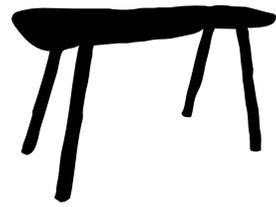


RURAL IRELAND  THE INSIDE STORY
VERA KREILKAMP, EDITOR



RURAL IRELAND THE INSIDE STORY

Edited by Vera Kreilkamp

McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College

Distributed by The University of Chicago Press

This publication is issued in conjunction with the exhibition *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story* at the McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, February 11–June 3, 2012.

Organized by the McMullen Museum, in collaboration with the Irish Studies faculty and the Burns Library at Boston College, *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story* has been co-curated by Vera Kreilkamp and Diana Larsen in consultation with Marjorie Howes, Claudia Kinmonth, and Joseph Nugent. The exhibition has been underwritten by Boston College, **the Patrons of the McMullen Museum**, and Culture Ireland, with additional support from Eileen and Brian Burns.



Library of Congress Control Number: 2011945924
ISBN: 978-1-892850-18-8

Distributed by The University of Chicago Press
Printed in the United States of America
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Copy editor: Kate Shugert
Book designer: John McCoy

Front: Tom Semple (n.d.), *Untitled* [Irish Interior], 1830. Oil on canvas, 31 1/2 x 42 3/4 in., National Monuments Service, Dept. of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht/Office of Public Works, Dublin.

Back: *Dresser*, Irish, late 19th century, painted and carved wood, 85 x 62 1/2 x 19 1/4 in., McMullen Museum Collection, Gift of the Patrons of the McMullen Museum. *Transfer-printed and sponge-decorated earthenware*, Irish and English, c. 19th century, Collection of Don Slater and Collection of Frances and Brian Kennedy. Photo: Kerry Burke (Boston College).

Photo credits: Kerry Burke (Boston College): plates 54–56, 58–59, 68–91; Dara McGrath (Crawford Art Gallery, Cork): plates 15–16, 26–28, 30, 57, 67.

THIS PUBLICATION IS FUNDED IN PART BY
THE PEGGY SIMONS MEMORIAL PUBLICATIONS FUND



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DIRECTOR'S PREFACE

THE CONCEPTION OF THIS EXHIBITION AROSE FROM AN EMAIL MESSAGE IN 2007, WHEN historian Kevin O'Neill sent Vera Kreilkamp his review of Claudia Kinmonth's *Irish Rural Interiors in Art*. The two began discussing how, through an exhibition at the McMullen Museum, they and colleagues might build upon Kinmonth's discovery of many previously unknown paintings depicting rural Irish life in homes, schools, shops, and medical dispensaries. For the eighth time in the past two decades, the McMullen set out to collaborate with Boston College's Irish Studies faculty, conceiving an exhibition and accompanying volume of essays that would invite an interdisciplinary group of scholars to explore the significance of paintings of Irish rural interiors for social history, literature, cultural studies, archaeology, and the fine arts.

The original Irish Studies organizing team—comprising Kreilkamp and O'Neill, as well as Marjorie Howes, Joseph Nugent, and Robert Savage—immediately embarked on a plan to display furnishings and decorative and utilitarian objects in proximity to their painted representations, thus focusing the exhibition on Ireland's material culture. Although working together, *Rural Ireland's* co-curators divided certain responsibilities: Vera Kreilkamp sought out paintings and Diana Larsen took on the responsibility of collecting the objects, purchasing many of them with funds provided by the Patrons of the McMullen Museum. They worked in consultation with Claudia Kinmonth, Peter Murray—Director of the Crawford Art Gallery in Cork, who had mounted *Whipping the Herring*, a groundbreaking exhibi-

tion of some of the paintings in 2006—and James and Thérèse Gorry, owners of Dublin's venerated gallery for Irish paintings.

In her role as editor of the exhibition catalogue, Kreilkamp assembled an outstanding group of international contributors to this volume to whom we extend special thanks: Nicholas Allen, Síghle Bhreathnach-Lynch, Angela Bourke, L. Perry Curtis, Jr., Marjorie Howes, Claudia Kinmonth, Beth Kowaleski Wallace, Andrew A. Kuhn, Diana Larsen, Joseph Nugent, Kevin O'Neill, Charles E. Orser, Jr., Paige Reynolds, Brendan Rooney, and Kelly Sullivan.

The greatest debt of gratitude is owed to Vera Kreilkamp, whose scholarly vision and editorial expertise inform all aspects of the exhibition and publication.

Her creativity, broad knowledge of Irish literature and culture, and generosity have made this a most rewarding and collegial enterprise. No less talented and dedicated is the exhibition's co-curator, Diana Larsen, who not only gathered and researched the furniture and objects, but also designed the installation to evoke nineteenth-century interiors in the Irish countryside.

Completion of this complex project would not have been possible without the aid and support of colleagues at the McMullen Museum, across Boston College and beyond. In designing this volume, the exhibition's graphics, and its website, John McCoy has captured the style of nineteenth-century Irish publications and a sense of the aesthetic of the rural Irish cabin. Kerry Burke took the superb photographs of the McMullen Museum's objects. Giovanni Buonopane and Nicholas Mastropoll recreated a hearth for the installation with extraordinary skill. Margaret Neeley undertook the organization of the loans in the early phases of the planning. Her role was taken over by Kate Shugert, who copyedited all the texts with great care and expertly guided this publication and the exhibition to completion. Kelly Sullivan also helped with editing and organization of loans. Interns Paul Lindholm, Molly Phelps, Liah Luther, Samantha Reynolds, Lauren Passaro, and Christina Tully contrib-

6 uted extra pairs of eyes and assisted with documentation. Shelley Barber, Adeane Bregman, Bridget Burke, Barbara Hebard, Andrew A. Kuhn, Robert O’Neill, Justine Sundaram, Thomas Wall, and Kathleen Williams helped with loans from the Boston College libraries. Anastos Chiavaras and Rose Breen from Boston College’s Office of Risk Management provided valuable guidance regarding insurance. We are grateful to the University’s Advancement office—especially James Husson, Thomas Lockerby, Catherine Concannon, Mary Lou Crane, and Ginger Saariaho—for aiding our funding efforts.

Friends and colleagues at other institutions helped us to obtain loans and photographs. We thank Eileen and Brian Burns; Austin Daly; Nancy Joyce; Frances Kennedy; Alexina and Richard de Koster; William Laffan; Mary McNamara; Cormac and Moira O’Malley; Joan Slater; Susan Sloan; Margaret Stapleton; Marietta Whittlesey; Michael Lonergan (Consul of Ireland in Boston); Eugene Downes (Culture Ireland); Peter Murray, Anne Boddaert, and Dara McGrath (Crawford Art Gallery, Cork); Shan McAnena (Naughton Gallery, Queen’s University Belfast); Eileen Black and Anne Orr (Ulster Museum); Fiona Ross and Honora Faul (National Library of Ireland); Michael Flanagan (Emer Gallery, Belfast); Raymond Keaveney, Brendan Rooney, and Kim Smit (National Gallery of Ireland); The Most Reverend Keith Patrick Cardinal O’Brien (Archbishop of St. Andrews and Edinburgh); Flora O’Mahony, Tony Roche, and Adrian Kennedy (Office of Public Works, Ireland); Rionach ui Ógáin and Criostoir Mac Carthaigh (National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin); John Leighton and Janice Slater (National Gallery of Scotland); Mark Adams (Mark Adams Fine Art, London); Alan and Mary Hobart and Anna O’Sullivan (Pyms Gallery, London); Gillian Smithson (The Whitworth Gallery, The University of Manchester); Riann Coulter and Evonne Scott (Trinity College Dublin); John Buschman, Christen Runge, and LuLen Walker (Georgetown University Art Collection); John and Maureen Connolly (Aisling Gallery, Hingham, MA); John de Vere White (de Veres Art Auctions, Dublin); and Michael Cronin (Boston College-Ireland).

We could not have undertaken such a complex project of international scope were it not for the continued generosity of the administration of Boston College and the McMullen family. We especially thank President William P. Leahy, SJ; Provost Cutberto Garza; Chancellor J. Donald Monan, SJ; Vice-Provost Patricia DeLeeuw; Dean of Arts and Sciences David Quigley; Director of the Center for Irish Programs Thomas Hachey; Institute of Liberal Arts Director Mary Crane; and Lowell Lecture Series Director Carlo Rotella. For major support of the exhibition we are indebted to the Patrons of the McMullen Museum, chaired by C. Michael Daley, and to Culture Ireland, the state agency for the promotion of Irish arts worldwide. Additional support was provided by Eileen and Brian Burns. Publication of this volume is underwritten in part by the publication fund named in memory of our late, and much beloved, docent Peggy Simons, a great lover of art, scholarship, and all things Irish.

Nancy Netzer
Director and Professor of Art History

INTRODUCTION

Vera Kreilkamp

RURAL IRELAND: THE INSIDE STORY CONTINUES A LONG COLLABORATION BETWEEN BOSTON COLLEGE'S FACULTY and the McMullen Museum. Seven previous McMullen exhibitions of Irish art have challenged scholars to find the meeting ground between their disciplines and the pursuit of a broader understanding of Irish culture and society.¹ Planning for *The Inside Story* began in 2007 when members of the Irish Studies faculty discovered Claudia Kinmonth's *Irish Rural Interiors in Art*.² In discussions of this paradigm-shifting new scholarship, faculty considered how to share their revised understanding of what nineteenth-century Irish artists chose to represent—the subject world of their paintings—with museum audiences. Key work by Irish social historians, historical archaeologists, and cultural studies scholars responding to postcolonial and subaltern studies provided rich interdisciplinary contexts for this new visual evidence.³ The exhibition's curators explored art collections in the United States, Ireland, and Great Britain, and gathered more than sixty paintings that depict a range of Irish interiors created between 1800 and 1950: a few offer versions of a rural life known primarily from shocked accounts of travel writers, newspaper illustrators, or British government reports. Although impressed by the visual power of these images, in making our selections we considered a painting's evidentiary value for students of Irish social history and culture, not simply its position in established hierarchies of art. Like Kinmonth, we believe these Irish genre works, too long ignored or neglected, offer a new interdisciplinary path into “a history of rural society.”⁴

One immediate goal was to reassess assumptions that nineteenth-century artists painting in Ireland, largely dependent on the patronage and purchasing power of a Protestant Anglo-Irish ruling class, produced mainly landscapes and portraits of that elite population and its horses and big houses.⁵ The exhibition's images unsettle assumptions that paintings of small tenant cabins and strong farmer homes played an insignificant role in the

Irish fine arts tradition. *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story* suggests, rather, that throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries local and visiting painters steadily chose to depict Irish country people and their domestic surroundings, in a few cases even turning to the poorest landless cottiers living in cave-like dwellings on the eve of the Great Famine.

For students of history and culture, the images we

chose for the exhibition offer significant new evidence about the lives of a silenced population: Irish-speaking, slowly emerging into literacy, economically marginalized by a colonial land system, politically controlled by a Protestant Anglo-Irish ruling class and by its own lack of representation in a distant London Parliament. Access to this rural world of landless cottier and tenant dwellings, as well as of shops, priests' homes, public houses, medical dispensaries, and school rooms, has long been scanty in the fine arts tradition and slow to emerge even within disciplines dependent on sources less tied to patronage and marketplace demand.

Genre paintings, representational in style, depict ordinary and therefore anonymous people and the objects surrounding them in their domestic settings. Although most rural Irish interiors reveal their creators' familiarity with the Dutch genre tradition, any formal similarities are complicated by social, economic, and political differences between the populations addressed. Seventeenth-century Dutch artists initiating genre as a popular major visual form throughout Western Europe generally depicted the lives of what Simon Schama calls the “middling classes”—a comfortably housed and typically urban population with abundant food (even among farm workers and fishermen), an obsession with

8 cleanliness, and a high standard of domestic comfort.⁶ When painting the rural poor, Dutch artists focused on their boorishness or on the moral virtues of plain living rather than on the abjectness of their lives. If paintings of ordinary people generally failed to command the high prices achieved by history paintings and portraiture of the rich, a flood of lower-priced genre work was, nevertheless, created and sold in Holland.⁷

The proportionately rarer nineteenth-century images of Irish rural interiors portray visible economic difference between households, but less strikingly so than might be expected. Certainly, not all Irish tenants were poor. The paintings of substantial strong farmers' dwellings in Ireland by artists like John George Mulvany (plate 3) and Tom Semple (plate 4) in the 1830s or by Aloysius O'Kelly (plates 43–44) and Howard Helmick in the decades after the mid-century Famine suggest relative prosperity. Semple's untitled painting reproduced on the cover of this catalogue draws on familiar conventions of Dutch genre interiors; a courting couple sits in a comfortably furnished and well-stocked rural kitchen: a dining room can be glimpsed through an open doorway at the back, as in a seventeenth-century Pieter de Hooch domestic interior. These Irish images depict homes of tenants who may well have occupied substantial rental holdings; we see evidence of multi-roomed and two-storied houses, plentiful food, paved (non-earthen) floors, elaborated furnishings, ample utensils and crockery, and of still-costly items such as glass windows, mirrors, or wax candlesticks. Such details undermine widespread misperceptions that all Irish tenants lived in poverty. Yet paintings depicting prosperous, although always insecure, tenant farmers convey little sense of that abundance, even opulence, apparent in many Dutch genre works that influenced nineteenth-century artists. Operating within a land system denying any security of tenure, even prosperous Irish farmers might well have been wary of improving the appearance of their households for fear of unsustainable rent increases and subsequent threats of eviction. Still other images in the exhibition, such as Francis William Topham's (plates 12–13) and Alfred Downing Fripp's (plates 9–11) watercolors of Famine-era landless cottiers in barn-like homes and

Basil Bradley's rendition of a well-organized byre house shared by cattle and humans (plate 31) depict far poorer Irish rural households—both before the mid-century Famine and decades after.

Rural Ireland: The Inside Story's inclusion of many of the actual things depicted in the paintings explicitly positions the exhibition within an investigation of material culture—the study of what a founder of that expanding field terms “the vast universe of objects used ... to cope with the physical world, to facilitate social intercourse, and to benefit our state of mind.”⁸ We anticipate that the presence of these objects will encourage visitors to return to the paintings; in the words of one catalogue contributor, writing about the evidence of domestic items in a rural interior, such artifacts, when viewed alongside the paintings, become “both decorative and necessary, represented and real.”⁹ The vernacular household goods we display—a settle bed, a dresser filled with dishes, kitchen utensils, chairs and benches, as well as printed chapbooks and broadsides that might have been found in tenant homes—have survived by happenstance rather than through decades of preservation in museums or through traditions of connoisseurship. As co-curator Diana Larsen explains in her account of her search for domestic objects, only with the recent popularity of pine “country furniture” on the antique market and the subsequent stripping of paint from dressers and settle beds have a few efforts to conserve these artifacts begun.

The objects displayed have long biographies. The paintings reveal a rich vernacular object world in the woven baskets and the wooden furniture made from local materials by farmers and indigenous craftspeople. But stacked on our late nineteenth-century kitchen dresser's shelves (plate 68), along with many examples of Irish spongeware, are imported factory-made transferware ceramic pieces that demonstrate how seemingly isolated rural households already participated in an international commodity market. Shards excavated by Charles E. Orser, Jr. from Famine-era evicted homes in County Roscommon (plates 73–76) and his accompanying catalogue essay confirm, but also supplement, imagery in the paintings. Rather than depending solely on

the evidence of artists' representations as we filled the exhibition's dresser, we recognized the equally compelling evidentiary power of Orser's physical artifacts. We therefore included pieces of spongeware and of multicolored transfer-ware in the dresser, not just the blue and white ceramics most artists chose to represent in their images. Archaeological finds and artists' canvases both became useful evidence in reconstructing the past.

Rural Ireland: The Inside Story explores not only the utilitarian but the decorative functions of domestic objects in the Irish cabin; indeed, a second major goal in our planning was to demonstrate that aesthetic sensibility apparent in household arrangements of even the poorer rural interiors, where occupants used cracked dishes, pot lids, and hanging fishing nets and clothing to adorn their small living spaces.¹⁰ Such evidence of delight in display and color, as well as in the creation of functional and often ingenious furniture from limited resources such as salvaged wood, turf, or straw, calls into question a contrasting discourse about crude and uncivilized rural hovels. The exhibition's paintings of the poor thus contest an enduring strand of anxious travel reports by visitors and government officials describing the so-called Irish “peasant” as an abject figure living in squalor.¹¹ The works of art in *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story* might usefully be contrasted with this sustained nineteenth-century text tradition about the Irish tenant in his cabin.¹²

Fearfully envisioned as occupying a primitive byre dwelling with his pigs, surrounded by his bog land and manure pile, the rural Irish farmer became an object of pity, incredulity, and condescending scorn. Beth Kowaleski Wallace's catalogue essay contrasts a portrait of a prosperous Cork merchant family in their spacious eighteenth-century sitting room with several of the exhibition's poorer interiors. Her account of the rural byre dwelling shared by humans and animals, and of cabins, with irregular cave-like walls and low and rudimentary furniture, suggests sources for visitors' anxiety about the breakdown between perceived civilized and uncivilized spaces. In the persistent nineteenth-century discourse, the Irish tenant occupied a hovel sheltering far too many family members, whose strange language, informal

domestic arrangements, and agricultural methods were to be reformed according to British principles. Ireland's political identity as part of the United Kingdom after the 1800 Act of Union made its states of disaffection, lawlessness, and destitution particularly unsettling in the face of a rapid and alarming rise in population from 1760 to just before the Famine. That such conditions of poverty and dependence on a potato diet could sustain a healthy and growing population bewildered pre-Famine visitors. Ina Ferris points out that James Mill, although never having visited the country and basing his impressions on the stereotypes of current travel writing, contemptuously wrote in the *Edinburgh Review* of the Irish as living in hovels too wretched to deserve the name of houses—or even pig sties.¹³ An observer like Samuel Carter Hall, the Irish-born journalist and editor of London's *Art-Journal*, was more explicit about the wretchedness of the rural cabin he remembered from his youth.

This is the sight I see: a growth of diseased vegetation covers the thatched roof...; a cesspool of stagnant waters oozes from the dung heap ... the mud walls have given way in parts and there is a general sinking of the fabric; the door is hanging by broken hinges; two holes indicate windows; into one of them if the weather be damp, the tenant's top coat is thrust to keep out the cold, the other is partially boarded up. The inevitable consequence is, that within, when the turf fire is lit, there is an abundance of smoke.... Generally the rain finds its way in some part of the roof, and there is a consequent puddle on the floor. The pig goes in and out as he pleases. Of course there is no grate, often no chimney; and although the hut may be divided into two rooms, as a rule there is but one in which a whole family live and sleep.... The bed is a mess of damp straw, with a single blanket or quilt, and there is a straw shakedown for the children. Heather though a hundred times better than straw and always at hand, is a

luxury seldom resorted to. To complete the bedding, there are the extra coats and gowns of the household. When the family retire to rest at night it is likely that as many as eight or ten human beings, of all ages and sexes, will be crowded into this miserable room.¹⁴

With the post-Famine rise of organized hostility to the land system, culminating in the 1879–82 Land War, professions of sympathy or even hopes for benign British-style reform were drowned out by a horror with the otherness of the rural Irish in their cabins. Such hostility was expressed through a growing preoccupation with mud, pigs, and hovels—and, always, with excessive whiskey drinking. Brendan Rooney suggests that the frequent visual focus on rural women at their domestic tasks rather than on male figures reflects a British uneasiness with tenant insurgency. A newly explicit racism crept even more prominently into the discourse about rural Ireland, as in the now infamous remark from Sligo in 1860 by visiting British novelist and historian Charles Kingsley.

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, and more comfortably fed and lodged under our rules 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 when tanned by exposure, are as white as ours.¹⁵

That the paintings in this exhibition, particularly those by visiting artists such as David Wilkie from Scotland or Basil Bradley, Topham, and Fripp from England, address their subject worlds so differently warrants speculation—and suggests another major conceptual direction taken up by the exhibition's organizers. If the market for oil and watercolor paintings was restricted to the prosperous—initially to upper-class patrons and

increasingly to newly rich merchants and British factory owners forming a self-made elite—we speculated about why some of these newly discovered images of poorer cabin interiors were produced and for whom they might have been painted. And why were these genre works invariably created to elicit sympathy rather than to replicate that disapproval or horror increasingly common in the prevailing British and Anglo-Irish print discourse about rural tenants? This catalogue includes essays by Irish and American scholars, whose contributions reflect a range of disciplines: history, art history, historical archaeology, folklore, literature, and cultural studies. Several writers, directly or indirectly, begin to address the above queries, suggesting different strategies that painters brought to their representations of rural Irish interiors.

Market conditions certainly influenced what was painted. An artist like Erskine Nicol, accused of perpetuating stereotypes of the crude rural Paddy in his popular and widely reproduced images, suggests Síghle Bhreathnach-Lynch, chose very different kinds of painting for his London or Dublin exhibition venues. And painters with an eye on an expanding nineteenth-century arts marketplace avoided the harshest depictions of the poor for their customers' drawing-room walls. (Even in seventeenth-century Holland, when Gerard ter Borch painted a rare depiction of destitution in *The Stone Grinder's Family* [1653–55], his emphasis was on domestic virtue, not disturbing squalor.¹⁶) As several contributors point out, in *The Irish Whiskey Still* (1840) (plate 5) David Wilkie envisions the Irish cabin, not through the exacting realism so central to genre traditions, but through the lens of older visual forms—for example, bandit paintings from Italy and France and an academic genre of large-scale history paintings. In his image of exotic and monumental figures in the Irish cabin—in reality a damp and cold setting for the scantily dressed family he depicts—Wilkie imagined the rural Irish dramatically if not realistically.¹⁷ His arresting image also reflects long-standing (and long-lasting) British anxieties about Irish criminality—in this case about illegal home brewing of poteen to avoid government taxes. That such illicit manufacture had sustained many country people and

10 contributed to the heavy consumption of alcohol at social gatherings like rural wakes and weddings remained a source of British concern throughout the century. In a sense, the visiting artist (Wilkie spent less than two months in Ireland in 1835) has it both ways: he transmits his dark reading of the Irish cabin—half-naked bodies and criminality—by imposing familiar aesthetic conventions of high academic art on a cabin interior.

Several contributors addressing Irish genre work identify efforts to sentimentalize or allegorize visual depictions of the poor. L. Perry Curtis, Jr.'s amply illustrated essay contrasts what he views as generally tidied up and idealized paintings with the more realistic genres of late nineteenth-century news artists' illustrations and eviction photographs. Curtis's analysis of hostile post-Famine relations between tenants and landlords offers rich photographic and print evidence showing the ruthless removal to the "outside" of the rural cabin of that same furniture that most paintings depict in a tranquil "inside." Like Kinmonth, Bhreathnach-Lynch suggests that Famine-era paintings by Topham and Fripp, as well as by a local priest who joined these visiting English artists in painting interiors in Galway's Claddagh district, often created allegories, rather than fully realistic depictions of destitution. They symbolically pictured depleted dresser shelves and empty potato skibs, not graphic renditions of brutal evictions from cabins and the starving bodies of the homeless. Father John Rooney's *Sympathy* (plate 14), created in the worst year of the Famine, offers an allegorized evocation of a child's dead bird rather than any attempt to represent the artist's many parishioners who died of Famine fever or starvation.¹⁸ Brendan Rooney maintains that the nineteenth-century preoccupation with a pleasing picturesque style in peasant painting deflected many artists from any "substantive interrogation of Irish peasant life [that] invited distinctly unpicturesque associations with poverty, social disaffection, and agrarian conflict."¹⁹ Rooney like Curtis, praises not what he views as the "heavily sentimentalized" or "naïve" genre works of Topham or Fripp, but Harry Jones Thaddeus's monumental *An Irish Eviction, Co. Galway* (plate 35), which inserts theatricality and political urgency into a unique representation of an impoverished

cabin interior.

Drawing on her knowledge of rural culture, folklorist and cultural critic Angela Bourke offers quite another explanation for the visiting artist's sympathetic, and to some, sentimental, depiction of cabin dwellers. Although also situating artists' visits to rural Ireland within a general nineteenth-century search for the picturesque, Bourke speculates that painters rapidly became drawn into personal relationships with their opportunistic subjects, who sought payment for permission to paint them and their homes. It is likely that that once visitors became engaged with a quick-witted and imaginative country people, any inclination to objectify them—as dehumanized or merely sentimentalized victims—would have become much abated; artists were now rather creating works recording the details of rural poverty in the lives of a people they had come to know and even recognize, perhaps, for their creativity. In his study of Jack Yeats's sketchbooks, Nicholas Allen also comments on the relationship between the observing artist and his rural subject, noting the "confidence" the painter must assume in occupying another's domestic space for his own artistic ends; we might speculate that Yeats, like the earlier artists Bourke discusses, developed such confidence through his engagement with a rural social world previously unknown to him. Adding yet another explanation to questions about why artists chose to paint rural interiors, Kinmonth sensibly observes that many came to paint more marketable landscapes, but that inclement local weather may well have driven them indoors.

Kinmonth's contribution to the catalogue, one of three focused studies of artists whose careers have been as yet insufficiently examined, addresses the still emerging biographical record and major Irish painting of the American artist Howard Helmick. The appearance of many new works on the art market motivated the McMullen Museum to borrow six Helmick paintings, several of them recently discovered and thus never before displayed in a contemporary exhibition. Given the Victorian setting of Helmick's career, Kinmonth's new evidence about this married artist's enduring and secret liaison with a fellow artist known as Josephine Lizzie Cloud cannot but generate speculation about his

recurring interest in the subject of arranged marriages in a major group of Irish images. Women typically assume key roles in domestic interiors; but Kinmonth's detailed analysis of Helmick's marriage paintings reveals that this American artist's interest turned not just to how Irish women adhered to Victorian codes of female docility in arranged marriages, but also to how they resisted such pressures. The essay's suggestive pairing of biographical research and visual analysis offers interdisciplinary gender critics ample material to pursue.

After years of too seldom considering visual evidence, Irish interdisciplinary scholarship has begun to incorporate pictorial source material into explorations of social and cultural change. In this catalogue Kevin O'Neill and Andrew A. Kuhn offer different explanations for Ireland's rise in literacy by turning variously to the exhibition's paintings or to broadsides, engravings, chapbooks, and periodical illustrations from the University's John J. Burns Library. Both explore the process by which a largely illiterate Irish-speaking population became one of Europe's most literate societies. O'Neill examines two paintings that loosely span decades of significant changes in Irish reading habits—John Boyne's post-Union *The County Chronicle* (1809) (plate 1) and James Brenan's *News from America* (1875) (plate 26). He focuses on the role of oral reading and its relationship to rural Irish-language traditions, speculating that old habits of reading aloud may well help account for the richness of English as spoken in Ireland. Again turning to visual evidence, Kuhn explores the role of printed artifacts in the rural cabin, emphasizing the nineteenth-century's revolution in print technology that accompanied and fueled educational advances and Irish literacy.

