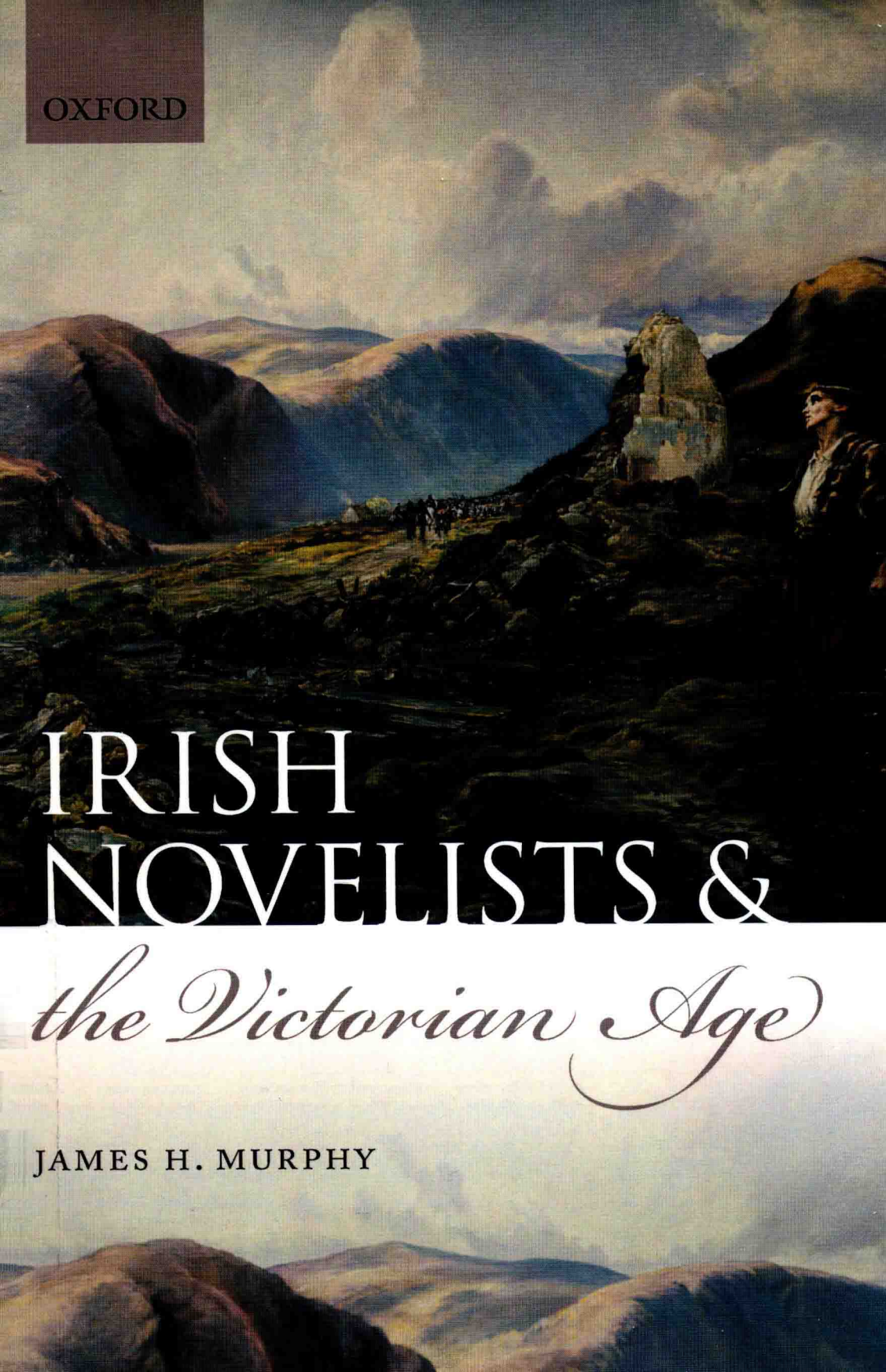
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IRISH NOVELISTS &
the Victorian Age
JAMES H. MURPHY

Irish Novelists and the Victorian Age

By
JAMES H. MURPHY

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IRISH NOVELISTS AND THE VICTORIAN AGE

For Barbara

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J. H. M.

