>43</sup>

Ireland and the Irish remain an unhappy issue for Carlyle. His role as social critic cannot quite exempt him from complicity with the misrule of the state that governs it or the state’s proxy, capital’s misguided economic managers – white European men all, like himself. Nor can Carlyle’s invocation of the larger categories of whiteness and Britishness to include the impoverished Irish in Britain as brothers and sisters, while reserving an exalted space for the Saxon, quite exorcise the misery and rage induced in him by Ireland’s predicament, which included the difference and inferiority of its Celtic population, a difference that is always figured as in excess of the recognized effects of centuries of mismanagement and oppression. Never willing to blame the Irish for their plight, nor to let them off the hook, nor to leave them to their own devices, too willing to credit them with all the vices of men and none of their resources or virtues (all allocated to the Saxon people), the paradox that results cannot be psychically managed, but became for Carlyle, as for Kingsley, the internal as well as the external signs that all was not well not only within England but within that masculine self-construction, the English self.

1849 was not only the year of Carlyle’s trip to Ireland with Duffy, it was the year of the writing and publication of Carlyle’s most notorious expression of his racial views, the ‘Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question’ which appeared in *Fraser’s Magazine* at the end of the year, and was later retitled, republished and aggressively circulated by him as ‘Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question’. The two issues – Ireland and the West Indies – were for him deeply connected. The rage at the immiseration of ‘white Christians’ in Britain, including those lesser types of Celtic Catholics with their ‘Irishisms’, and the residual guilt that it induced, becomes projected outward in ‘The Negro Question’ onto idle ‘Quashee’, the caricatured Jamaican freedman who refuses the discipline of plantation labour.<sup>44</sup> ‘Quashee’ was a racial construct both ethnically and physically at a safe distance from Great Britain. His new freedom to sell or withhold his labour incited in certain elements of the white metropolitan imagination a guilt-free, murderous fantasy of order undemocratically imposed, of rebellions brutally suppressed – of violence, in short, that can go

43 Thomas Carlyle, *Reminiscences of My Irish Journey in 1849*, ed. J.A. Froude (London, 1882), pp. 175–6. 44 The frustrated Carlyle could concede that if the landlords seized all the crop for rent, it was ‘understandable that the Irish peasants declined to work *and* starve also.’, Kaplan, *Thomas Carlyle*, p. 340. The independence of the free black peasantry in contrast received no such acknowledgement and their idleness was attributed to their near animal status, see ‘Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question’, *Fraser’s Magazine*, 40 (December 1849), or its revised version ‘Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question’, reprinted in *English and Other Critical Essays* (London, 1964).

unpunished, that does not somehow miss its mark and shoot the shooter. Carlyle and Kingsley's defence of Governor Eyre is anticipated in their writing from the late 1830s forward. As for Kingsley, Carlyle's racialised representation of Ireland and the Irish poor was bound up with a retro-romance with England as a 'Saxon' land, a romance joined to their frustration with the failure of the resistant and rebellious poor within England to listen to the advice of leading intellectuals. Carlyle's *Chartism* ends with a hymn to the spread of empire through Saxon emigration.<sup>45</sup> Carlyle and Kingsley shared a vision of a future empire run by Saxons in which supposedly inferior races were properly disciplined and subordinated. A very wide range of public figures from the broadest political spectrum admired Carlyle. Engels and Duffy, from their different standpoints, mistook his ferocious anti-utilitarianism as part of a progressive critique of capitalism and colonialism. In fact it was often a reactionary modernity that Carlyle espoused – one that depended in its view of home and empire on both vertical and horizontal hierarchies of racially defined subjects, whose own rational as well as embodied assessment of the injuries of capitalism, class and colonialism must be rejected and silenced. That Ireland and the Irish, for Knox, Carlyle or Kingsley, could not, first or finally, be conflated with what they regarded as the subhuman African, does not lessen the centrality of race in their representation of them.

'No race interests us so much as the Saxon',<sup>46</sup> wrote Knox in his introduction to *The Races of Men*, and perhaps that ethnically solipsistic statement is the guiding principle to understanding the engagement of the English or at any rate English-identified Victorians with the plight of the Irish, whether in Ireland or in Britain and with the racial attributes of Irishness. Yet the repeated imputation of 'disorder' that clings to the description of Irishness, and not only to the Irish poor, whether conceived as innate or cultural, or, more commonly as I have suggested, a bit of both, is one that seems to return to trouble but not necessarily to disempower the very racialised discourses that seek to locate its sources, spirit and practice anywhere but in Saxon England. English thinking about the racial status of the Irish and the Saxon is partly hostage to the 'contrastive concept' that Stepan sees as the ruling paradigm of the age: Knox's argument acquires much of its energy from his attempt to disprove it with a racially purist theory that, for Carlyle at least, would have rendered England and Britain ungovernable. What I have tried to suggest in this short piece on the varieties and continuities in such thinking is that while Knox's exaggerated claims for race as the monocausal explanation for Ireland and Europe's history and present state were key to his self-promotion as a prophetic voice, his instinct that

<sup>45</sup> Knox's vision was more contradictory. Although he saw the Saxon character as best exemplified in the United States where he was free from the Norman yoke, he also argued that races, including the Saxon did not thrive when removed from their region of origin. <sup>46</sup> Knox, *Races of Men*, p. 15.

Victorian society was ripe to accept racial thinking, if not quite his extreme version, as a central causal explanation in part as a replacement for a misguided 'utopianism' or 'universalism' – registered as a naïve ameliorative, humanitarian vision of an earlier generation – was largely correct. Nor was he on the wrong track when he insisted that 'race' as an idea was not only a black and white affair. His 'new sense' of race was a symptom of an expanding and bleakly conservative modernity that provoked and permitted the 'deniable genocidal fantasy'<sup>47</sup> which all three of the writers discussed above entertained for racial others, the Irish among them.

<sup>47</sup> Barrell, 'Death on the Nile', p. 202. Barrell sees this fantasy, among other strategies, as a way of 'wishing away' the uncertainty that racial difference and relations throw up in this period, by 'wishing away' the raced group that causes it.