Traditional disciplinary sources enrich two catalogue essays that focus on single images: Brendan Rooney's study of the visual sources of Thaddeus's *An Irish Eviction* (1889)—unfortunately recently withdrawn from the exhibition—and Joseph Nugent's reading of Aloysius O'Kelly's *Mass in a Connemara Cabin* (c. 1883) (plates 43–44). These magnificent cabin interiors amply reward such examination, one from the perspective of an art historian tracing the visual antecedents for Thaddeus's dramatic intervention into traditional genre protocols,

the other richly drawing on memoir and fiction by Catholic priests to unpack a psychologically intriguing figure in O’Kelly’s painting. Nugent situates the elevated class position and related social isolation of O’Kelly’s young protagonist in contemporary accounts of the rigorous training of clergymen under Cardinal Paul Cullen’s leadership of the church after 1852. The lonely and isolated young priest in *Mass in a Connemara Cabin*, so physically elevated above his parishioners and seemingly so separated from them, has been groomed to assume his role among Ireland’s new political and social elite, the Catholic clergy.

Drawing on the new cross-disciplinary interest in material culture, Marjorie Howes considers literary scholarship’s engagement with “thing theory,” a recent theoretical approach that looks at how objects in a text are represented or made to acquire meaning: in texts “things” have meaning not only as artifacts reflecting the lives of those who purchase and consume them, but also as objects with their own narratives to tell. But Howes finds yet another way that things come to mean by exploring similarities between visual imagery and texts in the Revivalist period. She notes that Augusta Gregory, a founding leader of the Literary Revival, recognized how Irish country people in a colonial society often “repurposed” the objects in their lives: thus the warrant for a son’s arrest, a sign of shameful criminality to the colonial ruling class, became an honorable token of nationalist heroism when framed on the walls of a rural home. Artists painting interiors during the period were equally interested, Howe maintains, in such “conscious appropriation and manipulation of things”²⁰ by country people—often as a means of negotiating resistance to colonial conditions. She turns to the old woman in James Brenan’s *Patchwork* (1891) (plate 30) to suggest that our initial inclination to read the painting merely as an image of rural privation and isolation might be modified if we consider Brenan’s interest in including signs of her successful survival, her active manipulation of the things in her world.

Rural Ireland: The Inside Story had originally been conceived as an exhibition of nineteenth-century objects and images. Yet as we explored various collections, we

found ourselves increasingly swayed by how twentieth-century representations of cabin interiors suggest striking continuities with the past—even as new inventions and artifacts assumed key roles in some rural households and as modernist stylistic innovations transformed the paintings. The decision to extend the chronological range of the exhibition into the twentieth century reflects a response to such evidence of both continuity and change.

Jack Yeats’s reputation as the great twentieth-century painter of an emerging independent Ireland, suggests Nicholas Allen, might be supplemented by consideration of the over one hundred surviving sketchbooks, some offering mysteriously intimate glimpses of rural interiors. This exhibition’s display case of turn-of-the-century drawings conveys the artist’s interest in Ireland’s neglected spaces, as in his detailed rendering of a traditional domestic cabin interior (plate 51) so darkly different from the more substantial and light-filled dwellings of his own social world. Allen turns as well to the artist’s fascination with Ireland’s role in an expanding Atlantic world, evident in the sketch of the Ardrahan, Galway, railway station (plate 50), where emigration and tourism posters signal place more vividly than reality. Like Orser’s ceramic shards that indicate rural Ireland’s role in a global system of commodity exchange, the Jack Yeats sketchbooks also suggest, in Allen’s words, how the “outside world seeps into private space through the acquisition of objects.”²¹

Two final catalogue essays address later twentieth-century artists, with Paige Reynolds providing the first significant close study of Michael Power O’Malley’s rarely viewed portraits of women; she reads them in the tradition of Dutch genre, as opening up a space for women. Reynolds carefully distinguishes Power O’Malley’s visual representations of women’s lives from more romanticized or harshly naturalized readings of gender roles in post-Independence Ireland. She suggests that household items in the paintings—the blue platters, pitchers and bowls in *Her Family Treasures* (plate 55) or the spinning wheel in *And Sheila Was Spinning* (plate 59)—offer the female figures prompts for moments of autonomous reverie as they engage in traditional domes-

tic tasks. Rather than reflecting a post-Independence idealization of female domesticity or the more recent feminist hostility to such ideals, Reynolds argues that Power O’Malley’s appealing portraits gesture toward a revisionary reading of the Irish woman’s household responsibilities and pleasures.

Kelly Sullivan’s essay on Gerard Dillon provides a fitting coda for this catalogue’s exploration of Irish genre paintings of rural interiors. Creating some of his most engaging interiors in the mid-twentieth century, Dillon’s modernist forms of distorted perspective and geometric surfaces, the essay argues, negotiate boldly with his celebrations of tradition. Dillon responded to the slow modernization of rural Ireland following the 1945 Rural Electrification Scheme, but he painted on the western island of Inishlacken, one of the last areas in the country to gain electric power. A mid-century painting, *The Gramophone* (plate 64) can still joyfully invoke a new music-making technology; significantly, the image focuses on a wind-up (rather than electric) phonograph in a cabin filled with many traditional artifacts: a transfer-ware filled dresser, an open hearth and its implements, a dancing man in his western dress. Four years later, however, in *Yellow Bungalow* (plate 66), Sullivan observes Dillon’s more disturbing evocation of progress through suggestive disjunctions in content and form. A couple sit apart and seemingly alienated in the new geometrically ordered Irish rural interior—its traditional hearth replaced by a closed-in cast-iron stove, the iconic dresser by a shelf for a lamp, the woman of the house, with her arms crossed across her body, scowling at a man playing a traditional instrument. This efficient and smooth-surfaced two-floor bungalow—plaster boarded, wood floored, and slate roofed—has now replaced the vernacular thatched rural cabin painted by countless artists in this exhibition.²² Dillon’s image registers loss.



The generosity of countless people contributed to *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story*, many of them already acknowledged by Nancy Netzer, Director of the McMullen Museum, earlier in this catalogue. Here, I convey my appreciation to those curators, scholars, librarians, and museum directors and staff members who personally aided me as I sought paintings for this exhibition and planned its catalogue. I also want to thank the talented and endlessly cooperative contributors to this catalogue, who patiently put up with my editorial suggestions.

Without Nancy Netzer's leadership, this complex and wide-ranging project, involving multiple lenders and works of art and artifacts from two continents, would have never come to be. Her suggestion that we consider a multi-dimensional exhibition embracing both painting and objects set us on the path we could not have pursued without her steadfast commitment to our shared academic goals.

Claudia Kinmonth's scholarship was the inspiration for *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story*. During the early stages of planning in 2009, Claudia generously offered me many days of advice and education about Irish rural interiors at her home in West Cork. As our consulting curator in Ireland, she remained available to the McMullen Museum staff and the exhibition curators during all stages of planning.

James and Thérèse Gorry first welcomed me, a stranger, to their busy Molesworth Street gallery in Dublin in 2009, encouraging and supporting my effort to locate seemingly impossible-to-find paintings. I cannot thank them enough for their generosity in sharing their knowledge of Irish visual art and for becoming essential partners in the creation of this exhibition.

Many curators and staff members at various institutions contributed this exhibition, but here I want to mention those who personally advised me. Honora Faul, Assistant Keeper I, Department of Prints and Drawings at the National Library of Ireland, not only helped make available all the paintings I had hoped to borrow, but also welcomed me on one afternoon with a range of new possibilities, including a yet unattributed work by Alfred Downing Fripp that she discovered among the

NLI's holdings. Peter Murray, Director of the Crawford Art Gallery in Cork City, whose innovative 2006 exhibition *Whipping the Herring* displayed important Irish genre work Claudia Kinmonth had rescued from relative obscurity, offered hours of valuable advice at a busy time at the Crawford and facilitated the loan of many essential paintings. Linda Ballard, Curator of Folk Life at National Museums Northern Ireland, spent the good part of a day educating me about the collections of material culture of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum in Belfast. Eileen Black, Curator of Arts at the Ulster Museum, pointed out several paintings yet unknown to me. Shan McAnena, Curator at the Naughton Gallery at Queen's University Belfast, first urged me to consider expanding the range of the exhibition to include twentieth-century interiors. My work in Belfast was supported by an exchange program between Boston College's Irish Programs and the Institute of Irish Studies at Queen's University, Belfast.

Some works in the exhibition were borrowed from generous private owners such as Brian Burns, a longtime friend of the University. I also want to single out Cormac and Moira O'Malley, who once again, as in the McMullen's 2003 exhibition, *Éire/Land*, welcomed me, the exhibition's co-curator, and the McMullen Museum's director into their home to discuss their contributions. I am also very grateful to Riann Coulter for suggesting and helping me locate essential works by Gerard Dillon and Michael Power O'Malley for the twentieth-century section of the exhibition.

At Boston College I depended on the advice and support of consulting curators Marjorie Howes and Joseph Nugent during years of planning, but also on Kevin O'Neill, whose co-teaching with me in two courses—Irish Material Culture in 2011 and *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story* in 2012—introduced me to new ways of thinking about Ireland's material culture. Discussions with Kevin about rural Irish life have influenced every phase of this project. The students in Irish Material Culture last spring, particularly in their research papers drawing on this exhibition's paintings, offered valuable new perspectives about historical contexts for the art.

The exhibition's co-curator and designer Diana Lars-

en has become, within four years, a historian of Irish artifacts and a persistent and successful sleuth in locating the objects we so needed for *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story*. Her steady advice and interest in Irish material culture has added much to my pleasure in working on the exhibition. The Museum's Media Designer/Information Specialist John McCoy, who has designed this catalogue, has patiently advised me about how best to achieve our goal of a visually appealing and reader-friendly book. His assiduous efforts in tracking down hard-to-find images for publication have been much appreciated.

Through their knowledge of Irish culture and bibliographic sources, Adeane Bregman and Kathleen Williams at Boston College's University Libraries provided essential research support to me and to several catalogue contributors. Andrew Kuhn discovered valuable artifacts for us to display at the Burns Library.

As Publications & Exhibitions Administrators, Margaret Neeley, in the earlier stages of this project, and Kate Shugert, in the last five months, organized and managed the detailed operations of the exhibition. Kelly Sullivan's willingness to undertake some early copyediting for me was invaluable. I particularly want to praise Kate Shugert's ability to master a huge amount of information and to take responsibility for endless tasks—including the scrupulous final copyediting of all catalogue essays—with miraculous speed, efficiency, and tact after arriving in the busy final stages of our project.

Angela Bourke and Michael Hayes gave me a home in Dublin during two trips devoted to searching for paintings—and Tom Kreilkamp offered, as always, endless support, patience, and wise counsel. Finally I want to celebrate the memory of Adele Dalsimer, who co-founded the Irish Studies Program at Boston College and vigorously promoted the visual arts through a series of collaborative exhibitions with Nancy Netzer at the McMullen Museum. Adele's commitment to Irish art originally drew me to my present work.

- 1 The McMullen Museum has mounted seven previous exhibitions of Irish art: *Drawings and Watercolors from the National Gallery of Ireland* (1993), *America's Eye: Irish Paintings from the Collection of Brian P. Burns* (1996), *Re/Dressing Cathleen: Contemporary Works from Irish Women Artists* (1997), *Irish Art Now: From the Poetic to the Political* (1999), *Eire/Land* (2003), *[GONE]: Temporary Site-specific Works by Dorothy Cross* (2005), *Literary Lives: Portraits from the Crawford Art Gallery and Abbey Theatre, Ireland* (2010).
- 2 Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). Another major source was the catalogue of the 2006 Crawford Art Gallery exhibition *Whipping the Herring*: Peter Murray, ed., *Whipping the Herring: Survival and Celebration in Nineteenth-Century Irish Art* (Cork: Crawford Art Gallery; Kinsale: Gandon Editions, 2006). Also of value was the catalogue of the National Gallery of Ireland's 2006–2007 exhibition *A time and a place*: Brendan Rooney, ed., *A time and a place: Two Centuries of Irish Social Life* (Dublin: National Gallery of Ireland, 2006).
- 3 For examples of such cross-disciplinary scholarship, see Robert James Scally, *The End of Hidden Ireland: Rebellion, Famine, and Emigration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Charles E. Orser, Jr., ed., *Unearthing Hidden Ireland: Historical Archaeology at Ballykilcline, County Roscommon* (Bray: Wordwell, 2006); Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story* (London: Pimlico, 1999); Toby Barnard, *A Guide to Sources for the History of Material Culture in Ireland, 1500–2000* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005); J. S. Donnelly and Kerby A. Miller, eds., *Irish Popular Culture, 1650–1850* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998).
- 4 Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 1.
- 5 See P. J. Duffy, “The Changing Rural Landscape, 1750–1840: Pictorial Evidence,” in *Ireland: Art into History*, eds. Brian Kennedy and Raymond Gillespie (Dublin: Town House, 1996). Duffy emphasizes the disinclination of the successful artist to paint the actual homes of the poor in Ireland—those cabins that pre-Famine visitors so frequently described in their memoirs or travel writings as pitiable, squalid, or subhuman.
- 6 Duffy sees artists as, rather, fulfilling the market demands of elite patrons: their “preferred” landscapes were the big house, or wild landscapes of Killarney or Connemara that could be imagined through a Romantic lens. Anne Crookshank and the Knight of Glin’s reissue of their major study *Ireland’s Painters, 1600–1940* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) mentions about half of the pre-1940 artists represented in this exhibition. New scholarship and exhibitions such as *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story* are beginning to introduce many neglected genre painters into the repertory of Irish visual art.
- 7 Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 4.
- 8 Peter C. Sutton, “Masters of Dutch Genre Painting,” in *Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), xvi.
- 9 James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life*, rev. ed. (New York: Random House, 1996), 35. Attention to material culture has accompanied all aspects of planning for this exhibition. A 2009 symposium, “Irish Material Culture” at Boston College invited American and Irish scholars to discuss that aspect of the planned exhibition, and two undergraduate courses drawing on the paintings in the exhibition as primary texts have focused on this emerging field of inquiry.
- 10 Kelly Sullivan, “Materials for Composition: Gerald Dillon’s Modernist Interiors,” 125.
- 11 See Kinmonth, “The Dresser, Display and Colour,” *Irish Rural Interiors*, 38–77.
- 12 Except for its use in a fine arts tradition of peasant paintings, the word “peasant,” suggests historian of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland Kevin O’Neill, is an inappropriate descriptive term for nineteenth-century Irish tenant laborers working under a radical form of capitalism—without any of the customary rights recognized in more traditional European agricultural systems (Kevin O’Neill, email exchange with Vera Kreilkamp, Dec. 5, 2011).
- 13 For useful discussions of this discourse see Ina Ferris, *The Romantic National Tale and the Question of Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 18–45 and Joseph Nugent, “The Human Snout: Pigs, Priests, and Peasants in the Parlor,” *Sense and Society* 4, no. 3 (Nov. 2009): 282–302.
- 14 [James Mill], “State of Ireland,” *Edinburgh Review* 21 (July 1813): 342, quoted in Ferris, *Romantic National Tale*, 35.
- 15 Samuel Carter Hall, *Retrospect of a long life: From 1815 to 1883* (New York: D. Appleton, 1883), 482.
- 16 Frances Eliza Grenfell Kingsley, ed., *Charles Kingsley, His Letters and Memories of His Life* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, 1877), 308.
- 17 Schama, *Embarrassment of Riches*, 395.
- 18 See Fintan Cullen, *Visual Politics: The Representation of Ireland, 1750–1930* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), 116–35.
- 19 Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 82.
- 20 Brendan Rooney, “The Cottage as Stage: Nicol, Brennan, and the Pictorial Origins of H. J. Thaddeus’s *An Irish Eviction, Co. Galway*,” 32.
- 21 Marjorie Howes, “Repurposing Things in Irish Painting and the Irish Literary Revival,” 103.
- 22 Nicholas Allen, “The Interior Yeats: Sketchbooks and Vernacular Culture in the Work of Jack Yeats,” 112.
- 23 See F. H. A. Aalen, “Bungalows: The New Vernacular?,” in *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape*, eds. F. H. A. Aalen, Kevin Whelan, and Matthew Stout (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), 163–64.

IN SEARCH OF THE IRISH VERNACULAR OBJECT

Diana Larsen

OH, TO HAVE A LITTLE HOUSE!
To own the hearth and stool and all!
The heaped up sods upon the fire,
The pile of turf against the wall!

To have a clock with weights and chains
And pendulum swinging up and down,
A dresser filled with shining delph,
Speckled and white and blue and brown!¹

“Old Woman of the Roads,” Padriac Colum

Padraic Colum’s poem expresses a universal longing for “home,” evoking that remembered and imagined place through its objects. In *Ways of Old*, an exploration of Irish traditional life, Olive Sharkey explains how such familiar things can evoke memories, visceral associations with the essentials of living like eating, communing, keeping warm, and sleeping: “I look at an old black kettle and am immediately transported back to a dark kitchen smelling of freshly baked bread and of turf smoke, with the solemn tick of a clock beating a slow tattoo in the background.”² Because a successful museum exhibition engages its visitors by telling stories, *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story*’s inclusion of objects encourages viewers to make associations between what is represent-

ed in the paintings and the actual things on display: “A building—or an object—that has survived from a past era is a survivor from another world. It impresses us because it makes that world tangible and if it looks old—if it bears visible signs of having passed through time—it impresses still more.”³

This exhibition gathers paintings of Irish rural interiors created from early in the nineteenth century until the 1950s. Although occupied by people of different economic circumstances, these interiors contain basic household elements, often dictated by the configuration of the characteristically small Irish tenant dwellings. The cabin’s source of light and heat—the hearth with its accoutrements of crane, hooks, and black kettle



Fig. 1: Stripped pine dresser with “delph” displayed. Collection of Don Slater, Deep River, CT. Author’s photograph.

16 or three-legged iron pot and fireplace tongs (plates 87–88)—was a central unifying feature in rural homes. The iconic painted kitchen dresser, the most characteristic piece of furniture in all but the very poorest dwellings, displayed the family treasures of “delph” or “delf” (a general colloquial term for ceramics).⁴ Because of its utility, the convertible settle—a bench by day and foldout bed by night, with space inside the folded seat to store bedding and a high back to protect daytime sitters and nighttime sleepers from drafts—also reappears in several images. Chairs, benches, and stools were equally important in cold and smoky rural houses necessitating raised seating in differing heights from the floor.

Robert Lynd’s *Home Life in Ireland* describes the essential furnishings of the interiors depicted in many of this exhibition’s oils and watercolors—the sorts of objects the curators have chosen to display with the paintings.

The turf fire burns on the floor against the wall furthest from the door, and over it from hooks and hangers swings a coal-black pot with swollen sides and insect-like feet, or a heavy old-fashioned kettle. High upon another wall rises the dresser with its rows of pleasant and many-coloured delf—the most comfortable of all ornaments. Perhaps there is a wooden bed in the corner of the room—a large and lordly bed high beyond all temptation to sit down on the edge of it. There is a wooden chair here and there, and, perhaps a long bench against the wall in which the door is built. . . . Sometimes . . . you see crudely-coloured pictures of saints plastered all over the wall—pictures

sold by pedlars or given away with religious papers.⁵

Furniture in rural Irish dwellings was necessarily functional and durable, designed to last for generations. Replaceable parts, such as sledge feet for dressers and through-wedged chair and stool legs, as well as *súgán* (twisted rope) chair seats, assured the longevity of these



Fig. 2: Stripped pine dresser, Massachusetts antique dealer. Author’s photograph.



Fig. 3: Assorted stripped pine furniture, County Cork antique dealer. Author’s photograph.

well-crafted pieces (see plates 83, 80, 86, and 84 for the exhibition’s hedge chair, bench, stool, and *súgán* chair). Often dressers were built into cottage walls or formed partitions to divide interior spaces. Dual-purpose settle beds were especially valuable in small cottages with many occupants. As the only heat source and cooking facility, the hearth was integral to the rural cabin, becoming the dwelling’s gathering place—the focal point for social interaction. Meals were traditionally eaten in front of the fire rather than at the table, which would be typically placed beneath a window and used for food

preparation rather than for serving. The fire, tended by the woman of the house, was never extinguished, thereby becoming symbol of family continuity.

Some form of the dresser, reflecting differing economic circumstances, appeared in most Irish kitchens. Aloysius O’Kelly’s *Mass in a Connemara Cabin* (c. 1883) (plates 43–44) depicts a typical dresser in a prosperous household, one filled with proudly displayed blue and white transfer-printed wares.

Contrastingly, Alfred Downing Fripp’s earlier watercolor of a much poorer household *Interior of a Fisherman’s Cabin, Galway* (1844) (plate 10), includes a roughly constructed rudimentary dresser at the far right that contains only utilitarian vessels on its lowest shelf, its relative emptiness signifying the poverty of the home’s occupants. These decorative or merely functional dressers holding much that families possessed appear in images representing economic extremes. Gerard Dillon’s *The Gramophone* (c. 1950) (plate 64) and Seán Keating’s *The Playboy and Pegeen Mike* (c. 1927) (plate 54), both painted in the twentieth century, indicate how Irish country people continued to furnish their kitchens with well-stocked dressers.

With its implements and cooking paraphernalia, the hearth and the characteristic settle bed also reappear in a variety of Irish rural homes. Tom Semple’s depiction of a strong farmer’s dwelling in *Untitled [Irish Interior]* (1830) (plate 4) features a swinging hearth crane, tongs, and a black kettle as well as a red settle bed. Alfred Downing Fripp’s painting of a poorer rural dwelling, *The Cabin Hearth* (c. 1843–48) (plate 9), once again shows the central hearth hook and black cooking pot, although any provision for bedding, except for the infant’s basket, is absent in this cave-like dwelling. Michael Power

O'Malley's c. 1930 etching (plate 58) depicts a man and woman sitting by a hearth, with the edge of a settle bed at the right suggesting the usefulness of this space-saving piece of furniture well into the twentieth century.

Faced with the task of selecting and then searching for objects for this exhibition, we immediately identified the essentials: a dresser with dishes to fill it; a settle bed; hearth accoutrements; and a range of chairs, benches, and stools. A presentation at the Boston College symposium, "Irish Material Culture" in November 2009 by Claudia Kinmonth, whose volume *Irish Country Furniture, 1700–1950* has made her the authority on the topic, and subsequent consultations with her guided the selection of objects. Kinmonth emphasized the importance of finding artifacts that retained their original surfaces—furniture still "in the paint."⁶ Shortages of wood in a deforested Ireland had made furniture makers inventive as they incorporated differently sourced timber into single pieces: whether imported "deal" (pine), driftwood, boards salvaged from shipwrecks, or wood culled from nearby hedgerows. Applying layers of paint to furniture constructed of such varied woods by homeowners or local carpenters created aesthetically unified surfaces, protected against the pervasive damp of the rural dwellings, and made the objects easy to clean and maintain. Paint was reapplied as often as twice a year, generally for important religious events such as Easter and perhaps for a "station," the visit of a local priest to say Mass and hear confessions in selected rural homes. Eric Cross's comic take on country living, *Tailor and Ansty* (1942), recounts this common domestic practice: "Twice a year the settle and the dresser and the doors and the shutters for the windows are painted by Ansty until by now the accumulation of paint must be near to half an inch thick."⁷



Fig. 4: Stripped glazed dressers, County Cork antique dealer. Author's photograph.

In the search for authentic examples of rural furniture, we therefore pursued pieces that revealed each item's use, identified by the many coats of paint that recounted, like the rings of a mature tree, its life history. We sought ceramics that were not in pristine condition, but rather ones that displayed their wear through chips, cracks, or even crude repairs. My search began online in New England as I identified dealers specializing in Irish country furniture—but I quickly realized that most rural Irish pieces available locally had been



Fig. 5: Piles of discarded blanket chests, 1970s. Photo archive of Clive Nunn, Thomastown, County Kilkenny.

stripped or refinished to suit the tastes of antique collectors. Photographs of different New England antique shops, and of a dealer's premises in Cork City, Ireland, reveal displays of "spruced up" or stripped pine dressers (figs. 1–4). Settle beds are, apparently, no longer collectible items in the United States, although local dealers remember them as available in the past; a search throughout the United States yielded only one in a private collection in Tennessee, unfortunately stripped of its paint. Nor did I locate a settle bed in Canada, a furniture form typically brought by Irish immigrants and copied by French Canadians for use in the south of the country, where it

was known as a *banc lit*.

Realizing that a good selection of painted Irish country furniture remained available only in Ireland, I traveled abroad in my search for larger domestic items—also viewing a range of folk history museums and folk villages in the West that offered impressive reconstructions of rural cottage interiors.⁸ Benefitting from Kinmonth's advice, I visited dealers of vernacular furniture in Galway and a traditional basket maker in Connemara. My search quickly revealed that locating vernacular items even in Ireland is no easy task. The

Museum's plain panel-backed settle bed, painted in a characteristically twentieth-century red (plate 79), was purchased there, as was the dresser—its austere form and fascia board pierced with crosses suggesting a Catholic southwest origin.

In order to fill the dresser (plate 68) shelves with local "delph," I searched for the most common blue and white willow-pattern transfer ware platters and other pieces, as well as the even less expensive hand-printed spongeware plates, mugs, and basins or bowls. Such

wares were made by using cut sponges to apply stenciled patterns in various glaze colors to the plain surfaces, a technique that originated in Scotland. The dresser's contents include imported ceramics like those that historical archaeologist Charles E. Orser, Jr. excavated from ordinary mid-century Irish cabins—pieces that suggest the nineteenth-century Irish tenants purchased imported, not just local goods.⁹ The bowls, known as basins, were used for both eating and drinking; because of their large size, they were often displayed upside down in stacks on the lower shelves of the dresser to keep out the dust and also show their patterns (a practice known as "whamelling").¹⁰

18 Wares imported from England were found at local markets and fairs but also distributed by Irish Travellers or tinkers to more remote areas. Orser's archaeological finds from excavated farmhouses indicate that these goods were widely disseminated in the countryside, even to poorer farmers. So valued were ceramic pieces by rural families that if broken or chipped, they were displayed on the dresser, turned to hide the damage or carefully repaired.

The timber shortage in a deforested Ireland caused people to look for indigenous materials other than wood to create useful household objects. *Súgán* rope, made by twisting hay or straw, abundant in the Irish countryside, was used to construct creels (carrying baskets) as well as for making chairs. Because the straw plaiting and basket making crafts created indispensable items for the rural home, we sought to include the work of a disappearing breed of craftspeople. From a Connecticut dealer the Museum acquired a *súgán* chair with a double weave pattern for durability, as well as a rare decorative pierced back (plate 84), an artifact displaying the craftwork that Basil Bradley's *Soogaun Making, Connemara, Ireland* (1880) (plate 32) demonstrates.