Contents

1

Introduction: Approaches to Reading Irish Fiction

Kathleen O'Meara (1839–1888) was an Irish novelist with an interesting connection. Her grandfather had been Napoleon's doctor on St Helena and had later sensationally denounced Britain's treatment of the ex-emperor. She herself lived in Paris for most of her life and during the last two decades of her life was a quite successful and relatively prolific author of books written in English. For whatever reason, she only chose to publish under her own name towards the end of her career, preferring instead the use of the more English-sounding *nom de plume*, Grace Ramsay. In 1869, the London firm of Hurst and Blackett published her second novel, *Iza's Story*, about the struggle of Polish patriots against Russian occupation. It contains a brief conversation in which the Polish–Russian situation is compared with the Irish–British situation, with one character who pronounces it '"too ridiculous" to be worth disproving, [nonetheless] set[ting] about disproving it vehemently'.[1] It was not this incident, however, so much as the whole tenor of a work, which praises the rebellion of a small nation against a great neighbour, that disconcerted both of the principal London weekly literary reviewers of the time. Imagining the unknown author to be English, the *Athenaeum* reviewer expressed some relief that

> she is evidently quite enough of an English patriot to imagine what her own ideas would be on the subject of good taste and discretion if she came across a novel written by some well-established foreign author and published by some eminent foreign firm, detailing for the benefit of Irish excitability (it is the author herself who suggests the parallel) particulars of British tyranny since Lord Aberdeen's ministry.[2]

The account in the *Saturday Review* reproves the work in similar terms. And in identifying the ways in which the political overwhelms the aesthetic in the novel, it anticipates, albeit unconsciously, what has since become one of the nostrums of criticism of nineteenth-century Irish fiction:

> Fancy if a Fenian novel is ever written by as sympathetic a chronicler as Miss Ramsay! What terrible deeds will be wrought in it by some fiendish Sassenach colonel . . . It is possible that such a book may serve a political purpose. Like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it may

[1] Grace Ramsay [Kathleen O'Meara], *Iza's Story*, 3 vols (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1869), 3, p. 237.
[2] *Athenaeum* 2171 (5 June 1869), p. 759.

> have a distinct effect upon public opinion. But it will scarcely be able to claim much consideration as a work of art.[3]

Comparisons between Catholic Ireland facing Britain and Catholic Poland facing not only Russia, but also Prussia and Austria, were common. Indeed, Queen Victoria's German consort Prince Albert had got into trouble when a report was made public of a conversation he had had with Alexander von Humboldt in which he had commented that he had as little sympathy for the Irish as for the Poles.[4]

It is intriguing to reflect, then, on the fact that Dorothea Brooke, the heroine of the novel that stands at the pinnacle of British Victorian fiction, George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–2), marries a young journalist-come-politician of Polish descent, who has been deprived of his inheritance. The novel is set around the time of the 1832 parliamentary reform act, only a few years after the passing of the 1829 Catholic emancipation measure that had been of such moment for Irish Catholics. Will Ladislaw, moreover, is described as an agitator, a term of disapproval for those who drew the disenfranchised into political debate through populist means. It was a term frequently used at the time for the Irish radical leader Daniel O'Connell.

Middlemarch may well be seen as a novel that is covertly about Ireland, with the marriage which ends it as a national marriage, symbolically enacting the reconciliation of Ireland and Britain, in the tradition of Maria Edgeworth and Lady Morgan, and the Irish novelists of the early nineteenth-century romantic period.

