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THE DANDY IN IRISH AND AMERICAN SOUTHERN FICTION

Aristocratic Drag

Ellen Crowell

THE DANDY IN IRISH AND AMERICAN SOUTHERN FICTION

ARISTOCRATIC DRAG

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ELLEN CROWELL

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INTRODUCTION
SHAM GRANDEURS, SHAM CHIVALRIES: ARCHITECTURES OF ARISTOCRACY IN IRELAND AND THE AMERICAN SOUTH

Some violent bitter man, some powerful man
Called architect and artist in, that they,
Bitter and violent men, might rear in stone
The sweetness that all longed for night and day,
The gentleness none there had ever known . . .
W. B. Yeats, 'Meditations in Time of Civil War'

[H]e was a good architect; Quentin knew the house, twelve miles from Jefferson, in its grove of cedar and oak, seventy-five years after it was finished. And not only an architect, General Compson said, but an artist since only an artist could have borne [. . .] Sutpen's ruthlessness and hurry and still manage to curb the dream of grim and castlelike magnificence at which Sutpen obviously aimed.
William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*

In 1845, following the publication of his *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Frederick Douglass escaped recapture by travelling through the British Isles, lecturing on the American abolitionist movement. Visiting Ireland on the eve of the Famine, he drew comparisons between destitute Irish peasants living as tenants on Anglo-Irish estates and African-American slaves living on plantations in the American South:

> [Irish peasants] lacked only black skin and woolly hair, to complete their likeness to the plantation Negro. The open, uneducated, mouth – the long gaunt arm – the badly formed foot and ankle – the shuffling gait – the

> retreating forehead and vague expression – and their petty quarrels and fights – all reminded me of the plantation. (Qtd in Rice 1999: 122)

Douglass's comparison works in two contradictory ways: his simian imagery reinforces a transatlantic, racist system of identification between the Irish peasant and the African slave, but his use of imagery signifying a common oppression links the two groups politically: 'I see much [in Ireland] to remind me of my former condition, and I confess I should be ashamed to lift up my voice against American slavery, but that I know the cause of humanity is one the world over' (qtd in Hardack 1999: 121–2). This linkage is implicit in his final shift from comparing people to comparing places; the Irish peasant's 'likeness to the plantation Negro' finally reminds Douglass of the 'plantation' itself

In 1882, an Irish visitor to the American South experienced an inverse déjà vu that reiterated and reinflected Douglass's earlier experience. Whereas Douglass interpreted mid-nineteenth-century Ireland by drawing comparisons between Irish peasants and African-American slaves, a transatlantic parallel already well established in Victorian caricature, Oscar Wilde familiarised himself with the Reconstruction South by highlighting cultural and political similarities between Irish protestant and Anglo-southern ruling elites. The experience of Wilde's own uncle testifies to the ease with which a nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish gentleman might establish himself in the Old South: J. K. Elgee, Jane Wilde's eldest brother, came of age in Dublin but left in the 1830s to invest his inheritance in the American South. Following the lead of other Irish entrepreneurs,[1] he purchased a large plantation in Rapides Parish, Louisiana, and soon secured a prominent place in local politics. Elgee shared his nephew's flair for ostentatious artistry: in his capacity as state senator Elgee single-handedly designed Louisiana's colourful confederate state flag, and when Louisiana drafted its Declaration of Secession, the statesman placed his flamboyant, outsized signature at the document's very centre. And although Oscar Wilde, when asked by New Orleans reporters in 1882 whether he was in Louisiana to 'look after some of the family possessions', coyly demurred: 'however much I might desire to have a plantation in Louisiana, not the least of the attractions of which would be the proprietorship of groves of magnolia trees, I have no such object in view' (*Daily Picayune* 1882: 4), the young aesthete likewise ingratiated himself with white southerners by drawing broad ideological parallels between southern and Irish ruling classes.

In so doing Wilde merely offered audiences – then and now – variations on a longstanding theme, one whose roots can be traced both through verifiable cross-colonial histories and in the more porous contours of imagined cross-cultural affinity. As Ronald Takaki records,

> [t]he conquest of Ireland and the settlement of Virginia were bound so closely together that one correspondence, dated March 8, 1610, stated: 'It is hoped the plantation of Ireland may shortly be settled. The Lord Delaware . . . is preparing to depart for the plantation of Virginia'. (Takaki 1992: 895)

And indeed, many of the major figures responsible for orchestrating the 'plantation' of Ulster also assisted in the plantation of the American South; as Kieran Quinlan observes, the colonisation process in the American colonies

> bore obvious, and frequently recognized, similarities to events in Ireland, for many of the new colonists from as early as 1594 onwards – Sir Humphrey Gilbert, Sir Walter Raleigh, Ralph Lane, Sir Richard Grenville – had gained their first experience of conquest by crossing the Irish Sea and were armed even now with settlement layout plans that had already been used in Ulster. (Quinlan 2005: 23)