A plaited straw hen coop, similar to the one displayed at the National Museum of Ireland-Country Life in Mayo in its recent special exhibition *Straw, Hay & Rushes/Tuí, Féar & Luachra*, also came from our Connecticut source (plate 85). Many small farms owned as many as thirty laying hens and therefore several of these coops. These igloo-shaped containers gave the hens shelter and warmth to lay their eggs and ensured that the household would have fresh eggs year round. The

plaited coops were placed indoors about four feet from the ground on a shelf or table to prevent other wandering animals from stealing the eggs; some cone-shaped nests were suspended from the ceiling or against interior walls by means of a straw looped handle. The woman of the house who managed the hens often generated a larger income from her egg selling than that produced by her husband's livestock. Hens were so important that some dressers were custom made with compartments in their lowest section to house them. Brennan's *News from America* (1875) (plate 26) and Frances Livesay's *Cottage*



Fig. 6: Piles of discarded settle tables, 1970s. Photo archive of Clive Nunn, Thomastown, County Kilkenny.

Interior, Co. Mayo (1875) show chickens inside the house, a practical solution to the problem of shielding hens from predators and from the cold weather that would diminish their capacity to produce eggs.

Baskets were filled with all manner of things in rural Ireland. The skib, used until the late 1970s, contained potatoes, the diet staple for rural people, and often served as a "table" around which families would gather to eat. Some skibs, usually made from unpeeled willow, were fashioned with an inner basket to hold a jug of buttermilk into which potatoes were dipped. Another

basket form, the durably constructed creel made to fit on the backs of humans or donkeys, held loads from markets, turf from the bog, or seaweed from the shores of coastal areas.¹¹ Because baskets used in the period of this exhibition rarely survived, the McMullen Museum commissioned such artifacts from the traditional basket maker Joe Hogan, who works from his studio on the shores of Loch na Fooey, County Galway. Various woven pieces appear in the paintings—ranging from John Boyne's early nineteenth-century *The County Chronicle* (1809) (plate 1), John George Mulvany's pre-Famine *A*

Kitchen Interior (n.d.) (plate 3), Charles Henry Cook's *St. Patrick's Day/Irish Matchmaker* (1867) (plate 19) through Leo Whelan's twentieth-century *Interior of a Kitchen* (c. 1934) (plate 60). A symbolically empty skib figures centrally in Alfred Downing Fripp's *Interior of a Fisherman's Cabin, Galway* (1844) (plate 10), an image painted on the eve of the Great Famine; James Brennan's later *Patchwork* (1891) (plate 30) depicts an openwork creel full to the brim with turf, suggesting the post-Famine economic recovery in rural Ireland.



Fig. 7: Roadside furniture sale; Clive Nunn (foreground) buying from Traveller Henry Conors of Pallas, Clonroche, County Wexford, 1970s. Photo archive of Clive Nunn, Thomastown, County Kilkenny.

The disappearance of vernacular artifacts arose from major changes in rural Irish society. A fortunate discovery led me to Clive Nunn, a former antique dealer, now furniture maker and collector in County Kilkenny, who provided the socio-economic context explaining the disappearance of the traditional Irish country furniture he knows so well. He identifies Ireland's joining the European Community in 1973 as the key event that gave small Irish farmers unprecedented prosperity. Now able to improve their standard of living, they replaced their old things, the furniture that "represented hardship and

poverty.”¹² These country people eagerly chose instead to enter a modern world of industrially produced goods that their American relatives had been long enjoying. Nunn maintains that the convergence of such new prosperity among the rural Irish with the international vogue for stripped pine furniture “sounded the death knell for much of Ireland’s vernacular heritage.”¹³ As the accompanying photographs reveal, traditional furniture was simply discarded (figs. 5–6).

Such furnishings from neglected or abandoned homes were often picked up by Travellers in the 1970s and sold to dealers like Nunn. An active market for light pine “country furniture” that continues today caused dealers to strip the paint off virtually everything they came across by bathing items in caustic soda—leaving little of authentic vernacular furniture available even in Ireland. Nunn vividly conveys how rapidly such artifacts were discovered and disposed of on the marketplace.

In the 1970s and 1980s Ireland was literally scoured, principally by Irish Travellers, for this material and it was then sold to visiting dealers and on into markets in the UK, Europe, and North America hungry for the then fashionable “stripped pine.” Sadly, the origin or historical significance of these items was of little concern [for most] purchasers abroad—it was simply a question of—“if it is blond, it is beautiful.”¹⁴

Irish tinkers helped to disperse the rejected furniture from modernizing houses, items typically relegated to barns in the 1970s and 1980s (fig. 7). Often traveling as families before the advent of the automobile, tinkers traditionally disseminated objects such as imported

ceramics, or “delph,” to the rural population. In *Tinkers and Travellers*, Sharon Gmelch introduces James Browne, an Irish Traveller who explains his people’s economic survival through selling vernacular goods:

A tinker was a man years ago who thought of a hundred ways of surviving. If he was sellin’ delph and the delph failed him, he’d switch to somethin’ else. He’d sell somethin’ else of he’d buy somethin’ else and resell it. There was always a hundred ways out. This was the



Fig. 8: Red-painted hearth, Bunratty Folk Park, Bunratty, County Clare. Author’s photograph.

real tinker, not just the tinsmith. He was a better survivor than the rest.¹⁵

The rejection of traditional artifacts accompanying a new rural prosperity brought irrevocable change to the Irish countryside. From the 1960s through the present, accounts from rural areas all over the Republic and Northern Ireland testify to a dramatic loss of Irish vernacular buildings and consequently of their contents. Statistics from a survey done in Northern Ireland in 2003 reflect the general situation for the whole island: forty-nine percent of the traditional rural homes have

vanished altogether, thirty-nine percent being substantially altered, leaving only twelve percent intact. A lack of trained craftspeople to practice traditional crafts like lime washing and thatching, using locally available materials, has also contributed to these losses.¹⁶

Additional changes brought about by twentieth-century modernity have contributed to the disappearance of traditional customs and the objects and buildings associated with them: improved communications and roads; rural electrification, which began in 1946 and continued until 1976; cooperatives, like creameries, making the cottage industries unnecessary; the availability of factory-made furniture and farming equipment; a lack of traditional craftspeople; rural depopulation; and emigration. Negative associations with hardship and poverty meant that rural dwellers were more than keen to embrace the new ways, eagerly shedding a now devalued heritage. In *The disappearing Irish cottage: a case-study of north Donegal*, Clive Symmons and Seamus Harkin criticize the failure of local planners:

Large numbers of these former “jewels” of the Irish countryside are disappearing yearly, so that

few now exist even as ruins. Sadly, in some cases the misguided planning policies of local authorities and the past lack of any conservation provisions have hastened their demise, particularly with the controversial advent of “bungalow bliss” and one-off building in the Irish countryside.¹⁷

This bungalow phenomenon is also discussed in *Atlas of Rural Ireland*, which identifies the proliferation of automobiles that accompany increased affluence as contrib-



Fig. 9: Settle bed with dash churn. Bunratty Folk Park, Bunratty, County Clare. Author’s photograph.

20 uting to patterns whereby returning emigrants and city dwellers settle in rural areas “with the bungalow as their favoured dwelling form.”¹⁸

Such loss occurred even in the most geographically remote communities. R. A. Gailey describes the effects of modernization on the isolated communities of the Aran Islands, a process that began with Irish language tourism, according to John Millington Synge’s *The Aran Islands* (1907), a full half century before the mid-twentieth century here addressed:

The improvement of living standards is not to be denied, but slated and tiled roofs mean that the assistance of neighbours for thatching is not longer necessary, and this is one factor among many which have contributed to the disintegration of the old community life in the islands. Factory-made furniture is replacing the old locally made dresser which when brightly painted managed to look so dignified against the white-washed interior of the kitchen. Pride of place in both old and new houses has gone to the wireless set.... The family life still centres round the hearth, now often replaced by a coal-burning stove or cooker, for it is almost as cheap to import coal from Galway as it is to bring turf from Connemara.¹⁹

In “Furnishings of Traditional Houses in the Wicklow Hills,” F. H. A. Aalen observes that even in remote parts of County Wicklow, by the 1960s the “tempo of change [was] accelerating and traditional interior arrangements and furnishings in particular [were] being

rapidly modified and replaced” as older homes were abandoned or renovated.²⁰

Many of the objects discussed in this essay were devalued in light of the profound changes occurring in the first half of the twentieth century. Some remote areas did not have electricity until as late as the 1970s, but when modernization arrived, the effect was life altering. The improvement of roads allowing travel to areas previously inaccessible meant that the outside world could

reach a formerly isolated people. With the introduction of new cooking ranges, the old iron crane and hooks



Fig. 10: Display of furniture, National Museum of Ireland-Country Life, Castlebar, County Mayo. Author’s photograph.

ere left unused over the hearth or removed altogether; the built-in dressers were abandoned as old cabins were renovated or repurposed (often as out-buildings for animals) and new bungalows were built. Factory-made upholstered chairs and beds replaced the uncomfortable but functional settle beds and wooden seating of the past. The cooperative creameries of the early twentieth century assured that the butter churn was relegated to the barn, along with the spinning wheel. Traditional crafts like basket making, spinning, and plaiting straw were abandoned with the advent of new factory-made

containers and clothing onto the market.

In reaction to these changes, some recognized the importance of saving the island’s disappearing heritage, forming museums to house collections of vernacular furniture (figs. 8–11). The first of these was the Folk Village Museum at Glencolmcille, County Donegal, founded by Father James McDyer in 1967. Seeing his community’s rapid transformation, he acted to preserve what was being lost. Within a decade in 1974, Northern Ireland established Belfast’s Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. Clive Nunn and others formed the Irish Country Furniture Society in 1978, collecting items that became the core of the folk life displays at the Irish

Agricultural Museum at Johnstown Castle, County Wexford. More recently in 2001, the National Museum of Ireland-Country Life in Castlebar, County Mayo was established.

The curators of *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story* believe that the juxtaposition of everyday furnishings and objects with the paintings on display will connect viewers directly, through



Fig. 11: Red dresser, Glencolmcille Folk Village, County Donegal. Author’s photograph.

association and memory, to the historical period and places evoked by the exhibition. We also suggest that the presentation of these less-than-perfect objects will reveal their lived histories and imply stories that enrich the aesthetic experience of viewing paintings.



- 1 Padraic Colum, "Old Woman of the Roads," in *Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1932), 90.
- 2 Olive Sharkey, *Ways of Old: Traditional Life in Ireland* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 2000), 9.
- 3 David Knell, "The Art of Country Furniture: The Value of Being Old and Eccentric," David Swanson Antiques, accessed Sept. 30, 2011, www.davidswansonantiques.co.uk/about_antiques.asp.
- 4 Typically, nineteenth-century ceramics found in tenant homes (in addition to Irish-made coarse earthenware) were transfer-printed and luster wares from England and relatively inexpensive spongeware, popular from the mid 1830s through the 1930s. The term "delph" or "delf" comes from the original sixteenth-century tin-glazed earthenware made in Delft, Holland and decorated primarily in blue and white in imitation of Chinese porcelain. The technique was brought to England and then to Ireland toward the end of that century. Because such "delph" was hand-painted ware, it was expensive and would rarely have been displayed in dressers in rural tenant homes.
- 5 Robert Lynd, *Home Life in Ireland* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1912), 17.
- 6 Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Country Furniture, 1700–1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 21–27.
- 7 Quoted in *ibid.*, 23.
- 8 Note especially Bunratty Folk Park, Bunratty, County Clare, the National Museum of Ireland-Country Life in Castlebar, County Mayo, and Glencolmcille Folk Village, County Donegal.
- 9 Charles E. Orser, Jr., "Three 19th-century house sites in rural Ireland," *Post-Medieval Archaeology* 44, no. 11 (2010): 81–104. See also Orser's essay in this catalogue, 61–66.
- 10 See Kinmonth, *Irish Country Furniture*, 102, fig. 146.
- 11 In *Basketmaking in Ireland* (Bray: Wordwell, 2001), Joe Hogan discusses different forms in chapters on creels, potato baskets, and hens' nests. See also Angela Bourke's essay in this volume for a detailed account of constructing creels, 41–46.
- 12 Clive Nunn, former dealer, furniture maker and one of the founders of the Irish Country Furniture Society shared his experiences with me in interviews and provided photographs from his personal photo archive of vernacular Irish furniture. He lectures on the subject and has an engaging website: www.clivenunn.com (Clive Nunn, email interview by Diana Larsen, Oct. 10, 2011).
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Sharon Gmelch, *Tinkers and Travellers* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 1975), 28.
- 16 Harriet Devlin, "Saving Northern Ireland's Vernacular Houses," Mourne Heritage Trust, accessed Oct. 14, 2011, http://www.ihbc.org.uk/context_archive/78/northern_ireland/vernacular.htm. For other sources regarding loss of traditional buildings/crafts see: Brian P. Kennedy, "The Traditional Irish Rural Dwelling," in *Old Cultures in New Worlds: 8th ICOMOS General Assembly and International Symposium Program Report* (Washington, DC: ICOMOS, 1987), 645–52; Dara Flynn, "Clutch at Straws," *Sunday Times* (London), July 2, 2006; Lotts Architecture and Urbanism, comp., *Traditional Houses of Rural Co. Wicklow: An Inventory of Vernacular Architecture* (Wicklow: Wicklow County Council, 2008); Denise M. Meagher, "The Houses that Speak of North Tipperary," *Tipperary Star*, June 26, 1998; Barry O'Reilly, *Living under Thatch* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2004); *Traditional Buildings: Survey and Survival: Case Studies from the Northern Counties Based on an Exhibition at Parkes Castle National Monument, Co. Leitrim* (Dublin: North-South Interreg Fund, 2006).
- 17 Clive Symmons and Seamus Harkin, *The disappearing Irish cottage: a case-study of north Donegal* (Bray: Wordwell, 2004), vi–vii.
- 18 F. H. A. Aalen, Kevin Whelan, and Matthew Stout, eds., *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), 163.
- 19 R. A. Gailey, "Aspects of Change in a Rural Community," *Ulster Folklife* 5 (1959): 33.
- 20 F. H. A. Aalen, "Furnishings of Traditional Houses in the Wicklow Hills," *Ulster Folklife* 13 (1967): 61.

WAYS OF SEEING: THE DEVELOPMENT OF GENRE PAINTING

Síghle Bhreathnach-Lynch

WITH THE RISE OF GENRE PAINTING—THE DEPICTION OF SUBJECTS TAKEN FROM EVERYDAY life—representations of the anonymous peasant played an increasingly central role in Western European art.¹ This visual attention to the peasant was first firmly established by the seventeenth century in the Netherlands where the absence of patronage for religious and decorative painting in a Protestant context stimulated such new work.² Artists created a range of genre settings, including tavern scenes, musical or drinking parties, and domestic interiors, all through imagery containing implicit or explicit moral messages.³ Whereas some genre painters depicted the genteel lives of prosperous middle-class families, others turned to cruder aspects of peasant life in paintings that delighted buyers and critics alike. Interest in this new subject matter led to the popularity of genre painting in France and Italy a century later, albeit of a more refined kind. In nineteenth-century Britain and Ireland, genre reached its zenith.⁴

Considering the development of genre painting in Ireland involves exploring the context in which this work was produced. Art education in Ireland was essentially a category of British—or more narrowly English—training. Similar professional instruction on both sides of the Irish Sea inculcated academic ideals centering on a hierarchy of art categories and emphasizing how each category should be presented. Eighteenth-century art in Britain and Europe had displayed a taste for grand themes of history and mythology in keeping with the classical education of aristocratic buyers and collectors. But in response to new sources of wealth generated by industrialization, an increasingly secure nineteenth-century middle class began to patronize the visual arts.

Images of the rural peasant became particularly popular with such audiences, who frequented annual Royal Academy (RA) exhibitions in London and other mainland British cities, and its sister institution, the Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA) in Dublin. In 1815 the first exhibition of Old Masters was held in London, devoted to Dutch and Flemish painting.⁵

New middle-class viewers felt comfortable with subject matter that turned to ordinary contemporary life, both urban and rural, and with themes reflecting the human condition from the cradle to the grave. Interest in motifs relating to these viewers' own experiences led to the popularity of domestic scenes of the family at home. The vast majority of these motifs offered pleasing

representations and focused on minor incidents, invoking an ambience rather than a strong sense of dramatic narrative. Following critical dicta, Victorian genre painters eschewed the brutal aspects of poverty, instead generally depicting a timeless, politically naïve, and homogeneous peasantry, one intimately connected with nature and the natural environment.⁶ Artists choosing to portray urban and rural social problems found that such disturbing images often failed to find buyers, who had little desire to be reminded of the darker sides of life.

Genre scenes of daily life generally followed familiar Dutch and Flemish traditions, but also reflected the influence of the eighteenth-century English painter, pictorial satirist, and social critic William Hogarth (1697–1764).⁷ Although the skill of Dutch painters was much admired and emulated, the evangelical prudishness of Victorian Britain and Ireland ensured that the more salacious aspects of earlier genre were toned down—both in how figures and their activities were portrayed and in the use of innuendo and sexual symbolism. Artists replicated Hogarth's emphasis on depicting meaning through expressive features, but moderated his biting satire. With the introduction of new subject matter dealing with contemporary issues, including emigration and criminality, Victorian critics boasted that artists had

24 raised the category of genre to a new level.

Critics judged all works—history painting as well as genre—according to both the affect the imagery evoked and its documentary accuracy. Artists were to stimulate humor, pathos, and above all sympathy and a sense of benevolence in audiences. In addition, images were to be true to nature—realistic in every detail so that viewers felt they were looking at actuality itself. In June 1863, the *Art-Journal* decreed that “faces should be individual; they should each tell a story, contain lines of history, and marks of joy and sorrow.”⁸ Thus artists imbued their characters with emotional qualities conveyed through easily comprehended poses and facial expressions. Figures were carefully clothed in apparel appropriate to the particular setting, and each object of the painting was accurately drawn. In interiors, for example, careful attention was paid to the architectural or decorative features of the painted space. Finally, the *Art-Journal* insisted that every brushstroke must demonstrate “cleverness, dexterity, neatness, sparkle and a keen edge.”⁹

Such imagery involved careful preparation: the study of models, copious preparatory drawings, and a thorough study of each item to be included in the projected scene. In their search for veracity, artists painted not just in their studios but also *in situ*, both in urban and rural areas. Those interested in depicting rustic scenes sometimes chose to live in rural communities in order to achieve the greatest possible authenticity. This obsession with hyperrealism that applied to every category of painting arose from a radical belief in the power of art to tap into the better nature of humankind. Every image was to be depicted with as much accuracy as possible in order to suggest to spectators that what they observed was as real as life itself. By vicariously experiencing what was happening in a painting, their better natures would be tapped; nineteenth-century critics and others influential in the visual arts, such as the director of the Victoria and Albert Museum,

Sir Henry Cole (1808–82), believed that visits to museums and art galleries could move, uplift, and educate viewers.¹⁰

This imperative for realism in genre painting, nevertheless, was often difficult to implement. Artists painting from nature quickly found that pleasing rustic scenes depicting healthy and happy laborers were far easier to sell than those exposing the harsher realities of impoverished rural lives in both mainland Britain and Ireland. Moreover, theories of art were adamant about



Fig. 1: Trevor Fowler (fl. 1830–44), *Children Dancing at a Crossroads*, c. 1840. Oil on canvas, 28 x 36 1/2 in., National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.

what constituted a successful work. The *Literary Gazette* declared that the most satisfactory paintings showed an ordered society and social structure: “a composition which cannot be contemplated without feelings of strong emotion, and, of self-congratulation on belonging to a country, of the character and habitual sentiments of so large a proportion of the inhabitants of which it is the unexaggerated representation.”¹¹

Among the affluent, representations of poverty were to encourage sympathy and generosity towards the poor.

Paintings of everyday urban and rural life were thus often conceived as a means of bringing moral and social improvement to the working classes. Rustic genre painting had a particular social role in its depiction of rural families who did their best with limited resources—the deserving poor who accepted their condition in life without complaint.¹² These rural images were viewed as object lessons to the urban masses, corroborating the link between the virtues of piety, family affection, frugality, and happiness. Additionally, rustic subjects had

a particular nostalgic resonance for those city dwellers who themselves had been brought up in the country, reminding them of simple childhood virtues and acting as a counterweight to the corruptions and temptations of urban life.

The evidence of distinct differences among the regions of Britain and Ireland also influenced how artists chose to represent the countryside. Painters typically depicted the Scottish Lowlands and England nostalgically, as populated by healthy and relatively prosperous inhabitants.¹³ The Scottish Highlands, Ireland, or remoter parts of Wales, however, were viewed as surviving remnants of a wild and lawless past, with such lawlessness compensated for, on occasion, by equally primitive virtues. Victorian metropolitan viewers, all too aware of the distress of the urban poor living among them, clung to the belief that the peasant, living closer to nature, was morally and physically healthier than the underprivileged dweller of the industrialized city.

Widely held convictions about the social power of art meant that those pictures highlighting suffering, albeit in ways that did not offend, could stir the consciences of the ruling classes, thereby contributing to reforms that would improve the condition of the poor.

Assumptions about the social influence of rural genre painting became increasingly achievable with the introduction of new systems for the dissemination of images: whereas upper- and middle-class audiences viewed and purchased the original oils or works on paper, more

popular scenes were circulated widely through inexpensive copies after the introduction of the steel plate in the 1820s. Samuel Carter Hall's *Art-Union*, first published in 1839, and the *Royal Irish Art-Union* founded the same year attempted to bring art to a wider public. Hall argued, "a collection of pictures powerfully helps to thin our poorhouses and prisons . . . men to whom public galleries are open will seldom be found in public-houses."¹⁴ Although the probable destinations of such copies were actually the modest middle class, fine prints translated into cheaper ones, either through pirated engravings or through reproductions in newspapers or specially produced books of prints. And these reproductions became increasingly accessible even to the working classes.

Any examination of nineteenth-century genre paintings of the Irish countryside, so amply represented in *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story*, must also consider English attitudes toward her sister country. In his analysis of landscapes depicting the rural poor between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, Tom Dunne describes how the image of Ireland for the English was "terrifying . . . with poverty and violence defining the ubiquitous negative image of Irish national character, so at odds with the English self-image."¹⁵ Even patriotic Irish artists used such pervasive negative stereotypes unreflectively; thus many genre scenes by Irish artists such as *The Dancing Master* (c. 1848) by Daniel MacDonal (1821–53) (plate 16) and *Children Dancing at a Crossroads* (c. 1840) by Trevor Fowler (fl. 1830–44) (fig. 1) depicted a rural countryside in which music, dance, and drink dominate the carefree peasant's life. In such representations of Ireland, the country's artists followed the style of English genre painters; any distinctive differences in customs from mainland Britain were typically presented so as to amuse rather than disturb. Such "safe" paintings, invariably, were popular commodities both on the British and Irish art markets.

The accomplished Scottish genre painter Erskine Nicol (1825–1904) generally adopted such a strategy in his Irish work. He lived in Ireland for four years from 1846, subsequently returning each summer to sketch and paint, building a lodge and studio on Clonave Island on Lough Derravaragh, County Westmeath. His visits there

generated Irish scenes popular with British and Irish patrons, works that he showed at the RHA and contributed on a regular basis to the RA and Royal Scottish Academy exhibitions. Although Nicol established a reputation with light-hearted scenes of Irish rural life, his art often pandered to the bigotry and racism of his English and Scottish audiences. In works such as *Paddy at Versailles* (1856), he painted rural Irishmen with simian-



Fig. 2: Erskine Nicol (1825–1904), *Paddy at Versailles*, 1856. Watercolor and pencil on paper, 14 1/2 x 10 1/4 in., © National Museums Northern Ireland, Collection Ulster Museum.

features, their actions making clear their low intelligence or brutality (fig. 2). When exhibiting in Dublin, Nicol chose his less racist images, with content and titles calculated not to offend potential local buyers.¹⁶

Despite a widespread critical uneasiness with his purported bigotry, a recent revisionary reading of the Nicol's genre paintings warns against easy assumptions about his lack of sympathy for his Irish subject matter.

Brendan Rooney argues in this catalogue and elsewhere that Nicol's relationship with Ireland has been misconstrued by critics who focus on his comic portrayals of the rural Irish as suggesting a sustained racism or condescension—and an inability to provide a truthful representation of the country. Depicting the artist with local friends in a cottage, Nicol's *Interior Westmeath Cabin*/"A thing of beauty is a joy for ever . . ." (c. 1860) (plate 21) is decidedly sympathetic in its rendition of an Irish scene. Nicol, the bearded man with the broad-brimmed hat, sits with a sketchbook in hand looking at the locals examining his meerschaum pipe. Although his attire clearly signals a greater prosperity, the convivial intimacy within the group suggests his ease in this company of rural Irishmen; the features of the men opposite him show a natural intelligence as they scrutinize the pipe while the artist observes them with genuine interest. Rooney argues that when depicting communities he knew, Nicol avoided stereotyping and was keen to avoid offending those he liked and respected.¹⁷ But ever the canny businessman, he also knew his audiences, producing work that would interest patrons in Dublin, London, or Edinburgh. Such responsiveness to the demands of his different markets suggests some explanation for the controversy surrounding his reputation as a genre artist.

Two significant Irish genre scenes by the earlier Scottish artist David Wilkie (1785–1841), *The Peep-o'-Day Boys' Cabin, in the West of Ireland* (exhibited 1836) and *The Irish Whiskey Still* (1840) (plate 5), indicate how viewers responded to paintings in which regional differences were addressed in new ways. By drawing on earlier conventions of history painting and merging them with the existing form of genre, Wilkie played a key role in the development of nineteenth-century genre art. His innovations influenced several major Irish artists in this exhibition: Frederic William Burton (1816–1900), James Brenan (1837–1907), Harry Jones Thaddeus (1860–1929), and Aloysius O'Kelly (1853–1936).

Born in Fife, Wilkie trained at the Trustees Academy of Design in Edinburgh, and settled in London in 1805. Realizing early in his career that the new art market favored domestic rather than the historical scenes, he adapted the motifs and characters of seventeenth-cen-

26 tury Flemish and Dutch genre painting and the satirical images of urban life by Hogarth for nineteenth-century British tastes. Since a more respectable Victorian age mandated decorum, delicacy of feeling, and good taste, he eschewed coarser aspects and sexual innuendos. Termed “the Leonardo of ordinary everyday character,” Wilkie was praised in 1841 for his truth to a nature “so faithfully represented and so generally understood, [it] has procured for him admiration more general and real than any painter ever enjoyed.”¹⁸ Although several of his most popular pictures depict the life and folk traditions of a rural Scotland familiar to him from boyhood, he did not confine his subject matter to mainland Britain. He traveled abroad to Italy and Spain and in 1835 spent a month in Ireland with the intention of creating “a picture or two of a national kind.”¹⁹ The visit resulted in a variety of drawings and sketches from which he created two significant Irish oil paintings.