The covert Irishness of *Middlemarch* is ironic, given the constant calls in Irish criticism for the identification of an Irish *Middlemarch*. In this context, the novel has a metonymic role. The search is really for an Irish novel which possesses that high-Victorian realism exemplified in the works of the likes of Eliot. The question was first asked in the nineteenth century and with genuine perplexity. Thus, in her *cri de coeur* of 1891, 'Wanted an Irish Novelist', Rosa Mulholland (1841–1921) puts it in the form of a wish: 'Would we had a George Eliot to give us of Irish life scenes and characters corresponding to those in *Silas Marner* and *The Mill on the Floss*.'[5] Realism in connection with the nineteenth-century novel is a term in criticism which can and has been used in a variety of ways. It can be used to encompass much of the fiction of the Victorian period that attended in detail to contemporary, often gritty, human experience but also to isolate a particular, more rarefied dimension of that fiction associated with authors of high seriousness in the 1860s and 1870s such as George Eliot.[6] Eliot's work sought to interrogate the development of individual consciousness not in isolation but in the context of the interconnectedness of a society which was

[3] *Saturday Review* 28.717 (24 July 1869), pp. 127–8: p. 128.

[4] James H. Murphy, *Abject Loyalty: Nationalism and Monarchy in Ireland, during the Reign of Queen Victoria* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press; Cork: Cork University Press, 2001), p. 124.

[5] Rosa Mulholland, 'Wanted an Irish Novelist', *Irish Monthly* 19 (July 1891), pp. 368–73: p. 370.

[6] Michael Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian Period, 1830–1890* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1985), p. 7.

also the object of scrutiny. It was thus psychological and sociological but also, in an age in which religion was losing its valence, moral. Confident moral judgement requires the stability of a consensus not only about individual action but about society itself. Victorian realism found that consensus in the values of the middle class.[7]

Such a reconciling consensus was missing in an Ireland that was perceived as riven between Protestant landlords of British descent and a Catholic tenantry of Gaelic descent, and in which the middle class apparently counted for little. Pressing political and economic issues barred the door to the realm of the moral and aesthetic in literature.[8] This was the view put forward by Stephen Gwynn in his essay 'Novels of Irish Life in the Nineteenth Century', which was written in 1897 and in which the historical novelist Sir Walter Scott is made to stand in for George Eliot as he fulfils roughly the same function:

> At present, indeed, a Walter Scott, should he appear in Ireland, would be apt to have a cold welcome. To write on anything connected with Irish history is inevitably to offend the Press of one party, and very probably of both.[9]

Added to the intramural Irish conflict, which ensured harsh criticism for the stereotype-using Charles Lever (1806–1872) in a way not reserved for his equally stereotype-using English rival Charles Dickens, there was the further dimension whereby a book was to be 'judged by the effect it was likely to have on English opinion':

> Literature in Ireland, in short, is almost inextricably connected with considerations foreign to art; it is regarded as a means, not as an end.[10]

Belief in the supposedly maimed nature of Irish fiction from the Victorian period has carried down to criticism in the present day, but it is now something to be celebrated rather than regretted. The absence of a robust *bourgeois* literature enabled Irish fiction to become the *locus* for a pioneering modernism, most notably in the case of the work of James Joyce, it is believed. The colonial periphery had been transformed into the modernist centre.[11]

This view has much to commend it, though it is often simply asserted in a priori terms as part of a postcolonial critique, without reference to many of the thousands of novels written during the period. In fact, as we shall see, there were specific circumstances at particular periods that helped to accentuate the political dimension of

[7] Linda M. Shires, 'The Aesthetics of the Victorian Novel: Form, Subjectivity, Ideology', in Deirdre David (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 61–76.

[8] Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 147.

[9] Stephen Gwynn, 'Novels of Irish Life in the Nineteenth Century' [1897], in *Irish Books and Irish People* (Dublin: Talbot, 1919), pp. 7–23: p. 7.

[10] Gwynn, 'Novels', p. 8.

[11] See Margaret Kelleher, '"Wanted an Irish Novelist"': The Critical Decline of the Nineteenth-Century Novel', in Jacqueline Belanger (ed.), *The Irish Novel in the Nineteenth Century: Facts and Fictions* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2005), pp. 187–201: p. 199, who refers to the notion held by some 'that the nineteenth-century Irish novel may be redeemed only by its proto-modernist, even post-modern traits'.