The word plantation, then, has its origins in the simultaneous settlements of Ireland and America by the English; the *Oxford English Dictionary* in fact identifies the word 'chiefly with reference to the colonies founded in North America and on the forfeited lands in Ireland in the 16th–17th centuries'. For the year 1610, the *OED* records two instances of the word – one in T. Blennerhasset's *A Direction for the Plantation of Ulster* and the other from a pamphlet entitled 'A True and Sincere Declaration of the Purpose and Ends of the Plantation begun in Virginia'. Given this intimate Irish-American history of the word 'plantation', we are compelled to identify, in both Douglass's observation that an Anglo-Irish demesne 'reminded me of the plantation' and Wilde's professed 'desire' for a plantation with 'groves of magnolia trees', a continued cross-cultural identification with – and critique of – Irish and southern architectures of aristocratic supremacy.

I use the phrase 'architectures of aristocratic supremacy' to signal a key focus of this study. For in the above examples, and multiple others besides, we see a transatlantic dialogue between Ireland and

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the South coalescing around questions of power, supremacy, and gentility. In 1836, John Pendleton Kennedy, the Irish-American father of the Southern plantation novel, rewrote the ancestry of the 'Southern Cavalier' by conflating Southern honour with its gentlemanly Irish equivalent:

> [The Cavaliers] were sons of the Emerald Isle, – of a race whose historical boast is the faithfulness of their devotion to a friend in need and their chivalrous courtesy to woman, but still more their generous and gallant championship of woman in distress. (Kennedy 1969: 75)

Wilde, himself an Irish 'Cavalier', in interviews with the Southern press conflated the Irish Home Rule movement with 'the principles for which the South [had] fought' (*Atlanta Constitution* 1882: 8) – a strategic identification reciprocated by William Faulkner, who imported 'The Irish poet, Wilde' into the grounds of his modernist meditation on performed Southern aristocracy, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) offered readers a Celtic origin myth for the South by following Gerald O'Hara from colonial Ireland, from which he fled after murdering an Anglo-Irish landlord, to the Old South where he lords over a slave-holding plantation that replicates the very colonial power structures that forced his exile. And in *The Mind of the South* (1941), cultural historian W. J. Cash echoes these transatlantic literary parallels when he 'account[s] for the [Southern] ruling class' by imagining what he calls 'a concrete case' – 'A stout young Irishman [who brings] his bride into the Carolina upcountry about 1800'. When this transplanted 'backcountry Irishman' dies, he leaves 'two-thousand acres, a hundred and fourteen slaves, and four cotton gins' and is remembered as a 'gentleman of the old school' and 'a noble specimen of chivalry at its best' (Cash 1941: 15).

Given this longstanding cross-cultural dialogue, we might find less surprising the fact that, while attending the University of Wisconsin in the 1920s, Eudora Welty nursed homesickness for Mississippi by immersing herself in Yeats, her reading of whom became 'an end in itself, a compensation for the alienation she felt in Madison' (Marrs 2005: 23). Or that in 1960, Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen visited a Civil War battlefield on the advice of her friend Welty, and there found a fellow Bowen among the fallen Confederate generals: 'I went back to the Memorial museum to see his portrait. Fair, like my father's family, youngish, intent, candid, he returned my gaze: I considered

I knew him' (Bowen 1960: 73). So, although Anglo-Irish novelist Edith Somerville, after accepting an invitation from South Carolina to ride with the 'Aiken hunt', concluded in *The States through Irish Eyes* (1930) that she preferred her own West Carbery hunt to its Southern equivalent – for many writers on both sides of the Atlantic the distance – cultural if not geographical – between these two landscapes of privilege seemed short indeed.

Such meditations, moreover, are not limited to cross-cultural conversations between literary artists. In the figure of Mr Thomas Conolly, mid-Victorian MP, master of Castletown House in County Kildare, and gun-runner for the Confederacy, we find a historical codicil to the transatlantic literary dialogue I sketch above. With fellow Confederate sympathisers Lord Charlemont of Roxborough Castle, Co. Tyrone, and John Palliser of Annestown, Co. Waterford, Conolly shared the (dubious) distinction of having participated in the last blockade-running expedition to reach the Southern states; when he debarked in 1864 to explore 'Dixie' as it fell around him, Conolly also became one of the Confederate South's last 'tourists'. In his introduction to Conolly's travel diary, Nelson Lankford attempts to explain 'why this leading member of the Victorian gentry of Ireland chose to endure hardship and risk capture, or worse' for the Confederacy (Conolly 1988: 3). Although Lankford never directly answers this question, the diary itself reveals several compelling reasons.