In both works Wilkie addresses topics of political and social criminality appearing prominently in Irish fiction of the 1820s and 1830s. *The Peep-o'-Day Boys' Cabin*, in which a wife watches over her outlaw husband within a dark, disorderly cabin, responds to fears of violence arising from Irish agrarian secret societies.²⁰ The couple's naked infant son lies asleep next to his father, while the mother leans back on her knees, one arm on her breast; she anxiously listens to a young woman who has burst in through the door to warn her that her husband may be captured at any moment. Representations of both illicit stills and venues for the sale of alcoholic drink also became a popular theme in nineteenth-century genre painting. In the *The Irish Whiskey Still*, again set in a cabin interior, family members await the result of another day's distilling. They gaze intently at an older figure (possibly the grandfather) who holds the potion up to the light to determine its quality.

In both pictures Wilkie follows the tradition of depicting Ireland as a wild and lawless country, but in

several unexpected ways. In the first place, the canvases are large, as befitting history rather than genre paintings. The artist argued that as his two modern topics were connected with public issues relating to Ireland's political and social problems, they “should be painted larger than merely domestic subject[s].”²¹ He also sought to extend the existing boundaries of history painting by borrowing the language of the Old Masters in his genre work, where, for example, the family trio in each composition recalls Renaissance Holy Family



Fig. 3: Daniel Maclise (1806–70), *Gil Blas Dresses en Cavalier (Scene from Gil Blas)*, 1839. Oil on panel, 30 1/4 x 37 in., National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.

pictures.²² Wilkie reverts to a Renaissance ideal in his portrayal of the figures as larger than life-size: the men are fine-featured, the women strikingly beautiful, and the near-naked children have all the allure of Italian Renaissance and Baroque cherubs. The choice of palette, moreover, is reminiscent of sixteenth-century Venetian painters. Indeed the artist remarked that the madder red of the women's skirts “brightens up the cabin ... like a Titian or a Giorgione.”²³ The poses and expressions of the *dramatis personae* add a strong sense of narrative,

one overriding the usual meticulous detailing of genre. Such a change of direction in artistic style is clearly evident when the two Irish works are compared to the same artist's Scottish scene, *The Whiskey Still at Lochgilphead* (1819). That composition, typical of his early genre style, is dominated by details of the still itself rather than that of the figures, which are small in scale and recall those of the seventeenth-century Flemish artist, David Teniers the Younger (1610–90). According to traditional academic norms, such a scale befitted inferior subject matter.

Wilkie's two paintings were exhibited in 1836 and 1841 at London's Royal Academy where viewers would have been well aware they were looking at Irish images. In addition to its identifying title, *The Irish Whiskey Still* features the national symbol of a wolfhound in its foreground. Wilkie's elevation of his Irish images through the conventions of contemporary history paintings elicited different critical responses. Some English viewers were critical of the depiction of lawlessness and criminality in Ireland, a theme and subject in sharp contrast to the soothing “myth of the rural idyll” embraced by English genre painters.²⁴ On the other hand, other private responses to the images concentrated on the inaccuracy of their depiction of the Irish. After seeing early sketches for *Peep-o'-Day*, Maria Edgeworth noted that the “dress and expression were not characteristically Hibernian.”²⁵ But generally, London critics seemed to ignore the national settings of the pictures, instead concentrating

on their dramatic narratives and formal values. The *Athenaeum*, an influential journal of literature, science, and the fine arts, commented that “the resting bandit—surely the most handsome Irishman in British art—was a fine athletic young fellow.”²⁶ Fintan Cullen argues that by portraying the Irish peasantry in the language of high art, Wilkie offers figures who represented not “a festering guerrilla force but a series of pictorial effects as timeless in visual terms as sixteenth-century altar-pieces appeared to nineteenth-century eyes.”²⁷

Influenced by Wilkie's use of elements from history painting, a growing number of artists painting in Ireland produced genre themes in a more academic style. The delineation of large-scale figures in spacious surroundings differs radically from the smaller scenes full of teeming people, so beloved of earlier Flemish and Dutch artists. The contrasting approach in nineteenth-century genre concentrated on figures with pronounced expressive features and poses, components that were then used to convey scenes with a clearly identifiable storyline. Writers and critics often labeled such imagery "genre subject painting." Audiences enjoyed reading these visual narratives and working out the elements of the story for themselves. Although the term "reading" might appear to be a misnomer when applied to the visual, the Victorians who frequented exhibitions constituted the same class that enjoyed literary and dramatic activities. The poetry and short stories published in the many nineteenth-century periodicals as well as popular theatrical productions helped to shape the viewers' responses to these genre subject paintings. Audiences were, therefore, at least superficially skilled in interpreting the intersecting conventions of symbolism and stylistic motifs in both visual and literary works.

Two paintings in *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story* dramatically reveal the growing differences between evolving genre styles. Both turn to customs connected with the domestic wake, an important social ritual in rural Irish life. The aquatint after N. A. Woods's *An Irish Wake* (1819) (plate 2) depicts the occasion of a timely death, that of an old person in a scene swarming with more than thirty figures. Some have come to mourn, others to drink and carouse: most treat the event as a social occasion where the latest news and gossip might be picked up. Woods's busy scene is difficult to read because of the placing of the figures. Viewers are guided towards the man in the middle of the composition and to the keening woman directly behind, but the remaining figures are unevenly divided into two groups—thus creating an imbalance within the arrangement. These small caricature-like figures, the variety of activities going on, and the scale of the picture (14 1/2 x 20 1/2 in.) recall the work of the seventeenth-century Dutch genre painter,

Adriaen Van Ostade (1610–85).

Another image of a wake, Frederic William Burton's (1816–1900) *The Aran Fisherman's Drowned Child* (1841) (plate 6), illustrates the shift from small traditional genre scenes to larger subject paintings. That this painting was chosen for engraving by the *Royal Irish Art-Union* in 1843 attests to its success among critics and other audiences. The traditional irreverent image of the Irish wake exemplified by Woods's aquatint illustrates British views of the drunken debauchery of the country, whereas Burton's painting of a funeral ritual conveys a gravitas associated with grander themes of high art. And despite his London-based career, Burton reveals far more knowledge of Irish peasant life than Wilkie, whose acquaintance of Ireland was essentially that of a tourist. A lifelong interest in Ireland and friendship with the Irish painter and antiquarian George Petrie brought Burton on sketching tours to the West, excursions that encouraged him to depict an authentic landscape and population. Although Burton did not visit the Aran Islands until 1857, well after painting *The Aran Fisherman's Drowned Child*, by 1841 his knowledge of the west of Ireland was already intimate.

The image is a highly finished watercolor of exhibition-size dimensions (34 3/4 x 31 in.) that depicts a scene of lamentation over the untimely death of a small child in the Claddagh area of Galway.²⁸ A crowd of country people gathers in the interior of a fisherman's cabin to wake the dead figure embraced by the mother. In a dramatic pose conveying her despair, she bends over the small still body, desperately seeking a sign of life while the gesture of the kneeling female figure to her left echoes her anguish; to the right of the mother, a professional keener raises her arms in an expression of grief. In the left foreground, the father stands apart, frozen with despair, too traumatized to speak, but the expression on his face conveys his terrible loss.

Burton's watercolor exhibits several important differences from Woods's aquatint, all in keeping with the new treatment of genre as contemporary history painting promoted by Wilkie in the 1830s and disseminated by other artists. Compositionally, Burton's image is more stable, with its dramatic story easily comprehended at

a glance. The father, the keener, and the seated woman in the right lower foreground provide a solid triangular framework for the two looser horizontal groups behind—from the grandfather in the left middle ground across to the seated figure beside the hearth, whose pose is a reverse of that of the old man. The second group stretches from the woman in profile at the open door across to the young man with hands pointing down toward the anguished mother, also in profile. In addition, the large scale and dignified treatment of the rural Irish reflects the new treatment of genre as contemporary history painting that Wilkie promoted. Burton freely borrows motifs from the Old Masters: the mother and child group recalls an engraving of Raphael's *The Massacre of the Innocents* (1510) while the figure of the old man is inspired by one of the lunettes in the Sistine Chapel (1508–12).²⁹

Another highly successful Irish artist in London, Cork-born Daniel Maclise (1806–70), knew Wilkie and admired his work. Burton's picture is directly influenced by Maclise's theatrical genre painting, *Gil Blas Dresses en Cavalier (Scene from Gil Blas)* (1839) (fig. 3):³⁰ the two similarly lit pictures depict dark interiors with figures entering through a doorway and display similarly striking stances of the central ones. Burton's theatrical rather than realistic lighting, more reminiscent of that in Caravaggio's seventeenth-century paintings than of any actual lighting to be found in an Irish cabin, suggests the artistic license claimed by the nineteenth-century genre painter working after Wilkie.

Burton's rich, almost sumptuous palette also recalls Wilkie's Irish scenes. Petrie had described the Galway local costumes as "exquisitely beautiful and simple—exactly as if they stepped out of the pictures of Raphael or Murillo."³¹ But in keeping with Victorian expectations for veracity of detail in genre painting, Burton carefully depicts the local apparel as well as the details of furniture and household objects that might adorn the home of a Claddagh fisherman. Fishing nets hang from the ceiling, and the simple kitchen furniture consists of low stools and benches; the mother sits on what is possibly a settle bed (a seat by day and a bed by night). In the hearth a cast iron three-legged cooking pot or skillet

28 filled with potatoes hangs from a horizontal beam with hooks attached to it, the crane holding kettles and cooking pots. A keep hole set into the wall on one side of the hearth was used for storing small items like rosary beads, tobacco, pipes, or knitting materials.

Other artists continued to develop Irish genre conventions. Brendan Rooney views Harry Jones Thaddeus's (1860–1929) *An Irish Eviction, Co. Galway* (1889) (plate 35) as introducing historical import to what is ostensibly a lowly genre scene.³² In the largeness of its scale, its historical subject matter, and its exhibition-quality finish, the painting is, according to Rooney, “arguably the most powerful socio-political image of Ireland of the nineteenth century.”³³ Thaddeus, who trained at the Cork School of Art and achieved international fame as a portraitist, was to paint several Irish scenes during his career, much of which was spent abroad. Nevertheless, like Frederic William Burton, he makes clear in his *Recollections of a Court Painter*³⁴ that he maintained an interest in broader Irish affairs; a decade earlier, inspired by the Land War, he had painted, *Renewal of the Lease Refused* (1879). His sympathy with the plight of tenants facing eviction, a familiar episode dominating rural life in post-Famine Ireland, becomes even more evident in his later scene of resistance presented from within the rural home.

In *An Irish Eviction, Co. Galway*, Thaddeus eschews that comforting, sentimentalized image of Irish country people typical of many contemporary rural genre paintings. The image unequivocally declares its national setting and particular location in its title, and the dramatic physicality of the painting's dominant male figure conveys a heroic and unyielding opposition to British policy. By centrally including a woman in the composition, Thaddeus registers the active involvement—through violent physical confrontation and resistance—of Irish women in the Land War. Ignoring Victorian visual conventions depicting women's idyllic domestic lives, he instead acknowledges their role in the harsh social reality of political, social, and economic upheaval. The artist's difficulty in selling *An Irish Eviction, Co. Galway* suggests the unpopularity of such choices in the contemporary art market.³⁵

Aloysius O'Kelly's (1853–1936) large oil painting *Mass in a Connemara Cabin* (c. 1883) (plate 43) represents yet another nineteenth-century Irish rural interior presented without the pervasive sentimentality of genre painting—and arguably another with a political agenda. With an ardently Fenian brother, O'Kelly maintained close ties to nationalist views; his illustrations of contemporary Irish political events for the *Illustrated London News* make his politics clear. In the early 1880s, O'Kelly produced several representative images of Irish rural life, with *Mass in a Connemara Cabin* bringing him particular acclaim.³⁶

Illustrating the traditional Irish practice of the “station” that celebrates the Catholic Mass and Confession in rural homes, the painting portrays a kneeling group of rural parishioners, a young priest blessing them, and a meticulously rendered interior of a tenant cabin. Niamh O'Sullivan suggests that in depicting a traditional religious ritual being attacked by the policies of the post-Famine devotional revolution, O'Kelly makes clear his opposition to an entrenched, anti-nationalist clerical establishment that feared the gatherings involved with such rural stations were tied to nationalist politics.³⁷

Viewed in the context of works by Wilkie, Burton, and Thaddeus, O'Kelly's large-scale exhibition picture with possible political implications was not unique; nevertheless, most Irish and British rural genre artists continued to represent rural life more traditionally.³⁸ Visual representations of interiors in England typically depicted the cottage and its inhabitants existing in an utopian vacuum, conveying the impression of a rural paradise that ignored the realities of an often impoverished and politically unstable nineteenth-century British countryside—although one significantly less volatile than its Irish counterpart.³⁹ For example, the Cranbrook Group, settling in the attractive village in Kent in the 1850s, continued to produce appealing genre scenes of the countryside.

But three English artists—Alfred Downing Fripp (1822–95), Frederick Goodall (1822–1904) and Francis William Topham (1808–77)—traveled to the west of Ireland in 1844 and succeeded in depicting rural life at its most desolate. This so-called “Galway Group”

of professional artists produced images not of carefree Irish peasants dancing and making music in clean and comfortable cottages, but of raggedly dressed country people housed in tumbledown hovels, lacking adequate food and household furnishings.⁴⁰ Although depictions of the wilder regions of Britain were acceptable subjects for metropolitan audiences, pictorial conventions decreed that the harsher aspects of life there be addressed in imagery that did not offend. Thus in keeping with the Dutch and Flemish tradition and that of Hogarth, the artists of the Galway Group represented suffering, especially hunger, symbolically. As befitted Victorian conventions, their symbolism was tasteful—without any turn to the ribald forms of earlier genre painters. Alfred Downing Fripp's *The Cabin Hearth* (c. 1843–48) (plate 9) illustrates the starvation of a woman and her children simply by placing an empty potato basket (a skib) prominently in the foreground. But under the influence of new directions in genre taken by Wilkie, Fripp invokes the Virgin and Child, a central trope of Renaissance religious art: the expression on the woman's face in *The Cabin Hearth* recalls that of the suffering mother at Calvary.⁴¹ Through his use of such a familiar, even assuaging, artistic convention, the artist dislocates the scene from its horrifying temporal present into a timeless universal anguish more acceptable to his contemporary audiences.

Allegory also served to suggest suffering, but distanced the immediacy of what the artist perceived—again making representations of suffering marketable. While painting in Galway, Fripp, Goodall, and Topham befriended the local priest, Father John Rooney (1809–50), who persuaded inhabitants of the desperately poor Claddagh area of the city to sit for the visiting artists. Rooney's interest in the Galway Group's work encouraged him to take up painting himself. Turning to Marion McEnroy's research on the artist, Claudia Kinmonth reads Rooney's *Sympathy* (1847) (plate 14), which depicts a mother turning from her spinning to show sympathy to her daughter whose pet bird lays dead, as an allegorical reference to the Famine. The artist's parish in Oranmore lost forty percent of its 1841 population during the Famine years; thus the symbolic inclusion of the bird,

suggests Kinmonth, alludes to the vast numbers of the dead the priest knew so well.⁴²

The inclusion of political and historical interventions in traditional Irish genre imagery persisted into the late Victorian period as economic depression, trade competition from America, urban decay, and an increasingly violent struggle against Union by Irish nationalists challenged the conventions of the century's earlier genre work. James Brenan (1837–1907) continued to produce realistic genre paintings that documented the life of rural County Cork communities, even as they reflected the darker realities of Irish life. Trained at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art and the RHA, Brenan became involved in London's South Kensington School, an institution specializing in arts and crafts. In an effort to alleviate the lot of poor rural women working from home, he devoted much of his life to the improvements of lace manufacturing in Ireland. He served as an art teacher in various colleges in England before becoming headmaster at the Cork School of Art and heading the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art from 1889. Although most of his paintings exhibited in England and Ireland depict cottage interiors and scenes of country lives, Brenan's secure income as an administrator meant that he could turn to subjects that were not necessarily popular on the commercial art market. His themes, consequently, reflect an enduring interest in the plight of the rural poor and treat key areas of social concern: emigration, the falling market for Irish textiles, arranged marriages, Catholicism, literacy, and education. For the most part, Brenan's realistic genre scenes appear sentimental rather than openly critical of the political status quo, but by painting on a relatively large scale he promoted Irish country people as a serious subject for art. And unlike so many representations of a carefree Irish peasantry in the genre tradition, these narrative paintings depict their subjects as dignified and industrious.

Words of Counsel (1876) (plate 27) exemplifies the quintessentially Victorian subject painting beloved of the art-going public in Ireland and Britain. Its narrative, conveyed not only through expression and gesture but also through a number of symbolic clues, suggests the consequences of a runaway match. The public at

the oil painting's RHA exhibition would have inferred the young girl's pregnancy by noting how the priest's stick points directly to the apron obscuring her waistline. Unlike her mother, she lacks a wedding ring on her left hand, and viewers would further decode her red-checked shawl as indicating her role as a sinner. Brenan's inclusion of a rosary, a cross, and a gilt-edged prayer book instantly signals the family's respectability and devout Catholicism that her errant behavior has undermined.⁴³

In the later decades of the nineteenth century, while artists like Brenan, Thaddeus and O'Kelly addressed serious concerns about rural Ireland, a group of British artists, the Social Realists, began exhibiting images of English working-class life and its difficulties.⁴⁴ Their exhibition paintings confronted major social problems such as homelessness, poverty, and the unacceptably high rate of infant mortality. Although images by artists such as Hubert von Herkomer (1849–1914) still remained a minority taste, a number of critics and art patrons quickly recognized that such paintings offered important depictions of contemporary life—a realization that undoubtedly began to change attitudes about genre art focusing less sentimentally on social conditions.

The development of Irish genre painting documents the Irish Victorian era in multiple ways. Kinmonth observes that every picture opens up a range of potentially contrasting historical avenues.⁴⁵ Mary Cowling, in turn, argues that more than facts were documented, for “artists were able to capture with equal conviction the life of the mind and of the emotions: the psychological as well as the physical life of the era.”⁴⁶ As visual documents, the works in *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story* offer social historians detailed evidence about how country people in Ireland lived—even as the conflicted development of the paintings' artistic conventions reveals the role of historical forces on visual representation. Through the evidence of their creators' interventions into a strictly defined aesthetic genre, these images suggest the tensions artists negotiated as they recorded a century of historical conflict and trauma in the Irish countryside.



NOTES

- 1 The term “genre” comes from the French *peintres de gens*—painters of people. Genre painting encompasses all scenes of daily life, whether contemporary, historical, or literary.
- 2 Dutch and Flemish artists did not originate this style of painting. Venetians Jacopo Bassano (c. 1510/18–92) and Vittore Carpaccio (c. 1405–1522/6) led the way, but Dutch and, to a lesser extent Flemish, artists gave genre a new status and importance.
- 3 Dutch proverbs and sayings, familiar to contemporary viewers, were used to convey a moral message.
- 4 Ireland and Great Britain formed a single state after the 1800 Act of Union whereby the Irish Parliament was abolished, and Ireland became an integral part of a new United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, consisting of England, Scotland, and the island of Ireland. For the purposes of this essay, these will be treated as separate entities and the term “Britain” will allude to mainland Britain only.
- 5 With the dispersal of important French collections (including genre) following the French Revolution, British collectors like Sir Robert Peel formed notable holdings in the early nineteenth century. In 1829 John Smith published the first of his nine volumes of *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish and French paintings*.
- 6 The focus on the peasant is closely linked with a growing interest in scientific naturalism, anthropology, ethnography, and folklore.
- 7 For a comprehensive account of Victorian genre painting, see Christiana Payne, *Rustic Simplicity: Scenes of Cottage Life in Nineteenth-Century British Art* (Nottingham: Lund Humphries, 1998).
- 8 *Art-Journal* (June 1863): 166, quoted in Mary Cowling, *Victorian Figurative Painting: Domestic Life and the Contemporary Social Scene* (London: Andreas Papadakis, 2000), 18.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 See Síghle Bhreathnach-Lynch, *Ireland's Art, Ireland's History: Representing Ireland, 1845 to Present* (Omaha, NB: Creighton University Press, 2007), 21.
- 11 *Literary Gazette* (Jan. 28, 1837): 59.
- 12 Payne, *Rustic Simplicity*, 21.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Art-Union* (Nov. 1847): 365 quoted in Dianne Sachko Macleod, *Art and the Victorian Middle Class: Money and the Making of Cultural Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 48.

- 15 Tom Dunne, “The Dark Side of the Irish Landscape: Depictions of the Rural Poor, 1760–1850,” in *Whipping the Herring: Survival and Celebration Nineteenth-Century Irish Art*, ed. Peter Murray (Cork: Crawford Art Gallery; Kinsale: Gandon Editions, 2006), 48. The word “terrifying” conveys the dread of unrest and revolution by authorities in Britain.
- 16 Nicol exhibited a dozen pictures at the RHA between 1847 and 1856. Titles included *Highland boys, bird-nesting* (1847), *A Rustic Angler* (1847), and *Awarding Prizes in a Village School* (1848).
- 17 Brendan Rooney, “‘A Very Minor Virtue?’ The Notion of Accuracy in Scenes,” in *A time and a place: Two Centuries of Irish Social Life*, ed. Brendan Rooney (Dublin: National Gallery of Ireland, 2006), 17.
- 18 “Sir David Wilkie,” *Art-Union* (July 1841): 16.
- 19 Allan Cunningham, *The Life of Sir David Wilkie*, 3 vols. (London: Murray, 1843), n.p., quoted in Fintan Cullen, *Visual Politics: The Representation of Ireland, 1750–1930* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), 116. See Cullen, *Visual Politics*, 116–35 for a comprehensive account of Wilkie’s view of Irish national character in his genre painting.
- 20 Wilkie’s lack of knowledge about Ireland led him to erroneously name the group after a Protestant militant organization although the narrative concerns the Catholic rural agitators, the Whiteboys. See Cullen, *Visual Politics*, 125.
- 21 William J. Chiego, ed., *Sir David Wilkie of Scotland (1785–1841)* (Raleigh: North Carolina Museum of Art, 1987) 242.
- 22 Cullen, *Visual Politics*, 135.
- 23 David Wilkie to Sir William Knighton, Aug. 30, 1835, Mitchell Library, MS 308895, University of Glasgow, quoted in *ibid.*, 119.
- 24 Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 208.
- 25 Maria Edgeworth to Allan Cunningham, July 25, 1842, quoted in Chiego, *Sir David Wilkie*, 244.
- 26 *Athenaeum* (May 7, 1836): 331, quoted in Nicholas Tromans, *David Wilkie: Painter of Everyday Life* (London: Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2002), 104.
- 27 Cullen, *Visual Politics*, 135.
- 28 For the most comprehensive account of *The Aran Fisherman’s Drowned Child*, see Marie Bourke, “The Aran Fisherman’s Drowned Child” by Frederic William Burton R.H.A.: *Painting in Focus* (Dublin: National Touring Exhibition Services, 1987).
- 29 Marie Bourke, “The Aran Fisherman’s Drowned Child,” *GPA Irish Arts Review Yearbook* 5 (1988): 192.
- 30 Bourke, *The Aran Fisherman’s Drowned Child*, 8.
- 31 George Petrie to Captain John Larcom, Aug. 24, 1839, from William Stokes, *The Life and Labours in Art and Archaeology of George Petrie* (London: Longmans, Green, 1868), 132.
- 32 Brendan Rooney, *The Life and Work of Harry Jones Thaddeus, 1859–1929* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), 167.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 H. J. Thaddeus, *Recollections of a Court Painter* (London: Bodley Head, 1912) referenced in *ibid.*, 285.
- 35 Priced at £300, the work remained unsold at the Dublin exhibition; it was purchased a few months later for only £157 10s. Rooney, *Harry Jones Thaddeus*, 184.
- 36 The *Freeman’s Journal* of July 2, 1888, singled out the work as “exceptionally high rank” and the artist as amongst “the most important of modern artists.” Quoted in Niamh O’Sullivan, *Aloysius O’Kelly: Art, Nation, Empire* (Dublin: Field Day, 2010), 17. The watercolor *Mass in a Connemara Cabin* (plate 44), shown in 1899 and having reappeared recently, is featured in *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story’s* exhibition.
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 For a comprehensive history of the English cottage in art, see Hugh Lander and Peter Rauter, *English Cottage Interiors* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989) and Andrew Clayton-Payne, *Victorian Cottages* (London: Phoenix Illustrated, 1997).
- 39 Clayton-Payne, *Victorian Cottages*, 1.
- 40 Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 3.
- 41 Bhreathnach-Lynch, *Ireland’s Art*, 63.
- 42 See Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 81–82 and Marian McEnroy, “‘Joannes Clericus’: The Life and Work of the Revd. John Rooney,” *Irish Arts Review Yearbook* 17 (2001): 122–23.
- 43 See Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 160–63 for a full reading of the painting.
- 44 For an account of social realist art, see Julian Treuherz, *Hard Times: Social Realism in Victorian Art* (London: Lund Humphries, 1987).
- 45 Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 1.
- 46 Cowling, *Victorian Figurative Painting*, 7.

THE COTTAGE AS STAGE: NICOL, BRENAN, AND THE PICTORIAL ORIGINS OF H. J. THADDEUS'S *AN IRISH EVICTION, CO. GALWAY*

Brendan Rooney

FOLLOWING A VISIT TO THE WALKER ART GALLERY'S ANNUAL EXHIBITION IN 1890, THE reviewer for the local *Liverpool Daily Post* described Henry (Harry) Jones Thaddeus's (1860–1929) *An Irish Eviction, Co. Galway* (1889) (plate 35) as “very dramatic.”¹ The term was apposite in both an atmospheric and theatrical sense, as Thaddeus's cottage interior, like a stage, hosts a scene of high tension. While its walls define and set the parameters of the performance space, its pervasive gloom intensifies the claustrophobic mood. Strong directional light entering the cramped space, meanwhile, enhances the narrative. The painting was the antithesis of the alternately austere and saccharine society portraits on which Thaddeus had built an enviable reputation, but it was neither anomalous in his oeuvre, nor wholly unprecedented in Irish art. Instead, it represented the amalgamation of disparate pictorial models that had developed over the course of the nineteenth century. The predominant, typological model was characterized by the close attention its proponents paid to vernacular detail and particularity. The alternative privileged storytelling over descriptive zeal, often at the expense of accuracy. For *An Irish Eviction* Thaddeus drew on both of these models to produce a work that was at once descriptive, emotive, and documentary. This essay is an investigation of the pictorial origins, both general and specific, of Thaddeus's painting and an evaluation of its status as a complex theatrical work.