Irish novels and to inhibit the aesthetic of realism. And, of course, it was by no means impossible to write an Irish novel in the realist mode. Indeed, in her critique, Mulholland acknowledges this and actually names the Irish-content novel that has the greatest claim to be considered a successful example of realism, *Castle Daly* (1875) by Annie Keary (1825–1879).

The question of the existence of an Irish *Middlemarch* has thus often been raised by critics who would not be best pleased to find one. What are we to make of the argument above that, setting aside *Castle Daly* for a moment, *Middlemarch* itself is the Irish *Middlemarch*? In truth, whatever its merits, the initial impetus behind devising such an argument for this present discussion was a little tongue-in-cheek. Its purpose was really to illustrate something else, the recent tendency in criticism to find in English-set novels apparent allegories exploring Irish identity. Indeed, characters in another Eliot novel, *Adam Bede* (1859), have recently been read in terms of Anglo-Irish relations, with a central female character's passivity before dominant men seen as being 'in keeping with the commonplace stereotype of Ireland'.[12] Something similar has been detected in the relationship between Rochester and the heroine of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847).[13] This trend can be traced back as far as 1946 when the Anglo-Irish novelist Elizabeth Bowen (1899–1973) wrote a new introduction to the 1846 novel, *Uncle Silas*, by Joseph Sheridan LeFanu (1814–1873). It is true that LeFanu had been told by the publisher Richard Bentley to write a novel with 'an English subject and in modern times'[14] rather than an Irish historical novel as had hitherto been his wont and that, in writing it, LeFanu drew on earlier material with an Irish setting. Bowen, however, claimed that '*Uncle Silas* has always struck me as being an Irish story transposed to an English setting.' In fairness, this was more than a mere caprice or artificial imposition on the text. She argued that certain dimensions to the culture of the Derbyshire people in the novel were redolent of the Anglo-Irish of LeFanu's own background. 'The hermetic solitude of the family myth, fatalism, feudalism, and the "ascendancy" outlook are accepted facts of life for the race of hybrids from which Le Fanu sprang.' Derbyshire was a place which was out of cultural alignment with the more modern rest of the country, '—just such a time lag as, in a more marked form, separates Ireland from England more effectually than any sea'.[15]

More recently and quite famously there has been the rendering as Irish of Heathcliff, the alluring anti-hero of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), who was discovered wandering around Liverpool, point of departure for many an Irish emigrant to the new world, and speaking what was deemed to be gibberish,

[12] Neil McCaw, 'Some mid-Victorian Irishness(es): Trollope, Thackeray, Eliot', in Neil McCaw (ed.), *Writing Irishness in Nineteenth-Century British Culture* (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 129–57: p. 149.

[13] Kathleen Constable, 'Writing the Minefield: Reflections of Union in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*', in McCaw, *Writing Irishness*, pp. 98–115: p. 106.

[14] W. J. McCormack, *Sheridan LeFanu and Victorian Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), p. 140.

[15] Elizabeth Bowen, 'Introduction', in J. S. LeFanu, *Uncle Silas, a Tale of Bartram-Haugh* (1864; London: Cresset, 1947), pp. 7–28: p. 8.

but was perhaps Irish.[16] The novel, though, which has given greatest scope to the process has been *Dracula* (1897) by Bram Stoker (1847–1912).[17] This story of Transylvanian vampires with its emphasis on soil and on parasitic relationships has been read in terms of the traumas of the recent Irish land war, with Transylvania itself sometimes being seen as a version of the west of Ireland. Some of these readings have great merit. On the other hand, however, as one recent critic has pointed out, no one at the time these novels were written saw them as explorations of Irish consciousness or identity.[18]