First, Conolly seems to have recognised his own aristocratic culture mirrored in what he termed the 'Great Cause of the South': a landed class, relatively new to the status of 'nobility', which sought to distinguish itself, both politically and culturally, from a dominant, centralised government. Conolly's great-great-grandfather, the son of a publican in Co. Donegal, was determined to surpass his father in social position. To this end, he studied law, eventually making his fortune after the Battle of the Boyne through 'shrewd dealings in confiscated estates'. Thriving in the Protestant domination of all aspects of early eighteenth-century Irish life, this first Conolly amassed enough wealth to commission Florentine architect Alessandro Galilei to design Castletown House, the 'first great palladian country house in Ireland, the largest private home in the nation, and a source of wonder and comment to the members of the Ascendancy elite who were entertained under its roof' (Conolly 1988: 5).

By the time our Conolly inherited Castletown House, the family had been 'aristocratic' long enough that it took this status for granted. Others, however, were quick to assert that 'Irish gentry' was not the same as the English equivalent; as W. J. McCormack observes, although 'British nobility included many who could not trace their titled line further back than a few generations', in British attitudes towards Irish nobility one finds that 'superiority of the old aristocracy over the new was a familiar theme' (McCormack 1985: 56). Such attitudes permeated rumours about a certain Anglo-Irish blockade runner: although Conolly's plans were supposedly confidential, the Irish gentleman's exploits were a topic of speculative discussion:

> A rumor difficult to credit, but from the manner in which it is put forward, still harder to refute, has reached us, to the effect that an MP, of large fortune and commensurate eccentricity, is about to seek a new excitement in 'running the blockade.' The motive impulse is, of course, sympathy with the Southern cause; but it would seem that although of aces broad, he is not entirely blind to the commercial advantages of the operation . . . Need it be added that the gallant, adventurous, loquacious MP is a native of the sister isle? (Qtd in Conolly 1988: 11)

This characterisation of the Irish peerage as eccentric and avaricious is fairly typical, and although Conolly – whose ungrammatical diary records debauched exploits and excessive drinking – may have fitted the bill, one cannot help noting condescension here. Touring the South, however, Conolly seems to have sought out and found like-minded eccentrics in whose gregarious hospitality he luxuriated – even though that hospitality was offered against the chaotic backdrop of war.

Although Conolly spent minimal time discussing the merits of the Southern cause – being too busy gorging on alcohol and food in the company of soon-to-be vanquished Virginia planters – on several occasions he conversed with Southerners who drew parallels between the South's 'peculiar institution' and the 'Paddy' question. The Confederate captain who delivered Conolly to North Carolina, Captain Maffit, was born in Ireland and raised in a Protestant Irish family. His observations about the 'Irish', recorded by Conolly on 24 February 1864, underscore some less-than-chivalrous reasons Conolly might have supported the Confederacy: 'spent evening in Captain Maffit's room his opinion of the Irish & his idea of treating them "Give Paddy once an idea of your Justice & then you may treat him as unjustly as you please" ' (Conolly 1988: 22). Although he does not comment upon whether he agrees with Maffit's supremacist solution to the 'Irish question', that he records the conversation at all indicates some interest.

In Richmond, Conolly met the infamous George Fitzhugh, author of such supremacist tracts as *Sociology for the South, or, The Failure of Free Society* (1854) and *Cannibals All! Or, Slaves Without Masters* (1857). He refers to the writer affectionately as 'old Fitzhugh', calling him 'a real thoroughgoing Tory for Established Church & ranks & orders "on principle" ' and observing that

> This dreadful crisis has opened many mens eyes to the value of stable governments & strong checks upon the wicked nature of man – His discourse on the sound Public opinion & moral character of the South. Promises me a Copy of his Book – Fine old man! (Conolly 1988: 45)

Between Maffit and Fitzhugh, Conolly received colourful lessons in cross-cultural racism and supremacy – an education augmented by visits to several (barely) antebellum estates.

In his introduction to *Confederate Crackers and Cavaliers* Grady McWhiney observes that a 'carelessness about moneymaking and financial affairs as well as a strong commitment to the leisurely enjoyment of life characterized both Celts and Southerners and set them apart from most Englishmen and Northerners.' As evidence, McWhiney cites one week's entertainment, which included copious amounts of meat and wine, 'uproarious' company at the mansion, 'strong steeds racing' and 'the loud cry of the chase on the misty hills'. 'This might have been a report on a party hosted by an antebellum Southern planter', McWhiney observes, but is instead a record 'of how Daniel O'Callaghen of County Cork, one of Ireland's "big house" gentry, entertained in the eighteenth century' (McWhiney 2002: 8). Conolly certainly seems to have felt at home in antebellum plantation culture. He visited Claremont Manor, the Virginia plantation of Major Allen, who, because of his tendency for overindulgence, 'would have been a perfect companion for Conolly' (Conolly 1988: 50 n.). On the estate of his host, whom Conolly described as a 'Fine old Virginia family great planter and owner of 600 negroes before the war' the Irish lord was delighted to find another transplant from the old country: a landscape gardener who had previously worked the gardens of one of the few Irish estates which rivalled Conolly's own in size and opulence: 'met an Irish gardener from Castle Coole, one Boone, . . . & enjoy a short chat with him!' (ibid.: 50). Conolly's diary, then, directly affirms Takaki's observation that 'the conquest of Ireland and the settlement of Virginia were bound . . . closely together': even as late as 1845, the 'formal gardens' ornamenting these kindred aristocracies were being maintained by the same gardeners (Takaki 1992: 895).