The use of everyday interiors as stage-like settings in narrative painting was by the late nineteenth century a long and well-established tradition. From Renaissance depictions of the Last Supper to secular Netherlandish themes, artists had adopted theatrical devices in the animation of their subjects. Floors were routinely raked to allow for greater visibility, and the *dramatis personae* arranged so that no principal member turned his or her back to the audience or obscured another to the detri-

ment of the story. Interior settings were assigned clearly defined foregrounds, middlegrounds, and backgrounds, and doors and windows were identified as transitional points or as means of punctuating and/or illuminating actions. Dutch and Flemish seventeenth-century domestic scenes were particularly in vogue in Britain and Ireland in the nineteenth century and exercised a marked influence on such artists as Daniel Maclise (1806–70), David Wilkie (1785–1841), Thomas Faed (1826–1900),

and James Brenan (1837–1907).²

For many Irish painters, the conventional one- or two-room cottage had been too modest a setting for elaborate pictorial statements. Thus, Nathaniel Grogan's (1740–1807) animated *Itinerant Preacher* (c. 1783) and Daniel Maclise's Halloween revelers in *Snap-Apple Night* (1833) occupy altogether more expansive spaces. John George Mulvany (1766–1838) shared this appetite for lofty rooms, as did the American visitor Howard Helmick (1840–1907), who in his Irish works of the 1870s and 1880s often arranged his figures in a measured, frieze-like fashion across a spacious middle-ground. Helmick (plates 36–41), like Grogan, was also attracted less to the lives of the abjectly poor than to those living in modest comfort and was temperamentally better disposed toward buoyant and quirky themes like courtship and dancing than to more banal scenes of everyday life.

A majority of artists, however, displayed an increasing predilection for intimate views of peasant life in Ireland and were drawn to recording politically neutral and routine activities, particularly those engaged in by women. Young peasant men, whose character, work ethic, and politics would have been widely regarded with suspicion by outsiders, are conspicuous by their absence.

32 This more cautiously analytical inclination was typified by Francis William Topham's (1808–77) heavily sentimental *Cottage Interior, Claddagh, Galway* (1845) (plate 13) and Frances Livesay's (fl. 1869–81) naïve *By the Fireside, Co. Mayo* (1875), but was also echoed in the often eccentric paintings of Daniel MacDonald (1821–53) (plates 15–16) and the prosaic, but technically accomplished work of George Washington Brownlow (1835–76) (plate 25).

Many critics in Britain and Ireland were, for their part, seduced by the material accuracy of these interior views. Circumventing the causes of poverty, they focused on what they saw as the inherently picturesque nature of Ireland and the ability of individual artists to capture in detail what they considered the primitive lifestyle of its inhabitants. The *Art-Journal*, for example, observed that the two figures and the interior in Topham's *The Cabin Door* (exhibited 1846) were “undoubtedly truthful studies,”³ and later in the same year remarked that “Ireland has been a fertile field for Mr. Topham—as it may be to any artist; more of original character, as well as of the grand and beautiful in Nature, may be thus encountered than in any other country of Europe.”⁴ Whereas the countryside was perceived as picturesque, “character” was thought to be readily observable in Irish homesteads.

What many of these descriptive works gained in authenticity, however, they lacked in pictorial vitality. In its review of the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1880, the *Times* bemoaned the superficiality of studies by several artists (Topham and Frederick Goodall among them), but welcomed the efforts of William Magrath and Howard Helmick “with even more warmth than the quality of their work would of itself command.”⁵ These individuals, thought the writer, showed a greater capacity to “make the most of the picturesque quality that ought to be ready to hand in Ireland for any man who can pierce to grace and beauty through rags and squalor.”⁶ This appeal for greater insight in the depiction of rural Ireland and its inhabitants failed to acknowledge that substantive interrogation of Irish peasant life invited distinctly *unpicturesque* associations with poverty, social disaffection, and agrarian conflict.

The search for vigor was not new. David Wilkie, who spent just a matter of weeks in Ireland in the 1830s, had avoided “rags and squalor” by stressing the narrative dimension of his work. He claimed that as his Irish paintings were “connected with public events” they “should be painted larger than merely domestic subject[s].”⁷ However, Wilkie's pictures actually tell us more about the artist's appetite for drama and pursuit of high art than they do about the life of the Irish rural community. In his Irish paintings, Wilkie displayed a typical pictorial boldness and desire to impress with his technical bravura. He commented grandly that “in Connaught and Cunnemara [*sic*], the clothes particularly of the women are the work of their own hands and the color they are the most fond of is red they dye with madder, which as petticoat, jacket or mantle, brightens up the cabin or landscape, like a Titian or a Giorgione.”⁸ “Indeed,” he concluded, invoking that popular perception of Ireland, “the whole economy of the people furnishes the elements of the picturesque.”⁹

Wilkie's *The Peep-o'-Day Boys' Cabin, in the West of Ireland* (exhibited 1836) and *The Irish Whiskey Still* (1840) (plate 5) are set in Irish cottages, but both are populated with characters whose origins seem distinctly less certain. Whereas the figures in the former look rather Mediterranean (and, as Fintan Cullen has observed, akin to figures of contemporary Italian bandits in works by French and English painters),¹⁰ the family members in the latter might almost have been borrowed from Renaissance paintings or even the work of Jean Baptiste Greuze (1725–1805). Moreover, *The Peep-o'-Day Boys' Cabin* is thematically inaccurate. Wilkie appears to have confused the Peep-o'-Day Boys, a group of militant Protestant peasants founded in the 1780s, with the Whiteboys, an organization of Catholic rural agitators active in the 1770s and revived in opposition to church tithes in the 1830s. The picture's vernacular detail, much of it relatively accurate, merely embellishes a convoluted pastiche. Wilkie presented his Irish subjects, in the words of David Solkin, “as the object of his (and, of course, his audience's) amused and distanced observation.”¹¹ He did not engage in pure artifice, but distorted observed reality to recreate Ireland “in the image of

acceptable European high art.”¹²

Four decades after Wilkie's elaborate fiction, Thaddeus addressed Irish subjects more immediate and meaningful than the merely picturesque and “characterful.” However, just as quickly as he could see the topicality of land agitation and the often-harsh consequences of government policy, he had to acknowledge their pictorial and commercial limitations. In Paris, where he had traveled to continue his training, he recognized how his youthful endeavor and current pragmatism could coalesce. In 1881, just a year after his enrollment at the famous Académie Julian, his painting *Le retour du braconnier—Irlande* (exhibited later in Ireland as *The Wounded Poacher* (1881) (plate 33) was accepted at the Salon.¹³

Despite the specificity of the French title, the subject of Thaddeus's painting was inherently, and deliberately, ambiguous.¹⁴ Poaching was a well-established theme in nineteenth-century French art and particularly popular in the century's final decades: for example, Gustave Courbet's (1819–77) *Les braconniers* and Nicolas Bernard Lépicicé's (1735–84) *Départ du braconnier*. When not depicted making their way across atmospheric landscapes, hounds at their side and/or the spoils of their hunt thrown over their shoulders, French poachers were cast variously in sentimental, nostalgic, or anthropological guises. Elderly poachers were even celebrated regularly on Breton postcards as guardians of tradition or relics of the past.

In British art, with which Thaddeus would also have been very well acquainted, painters and illustrators were inclined to portray poachers as more mischievous than villainous—or alternatively, as pragmatic and dutiful. In Thomas Wade's (1828–91) *The Poacher's Home* (c. 1868), for example, the eponymous figure is presented, both literally and metaphorically, as an upright figure: a father, not a fugitive.¹⁵ In many Victorian cartoons, meanwhile, poachers were in turn quick-witted and opportunistic, or fundamentally decent. Newspaper reporters in England, for their part, were apt to dismiss agrarian malfeasance as mere “roguery” (a popular term among journalists at the time).¹⁶

Poaching in Ireland, in contrast, had very different connotations. Though reports of explicitly political

unrest in rural Ireland occupied more column inches in the Irish dailies and weeklies toward the end of the century, episodes of poaching—normally identified with dissent and poverty—were also widely reported. Irish newspapers stressed the violent and often deadly nature of confrontations between poachers and gamekeepers. In December 1881, for example, a group of armed men threatened a number of water-bailiffs on the River Erriff in County Mayo, dispatching them by discharging shots into the air.¹⁷ Similar incidents occurred off the Island Point on the Shannon just a few months later¹⁸ and in Carrick-on-Suir in May 1883.¹⁹

Contentious and politicized, poaching was, however, a relatively unusual subject in Irish art, and did not give rise to any consistent iconography. In his *The Poachers* (1835), painted just a few years after the passing of the comprehensive Night Poaching Act,²⁰ James Arthur O'Connor (1792–1841) placed his protagonists in an expansive night landscape, illuminated by the moon and casting long shadows on the earthen track on which they pause. Sir Richard Garnett's description of the work in 1917 as "steeped in Irish sentiment" was as vague as O'Connor's implications of criminality.²¹

Alfred Downing Fripp (1822–95), like Frederick Goodall, Francis Topham, and others, may have been inspired to travel to Ireland in the 1840s by David Wilkie. Fripp's *The Poachers Alarmed* (1844) (plate 11) at once recalls Wilkie's stage-like Irish compositions and anticipates the arresting drama of Thaddeus's *The Wounded Poacher*. In a ramshackle cottage interior, two young boys huddle anxiously by a door, one peering out through a crack, as an older man sleeps in his coat on a bed of straw and his bare-shouldered wife nurses a babe-in-arms. These are the desperately poor. The dead rabbit in the foreground of the picture seems a paltry return for risks taken. The sleeping poacher's boots and stockings have disintegrated, leaving the toes of his right foot to protrude inelegantly. The interior features no home comforts: no furniture, no hearth, no utensils. Bare flagstones pave the floor, and gaping cracks extend the height of the wall.

Unusually for the time, Fripp identified the inherent drama in an *authentically* realized episode from Irish life.

Thaddeus was perhaps more circumspect in his depiction of a similar subject, though admirers of his work did not equivocate about the bona fides of his *Wounded Poacher*. A correspondent writing for the *Irishman* in 1881 proclaimed that Thaddeus was "to be congratulated for not having wandered outside the island of his birth to seek a suitable subject for the display of his artistic talent."²² Thaddeus's friend Michael Holland later claimed that the main figure, in a rather perverse case of gamekeeper-turned-poacher, was inspired by a "burly water-bailiff" who had served as a model at the Cork School of Art while Thaddeus was a student there.²³ Holland suggested elsewhere that the theme itself was suggested by a story told by the same water-bailiff.²⁴ In reality, it is more likely that the model's imposing physicality rather than his testimony dictated his inclusion in the picture. Painted in Paris, *The Wounded Poacher* represents an assembly of scrupulously observed objects and details taken from life and memory. Whereas the clay pipe, for example, might be seen as Irish, the wine bottle is more readily identified with France. Other meticulously observed details—a head of kale, the furniture, the poacher's boots—are generally consistent with depictions of everyday peasant life throughout Europe.

Ultimately, *The Wounded Poacher* is Irish more in concept than detail. Thaddeus was concerned less with the documentary accuracy of his work than with its emotional impact. The narrative, like the vernacular detail, is contrived. The presence of a gun, for example, is striking, but problematic. Poaching with firearms carried extra risk, attributable not just to the danger of the weapon itself, but also to the nature of the opposition it would invite. Poachers would more commonly use snares and nets, or dogs in the pursuit of rabbits and hares.²⁵ The implication that Thaddeus's poacher was operating alone is also questionable. Organized poachers habitually employed pickets to keep watch for gamekeepers and the constabulary. Affrays tended to involve groups of poachers confronting gamekeepers, water-bailiffs, or police officers. Furthermore, in the 1880s in Ireland, the poaching of salmon, rather than winged or ground game, was considered the relevant crime of particular concern. Thaddeus's decision to cast his pro-

tagonist as solitary, desperate (the disorder of the room hints at the chaos that attended the poacher's recent entrance), and in mortal danger, facilitated a universal, theatrical reading of the subject. His painting is dramatic, but morally vague. Just as Allan Cunningham suggested that David Wilkie avoided the issue of criminality in *The Peep-o'-Day Boys' Cabin* by concentrating on the "hardy and generous youth, on the beautiful and faithful woman and on the sweet child,"²⁶ in *The Wounded Poacher*, Thaddeus focused on the poacher's imposing presence, the succor provided by the serene young woman at his side, and the security of the homestead. In a 1878 painting of the same title by the American William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), on the other hand, the artist emphasized the poacher's craggy features, providing a striking counterpoint to Thaddeus's picture; Chase compels the viewer to consider the sitter's character as much as the circumstances of his injury.²⁷

With *The Wounded Poacher* Thaddeus produced a work that could appeal to a neutral audience unconcerned or unfamiliar with the nuances of the Irish socio-political situation. However, he also identified the cottage interior as a profoundly psychological space. Frederic William Burton (1816–1900) had done so more poignantly in his powerful *The Aran Fisherman's Drowned Child* (1841) (plate 6), in which a tall young father looks out sternly, tears welling in his eyes, as if challenging the unwanted attention of his audience. He assumes the role of protector, shielding from intrusion this most tragic episode in the lives of his community. Thaddeus would not achieve such emotional intensity until *An Irish Eviction*, in which a private, domestic interior becomes both a refuge and a violently contested space.²⁸

One can find, unexpectedly perhaps, notable antecedents to Thaddeus's *An Irish Eviction* in the work of Erskine Nicol (1825–1904), an artist more commonly, and with good reason, identified as promulgating a derisive stereotype of the Irish peasant as a lawless but essentially good-natured buffoon. The politically conservative British press was generally disinclined to distinguish between Nicol's portrayals of Irish peasants, regardless of their circumstances. The *Art-Journal*, for instance, wrote that the principal character in Nicol's *The Renewal of the*

34 *Lease Refused* (c. 1863) “might almost by his aspect be a culprit in a dock charged with felony,” but was probably “a rascal and traitor” in any case.²⁹ Nicol relied heavily on memory, and for the most part indulged an appetite among his clientele for hackneyed, pejorative representations of the Irish peasant. However, he departed from such caricature on conspicuous occasions and also appreciated the dramatic potential of the Irish cottage interior. Unlike Wilkie, Nicol maintained a presence in Ireland over many years,³⁰ and declared his familiarity with the country on several occasions by introducing self-portraits into his Irish compositions.³¹ He included himself, for example, in his monumental *Donnybrook Fair* (1859), elegantly dressed and strolling with his wife through a carousing throng. In “*A thing of beauty is a joy for ever ...*”/ *Interior Westmeath Cabin* (exhibited 1860) (plate 21) he casts himself as a benign outsider, sitting at a table with local men who eagerly inspect a meerschaum pipe that he has brought with him.³² His intense gaze and the bound sketchbook on which he leans suggest that he looks on his tablemates as subjects for a future painting, while the contrast between his pipe and fine attire and the clay pipes and ragged clothes of his company elucidate his role as gentleman observer.³³

It is interesting to note that the setting for this gentle interaction between artist and subject features in more expansive and dramatic paintings by Nicol. In *The Day after the Fair* (1860), a man sits by the hearth, nursing injuries incurred during a brawl,³⁴ whereas in *Notice to Quit* (1862) (fig. 1), by comparison a much more sober subject, a bailiff delivers a notice of eviction to a family with a sick daughter.³⁵ Were it not for differences in local detail, one might suggest that these related pictures record sequential episodes or acts from the life of a single family.³⁶ That Nicol’s reuse of that space was deliberate and judicious is made clear by the survival of a fully finished, but unpopulated study of it in oils, *Interior of an Irish Cottage* (c. 1862) (fig. 2). In this work,

the cottage, stripped of all but a few domestic accoutrements, boasts the character of a stage awaiting its actors.



Fig. 1: Erskine Nicol (1824–1904), *Notice to Quit*, 1862. Oil on canvas, 28 ½ x 41 ½ in., private collection.



Fig. 2: Erskine Nicol (1824–1904), *Interior of an Irish Cottage*, c. 1862. Oil on canvas, 15 ¼ x 21 in., private collection.

Notice to Quit, perhaps more than any other work by Nicol, evinces the artist’s ability to exploit space theatri-

cally. In the painting, a young father and mother and an elderly grandmother, sitting by the bed of the sick child, react to the untimely intrusion into their home of the bailiff. The mother throws herself across her husband’s lap in despair, while the father, fixing his unwelcome visitor with an indignant stare, reaches for his stick. The most striking gesture, perhaps, is that of the grandmother, who brandishes a crucifix as if it were her last means of defense. The imagery is obvious, even clumsy, but the significance afforded the breaching of the threshold—both moral and physical—is unmistakable. This attempt to communicate indignation, defiance, despair, and, in the case of the process-server, cold indifference was a significant departure for an artist whose work was more commonly populated by ungainly “stage Irishmen” scratching their heads, rubbing their chins, or grinning inately at the most basic of challenges. The bailiff’s features, observed James Dafforne with unusual discernment, “certainly do not betoken a disposition to soften the painful nature of his mission by any display of gentleness or suavity.”³⁷ Significantly, Nicol’s concern with drama did not compromise the painting’s technical quality. It is a grave composition in which the artist demonstrated virtuoso skill while moderating his appetite for the picaresque.

The staged quality of Nicol’s most accomplished interiors was not lost on contemporary writers. Lionel G. Robinson noted that the French critic and Anglophile Ernest Chesneau (1833–90) categorized Nicol as a “dramatist,”³⁸ while Dafforne, employing similarly theatrical terminology, said in relation to Nicol’s *Waiting an Answer* (exhibited 1862), “the whole *mise en scene* is in every way good.”³⁹ James Lewis Caw, for his part, later criticized Nicol’s over-fondness for “the Irishman of farce.”⁴⁰ Nicol’s methods, of course, also con-

formed to conventional academic practice. Artists commonly introduced figures, posed and studied in isolation

in the studio, into carefully arranged and balanced settings. John Ballantyne's portrait of Nicol (c. 1864), in which the artist sits at an easel painting a model posed rather precariously on a platform, records this exact modus operandi.⁴¹ However, the success with which Nicol employed those methods for dramatic purposes marks out *Notice to Quit*.

How well Thaddeus knew Nicol's work remains unknown.⁴² A watercolor study of an empty cottage interior (1898) (fig. 3) indicates that he certainly employed similar methods to Nicol's while conceiving his own interior scenes.⁴³ However, one might argue convincingly that Nicol's picture informed *Notice to Quit* (1880) (fig. 4) by James Brenan, Thaddeus's former master at the Cork School of Art. Brenan's depiction is predictably more understated than Nicol's, but both paintings feature dramatic, raking light and a histrionic quality.⁴⁴ Indeed, Brenan's defiant peasant, a middle-aged man thumping his fist on a table, seems like a conflation of Nicol's elderly grandmother and glaring young man.

Brenan was almost certainly responsible in some measure for inspiring Thaddeus's youthful exercises in social realism, notwithstanding the younger artist's confident claims that he based his painting *The Convalescent* (c. 1878) "on an incident from home life"⁴⁵ and his *Renewal of the Lease Refused* (c. 1879) on "an incident of the Land War then agitating Ireland."⁴⁶ Living in Cork City, Thaddeus is unlikely to have witnessed first-hand an eviction of the kind his picture title suggests; he was probably influenced principally by pictorial models, news reports, and anecdotes that circulated freely.⁴⁷

Brenan also drew frequently on a theatrical model for interior views, including *The Finishing Touch* (1876) (fig. 5) a painting that records a family's preparation for the emigration of one of its young members, and which, as Claudia Kinmonth has observed, has a stage-like appearance.⁴⁸ In a manner strongly reminiscent of Nicol's *Notice to Quit*, Brenan positioned a door to the side in two similarly composed works, *Committee of Inspection (Weaving, County*

Cork) (1877) (plate 28) and *Words of Counsel* (1876) (plate 27), with both aesthetic and narrative intent. In these pictures, the inhabitants of the cottage appear subordi-



Fig. 3: Harry Jones Thaddeus (1860–1929), *Interior of an Irish Cottage*, 1898. Watercolor on paper, n.d., private collection.



Fig. 4: James Brenan (1837–1907), *Notice to Quit*, 1880. Oil on canvas, 26 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 34 $\frac{1}{2}$ in., private collection.

nate to the outsiders—one a priest, the other an austere inspector—who temporarily occupy their homes.

Thaddeus is sure to have seen Brenan's *Notice to Quit*

at the Irish Exhibition at London's Olympia in 1888, as he was the principal exhibitor there and may well have played a role in the selection of the works on show.⁴⁹ In light of his earlier closeness to Brenan and the relative absence in recent years of Irish subjects from his own work, it appears likely that contact with Brenan's emotive painting rekindled Thaddeus's interest in such themes.⁵⁰ Perhaps with Brenan's image partly in mind, Thaddeus intensified in *An Irish Eviction* effects with which he had experimented in earlier paintings, most notably *The Wounded Poacher*. Instead of entering benignly through a window, light invades the dark, cramped interior over the shoulders of Royal Irish Constabulary officers, instantly recognizable by their pointed helmets, as they smash down the door. As in the course of an eviction the police were not permitted to enter a house before the sheriff's party, this element itself may have been a theatrical conceit.

One of the main differences between Thaddeus's composition and those comparable paintings, including Brenan's, that had preceded it, is the behavior of the family members. Whether engaging in daily chores or receiving unwelcome news, Irish peasants had been represented disproportionately as sedentary and passive. Thaddeus, in contrast, installs a powerfully built, full-length male figure in shirtsleeves as the fulcrum of his composition. Like the earlier wounded poacher, the figure is emphatically academic, allowing the artist to demonstrate his skills in the description of anatomy, posture, and drapery. The figure's *contrapposto* pose, accentuated by the heavily drawn folds of his shirt, adds physicality to the scene. Indeed, the man's imposing presence itself bolsters the sense of resistance that characterizes the picture as a whole. He is also the only comprehensively modeled figure; the others, from the woman to the right who reaches down to seize a pitchfork, to the problematic characters in the background who lunge at the officers with a ladder are, by comparison, summarily described.⁵¹ Again, however, Thaddeus's main figure is not definitively Irish. His heavy woolen breeches and untailored white shirt, which closely resemble the

36 clothes worn by the artist's similarly ambiguous poacher, are generic peasant costume, and his bright red headscarf appears rather incongruous in an Irish setting.

In his profoundly dramatic *An Irish Eviction*, Thaddeus resisted the inclination, prevalent among painters in Ireland and Britain in the nineteenth century, to imbue his protagonists with complex individual character. As David Solkin has observed, Wilkie's "actors became virtually transparent, to the point where their private thoughts and feelings assumed a highly public visibility."⁵² The feelings of the solitary young woman in Lady Elizabeth Butler's (1846–1933) arresting composition *Evicted* (1890), with which Thaddeus's *An Irish Eviction* is often compared, are clearly discernible in her features. There is, by contrast, little beyond rage to be read in the faces of Thaddeus's peasants; and, in any case, the principal figure, in an eschewal of theatrical tradition, has his back to the viewer. His emotions are conveyed by his actions and circumstances alone. The audience, however, is not spared the reality that this family will suffer the same fate as those who are recorded sitting among their possessions in photographs, paintings, and newspaper illustrations of the time. Thaddeus willfully dismissed that notion of the picturesque that preoccupied earlier artists and writers and dispensed with those physical, tonal, or behavioral nuances that might conventionally have sweetened the scene. Indeed, the foreground detail, so fundamental in *The Wounded Poacher's* implication of domesticity and its display of technical skill, is obscured by an insidious gloom. Those few household items in evidence—a ladder, a pot, a pitchfork—have been appropriated as weapons.

Thaddeus's frame of reference in the formation of this work extended beyond easel painting. It seems highly likely that *An Irish Eviction* owed a debt to newspaper illustration, the genre that effectively popularized subjects from Irish daily life. Depictions of evictions by various "special artists," including Thaddeus's close contemporary and compatriot Aloysius O'Kelly (1853–

1936), had been relatively common in such English papers as the *Graphic* and the *Illustrated London News* since the 1870s.⁵³ Indeed, as Fintan Cullen observes, "it was



Fig. 5: James Brenan (1837–1907), *The Finishing Touch*, 1876. Oil on canvas, 25 ¼ x 29 ½ in., Collection of Quinnipiac University. Photo: Mark Stanczak/Quinnipiac University.



Fig. 6: (Charles) Paul Renouard (1845–1924), "Studies From Life in Ireland, The Eviction," the *Graphic*, Mar. 10, 1888.

the *Illustrated London News* that set the agenda for the iconography of evictions for much of Victoria's reign and certainly from the late 1840s to the late 1880s.⁵⁴ As L.

Perry Curtis, Jr. discusses in greater detail elsewhere in this volume,⁵⁵ the relevant illustrations ranged from the serving of notices and the initial confrontation between tenants and eviction parties to the execution and consequences of the evictions themselves.⁵⁶ Some were sentimental, others highly charged, but most allowed for a duality of interpretation that mitigated their polemical character. Most often, both illustrators and easel painters depicted evictions from outside the cottage, a perspective that demonstrated the actuality of the event as generally witnessed by observers. This viewpoint also had obvious pictorial consequences, including the repetition of such striking tropes as orderly lines of militia or constabulary men restraining crowds of onlookers. Evictions were fundamentally punitive, but were also intended to intimidate those who witnessed them. This role was reinforced through the circulation of staged photographs of evictions in progress, such as *The Battering Ram has done its Work* (1888), a well-known photograph of an eviction on the estate of Colonel Hector Vandeleur near Kiltrush, County Clare.⁵⁷ One might even argue that

some illustrators and photographers who depicted evictions as "public" events colluded, albeit inadvertently, with those agents who sought to make examples of the families they were displacing.

The depiction of one such brutal eviction from *within*, signed in monogram by (Charles) Paul Renouard and published in the *Graphic* (fig. 6) in March 1888, clearly prefigures Thaddeus's monumental composition. The illustration in question was one of three that plotted an Irish peasant family's eviction. In the second, the so-called "emergency men" have destroyed the corner of the house (both to afford the eviction party easy access and to render the dwelling uninhabitable), and constabulary men stand outside, about to apprehend the family. Inside the cottage, two men brandishing wooden sticks advance towards the officers, while a shawled woman, standing deeper inside, prepares to throw the steaming contents of a pot at the assailants. Improvisation borne of desperation was

common during evictions, but the resemblance between the actions of the woman in the illustration and that of the muscular male figure who dominates Thaddeus's *An Irish Eviction* seems too close to be mere coincidence. Furthermore, it seems likely that Thaddeus's image was also informed by the noticeably exacting text that accompanied the illustrations. "In the center of the room on the ground-floor," declared the report, "was a huge iron pot, in which it was proposed to boil water, meal, and lime to pour on the police."⁵⁸ The description of this toxic cocktail would no doubt have alarmed much of the newspaper's polite, middle-class audience, but made compelling reading. The illustration's male figure in shirtsleeves also calls Thaddeus's main protagonist to mind.