The allegorical approach attempts to find Irish issues hidden in novels without explicit Irish themes by both Irish and English authors. What this undoubtedly illustrates is the centrality of the question of Irish identity to the literary criticism of Irish novels. It is as if novels which do not overtly deal with Irish identity must be read as dealing with it in a covert fashion or not read at all. The approach betrays a secret anxiety about Irish fiction written during the Victorian age, that much of it was not truly Irish at all, but merely the product of an assimilation to British culture. And, indeed, there was a good deal of convergence in the writing of, and audience for, fiction between Britain and Ireland during the period. But this present study will not automatically assume that this was something to be reprobated. Interesting new perspectives arise if we allow a broader view of what can be deemed Irish fiction. The diversity encountered through this approach can also free us from the compulsion to identify an overarching narrative of the development of fiction.[19] Irish identity will be a central concern of this study but we can gain a new understanding of it if we read novels with explicit Irish themes alongside those without them. For example, the first and last political novels by Justin McCarthy (1830–1912), Irish nationalist parliamentarian and writer, concern Ireland but are illuminated by the non-Irish political novels, often with English settings, which he wrote in between.

The work of Charlotte Riddell (1832–1906) also serves as a good illustration of the unexpected permutations that can arise over issues of identity during this period. Born into a comfortable Protestant background in Co. Antrim, she moved to London at the age of twenty-two to work as a writer. There she married, though she was forced to support her husband after the failure of his businesses. She carried out editorial work for magazines and wrote dozens of novels, though only a handful with Irish themes. She was noted for her tales of the supernatural and she was the originator of the novel of the city, a genre that encompassed not only urban life but the lives of businessmen: the city being a metonym for London's financial centre.

[16] Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, p. 3.

[17] Joseph Valente, *Dracula's Crypt: Bram Stoker, Irishness and the Question of Blood* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

[18] Adrian Frazier, 'Irish Modernisms, 1880–1930', in John Wilson Foster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 113–32: p. 122.

[19] Such as 'the tendency to isolate Ascendancy Gothic as *the* defining nienteenth-century Irish alternative to English realism'. See Joe Cleary, 'The Nineteenth-Century Irish Novel: Some Notes and Speculations on Literary Historiography', in Belanger, *The Irish Novel*, pp. 202–21: p. 204.

The title of Riddell's semi-autobiographical novel, *A Struggle for Fame* (1883), puts the focus on individual achievement rather than on national identity. Indeed, there is precious little in the way of national solidarity in the story of Glen(arva) Westley, who arrives in England to become an author on the same boat as Barney Kelly, another aspiring Irish author, who turns into her rival and enemy.[20] Barney is advised '"to get rid of every Irish notion you failed to leave behind you on the other side of the channel"', while Glen is told by the publisher Vasset, a version of the actual publisher Charles Skeet in this *roman-à-clef*, that '"Irish stories are quite gone out"':[21]

> Ireland at that period had dropped to a tremendous discount. Fashionable novels, Glenarva, was told, were the rage—tales of high life—chronicles of the doings and saying of the upper ten in London—nothing else, one gentleman was good enough to tell her, would go down.[22]

Adjusting to this reality, Glen's success is built on novels without Irish themes, which she has no problem in producing, whereas Barney writes '"gutter fictions"',[23] and becomes jealous of Glen, particularly because she is a woman. He attacks her in a review as '"a greatly over-rated author"'.[24] In the end he actually saves her now flagging career with a positive review, done to annoy the publisher Laplash (William Tinsley), with whom Glen has fallen out.

This is a world of atomized and competitive individuals, who have little room for sentiment. Glen's desire to write about Ireland arises from no national commitment but simply because it is what she best knows. Her masterpiece is about Essex and has a universal theme. Irish authors can, with relative ease, enter into a shared British culture but cannot afford sentimental attachments to Irish issues. If the risky business is attempted of extrapolating something of Riddell's own attitude from this novel, it would appear to be one of ultimate indifference to the issue of Irish identity in her fiction. Yet, an examination of Riddell's own Irish novels, while initially appearing to confirm this judgement, actually adds an intriguing further level of complication.

Maxwell Drewitt (1865) is set in Connemara and is sprinkled with sectarian tensions, demonstrated in the divisions created in a Protestant family when one member marries a Catholic. It also features a contentious election, which is noteworthy for the drunkenness it occasions, and a theft of money. The novel rests, however, on the stock-in-trade of Victorian melodrama, the intergenerational concatenations of exclusionary wills and the bitterness of having to marry for money rather than love:

[20] See Margaret Kelleher, 'Charlotte Riddell's *A Struggle for Fame*: The Field of Women's Literary Production', *Colby Quarterly* 36.2 (2000), pp. 116–31.