As these multiple examples demonstrate, connections between Ireland and the American South have long been mobilised by colonial strategists, Confederate aficionados, abolitionists, cultural historians and literary figures interested in exploring and in some cases exploiting real and perceived affinities between two 'nations' that, as Quinlan observes, 'have long been the "problem," if also frequently romanticized regions, of otherwise "progressive" nations' (Quinlan 2005: 4). Certainly we see in these cross-cultural identifications a mutual recognition of peripheral status, coupled with the persistent romantic draw of the 'vanquished' culture; but I submit that these examples reveal the prominence of a much more specific cultural and aesthetic affinity. One extremely potent and persistent area of transatlantic identification between Anglo-Irish and Anglo-Southern writers has been the problem of supremacy: in the multiple examples I detail above, we see the concept of aristocracy – its establishment, maintenance, persistence, decay and disappearance – mobilised as a central, ideologically mutable motif.

Although this cross-cultural Anglo-Irish / Anglo-Southern meditation on the aesthetics of aristocracy began in the early nineteenth century, the following dramatic example from the modernist period illuminates this study's larger focus. W. B. Yeats begins his seven-poem lyric sequence 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' with the poem 'Ancestral Houses',' in which the speaker imagines how violence and artistry merged to create the signature icon of Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland: the 'ancestral' manor house and grounds:

> Some violent bitter man, some powerful man
> Called architect and artist in, that they,
> Bitter and violent men, might rear in stone
> The sweetness that all longed for night and day,
> The gentleness none there had ever known . . . (I:17–21)

After imagining this origin scene – in which the 'flowering lawns', 'bronze and marble' of eighteenth-century architecture soothe the savage beast of colonial violence – the speaker meditates on whether an architectural beauty designed to showcase imperial power is in fact the root cause of cultural decay:

> What if the glory of escutcheoned doors,
> And buildings that a haughtier age designed,

> . . . What if those things the greatest of mankind
> Consider most to magnify, or to bless,
> But take our greatness with our bitterness. (I:33–4, 38–40)

The original 'bitter man', who hires architect and artist to cover over a history of violent land acquisition with the 'levelled lawns and gravelled ways' of aristocratic privilege, was at least a virile founder; his ancestors – lazy recipients of 'inherited glory' – lack this dynamic admixture of violence and desire. The architectural 'sweetness' and 'gentleness' which pampered subsequent generations seems to have taken their masculinity, too, along with their 'greatness': 'maybe the great-grandson of that house, / For all its bronze and marble, 's but a mouse' (I:23–4).

Yeats's sequence therefore begins with an inquiry into the (gendered) aesthetics of imperialism, finally conceding that the 'design' of cultural supremacy, to use a Faulknerian term, is both energised and contaminated by the violence and beauty at its core. This inquiry, broadly sketched for the purposes of my argument, might as aptly describe the meditations on supremacy, artifice, and androgyny that structure William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*. For the story of Yeats's 'violent, bitter man' is also the story of Thomas Sutpen, the 'demon' at *Absalom*'s core, a man of uncertain origins who, in 1833, brings his own architect and artist onto 100 acres of land dubiously acquired ('land which he took from ignorant Indians, nobody knows how') to fashion there a majestic edifice capable of 'concealing him behind respectability' (Faulkner 1990: 10):

> He returned, again without warning and accompanied this time by the covered wagon with a negro driving it and on the seat with the negro a small, alertly resigned man with a grim, harried Latin face, in a frock coat and a flowered waistcoat and a hat which would have created no furore on a Paris boulevard, all of which he was to wear constantly for the next two years – the sombrely theatrical clothing and the expression of amazed and fatalistic determination – while his white client and the negro crew which he was to advise though not direct went stark naked save for a coating of mud. This was the French architect. (Ibid.: 26)

Of course, readers familiar with *Absalom* know that Sutpen is a character associated with violence from the novel's first pages:

> *It seems that this demon – his name was Sutpen – (Colonel Sutpen) – Colonel Sutpen. Who came out of nowhere and without warning upon*

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