That the illustrated press might have been a rich source for Thaddeus—or for that matter any other Irish artists interested in social reportage—is no surprise. It was incumbent upon illustrators, many of whom were easel painters in their own right, to dramatize their subjects in the interests of legibility and immediacy. Moreover, Thaddeus himself appears to have provided illustrations of scenes of rural unrest in Ireland for *Le Monde Illustré* in Paris in the 1880s, including the violent interior scene *En Irlande: Affiliés de la Land League faisant jurer sur la Bible à un fermier de ne plus payer son tenancier* (*In Ireland: Members of the Land League making a farmer swear on the Bible not to pay his landlord*), which features the same kind of anomalous detail that complicates both *The Wounded Poacher* and *An Irish Eviction*.⁵⁹ John Gilbert suggested that Thaddeus was also employed as an illustrator while he was a student at Heatherley's studio in London.⁶⁰

Despite the thought and effort Thaddeus expended on *An Irish Eviction*, he is not known ever to have returned to such a subject. Moreover, he did not promote the work through the press or exhibitions⁶¹ and neglected to mention it at all in his memoirs *Recollections of a Court Painter*, published in 1912. His opinion of the painting's worth may have become colored by his inability to sell it, a frustration shared by Lady Butler, whose *Evicted* remained in her personal collection for many years. But Thaddeus did seek to recreate the visual impact of *An Irish Eviction* in later dramatic works, most

notably *The Poachers* (plate 34) and *Christ before Caiaphas* (c. 1898). In the former, he returned to the subject of poachers in flight, but on that occasion avoided implying any obvious connection with Ireland. The detail, not least the red brick of the hay barn and the blond hair of the young boy, is not recognizably Irish, and contributes to a scene that is deliberately ambiguous. Not for the first time, Thaddeus chose to elevate suspense over geographical specificity. *Christ before Caiaphas*, meanwhile, was also an exploration of the primal fear of pursuit and capture, and in that respect not unlike *The Wounded Poacher* and *An Irish Eviction* in tone, but its subject matter and effect is altogether different. The painting, in which a shackled Christ stands before the high priest in a starkly lit interior as figures jostle for view from a doorway in the background, was first shown in 1895 and later served as the centerpiece of an exhibition of Thaddeus's work in London in 1902.⁶²

With *An Irish Eviction*, Thaddeus did not intend simply to bear witness to a brutal, lamentable, and all-too-common occurrence in rural Ireland; he sought as well to communicate the reality of a single, dramatic event in an arresting manner to which a general audience could respond emotionally. Significantly, he appears to have had some success in this ambition; the reviewer for the *Liverpool Daily Post* wrote that *An Irish Eviction* would "bring the horrors of the social warfare in the sister isle vividly home to English hearts."⁶³ This declaration was notable for its frankness, as critics at the time tended towards circumspection in their discussion of polemical subjects in Irish painting. *An Irish Eviction* was a signal work in Thaddeus's unorthodox oeuvre, but for an Irish subject of its kind, was also unrivaled in scale and visual impact. It was informed by numerous influences and artistic impulses, not least an instinct for drama that Thaddeus shared with many of his predecessors and acted upon to profound effect.



NOTES

- 1 In Liverpool, the painting hung alongside Thaddeus's similarly inspired (but now untraced) painting *A Home Ruler—Co. Galway*.
- 2 Philip McEvansoneya, "Gil Blas Dresses en Cavalier (*Scene from Gil Blas*)," in *Daniel Maclise 1806–1870: Romancing the Past*, ed. Peter Murray (Cork: Crawford Art Gallery, 2008), 122.
- 3 "Review of the exhibition at the British Institution," *Art-Union* (Mar. 1846): 78.
- 4 "Review of New Society of Painters in Water Colours," *Art-Union* (June 1846): 192.
- 5 *Times* (London), May 13, 1880. Magrath also exhibited a painting entitled *Notice to Quit*, at the Cork International Exhibition in 1902.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 David Wilkie to Robert Vernon, Oct. 15, 1835, MS 10995/29–30, National Library of Scotland, quoted in Fintan Cullen, *Visual Politics: The Representation of Ireland, 1750–1930* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), 118.
- 8 David Wilkie to Sir William Knighton, Aug. 30, 1835, Mitchell Library, MS 308895, University of Glasgow, quoted in *ibid.*, 119.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid., 122.
- 11 David Solkin, *Painting out of the Ordinary: Modernity and the Art of Everyday Life in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 29.
- 12 Cullen, *Visual Politics*, 120.
- 13 Thaddeus's prodigious achievement was compounded by the fact that the picture was hung "on the line"—the most advantageous position.
- 14 The title of the painting was actually misspelled in the catalogue accompanying the Salon exhibition as "*Le retour du braconnier—Islande*."
- 15 In the painting, the poacher keeps his eyes on the door while standing benignly over his three children as they prepare food. A dead rabbit lies wrapped in the poacher's coat in the foreground, destined to complete the family's square meal.
- 16 These French and English picture types were both in evidence in Irish-born Thomas Hovenden's *The Poacher's Story* (1880), in which a young man in traditional Breton attire regales a young woman and elderly man with an account of his latest escapade.

- 17 *Irish Times*, Dec. 14, 1881.
- 18 *Irish Times*, Feb. 10, 1882.
- 19 *Irish Times*, May 31, 1883.
- 20 The act, passed in 1828, forbade all night poaching, especially “taking or destroying game on lands, etc., by night, or entering lands at night to take or destroy game.” Also see Peter Murray, “*The Poachers*, 1875,” in *Whipping the Herring: Survival and Celebration in Nineteenth-Century Irish Art*, ed. Peter Murray (Cork: Crawford Art Gallery; Kinsale: Gandon Editions, 2006), 212.
- 21 *Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. “James Arthur O’Connor,” by Sir Richard Garnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1917).
- 22 *Irishman*, May 21, 1881.
- 23 Michael Holland, “Culture and Customs: A Cork Miscellany,” *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, 2nd ser., 47 (Jan.–June 1943): 32.
- 24 Usually such water-bailiffs, charged with patrolling the inland waterways and seaboard against poachers, featured in dramatic news reports of skirmishes and indeed were seen to mete out and receive injury in equal measure. Although not common, attacks by armed poachers did occur in Ireland and were reported sensationally in national newspapers.
- 25 Both methods were ideal for night poaching when apprehension of the poacher himself was less likely.
- 26 Allan Cunningham, *The Life of Sir David Wilkie*, 3 vols. (London: John Murray, 1843), 3:116.
- 27 Chase’s audience is left to infer from the painting’s parenthesized subtitle that the old man had gained little from his service in the Civil War.
- 28 Julian Campbell has noted the stage-like quality of Burton’s setting in his “*The Aran Fisherman’s Drowned Child*,” *Whipping the Herring*, 154.
- 29 *Art-Journal* (June 1863): 112.
- 30 Nicol established a studio and home at Derravaragh, County Westmeath, which he visited for many years. He named his home in London Clonave Villa after this Midlands retreat.
- 31 Examples include a watercolor study, *Self portrait with a rustic companion*, in which a young local man grins over Nicol’s shoulder as he sketches (Whyte’s Irish Art Auctioneers and Valuers Catalogue, *Important Irish Art: Apr. 30, 2007*, lot 113) and another in which the artist, pen in hand, observes an elderly woman from a staircase in a cottage interior (Skinner Auctioneers Catalogue, *European Furniture & Decorative Arts: Oct. 2, 2010*, lot 337).
- 32 This work has appeared most recently on the market as *Interior Westmeath Cabin* (Gorry Gallery Catalogue, *An Exhibition of 18th–21st Century Irish Paintings: Feb. 5, 2003*, cat. 3, lot 27). A label on the back of the frame, however, featuring a quote from John Keats’s poem *Endymion* (1818) indicates that the picture is probably “*A thing of beauty is a joy for ever ... Keats*,” exhibited at the Royal Scottish Academy in 1860 (no. 105).
- 33 The painting belonged to Arthur Armstrong of Dublin, one of Nicol’s most ardent patrons.
- 34 Donnybrook Fair, with which lawless and decadence had been so closely associated, inspired several paintings by Nicol.
- 35 Variations of this interior feature in other works by Nicol, including “*Bliss, condition, circumstance is not the thing, bliss is the same in subject or in king*” (1863), “*O I’m not Myself Molly Dear, Molly Dear*,” (included in Mrs. S. C. Hall’s *Tales of Irish Life and Character* as “Listenin’ to Raison” [plate 23]) and *Waiting for an Answer* (1863).
- 36 Nicol is certainly known to have used such a narrative device.
- 37 James Dufforne, “British Artists: Their Style and Character. No. XCL—Erskine Nicol, R.S.A., A.R.A.,” *Art-Journal* (Mar. 1870): 66.
- 38 According to Robinson, Chesneau believed that once the comic effect of the Scotsman’s paintings had faded, one was left with “only the moral hideousness of the scene, in which the mud-bespattered condition of the actors depicts their inmost thoughts and feelings.” Lionel G. Robinson, “English Art as seen through French Spectacles III,” *Art-Journal* (Oct. 1884): 343.
- 39 Dufforne, “British Artists,” 66.
- 40 James L. Caw, *Scottish Painting, Past and Present* (Edinburgh: T. C. and E. C. Jack, 1908), 164. Emily D. Mark discusses Caw’s assessment of Nicol in her impressive article “Pathos and Paddywhackery: Erskine Nicol and the Painting of the Irish Famine,” in *Beyond the Anchoring Ground: More Cross-currents in Irish and Scottish Studies*, eds. Shane Alcobia-Murphy et al. (Belfast: Queen’s University, 2005), 184–96.
- 41 See Lizzie Darbyshire, “The studios of celebrated painters: A series of portraits by John Ballantyne R.S.A.,” *Apollo* 142 (May 1998): 21–27.
- 42 The artists never exhibited together at the RHA, and did so just once, in 1883, at the Royal Scottish Academy exhibition.
- 43 No known oil painting by Thaddeus corresponds exactly to the watercolor. However, a related watercolor study features a variation on the composition of Thaddeus’s *The Cup that Cheers* (1898), in which an elderly Irish man drinks a cup of tea in a cottage interior.
- 44 Nicol’s *Notice to Quit* was never shown in Ireland, but instead was exhibited in London (RA, 1862), Edinburgh (RSA, 1863) and Glasgow (1878). Brennan may well have seen it on display on one of these occasions.
- 45 Holland, “Culture and Customs,” 101. Thaddeus also produced a painting around this time entitled *Composition of Four Figures—Interior of a Cottage*.
- 46 H. J. Thaddeus, *Recollections of a Court Painter* (London: Bodley Head, 1912), 3. Thaddeus received Taylor Prizes in consecutive years (1879 and 1880) for these works. His success with *Renewal of the Lease Refused* was compounded by its purchase, rather improbably, by Henry Chaplin, Unionist MP for Mid-Lincolnshire. Chaplin later served in Lord Salisbury’s ministries and, in 1893, as a member of the Royal Commission on Agriculture Depression.
- 47 For a comprehensive discussion of Thaddeus’s Irish work, see Brendan Rooney, *The Life and Work of Harry Jones Thaddeus, 1859–1929* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), 167–89.
- 48 See Claudia Kinmonth, “*The Finishing Touch*,” in Whyte’s Irish Art Auctioneers and Valuers Catalogue, *Irish & British Art: Mar. 14, 2011*, lot 107.
- 49 See Brendan Rooney, “The Irish Exhibition in Olympia, 1888,” *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies, The Journal of the Irish Georgian Society* 1 (1998): 100–119.
- 50 Thaddeus would also have been aware of Brennan’s burgeoning reputation. Brennan resigned as Master at the Cork School of Art to assume the equivalent position at the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin in 1889.
- 51 The figure on the left bears an unsettling, and in the context of this picture, rather incongruous, resemblance to the stereotypical image of the Irish peasant promulgated by sections of the illustrated press, as well as by various artists and illustrators in Britain.
- 52 Solkin, *Painting out of the Ordinary*, 34.
- 53 Niamh O’Sullivan discusses O’Kelly’s work for the *Illustrated London News* at length in her recent monograph *Aloysius O’Kelly: Art, Nation, Empire* (Dublin: Field Day, 2010).
- 54 Fintan Cullen, “Marketing national sentiment: lantern slides of evictions in late nineteenth-century Ireland,” *History Workshop Journal* 54, no. 1 (Autumn 2002): 171.
- 55 See L. Perry Curtis, Jr.’s essay in this volume (53–60).
- 56 See also L. Perry Curtis, Jr., *The Depiction of Eviction in Ireland, 1845–1910* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2011), 221–22.
- 57 For a discussion of the way this photograph was used polemically by Maud Gonne, see Cullen, “Marketing national sentiment,” 164–79.
- 58 *Graphic*, Mar. 10, 1888.
- 59 Other illustrations that Thaddeus produced were *Les troubles*

en Ireland. Sous-officiers de l'armée de la reine apprenant le maniement des armes aux paysans irlandais (The Troubles in Ireland—sub-officers of the Queen's army giving instructions on the handling of arms to Irish peasants) and Irlandais devant le magistrat (Irish people before the magistrate). Each was prepared for copy by F. de Haenen, a French illustrator who contributed frequently to the *Graphic* and other illustrated publications. See Rooney, *Harry Jones Thaddeus*, Appendix I, 251–53.

- 60 John Gilbert, "A Record of Authors, Artists, and Musical Composers born in the County Cork," *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, 2nd ser., 19 (Oct.–Dec. 1913): 177.
- 61 Thaddeus exhibited the painting at the Royal Hibernian Academy and the Walker Art Gallery in 1890.
- 62 The painting was available for viewing, for a fee, at the Weedon and Co.'s gallery in New Bond Street in April 1895. The later exhibition was held at the Continental Gallery, also on New Bond Street, in January 1902.
- 63 *Liverpool Daily Post*, Sept. 16, 1890.

INNER LIVES: CREATIVITY AND SURVIVAL IN IRISH RURAL LIFE

Angela Bourke

A PATCHWORK ECONOMY OF SHILLINGS, SIXPENCES, AND PENNIES, CARELESSLY HANDED out by members of the gentry, supplemented the income of many west-of-Ireland families in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Landlords and their friends came to stay in remote private lodges in the so-called “congested districts” to shoot and fish, while the romantic movement brought travelers to the same areas in search of the picturesque, and both groups offered opportunities for children and adults to earn tips for minor services.¹ From the middle of the nineteenth century, railways, new hotels, and a proliferation of guidebooks published in London and Dublin attracted increasing numbers of visitors, including visual artists, to those places where the natural beauty of rugged landscapes went hand-in-hand with rural poverty.

Renowned storyteller Peig Sayers was born to a subsistence-level Irish-speaking family in Dunquin, County Kerry in 1873 and grew up in a home like many of those depicted in *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story*, cooking over the open fire and eating mostly potatoes, milk, and butter. One sunny evening in the 1880s, she and her friend Cáit Jim were herding their families’ few cows on the hillside above their homes when Peig spotted a horse-drawn cab with a driver and three passengers coming fast along the road below. The girls abandoned their cows and ran down to the roadside in time to meet it. Despite some difficulty communicating in English, they guided the tourists on foot to one of the local antiquities and posed for a photograph, earning a shilling each. The event was still vivid in Peig’s mind as she

dictated her autobiography some fifty years later.²

The same quick-witted opportunism must lie behind many of the works brought together in *The Inside Story*. The poorest people depicted here lived in a world where material goods and intellectual life were homemade. They themselves had not “made it” in any economic sense, though, and would not have been nearly so interesting to the artists if they had. It is clear that many spoke only Irish, that a great many of those who did speak English were not literate, and that the differences between their life and that of the person painting or drawing them inform much of what we see here.

In order to sketch or paint an Irish rural interior—a private space—the artist had first to gain the permission and cooperation of the residents. Prosperous

families may have felt honored by such attention, but poorer people can only have been persuaded to admit the stranger and to pose for him or her by the possibility of financial reward. The finished image of an impoverished rural interior is a record of an economic opportunity, therefore, and probably of an economic transaction, formal or informal, in which both sides had parts to play.

How did the subjects of these paintings and drawings view the artists who came to sketch their homes, or what can we know of their inner lives? Claudia Kinmonth’s *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* has shown that even the poorest homes had aesthetic value for those who lived in them, and not just for artists and the viewing public.³ The wooden dressers, meal-chests, tables, chairs, and butter churns that appear in this exhibition and in Kinmonth’s book are plain and sturdy. Most would have been made by local craftsmen using simple tools and inexpensive materials, but her discerning commentary on the artwork shows with what careful sense of space and form some owners had arranged them in their homes. She shows how people too poor to afford a dresser might stand their few plates on edge on wall shelves for display, as in Frances Livesay’s (fl. 1869–81) *By The Fireside, Co. Mayo* (1875) (fig. 1) or prop them along the back of a

42 table, while others hung pot lids, proudly polished, near the hearth to reflect firelight.⁴ In households that lacked even such simple bought objects as plates and pot lids, artists depict items made by hand with care and ingenuity from wicker, straw, wool, or linen, while some show oral traditions in performance, hinting at the intellectual life of people who could not read or write.

Francis William Topham (1808–77) painted several watercolors in the west of Ireland just as the Great Famine of the 1840s began, including *Figures in an Irish Cabin* (c. 1844) (plate 12), and *Cottage Interior, Claddagh, Galway* (1845) (plate 13).⁵ The Claddagh (Irish *Cladach*, a stony seashore), now part of Galway City, was then a poor, huddled fishing village outside the city walls, at the mouth of the River Corrib. *Figures in an Irish Cabin* shows a man seated on a bed beside a hearth, in front of which two women sit close to the floor, perhaps on stones or half-filled sacks. The younger woman holds a baby, while the older may be making or mending a net that is tied to a ladder, as in *Cottage Interior*; on the floor in the left foreground lies what looks like a frame on which to wind a fishing line. The bed, the bright clothing of the younger woman, and the pot hung over the fire suggest that these people are not destitute, but *Cottage Interior* shows a much more disadvantaged household. Here again, an older woman is working while a younger woman tends a baby, but floor, walls, and roof are rough and uneven, and there is no furniture. Topham may deliberately have left a dresser or other furnishings out of his painting to increase the pathos of his scene, for as Kinmonth points out, his friend Alfred Downing Fripp (1822–95) was among the same party of artists, and seems to have used the same house for *Interior of a Fisherman's Cabin, Galway* (1844) (plate 10); it looks as miserable as Topham's *Cottage Interior*, but it does show a dresser on the right.⁶

Fifteen years after his second Irish summer, Topham returned to the Claddagh, and wrote home on August 9, 1860 about the welcome he received: “Imagine half a

dozen women after a scream of *joyful* recognition—spitting on their hands before they *seized* mine—then kissing my hands, then falling on their knees & throwing their arms wildly about and blessing & praises—altogether it was literally *stunning*—and all for—a *shilling*.”⁷ The shilling must have been the fee paid by Topham and his fellow artists to the people who sat for them and may also have been the tip he gave these women who recognized him so many years later. At the time of his first visits in 1844–45 it equalled the wages paid to an able-bodied man for a day's work, but food prices were rising so steeply that, as Cormac Ó Gráda writes, “Mere



Fig. 1: Frances Livesay (fl. 1869–1881), *By The Fireside, Co. Mayo*, 1875. Watercolor, 13 1/2 x 19 1/2 in., private collection.

subsistence for a family of four or five during the winter of 1846–47 cost at least 2s. or 3s. a day, before making any allowance for clothes or lodging.”⁸

The emotional display by the women Topham met in 1860 seems to have had about it an element of theater: a conscious, opportunistic, verbal and physical display by women whose survival depended on such creativity, calculated to move the heart—and the spare change—of the visitor.⁹ Their “throwing their arms wildly about” as they kept up their excited blessings and praises is strongly reminiscent of the scenes of keening (Irish *cao-*

ineadh) noted by writers and visual artists throughout this period and for centuries before: loud, public lamenting of the dead, generally by women, in rhymed, rhythmic verse. In fact, one of the most striking images of such a scene, *The Aran Fisherman's Drowned Child* (1841) (plate 6), by Frederic William Burton (1816–1900), is thought to have been sketched in the Claddagh, not in the Aran Islands as its title suggests.¹⁰ It shows one woman with hands raised above her head as she stands lamenting above the child's body. Marie Bourke has pointed out that the sorrowful woman with arms raised was a frequent motif in classical painting, and that Burton was certainly influenced by Rubens, among others.¹¹ But other representations of wakes and funerals, such as N. A. Woods's *An Irish Wake* (1819) (plate 2), show several women together in similar poses, while a number of writers tell of Irish women clapping their hands together as they keened. Some, such as J. M. Synge in his description of the Aran Islands at the turn of the twentieth century, describe men as well as women beating on the wood of the coffin while keening.¹²

In considering the possibility that the women who greeted Topham may have drawn on the lament tradition, it is worth noting that the rhetoric of *caoineadh* was not always as focused on the dead person as a modern reader or viewer might imagine. Many transcribed texts include scurrilous abuse of enemies or rivals, alongside praise of the dead and expressions of grief, and several

examples survive of the use of keening formulae and metrics in witty or light-hearted exchanges.¹³ James Brennan's (1837–1907) *The Village Scribe* (1881), discussed by Kinmonth, illustrates this flexibility. It shows a prosperous-looking couple who require the services of a man seated at a table, in what seems to be the back room of a shop, for the writing of a letter.¹⁴ The woman, seated, while her husband stands, is speaking with finger raised as though giving instruction. That her language is Irish is indicated by the lines printed in 1882 to accompany the painting in the catalogue of the Royal Hibernian

Academy Exhibition:

Dubhairt an bhean—
 Tá lá fada geal agad
 Tá páipéar breagh glan agad
 Tá do phágha ar do dhorn agad
 Agus bidheadh do ghnó a gceart agad.

The woman said—
 You have a long bright day
 You have fine clean paper
 You have your pay in your fist
 And may you get on with your job.¹⁵

In fact, the final line might be better rendered as a direct admonition: “And see that you do your job properly!” The four lines attributed to the woman and addressed to the scribe are in the meter and style of *caoineadh*, which often used an admonitory tone, and show the woman portrayed as fluent in oral composition. The much less well-off Claddagh women might easily have turned to the same sort of rhythmic formulae a generation earlier, with accompanying gestures, to express praise and gratitude in their greeting to Topham.

From the time of Giraldus Cambrensis in the twelfth century, Irish funeral practices seemed to crystallize all that visitors found outlandish about Ireland, although they had much in common with customs elsewhere on the periphery of Europe. For later travelers, one of the most exotic aspects of keening was the hiring of professional mourners. These were older women, experienced in loss and grief, who were also adept in the metrics and the many formulae of traditional lament poetry, which could be combined and recombined to suit almost any occasion. Diarmaid Ó Muirthe quotes the anonymous author of *A Gentleman's Tour in Hybernia* (1699) that the relatives of a dead person “do hire a whole herd of these crocodiles to accompany the corpse ... with their counterfeit tears and sighs.”¹⁶ Keening survived longest among the less well off, and professional keening women were usually without other means of support. They were paid by the relatives of the deceased in tobacco, tea, whiskey, or cash; it seems likely that some of them

appear in artists' depictions of keening and highly unlikely they would have consented to be sketched or painted without payment.

What cannot be shown in even the most dramatic painting or drawing is the elaborate verbal art practiced by these keening women. They made new poems each time out of old elements, leading listeners through the painful process of grieving while teaching lessons of genealogy and local history and delivering ringing verdicts, positive or negative, on the conduct of individuals, all in a strikingly memorable and lasting form.¹⁷ Oral culture was particularly rich where people did not speak English or own much, and it met a much broader spectrum of practical, personal and social needs than the modern imagination easily comprehends. Recent writings by Gearóid Ó Crualaoich, Lillis Ó Laoire, and the present writer have drawn attention to the therapeutic value of the oral traditions that have often been commoditized, sentimentalized, and then trivialized in immigrant or tourist environments.¹⁸

Storytelling was another verbal art that flourished in even the poorest rural interiors of the west of Ireland in the period covered by *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story*; it offered spiritual and mental sustenance to listeners, as well as entertainment and important social information. American folktale collectors Jeremiah and Alma Curtin went to the Claddagh in 1887, in search of publishable stories for the American market.¹⁹ Alma's description of the house they visited, with more detail added to her diary each day, is very close to what Topham and Fripp had painted half a century earlier, and includes two large pigs, which sleep under the old people's bed by the hearth. A younger couple appear to have slept in a bedroom off the kitchen, while their children would have shared either their accommodation or that of the grandparents; older children might have slept in the loft or “open attic” that Alma refers to, above their parents' room. On Sunday September 4, 1887, and the following days, she wrote:

We ... went to the Claddagh. A mass of little stone huts in all stages of decay, showing how very old some are. They are not built in rows

as the huts in towns or villages usually are, but are in a jumble, all near together, but squat down here, there and everywhere without regard to order. Remarkably interesting. We spoke to an old man, asked him if he knew stories; he did not. Then we saw a young good-looking fellow dressed as a sailor. We asked him. He said he could take us to an old man who could tell us stories, so we followed him to one of the houses, found an old couple by the turf fire with their morning meal on a chair in front of them, a large bowl of either tea or soup—tea, I suppose, and some bread she had baked in front of the fire. They welcomed us pleasantly, asked us to share their ‘grub,’ and soon the old man began and told a long story, similar to one we have, but very good. We promised to go up tomorrow.... It was a very small house. Bed one side of the fire, the usual cupboard, and 3 or 4 wooden chairs. Off was another tiny room with a bed. A ladder led up stairs or to an open attic, where things are stored.

Monday 5

Rain and storm and very high wind all day long.... We were glad to get back in the old man's house and he told us a story. Not very good. J. went and got him a pipe and some tobacco. And about 2 o'clock we found they had had nothing to eat all day: had no money to buy anything, so J. gave them a shilling and we came off home.

Tuesday 6

Pleasant day. We went down to the old fisherman's. Such a pig pen—litterally [*sic*] a pig pen, for 2 pigs live under the bed, which is a box affair by the fire, on which the old people live. There is no disagreeable smell from the pigs, strange to say, but when they

got hungry, there was a great grunting, which the old woman tried to quiet, but at last they got desperate and broke out into the room and went to licking the pots & kettles that stood around. The children drop [i.e. defecate] in the house and the ducks come in and devour it. A primitive people.