[21] Charlotte Riddell, *A Struggle for Fame, a Novel*, 3 vols (London: Richard Bentley, 1883) 1, pp. 160–61, 118.

[22] Riddell, *Struggle*, 1, p. 307.

[23] Riddell, *Struggle*, 3, p. 101.

[24] Riddell, *Struggle*, 3, p. 235.

> He had given his youth—his liberty—all chances of happy love, for money; and now he could not get rid of his wife—could not get rid of that old, rouged, affected, ugly woman, who was jealous of every look he cast in the direction of those who were younger and prettier than herself.[25]

Yet, having distanced itself from much pretence at presenting Irish realities, the novel ends with several of the characters trying to come to terms with an Ireland which very obviously impinges significantly on them, though in ways they find uncongenial. One flees back to England:

> I am of London, Londony, I am of the streets, streety. I detest high tragedy; and your prodigious funerals; and your outrageous griefs; and your excessive sensibilities . . . seem to me quite out of place in the civilized nineteenth century.[26]

Another, whose mother had come to Ireland as an unembittered Englishwoman but who had become embroiled in internecine family bitterness, also initially wants to get out: 'I hate the places! . . . I hate the associations! I hate the country.'[27] Yet, after he marries 'a bright, loveable English country girl',[28] he is better able to endure Irish realities, having thus distanced himself from them to a degree. The best way to be Irish, Riddell would appear to be suggesting, is at arm's length. The novel's characters thus end up where the novel's tone has been all along, but the reason for that tone is not indifference.

Apart from *The Earl's Promise* (1873), Riddell's next Irish-themed novel was not for nearly twenty years. *Berna Boyle* (1884) is set in areas of Ulster familiar to Riddell. It ends with the uniting of a pair of lovers against the odds, both their sets of parents having had to struggle, less successfully, against family disapproval based on class. An attempt to escape to a new life elsewhere, having failed for the elder generations, seems at one point to be the only option in a society of great constriction: '"we will go away and begin a fresh life in a fresh place—a new beautiful life in some fair land beyond the sea"'.[29] Once again, as with *Maxwell Drewitt*, Irish realities are hard to endure for the characters while Irish social issues, so characteristic of the Irish novel, especially during the decade of the land war and home rule crisis, are eschewed. The review in the *Athenaeum* thus noted that Riddell had 'avoided almost entirely the current political questions'.[30] Such questions, in a general sense, are raised at the end of Riddell's final Irish novel four years later, *The Nun's Curse*, albeit to enhance the macabre nature of what is once more a story of a malicious will and cross-class miscegenation, this time of the landlord-tenant variety. The will leaves a new landlord without money and thus puts a strain on his eventual reluctant marriage to a poor girl rather than his rich fiancée. It ends

[25] Charlotte Riddell, *Maxwell Drewitt, a Novel*, 3 vols (London: Tinsley, 1865; New York: Garland, 1979), 2, pp. 88–9.
[26] Riddell, *Maxwell Drewitt*, 3, pp. 243–4.
[27] Riddell, *Maxwell Drewitt*, 3, p. 243.
[28] Riddell, *Maxwell Drewitt*, 3, p. 260.
[29] Charlotte Riddell, *Berna Boyle, a Love Story of County Down* (1884; London: Macmillan, 1900), p. 348.
[30] *Athenaeum* 2959 (12 July 1884), p. 45.

with the return of the long-lost, half-peasant son of the marriage in the form of a trainee priest to claim his inheritance, and with Riddell deploying prejudices concerning the deleterious role of the Irish Catholic clergy in current Irish conflicts. He 'has come to preach no gospel of peace, but one of vengeance, bitterness, and all uncharitableness—[and is one] who, under the cloak of love for the poor, incites the poor to hate the rich'.[31] In all of these novels, then, there is an apparent diffidence about Irish identity but it is a diffidence that appears to be masking feelings which at times amount to revulsion. Riddell, far from being indifferent to Irish identity, is in fact quite passionate about it.