The “very good” long story that Alma and her husband wrote down on the Sunday afternoon appeared as “The King of Erin and the Queen of the Lonesome Island” in the book of Irish tales they published in Boston three years later, making a considerable sum for them in return for their work of transcribing and editing it, along with the shilling they paid the old man, in passing, for telling it.²⁰ Its complexity and glorious detail of action and description sit oddly with the abjection of the storyteller’s life, but this is typical of stories collected in the period and places covered by this exhibition (as it is of the stories told as an adult by Peig Sayers on the windswept and often hungry Great Blasket Island). Such a detailed complexity serves as a powerful reminder that people’s physical circumstances are an unreliable index of their intellectual or spiritual state.

For those who lived in houses like the poorer kind shown here, oral tradition offered a spiritual sustenance that helped them survive the privations that the artists depicted.²¹ Many immigrants from Ireland remembered these same privations from childhood and spoke of them years later to their own children and grandchildren with bitter incredulity. Most of them had emigrated in their teens or early twenties, however, probably without ever tapping into the social and emotional resources on which their parents relied.²² Peig Sayers’s children all died or emigrated to America in her lifetime, but many of the rags-to-riches folktales she told carry oblique references to difficulties she had endured and overcome in her own life, whereas her autobiography tells of the consolation she derived from vernacular prayers and religious tales.

Oral tradition offered practical benefits too: it was a

key component in the transmission of skills, as people in each generation learned how to make anew the things that would wear out. The cradles and hens’ nests made of straw (plate 85), the wicker bird-cages, and the cloth bed-coverings that appear in these images, along with baskets in all shapes and sizes, fishing nets, and home-made toys, remind us that some material goods are not destined for long life. *A Spinning Lesson* (1874) (plate 25), by George Washington Brownlow (1835–76), is one of many works that depict the passing on of practical skills to the next generation. In this case, of course, the skill

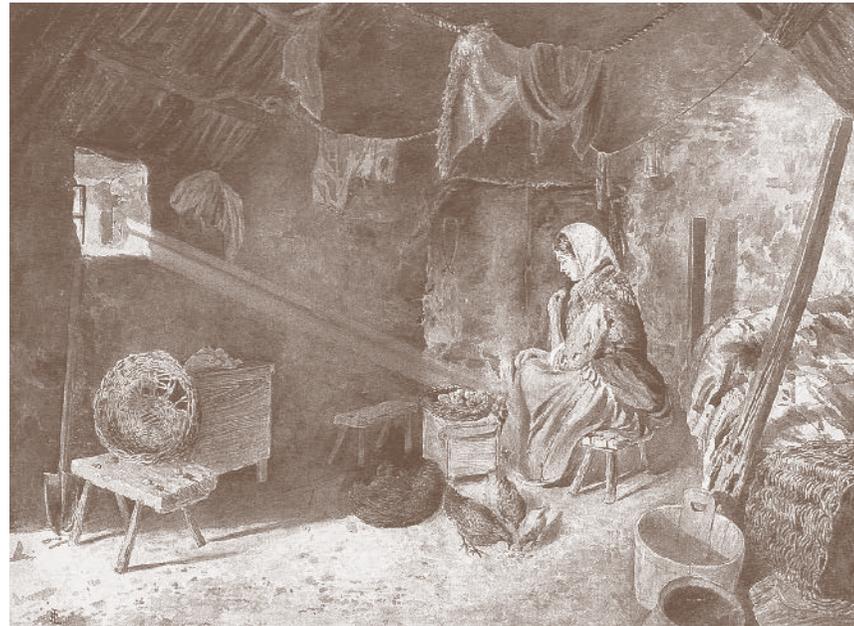


Fig. 2: Frances Livesay (fl. 1869–81), *Cottage Interior*, Co. Mayo, 1875. Watercolor, 13 3/4 x 20 1/2 in., private collection.

being acquired by the young girl had a definite economic value and so probably represented the end of her childhood. Textile production in all its phases attracted the attention of artists, who carefully recorded technical detail; James Brenan’s oil, *Committee of Inspection (Weaving, County Cork)* (1877) (plate 28) underlines the economic anxiety that so often accompanied work carried out for money in the home, as advances in technology elsewhere made it difficult for Irish weavers to compete in the market.²³ His later painting, *Patchwork*, (1891) (plate 30), however, shows the relative prosperity achievable through the last stages of textile work: the patching of

clothes, whether to reinforce them for longer wear or repair them after damage.²⁴

This same painting illustrates another traditional skill, carried out with great refinement: the creel that stands full of turf below the staircase would have been made by hand, but not for sale. Kinmonth points out that the open work on this example would have saved both weight and materials.²⁵ It might also have identified its maker to other members of his community, for every home had creels and their style could vary considerably. With a rope strung through slots made for the purpose in the back of the basket during weaving, women and men tied creels on their own backs to carry everything from turf to freshly caught fish, or hung them as panniers on donkeys. Creels carried seaweed, sand, or manure—or even small live animals or tired children—from seashore to hill and around the home area or farther afield to market. They also served as receptacles indoors, as Brenan shows, and an upturned creel could act as a cage for small animals or poultry, or for a naughty child.²⁶ Clearly, though, the one Brenan illustrates could not have carried sand.

Creels were made from willow or hazel rods, cut with a knife and brought home in bundles.²⁷ A man would stick four rods in firm ground outdoors to mark the corners of the basket’s rectangular mouth, then reinforce the corners with two more rods each (or two more at each back corner and one each at the front), before sticking pairs of rods into the ground along the sides, at intervals of about four inches. The strong top edge would be woven first, close to the ground, then the walls, and finally, after a bending of the rods inwards at right angles, the base. The completed basket was then pulled out of the ground, turned right-side-up, and its projecting rod-tops trimmed. In winter, the maker might bring sods of earth into the house rather than working outdoors. Brenan’s example seems to have been made with the pairs of rods pulled apart after the first set of courses had been woven, so that one rod makes a diagonal across each gap in the open section. The two watercolors that Frances Livesay painted in County Mayo in

1875, *By The Fireside and Cottage Interior, Co. Mayo* (fig. 2), show much poorer homes, with creels that are less finely made, but that nevertheless differ from each other in style.

To judge by the many autobiographies and memoirs published in the years after political independence, especially in Irish, people who stayed at home retained happier memories of childhood than did their contemporaries and descendants who emigrated young, and for whom the prosperity of America, for instance, must have been an immediate and shocking contrast.²⁸ Although few of the authors of these works enjoyed more than modest comfort in later life, it may be that by growing to full maturity in their communities, they experienced a fullness of cultural sustenance that groups of young, single migrants were unable to provide for each other or for those who came later.²⁹

Charles McGlinchey's *The Last of the Name* was unusual among *Gaeltacht* memoirs in appearing first in English, with the editorial aid of playwright Brian Friel, many years after a local schoolmaster had written it down.³⁰ McGlinchey was a weaver, whose father had begun teaching him the trade when he was sixteen. His sister Fanny emigrated to the US about the time he was born, married, and settled in Stockbridge, MA; his brother Owen followed her to the US and joined the Navy; other siblings died childless at home or in Scotland. Charles never married and lived all his life in the remote rural part of Donegal where he was born in 1861. Seven or eight years before his death in 1954, he began telling his life to Patrick "Master" Kavanagh, who visited him on one or two evenings each week in winter to write down his words. McGlinchey spoke fluently and without sentimentality of how he himself had listened attentively as a child at the fireside in winter to his own father and others, as they told long, complicated tales of ancient heroes or stories of more recent local happenings. He recalled without self pity how he had passed his time outdoors when, like Peig Sayers, he had to herd the cows on which his family depended for their sustenance:

During the summer-time we were hardly ever at school. We were kept home for herding

mostly, keeping cows from breaking over the march into a neighbour's field, or trying to keep them grazing round the edge of a field that corn or potatoes were growing in. It was nice in the good weather.³¹

The boys played a game while herding called "duck", with one large stone and several small ones. "Duck was a handy game," McGlinchey told "Master" Kavanagh, "for we could play it on any kind of ground and there was no want of stones." They made toys and hats from rushes, and whistles in spring from the branch of a rowan tree:

We cut a straight piece without knots and tapped the bark round and round with the handle of the knife or a stick until the bark got loose and came off in a piece. Then we cut a bit for a mouthpiece with a groove along the top of it and cut a hole in the bark behind the mouthpiece and stopped up the other end. Some would put a pea inside the whistle. You could hear it half-a-mile away. They soon got broken up in our pocket but it wasn't hard to make another.³²

Like the stay-at-home women in Alice Walker's resonant 1973 short story "Everyday Use," who know how to make gardens and quilts and how to take care of each other, the adults and children whom artists and other visitors found picturesque in rural Ireland in the nineteenth century, and to whom they casually gave shillings, possessed resources that were not necessarily visible to the stranger.



NOTES

- 1 For the origins of "picturesque" tourism in eighteenth-century Britain see Malcolm Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1760–1800* (Aldershot: Scolar, 1989).
- 2 Máire Ní Mhainnín and Liam P. Ó Murchú, eds., *Peig: A Scéal Féin* (1936; reprint, An Daingean: An Sagart, 1998), 26; Peig Sayers, *Peig: The Autobiography of Peig Sayers of the Great Blasket Island*, trans. Bryan MacMahon (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1974), 40–41.
- 3 Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 39–77.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 43–45.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 18–20.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 17, 20, 24.
- 7 Simon Fenwick and Greg Smith, eds., *The Business of Watercolour: A Guide to the Archives of the Royal Watercolour Society* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 1998), 242n6, quoted in *ibid.*, 20.
- 8 Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland: A New Economic History 1780–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 196.
- 9 Cf. Angela Bourke, "Keening as Theatre: J. M. Synge and the Irish Lament Tradition," in *Interpreting Synge: Essays from the Synge Summer School, 1991–2000*, ed. Nicholas Grene (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2000), 67–79.
- 10 Marie Bourke, "The Aran Fisherman's Drowned Child," *GPA Irish Arts Review Yearbook* 5 (1988): 193; see also Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 168–70.
- 11 Bourke, "The Aran Fisherman," 192.
- 12 J. M. Synge, *Collected Works, Vol. II: Prose*, ed. Alan Price (1966; reprint, Gerrards Cross, UK: Colin Smythe, 1982), 161. For a good survey of the practice of keening, see Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *Irish Wake Amusements* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1967), 130–45.
- 13 For examples and discussion, see Angela Bourke, ed., "Keening the Dead," in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Vols. 4 and 5: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, eds. Angela Bourke et al. (Cork: Cork University Press; New York: New York University Press, 2002), 4:1365–398.
- 14 Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 256–58.
- 15 Quoted by Catherine Marshall, "The Village Scribe," in *America's Eye: Irish Paintings from the Collection of Brian P. Burns*, eds. Adele M. Dalsimer and Vera Kreilkamp (Boston: Boston College Museum of Art, 1996), 88. Marshall writes, "By 1881, a couple such as the one portrayed here, would

- ordinarily be literate in the Irish language; they might not, however, speak or write English.” In fact, however, literacy in Irish was confined to a handful of scholars by 1881, just four years after the founding of the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language.
- 16 Diarmaid Ó Muirithe, “Tuairiscí na dTaistealaithe,” *Gnéithe den Chaoiteoireacht*, ed. Breandán Ó Madagáin (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar, 1978), 22.
- 17 Angela Bourke, “The Irish Traditional Lament and the Grieving Process,” special issue, *Women’s Studies International Forum* 11, no. 4 (1988): 287–91; “More in Anger than in Sorrow: Irish Women’s Lament Poetry,” in *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women’s Folk Culture*, ed. Joan N. Radner (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 160–82.
- 18 See, for instance, Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch, “Contest in the Cosmology and the Ritual of the Irish ‘Merry Wake,’” *Cosmos: The Yearbook of the Traditional Cosmology Society* 6 (1990): 145–60; “The ‘Merry Wake,’” in *Irish Popular Culture, 1650–1850*, eds. J. S. Donnelly and Kerby A. Miller (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998), 173–200; *The Book of the Cail-leach: Stories of the Wise-Woman Healer* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2003). See Lillis Ó Laoire, *On a Rock in the Middle of the Ocean: Songs and Singers in Tory Island* (Indreabhán, Conamara: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2007), originally published in Irish as *Ar Chreag i Lár na Farraige* (Indreabhán, Conamara: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2002). See Angela Bourke, “Irish Traditional Lament,” 1988; “More in Anger,” 1993; “Keening as Theatre,” 2000; “Keening the Dead,” 2002; “Fairies and Anorexia: Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s ‘Amazing Grass,’” *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 13 (1995): 25–38; *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story* (London: Pimlico, 1999).
- 19 Angela Bourke, “The Myth Business: Jeremiah and Alma Curtin in Ireland, 1887–1893,” *Éire-Ireland: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Irish Studies* 44, nos. 3–4 (Fall/Winter 2009): 140–70. Quotation from Alma Curtin’s diaries is courtesy of Milwaukee County Historical Society, with thanks to Steve Daily, Curator, Research Collections.
- 20 Jeremiah Curtin, *Myths and Folk-Love of Ireland* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1890); reprinted as *Myths and Folk Tales of Ireland* (New York: Dover, 1975), 49–64. The Curtins did pay their own travel expenses on this expedition.
- 21 Cf. Margaret Mac Curtain, *Ariadne’s Thread: Writing Women into Irish History* (Galway: Arlen House, 2008), 169–74, 180–83.
- 22 Ó Gráda, *Ireland*, 227. For more on patterns of Irish migration, contrasted with those of other ethnic groups, see Hasia Diner, *Erin’s Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).
- 23 Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 56.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 107.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 Kevin Danaher, *In Ireland Long Ago* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1962), 106. For a mother who carried a small child in a creel on her back up a considerable hill on the Great Blasket Island in the 1850s, when she had already carried six creels full of turf down, and then carried him home on her breast with the last creel of turf on her back, see Tomás Ó Crohan, *The Islandman*, trans. Robin Flower (1937; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 3–4: “She dropped me on the floor, and told Maura to shove me under a creel and leave me there to live or die.”
- 27 I am grateful to Dr. Karl Partridge, with whom I cut rods to make a creel in Cill Chiaráin, near Carna, County Galway, in the late 1970s, and to the late Seán an tSeaimpín Mac Donnchadha, of Roisín na Mainiach, who showed us how to make the creel by creating one himself.
- 28 Of course the many powerful memoirs by writers who were removed from family and community as children, and incarcerated in Ireland’s notoriously cruel and abusive Industrial Schools and Magdalen Laundries, present a very different reality. For Irish-language autobiographies, see Philip O’Leary, *Gaelic Prose in the Irish Free State, 1922–1939* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2004), 90–165 *passim*, and compare the genre of emigrant Irish life writing represented by Frank McCourt, *Angela’s Ashes* (New York: Scribner, 1996).
- 29 Cf. Mac Curtain, “Fullness of Life: Defining Female Spirituality in Twentieth-Century Ireland,” in Mac Curtain, *Ariadne*, 175–210.
- 30 Charles McGlinchey, *The Last of the Name*, ed. Brian Friel (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1986).
- 31 *Ibid.*, 123.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 124.

THE “INSIDE STORY” OF THE IRISH RURAL CABIN

Beth Kowaleski Wallace

ROBERT HUNTER’S *INTERIOR GROUP PORTRAIT OF PENROSE FAMILY* (1776) (FIG. 1), PORTRAYING the owners of cut glass factories, importers of timber, and property developers in and around Cork, still speaks audibly to a twenty-first-century audience about a family’s status.¹ This group portrait, belonging to an eighteenth-century “conversation piece” genre, depicts the figures indoors in a sitting room, celebrating the father’s return from a successful hunting trip. As the only seated figure, the father rests with his gun across his lap as his wife hovers solicitously over him, her hand on his arm. Two children complete the family unit. The small boy examines a dead bird with great interest while his sister, a girl of perhaps four or five, demands to see it as well. To the left is a large window, the shutter drawn aside, through which we glimpse the outdoors from which the father has recently returned. Light reflected off the figures illuminates their animated facial expressions and draws our eye to their lively and erect postures. But light also suffuses the outdoor scene on the other side of the window, keenly reminding the viewer that the family is indoors, safely ensconced in their domestic setting. That the father returns with his quarry suggests his role as master and provider; nature has yielded to his gun, and he returns from outdoors to bring indoors the product of his land.

Here then is a painting that not only distinguishes indoor from outdoor space, but that also develops that interior space as dominant. The family shelters itself in comfort. It protects itself from nature, yet, in its leisure and from a distance, enjoys what nature—here figured as a dead bird—has to offer. In this way, the painting uses indoor space to foreground the ease and the privilege of the Penrose family. The inside setting accentuates their amiable personalities, and its details, including the elegant window dressing, signal their elite status.

To turn from the late eighteenth-century portrait of the Penrose family to many of the paintings that comprise *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story* is to confront a dissimilar kind of representation depicting vastly different historical circumstances. An appreciation of the Penrose family’s situation does little to prepare the modern viewer for the grim economic conditions we often see in representations of the Irish cabin. Yet a focus on indoor and outdoor spaces as symbolic signifiers persists, despite major changes in Irish history and

the shift in subject from an elite setting to cabin interiors. Whereas Hunter confidently asserts his subjects’ status as indoor dwellers, painters like Alfred Downing Fripp (1822–95), Francis William Topham (1808–77), and Frances Livesay (fl. 1869–81) capture individuals who live in a space lacking the clear boundaries of the Hunter painting. Even where they use a window or door to distinguish inside from outside, these painters suggest a highly permeable boundary between domesticity and nature. Painted for Victorian audiences, their representations of the Irish cabin seem composed to elicit a specific response of sympathy or dismay from viewers, who were no doubt individuals living in very different domestic circumstances and in an altogether different socio-economic context from the figures they contemplated. As contemporary viewers of the same paintings, with the benefit of historical hindsight, we can today both intuit the intended symbolism of the paintings and supplement that intuition with knowledge of the actual historical circumstances that generated such material conditions.

Cabin architecture frequently signals a permeable boundary between indoors and outdoors, and painters regularly use details of the cabin’s construction to suggest that Irish rural people inhabit a liminal space

48 where nature is barely kept at bay. In the most extreme cases, the interior is barely indoors at all. Instead, the cabin can be cave-like or barn-like, due in large part to interior walls that, far from being smooth, straight, or perpendicular, appear irregular, uneven, and crooked. If the work of walls is to keep nature out and to protect the humans within, these walls more often appear to be co-extensive with nature, made, as they often were, of mud and rocks. In Fripp's *The Cabin Hearth* (c. 1843–48) (plate 9), the elemental nature of the structure's building material is evident, as the walls appear to press in around the huddled inhabitants in a womb-like enclosure. Whereas the straight walls of the Penrose habitation enclose stylish, elongated, and animated figures, bringing their civilized humanness to the fore, the crooked walls in the Fripp painting seem to encourage the low-to-the-ground posture of the nursing mother and her two children. The doleful expression on the mother's face suggests that her circumstances (including crushing hunger) master her. Below the figures, the uneven mud floor appears perilous, especially to the small bare feet of the children. The roof of the cave-like cabin looms over their heads. A small "smoke hole" puncturing the roof does the work of a primitive fireplace, letting smoke out, but also the rain in—further obscuring the difference between inside and outside.

Similarly, in Fripp's *Interior of a Fisherman's Cabin, Galway* (1844) (plate 10), floor, walls, and ceiling are barely distinguishable from one another; the roof appears to hang low, as if in danger of collapse, with a drying fish net, hanging in loops from the ceiling, enhancing the tumbledown effect of the interior. We observe no perpendicular lines in the painting. The door is flung open at an oblique angle into the cabin, where a crooked ladder leads to a slightly bowed loft. Here an open door has flooded the cabin with natural light, allowing the woman with a small child on her lap to carry on with her sewing. Her face, like the face of the older child looking in from the

open door, is illuminated, yet this use of light on the countenances of the two suggests that little distinguishes the inside figure from the figure outside: both seem to inhabit the same atmosphere and to breathe the same air, as if being indoors and outdoors were interchangeable states. Indeed, an empty basket, or skib, in the foreground signals the hunger that has brought this family to their dire circumstances, intimating their vulnerability before the elements. If Fripp wishes his audience to rec-



Fig. 1: Robert Hunter (1745–1803), *Interior group portrait of Penrose Family*, 1776. Oil on canvas, 59 x 70 ½ in., Crawford Art Gallery, Cork.

ognize his subjects as being "close to nature," here that proximity is imbued with melancholy, even pathos.

Like Fripp's image, Topham's *Cottage Interior, Claddagh, Galway* (1845) (plate 13) eschews straight lines: the cottage architecture arches gracefully around the figure of an adolescent girl holding a baby. Whereas the post leaning slightly to her left appears to prop up the roof, the beam to her right meets a crooked doorframe. Viewed together, the post and the beam provide an

elegant focal point for the central figure, whose beauty, posture, and mien contrast with the appearance of the older woman seated behind her to her left. Once again, however, the light that illuminates the erect and youthful figure comes from outside: daylight floods the cottage, as if to connect the girl's youthful bloom to the vitality of the natural world just outside the cabin walls. Although the girl stands indoors, she appears to belong outdoors, free, perhaps, from the domestic weight symbolized by the child in her arms.

As representations of the country during a period of extreme economic duress—just preceding and during the mid-nineteenth-century Famine—paintings like these seek to represent how Irish country people persisted in an inimical environment. If the function of indoor space should be to shelter the human from nature's destructive potential, here instead the human figure barely seems afforded such protection. Moreover, where humans cannot be shielded from the elements or where they hover on the threshold of inside and outside, the painter can suggest that their humanness has been compromised as well. Like the young woman sentimentally associated with nature in Topham's *Cottage Interior*, the subjects of these paintings can appear almost unearthly, or as if they belong to another transcendent existence. However, when the alignment of human figures with nature becomes close, then humans can appear debased.

The furniture depicted in these images—the stool in particular—plays a significant role in conveying the cabin dwellers' identities. In the conventions of the eighteenth-century conversation piece painting, the question of whether the subjects sit or stand—and exactly in what position—has considerable importance. In Hunter's representation of the Penrose family, the father's relaxed seated posture signals the ease with which he plays his role as provider, whereas the upright and erect stance of the other family members encourages the viewer to identify with them.

In contrast, in many cabin paintings indoor dwellers sit on the ground: certainly children often appear to have thrown themselves down—not only in Fripp’s *The Cabin Hearth* but also in *Cottage Interior with Uilleann Piper* (c. 1840) (plate 15) by Daniel MacDonal. But adults are also depicted as so low to the ground that their seating—most often a three-legged stool—is nearly imperceptible. Such is the case in George Washington Brownlow’s *A Spinning Lesson* (1874) (plate 25) where despite the elderly woman’s obvious expertise and wisdom—and although she is the largest figure in the composition—she sits at a height below that of a spinning wheel. To be sure, the attention given to her august features as she imparts her lesson to the young girl distinguishes her. But her low posture literally grounds her authority, indicating to the viewer that she is earth-bound, agrarian, or perhaps that she simply represents a traditional life. Other seated figures—in William Bourke Kirwan’s *Interior Lenaum September 1842 Reilly’s Kitchen* (1842) (plate 8), Livesay’s *By the Fireside, Co. Mayo* (1875) (fig. 2), or Topham’s *Figures in an Irish Cabin* (c. 1844) (plate 12)—also appear to be seated merely inches above the ground. With their stooped posture, they can appear to be too close to the ground. On the one hand, the stool hardly improves upon sitting on the floor, for its short legs result in a stooped or squatting posture antithetical to the upright posture of figures in a traditional conversation piece. The stool, especially when situated on a dirt floor, forces the individual to adopt a lower position, thus potentially depriving the sitter of the sort of dignity (and status) afforded the Penrose family members.

On the other hand, the utility of the stool is undeniable. In cabins heated by a single hearth, sitting on a low stool brings the sitter closer to the warm ground yet keeps him below the smoke from the fireplace. Moreover, as Claudia Kinmonth points out, stools are extremely portable and can be easily stowed out of the way in a crowded interior.² In the case of the seated elderly woman in Brownlow’s *A Spinning Lesson*, the backless stool on which she sits is ergonomically appropriate

to her task.³ A single piece of furniture thus implies more than one interpretive possibility in the cabin paintings: by depicting figures seated on these low, three- or four-legged stools—appropriately called “creepies”—the Victorian painter conveys how Irish country people lived in less than refined or “civilized” circumstances, but also offers realistic detail about the material conditions of life in the nineteenth-century cabin.⁴

Nonetheless, the representation of the subject’s low posture often remains ambiguous, as can be seen in the example of David Wilkie’s *The Irish Whiskey Still* (1840)



Fig. 2: Frances Livesay (fl. 1869–1881), *By The Fireside, Co. Mayo*, 1875. Watercolor, 13 1/2 x 19 1/2 in., private collection.

(plate 5). In this painting, a grown man and a Irish wolfhound laze in imitative postures, their backs angled in the same direction, and their faces, both drawn in profile, similarly turned to focus on the other figure holding up a glass of *poitin*. The man lounges comfortably, ankles crossed, merely inches above the dog, on what appears to be a pallet of some kind. Although others have argued that the painting expresses an interest in rendering Irish criminality as the appropriate subject for “high” art or for history painting in particular,⁵ the man’s lowly posture seems to contradict the painting’s elevated intentions. It seems difficult to afford this subject heroic

status, given his apparent comfort in such a seemingly low setting.⁶ Although the Irish wolfhound might be said to possess a kind of dignity, that the painter puts animal and man on the same level—and in an idle moment of inactivity—makes any determination of the outlaw’s nature ambiguous at best.

If human posture asks to be read for what it symbolizes, so too does furniture. The Irish dresser with an open base at the bottom that could be filled with straw and used as a chicken coop in the winter again breaks down the distinction between living inside or outside. Typically, this ubiquitous piece of furniture in the Irish cabin displayed a family’s tableware or dishes, as with the dresser in the background of James Brenan’s *Committee of Inspection (Weaving, County Cork)* (1877) (plate 28). The presentation of the family’s crockery on the dresser belies English agronomist and travel writer Arthur Young’s observation that the Irish peasant took little pride in “superfluities” although Young condescends to approve of the putative investment in pig over teacup.⁷ The dresser serves, then, to signal the family’s means, however meager, but also to suggest an investment in objects connoting civility—in other words, an “indoors” life. Yet when the bottom of the dresser houses live chickens, that function conflates the furniture’s “indoor” attributes with an outdoor purpose. Thus the dresser as chicken coop bespeaks both the family’s economic status and participation in a

commodity market of purchased goods—and its ongoing connection to an agrarian, “more natural” existence. This double signification persists despite the practical fact: poultry was best guarded from adverse weather and predatory animals when kept safely indoors.