Recent decades have seen the time between 1800 and 1830 confidently established in critical circles as that of Irish romanticism. In poetry, the major figure is Lord Byron's friend Thomas Moore (1779–1752), whose *Melodies* made such an impact in the Regency drawing rooms of London Whigs. In fiction, this period encompasses the more important parts of the careers of two women from very different backgrounds, Maria Edgeworth (1767–1849), who came from a landed family, and Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan (1776–1859), whose father had been an actor. The latter's pioneering of the genre of the national tale has taken centre stage in recent critical discussion. An ultimately less successful regionalist alternative to Sir Walter Scott's historical novel, the national tale is about the possibility of reconciliation in the period after the 1801 union of England/Britain and Ireland; not only reconciliation of the two countries, but of Ireland's own competing artistocracies. These were the long displaced but still spectrally present Gaelic aristocracy and the still insecurely *arriviste* Anglo-Irish aristocracy or Protestant Ascendancy. In passing, it should be noted that the fact that such reconciliation is enacted through the personal relations of characters, seen to be representative of the various sides, often by means of a national marriage, has been part of the impetus, alluded to above, behind the reading of later nineteenth-century novels in terms of allegory.

Morgan's most famous novel was her first, *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), which inaugurated the national tale. It flirts with radicalism in its positive portrayal of a surviving fragment of aristocratic Gaelic society, though it ends with a withdrawal into a safer Whiggism in the reconciling compromise of the national marriage. Her later novels, such as *O'Donnell* (1814) and *Florence Macarthy* (1818), which also fall into the national-tale pattern, move along more cautious lines. Similarly, Edgeworth's first novel, *Castle Rackrent* (1800), was also her most successful and apparently, though perhaps unintentionally, subversive in its portrayal of several generations of an irresponsible Irish landed family. It was certainly least in line with the agenda of Enlightenment education of her father, R. L. Edgeworth (1744–1817), whom Edgeworth sought to support through much of her fictional writing. Several of her later novels, among them, *Ennui* (1809), *The Absentee* (1812), and *Ormond* (1817), are also engagements with the cultural energies unlocked by Morgan's work.

[31] Charlotte Riddell, *The Nun's Curse*, 3 vols (1888; New York: Garland, 1979), 3, pp. 324–5.

There are two other elements to the standard picture of Irish romanticism in fiction. The first is the Gothic writing of Charles Robert Maturin (1780–1824). Maturin was a Protestant clergyman with a love of dancing and fine clothes. Early novels, such as *The Wild Irish Boy* (1808) and *The Milesian Chief* (1812), inhabited the national-tale world of Morgan and Edgeworth. His most noteworthy work, however, was the multi-layered Gothic novel, *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). Of all the myriad genres and sub-genres of fiction connected with the novel in English, Gothic has gained most new attention in recent years, because of the possibility of detecting within it subversive discourses of gender and power. Maturin's work is seen as bringing the first, more overtly supernatural, phase of *English* Gothic fiction to an end, whereas another Irish novelist, Bram Stoker (1847–1912), along with the likes of R. L. Stevenson (1850–1894), is considered as inaugurating the second, more psychological phase. The work of J. S. LeFanu (1814–1873) is considered something of a bridge between the two periods. In *Irish* criticism, Gothic, or *Protestant* Gothic as it is often known, has garnered considerable attention as opening a window onto the besieged and paranoid mentality of the insecure Ascendancy landlord class and its attendant distortions, especially of family relationships.[32] Unfortunately, Gothic was not actually used as a critical category during the Victorian age, however appropriate it may now be thought to be so. LeFanu's work, for example, was read during his day within a different taxonomy, as we shall see.

The other element to Irish romanticism was its coda in the 1820s in the work of some important Catholic writers, the brothers John (1798–1842) and Michael (1796–1874) Banim, and Gerald Griffin (1803–1840). The Banims were from Kilkenny. Michael remained there running the family business, while John lived a precarious life as a writer in London. They published novels as a writing collective called 'The O'Hara family', initially in two series of *The Tales of the O'Hara Family* (1825, 1826), though it is possible to determine which brother wrote which work. Their novels ranged for subject matter over history, the supernatural, and peasant and middle-class life. In the historical category, for example, John's *The Boyne Water* (1825) is a provocative engagement with the events that established the Protestant state in Ireland, while Michael's *The Croppy* (1828) is a milder exposition of the 1798 rebellion.

There is often an impressive and unflinching determination to explore the harsher and hitherto more hidden sides to contemporary Irish life in their work and that of Griffin. Their intention in treating the violent work of secret agrarian societies in some of their novels, for example, was not so much to confirm Irish stereotypes as to place Irish realities in their proper context. John Banim's *The Nowlans* (1826) deals with issues such as abortion and clerical sexuality that would not be written about in Ireland again for nearly a century and a half.[33]

[32] See, for example: Margot Gayle Backus, *The Gothic Family Romance: Heterosexuality, Child Sacrifice, and the Anglo-Irish Colonial Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

[33] James H. Murphy, *Ireland, a Social, Cultural and Literary History, 1791–1891* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2003), pp. 61–4; Emer Nolan, *Catholic Emancipations: Irish Fiction from Thomas Moore to James Joyce* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007), pp. 59–66.

The romantic and sexual mores of the Catholic middle class were also the theme of *The Collegians* (1829), the most famous novel by Gerald Griffin, which deals with clandestine marriage and murder. Like Edgeworth over *Castle Rackrent*, Griffin was rather disturbed by the way the public relished the less savoury aspects of the novel rather than drawing lessons in moral improvement from them. This reaction is illustrative of a curious feature of nineteenth-century Irish fiction in general, that though its subject matter often touched on extreme experiences, such as poverty and violence, it mostly remained quite conventional in terms of narrative form, such as the morality tale.

The Banims and Griffin were indebted to the Morgan and Edgeworth generation. However, they scrutinized the Irish social hierarchy from the perspective of an Irish Catholic middle class, growing ever more confident under the leadership of Daniel O'Connell in a decade which culminated in what was called Catholic emancipation in 1829. Ironically, O'Connellism was the very development that sapped the Morgan and Edgeworth generation of creative energy in pursuit of a now flagging Whig cultural agenda of reconciliation, though, by a further irony, it was at this moment that the Whigs returned to government in Britain after decades in the political wilderness and set about introducing a degree of reform in Ireland.

And yet, for all their creative energy, these Catholic authors were not the beginning of a new trend. There may have been several reasons for this. Firstly, there was the recrudescence of Protestant cultural nationalism in the 1830s, associated with the *Dublin University Magazine*. Secondly, in terms of the exploration of personal behaviour, there was the logic of the morally improving agenda implicit in their own work, whose ultimate and inevitable outcome in succeeding generations was reticence and the assertion of respectability, neither of them promising grounds for interesting novels.[34] Finally, in terms of their depiction of Irish society, there was the increasingly looming authority of William Carleton (1794–1869), as the supposedly authentic voice of *peasant* Ireland, the group that was, above all, of interest to English audiences of Irish fiction on account of its violent truculence over land and politics.

By the end of the first third of the nineteenth century it is possible to see, at least in retrospect, that the agenda of Irish romanticism had come to an end. There was something of a clean slate. It is therefore not entirely arbitrary, in terms of this present work, to attempt an analysis of Irish fiction in the age marked by the reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901). And yet there is a problem with the use of the adjective Victorian when it comes to Ireland. Even though there was a good deal of cultural convergence between Britain and Ireland during the period, especially at the middle-class level, there was considerable political divergence, with the rise of increasingly assertive forms of Irish nationalism. Most scholars have baulked at using the phrase Victorian Ireland.[35] Where it is used, it sometimes seems to denote the

[34] James H. Murphy, 'Catholics and Fiction during the Union, 1801–1922', in John Wilson Foster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 97–112: p. 100.

[35] An exception is W. J. McCormack, *Sheridan Le Fanu and Victorian Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980).