But nothing so frequently confounds an indoors/outdoors distinction as the animals that cohabit country people’s cabins. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century visitors to Ireland frequently noted animals living in close proximity to human inhabitants—and sometimes exploited that observation for its sensationalism. During the 1770s, Arthur Young, for example, provides the fol-

Mark the Irishman's potato bowl placed on the floor, the whole family upon their hams around it, devouring a quantity almost incredible, the beggar seating himself to it with a hearty welcome, the pig taking his share as readily as the wife, the cocks, hens, turkies [*sic*], geese, the cur, the cat, and perhaps the cow—and all partaking of the same dish.⁸

Kinmonth discusses the frequent representation of the domestic space used to house both people and animals, finding much historical authenticity in paintings such as Livesay's *Cottage Interior, Co. Mayo* (1875) (fig. 3). For Kinmonth, the painting gives vivid testimony to what the painter must have seen—the cooking implements, furniture, clothing, and hens all appearing together within the cabin.⁹ However, as a representation of the outside brought inside, the animals—and in this painting, specifically the hens—also comment to viewers on the inhabitants of the cabin: that the seated woman sits closely to her poultry intimates her close relation to the outdoors.

Whereas in *Interior group portrait of Penrose Family*, the dead bird symbolizes the family's mastery over the environment, in Livesay's painting, live chickens signal an unbroken continuity between the human and the natural. Indeed, the sunbeam that figures so prominently in the image, shooting directly from the window to the left to the woman's lower leg, appears to claim her seated figure as its own. Thus animals featured in Irish cabin settings can work variously, either by distancing the viewer from a degraded or animal-like existence (as indicated by Young's comments and perhaps suggested by Wilkie's *The Irish Whiskey Still*) or by engaging audiences in a sentimental fantasy of a simpler and more “natural” domesticity (as is the case of Livesay's image). In the same artist's *By the Fireside*, sentimentality is again evident, with a picturesque, tractable cow neatly tucked off to one corner of a

byre dwelling and a sunbeam similarly making its claim on a figure in the painting. Capturing her subjects in an unoccupied moment, Livesay omits the details of their actual labor. Thus she chooses to emphasize their state of existing in harmony with their surroundings, rather than the arduous nature of the work they do to maintain even this rudimentary level of domesticity in this thatched-roof byre cabin.

Where others might express shock or dismay at the indoor proximity of human to animal, Livesay literally and metaphorically naturalizes the arrangement and re-

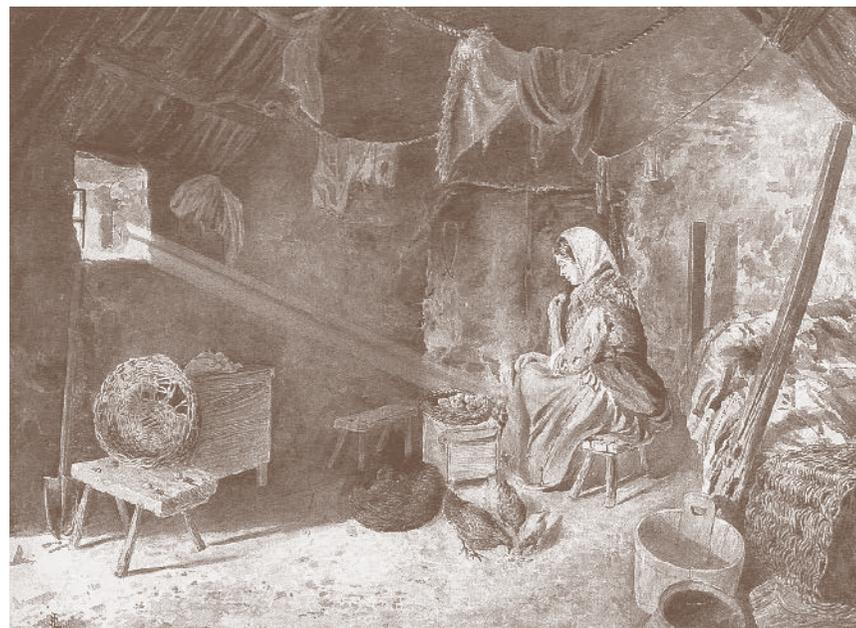


Fig. 3: Frances Livesay (fl. 1869–81), *Cottage Interior, Co. Mayo*, 1875. Watercolor, 13 3/4 x 20 1/2 in., private collection.

moves any alarm: her subjects live in their natural state without a hint of moral depravity. They also express a more natural subjectivity, one that is understood quite differently from that sense of self presumably experienced by the painting's viewers. Like Wordsworth's “rustic” man—for example, Simon Lee, the Old Huntsman, the eponymous character in a poem from *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)—Livesay's figures are remarkable in their apparent simplicity and innocence, traits which occur “naturally” in a pastoral setting. Yet also like Wordsworth's rustics, Livesay's subjects demonstrate if not extreme poverty, then a life of duress eliciting compassion. That

the cohabitation of human and farm animal can work in such antithetical ways, suggesting a less-than-human, even animal-like, identity at some moments and bucolic forbearance at others, testifies to a fundamental ambivalence about the natural world. The natural world can be understood—as in the Penrose painting—as a place where the elements must be mastered, subjugated, or kept at bay, or—as in Livesay's two paintings—as a place to be tolerated, endured, or valued for its simple possibilities.

The preceding exploration of rural Irish interiors suggests how details depicting architecture, furniture, and husbandry place subjects in a symbolic setting without necessarily narrating the full story of their circumstances. In response to a painting such as Fripp's *The Cabin Hearth*, the modern viewer might be inclined to note that not just a roof but a full set of very historic and economic circumstances threatens to crush the inhabitants. Moreover to see mud and thatch solely as signifiers of haplessness or misfortune—as a Victorian viewer might have done—is to miss what these building materials can tell us about the human capacity to adapt to challenging circumstances and to make the most of what is readily at hand. Such materials do not have the permanence of stone, but they are practical and environmentally sound accommodations to the material conditions of nineteenth-century rural life.¹⁰ In this way, the cabin paintings' details of architecture, furniture, and domesticity

demand to be read in a narrative context in which the question of human agency plays a crucial role: What opportunities do the inhabitants actually have? What are their options? To what extent does their symbolic positioning of being “closer to nature” result from their own choices?

Often the answers to such questions appear in the smallest or subtlest gestures of housekeeping, gestures through which painters can signal resistance to disorder and a “natural” chaos. Kinmonth describes how cabin paintings faithfully record actual domestic details—for example, how every object has its use and its place

for storage. Similarly, surfaces show signs of having been cleaned; tables and dressers appear to have been scrubbed with sand.¹¹ The arrangement of dishes on the dresser can suggest an effort to impose order in otherwise disorderly circumstances. Like several other painters, Livesay seems to have been alert to such detail in *By the Fireside* where the previously described merging of human and nature on the left of the painting is strongly counteracted by the neat display of household items to the right. Cabin paintings, moreover, record a host of domestic activities freighted with symbolism: cooking, which signals the mediation of “nature into culture,” washing, spinning, or patching. The frequent depictions of such activities seemingly address an audience likely to welcome recognizable efforts at domestic control. Even when an assumed distinction between indoors and outdoors breaks down, the focus on house-keeping activities in the cabin paintings signals “inside” behaviors that seek to establish a boundary between nature and culture—to demarcate inside from outside. Sweeping a floor, even a dirt floor, creates the categories of clean and dirty as the sweeper collects what has come from outside (or from nature itself) and deposits it back “where it belongs.”

Doors and windows, which feature prominently in so many of the cabin paintings, not only mark the boundary between indoors and outdoors, but also depict the constant interchange between what lives inside and what comes from outside. In a setting where privacy was never a major value, open doors and windows suggest an expansive hospitality, a readiness to let in the world, as much as they do the need to bring light into a dark interior.¹² But unlike the figures in Hunter’s *Interior group portrait of Penrose Family*, those depicted in the cabin paintings are neither independent nor self-contained. What comes through the doors or windows of these rural homes is often nature itself—a sunbeam, a stray chicken, or a breath of fresh air. Or what enters from outside can be figured as a human presence. Sometimes that interloper embodies ill information or threat—as in Brenan’s *Committee of Inspection (Weaving, County Cork)* (plate 28), where a grim inspector handles and judges the cottagers’ artisanal production. Similarly,

that intruder can be threatening—as in Brenan’s *Words of Counsel* (1876) (plate 27), where a black-clothed priest carrying a cane hovers ominously over a seated father, lecturing him about his daughter’s romantic transgressions. But often that individual brings longed-for news—as in the same artist’s *News from America* (1875) (plate 26)—or of welcome diversion—as in Kirwan’s *Reilly’s Kitchen* (plate 8), where the inhabitants revel in the music of a visiting bagpipe player.

In each case, the artist has framed the scene to make the open door a focal point. Although we are offered only the smallest glimpse of outdoors, we are encouraged to imagine the wider world beyond the indoor life of the inhabitant—the “outside” from which the visitor or intruder emerges. The open door constantly reminds the viewer of a dynamic interchange between indoors and outdoors, of an interior space never comprehended as self-enclosed, self-sufficient, or discrete, but understood instead as a space to be constantly visited, defined, and affected by forces outside and beyond. The image of the open door, thus, indicates how the artist deliberately acknowledges these permeable and seemingly vulnerable circumstances—the “inside story” of the rural Irish cabin.



NOTES

- 1 For the history of the Penrose family, see “The Cooper Penrose Collection,” Crawford Art Gallery, Cork, accessed Oct. 24, 2011, <http://www.crawfordartgallery.ie/Cooperpenrose/CooperPenrose.html>.
- 2 Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Country Furniture, 1700–1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 29–34.
- 3 Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 48.
- 4 Kinmonth, *Irish Country Furniture*, 33.
- 5 See Fintan Cullen, *Visual Politics: The Representation of Ireland, 1750–1930* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), 116–20.
- 6 For a different interpretation of the cultural work performed by this painting, see the essay by Síghle Bhreathnach-Lynch in this catalogue (23–30).
- 7 “In England a man’s cottage will be filled with superfluities before he possesses a cow. I think the comparison much in favor of the Irishman; a hog is a much more valuable piece of goods than a set of tea things.” See Arthur Young, *Tour in Ireland*, ed. Arthur Wollaston Hutton (London: George Bell and Sons, 1892), 49. Also quoted in Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 45.
- 8 Young, *Tour in Ireland*, 49.
- 9 Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 23.
- 10 As Toby Barnard writes, “Newcomers to the Irish hinterlands swiftly realized that the modes of the locals suited available materials and the idiosyncrasies of terrain and climate. These extenuations did not stop zealots for English ways from castigating anything that smacked of the impermanence and supposed backwardness of Gaelic society.” Toby Barnard, *Making the Grand Figure: Lives and Possessions in Ireland, 1641–1770* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 56.
- 11 Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 62.
- 12 As Henry Glassie writes, “Windows break through the wall above the internal work spaces, over the front table and back table and the sink in the pantry, dancing sunlight into the kitchen.” Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* (1982; reprint, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 356.

INSIDE OUT: EVICTION IMAGES OF IRISH COTTAGE EXTERIORS

L. Perry Curtis, Jr.

AT FIRST GLANCE, AN ESSAY ABOUT COTTAGE EXTERIORS MIGHT SEEM OUT OF PLACE IN AN exhibition devoted to interiors. The prints and paintings of Irish rural life found in *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story* provide a fund of evidence about the possessions of peasant families.¹ They also evoke a world of tranquility and stability despite the obvious signs of poverty. In sharp contrast, the graphic images of eviction or ejection produced by weekly newspapers and magazines in Dublin and London during and after the mid-century Great Famine, exemplify the antithesis of these conditions—namely, the shattering experience of dispossession. Most of the victims of final eviction lost not only their ancestral home but also every cherished stick of furniture and piece of crockery. These powerful images of loss demonstrate how the material culture of the rural Irish cabin, the household artifacts so lovingly invoked by image after image in this exhibition, have been ruthlessly removed to the “outside,” no longer displayed as a vital part of the “inside story.”

As Brian Kennedy has pointed out, late eighteenth-century Irish artists often romanticized peasant life in picturesque images of thatched-roof cottages that conveyed neatness, security, and familial serenity. In his view, they symbolized “rural contentment, nestling gently into the landscape.”² Rarely were male peasants depicted as working indoors while the women knitted, carded, spun flax or wool, and served food and drink to the men. Apart from the occasional stray hen, the interiors of these humble hearth-centered and earthen-floored cabins, or *bothán scóir*, were usually tidy and devoid of pigs. Although the gifted Scottish artist Erskine Nicol spent the Famine years in Ireland, his pictures

avoided the diseased, emaciated, and dead bodies that abounded in so many parts of Munster and Connacht. The few paintings that dealt with the tragic results of eviction and starvation featured mostly handsome, well-dressed, and well-nourished peasant families on the road to nowhere or the workhouse—as for example, Robert George Kelly’s *An Ejection in Ireland/A Prayer and a Tear for Erin* (1848), Nicol’s *An Ejected Family* (1853), and Daniel MacDonald’s *The Eviction* (c. 1850).

Instead of highlighting severe distress and premature death, mid-Victorian artists depicted cottage interiors in which seemingly content peasants conversed, cradled babies, sewed, spun yarn, or cooked in the main room.

One exception was Francis William Topham’s *Cottage Interior, Claddagh, Galway* (1845) (plate 13), wherein two young girls and a baby inhabit a fisherman’s crudely built shack devoid of furniture. This picture reinscribes the fine line between abject poverty and destitution. Rarely if at all did artists portray the hostile relations between landlords and tenants that culminated in the Land War after 1879.

As for the external features of peasant cottages, cabins, or hovels, the late E. Estyn Evans’s pioneering study of the central and gable hearth types serves as a useful point of departure for this aspect of rural society and culture. In addition, the many insights afforded by Henry Glassie, the “existential” ethnographer and folklorist, into both the interiors and exteriors of “home” in his classic work, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone*, deserve our attention as he ranges over so many aspects of communal life from mentalities to occupations, house construction, and furniture in a northern Fermanagh parish during the early 1970s.³

Graphic images of Irish rural dwellings in the post-Famine era were not confined to paintings and sketchbooks. They also appeared in photographs and prints during the heyday of the Land and National Leagues when evictions made headline news in the nationalist

54 press and London's illustrated magazines. Some of these pictures afford glimpses of the furnishings of the ancestral home because the law of the land stipulated that no eviction was complete until every movable object from kitchen dressers, tables, beds, and chairs, to farm implements and spinning wheels had been removed. Every animal, moreover, whether domestic or otherwise had to be driven out. If perchance the family cat or pig happened to rush back inside, the crowd of supporters would roar with delight at the sight of bailiffs trying to catch these elusive creatures. Hoping to obstruct or postpone their eviction, some tenants might stuff a small child into a hole in the wall or inside the thatched roof, thereby nullifying the proceeding and forcing the landlord to obtain a new ejection decree or writ and repeat the operation all over again some months later.⁴ Once the home had been emptied, the sub-sheriff would give formal possession to the agent by handing him a wisp of thatch taken from the roof. Before the 1860s, eviction often involved the razing or destruction of the cabin built by the occupants or their forebears, because the landlord wished to consolidate small holdings into large grazing farms and prevent illegal reentry.

One of the earliest full-page prints of eviction came from famine-ridden Ireland where the *Illustrated London News* (*ILN*) had engaged several artists to record the consequences of the deadly potato blight. Shortly before Christmas in 1848, Edmund Fitzpatrick produced a dramatic before-and-after eviction scenario. Under the heading, "*Ejection of Irish Tenantry*," his two prints captured the violence as well as pathos of dispossession. In the first image, "The Ejectionment" (fig. 1), several bailiffs under police protection have carried out a table and chair and are busy removing other chattel. On the left a man drives away the family's donkey while up on the roof two bailiffs strip away sod and thatch to the acute dismay of the blackthorn-wielding bystander on the far left. In vain the tenant implores the mounted sub-sheriff



Fig. 1: Edmund Fitzpatrick, "Ejectionment of Irish Tenantry—The Ejectionment," *ILN*, Dec. 16, 1848.



Fig. 2: Edmund Fitzpatrick, "The Day After the Ejectionment," *ILN*, Dec. 16, 1848.

or agent for a reprieve and his wife and daughter cling to him in desperation.

In the sequel "The Day After The Ejectionment" (fig. 2), the forlorn cottier stands outside a crude lean-to, or *scalpeen*, made of logs and thatch with a wagon wheel and door serving as a wall. Squatting inside this primitive refuge, his wife cuddles their infant. The barefoot daughter sits outside pointing poignantly towards their former homestead in the distance. The dying and almost leafless tree behind them bespeaks their bleak future.⁵

In marked contrast to the aura of security, warmth, and familial or communal activity conveyed in traditional paintings of cottage interiors, the eviction pictures highlight violence, disruption, and loss. Because such fragile objects as crockery and glass were unlikely to survive rough handling by the bailiffs or emergency men hired to

empty the premises, the occupants often wrapped these goods in blankets or placed them in a wicker basket, or creel, before carrying them outside. Most of the emergency men—otherwise known as "the crowbar brigade"—were tough Protestants recruited in the north, who had a well-deserved reputation for heavy-drinking, brandishing revolvers, and uttering sectarian slurs. Not only did they smash large pieces of furniture to get them through the door or window, but whenever they suffered painful injuries from stones or scalding liquid, they would deliberately damage the household goods. For this reason many tenants took pains to remove their belongings before the sheriff's party arrived.

RESISTANCE

With some notable exceptions, resistance to eviction before the 1880s tended to be spontaneous and involved more smoke than fire. Defiant tenants would use their blackthorns or fists and curse the sheriff's party in both English and Irish. After the founding of the Irish National Land League in October 1879, however, some tenants in the south and west took steps to foil the

evictors by barricading the doors and windows of their homes with huge logs, boulders, and furze. Some defenders recruited friends or neighbors to help them fend off the bailiffs with *shillelaghs*, poles, stones, and empty bottles. Summoned by word of mouth and the blowing of horns, large and angry crowds would assemble to bear witness and harass the sheriff's men and their armed escort. During the First Land War (1879–83) Charles Stewart Parnell, Michael Davitt, and other League leaders exhorted the tenantry to hold on to their homesteads and pay no rent except “at the point of the bayonet.” Needless to say, they did not dwell on the beatings, arrest, and imprisonment that faced anyone who dared to defy Dublin Castle's enforcers of law and order.⁶

Resistance to eviction on the Countess of Kingston's Mitchelstown estate in County Cork in 1881 involved barricading cottages and set an example for Lord Clanricarde's Woodford tenants in south Galway five years later. In August 1886 a form of siege warfare erupted there when four or five tenants, whose combined arrears barely reached £400, fought tooth and nail against the sheriff's party and several hundred well-armed police and soldiers. Although these unequal contests typically ended in victory for the forces of law and order, the evictors usually paid a high price for success. In fact, the Woodford evictions alone cost the government and the owner well over ten thousand pounds. After this fierce struggle, League “organizers” went around the country teaching tenants how to improve their defensive tactics by building stone walls inside the door and boiling water in cauldrons or large pots into which they would pour cornmeal, sheep dip, lime, cayenne pepper, and urine. Designed to scald and deter the invaders, this brand of “stirabout” became the non-lethal weapon of choice for tenants determined to defend their homes. Besides staining uniforms, these foul-smelling and sticky concoctions burned the faces and hands of the besiegers. The women and girls of the household played a

crucial role in such confrontations. After heating this repellent mixture over a turf fire, they threw or squirted bucketfuls of the liquid at the bailiffs or police thereby “stirring the boiling pot” both literally and figuratively. Some women also threw stones and fended off the invaders with turf-spades, pitchforks, and fists. Thus at Rathduff, near Cork City, Eliza Forrest jabbed District Inspector Tyacke in the face with a pitchfork, while her brother held off the bailiffs with a scythe. Eliza also bit four constables “severely” before being subdued.⁷ Such acts of defiance were common wherever active League branches held sway.



Fig. 3: (Charles) Paul Renouard, “Studies From Life in Ireland, The Eviction,” the *Graphic*, Mar. 10, 1888.

The defense of hearths or homes scheduled for eviction had the full backing of militant priests who led or advised the local League branch, to the dismay of their conservative bishops. Along with defiant tenants a number of such priests landed in jail for promoting resistance, and their martyrdom earned headlines in the nationalist press while raising the morale of their devoted parishioners. Conviction by government appointed magistrates in so-called coercion courts led to prison terms of up to six months, adding even more luster to the defenders or defendants. Upon release they were celebrated with parades, brass bands, and sumptu-

ous banquets. By 1887, resistance to eviction prevailed on well over a dozen large estates owing to the dynamic leadership of men like Davitt, John Dillon, William O'Brien, Tim Harrington, and Matt Harris.

Alive to the sensation value of all this agrarian unrest, the editors of Fleet Street's illustrated weeklies sent some of their best artists to the west of Ireland to witness and record the confrontations between the police and the people at multiple eviction sites. Chief among those assigned by the *Illustrated London News* to cover the Land Wars were Aloysius O'Kelly, R. Caton Woodville, S. T. Dadd, W. H. Overend, and Claude Byrne.

The *ILN*'s principal rival, the *Graphic*, also featured images of rural distress, agrarian crime, and resistance. For example, the influential French artist, (Charles) Paul Renouard, who visited Ireland in 1887–88, made three hasty sketches of an eviction in Connacht that appeared on March 10, 1888. One of these, “The Eviction” (fig. 3), depicts the fight inside a cottage as two defenders wielding long cudgels brace for the charge by policemen through the breach in the wall. Amidst the debris on the floor lies a cornet—a favorite instrument of nationalist brass bands. On the far right a woman prepares to heave a bucket of hot liquid at the foe. Whether or not Renouard actually witnessed this struggle—the police kept reporters and artists well away from the field of combat—his sketch anticipates Cork-born Harry Jones

Thaddeus's striking oil painting, *An Irish Eviction, Co. Galway, Ireland* (plate 35) completed in 1889. This rendering of close combat inside a cottage under siege is arguably the finest image of resistance ever painted. The muscular protagonist in the foreground, whose back is illuminated by a shaft of lambent light, prepares to hurl a bucket of hot water at the invaders. Standing at his side his red-haired wife stoops to pick up a pitchfork while their terrified young daughter clings to her skirt. In the rear two men—one endowed with the prognathous mouth and snub nose of a stereotypical Paddy—fend

56 off the constables with a ladder. Thaddeus captured not just the violence of eviction but also the determination of a tenant family to defend their home. His masterly play with light and shadow in this dark, smoke-filled, and confined space evokes some of Rembrandt's work.⁸

THE PLAN OF CAMPAIGN

During the Second Land War (1886–90) several thousand tenants were evicted for refusing to pay their rent in accordance with the strategy of the Plan of Campaign. This renewal of the anti-rent agitation began in October 1886 when some of Parnell's lieutenants, despite the strong disapproval of their leader, urged tenants to combine forces on over two hundred estates in order to force their owners to lower their rents by up to forty percent in response to yet another downturn in the economy. The tenants who subscribed to the Plan withheld payment and handed their rent less the desired reduction to a trustee—often the parish priest—who held it in escrow until the owner surrendered. While most of the afflicted landowners conceded the Campaigners' demands, a stubborn minority chose to fight. The coercion-minded Irish Chief Secretary, Arthur Balfour, launched a counter-offensive on behalf of the beleaguered owners of a dozen so-called Test Estates who faced insolvency without some kind of intervention. With great cunning he used his connections to create secret syndicates, composed of rich Unionist magnates like the Duke of Westminster and Arthur Hugh Smith Barry, that bought and managed these properties. After purging the Plan subscribers, the new management turned the vacant farms into ranches stocked with cattle. To Balfour's dismay, however, word of these syndicates soon leaked out; the Home Rule party erupted in anger; and nationalist newspapers ran editorials denouncing this plutocratic conspiracy.⁹

Multiple evictions on Wybrants Olphert's estate around Falcarragh in County Donegal, Lord Lansdowne's estate centered on Luggacurren in Queen's County, and Charles Talbot Ponsonby's property at Youghal in County Cork turned these districts into agrarian war zones with hundreds of soldiers and police assigned to protect the sheriff's party from hostile

crowds. Although most of the Plan tenants left quietly, here and there the emergency men had to contend with barricaded houses, resolute garrisons, and streams of boiling liquid. Because almost all of these sieges ended in the capture of the fortified house, the tenants' defiance involved an element of political theater designed



Fig. 4: W. M. Lawrence's *Eviction Scene (Battering Ram)*, courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.



Fig. 5: W. M. Lawrence's *Eviction Scene (Ireland)*, courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.

to attract huge crowds and gain maximum publicity. Besides reporters, artists, and photographers these conflicts also drew small delegations of Liberal Home Rulers from England. Occasionally an aristocratic humanitarian from the Continent would arrive on the scene to observe the fierce contest between Dublin Castle and the tenantry.

If the number of Plan evictions represented a small fraction of those that occurred during the Great Famine, they attracted far more publicity. Nationalist newspapers exploited the sensation value of vulnerable but no longer defenseless tenants fighting off thuggish emergency men with primitive weapons while the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) stood guard or actually took part in the assault. Some garrisons held off the evictors for hours with showers of missiles and liquid. Only when supplies ran low or after the crowbar brigade had hacked a big hole in the wall or roof did they surrender. Overpowered and beaten by vengeful bailiffs or constables, they were hauled out bloody but unbowed to loud cheers from hundreds or even thousands of supporters.

Although police regulations forbade the constabulary from taking part in the actual eviction, as resistance intensified and bailiffs were driven back or retired from the field of combat bruised and scalded, the presiding magistrate would order a squad of constables to charge the fortified premises with fixed bayonets and batons. In vain, Dillon and other Plan leaders protested this violation of the police code. But without this intervention the sheriff's party would have suffered a number of embarrassing defeats.¹⁰

THE BATTERING RAM

To deal with heavily barricaded houses or cabins Dublin Castle adopted a new but actually medieval weapon—the battering ram. Hoping to shorten sieges and minimize the danger of fatal injuries, Balfour encouraged sub-sheriffs to procure rams made from large tree trunks and sheathed with an iron head. This so-called “engine of destruction” was suspended by a heavy chain from a tripod. Half a dozen emergency men would heave and haul the beam back and forth against a wall until they had opened a hole big enough to admit the bailiffs or police. Despite several humiliating setbacks the ram proved its worth on at least a dozen estates. At times the mere presence of a ram lashed to a wagon discouraged tenants from putting up a fight because they knew that their cherished dwelling would be reduced to rubble. In Parliament Balfour fended off Parnellite denunciations of the ram by calling it a purely

defensive tool designed to minimize injuries on both sides.¹¹

A good idea of the ram's size and ability to inflict damage on stone-walled cottages may be seen in W. M. Lawrence's photograph, *Eviction Scene (Battering Ram)* (fig. 4). Besides capturing the dimensions and destructive power of the instrument, this picture also reveals the thickness and type of flat stone used in the wall's construction. Not surprisingly the rammers took much pride in their weapon and enjoyed posing alongside it for photographers, as sub-sheriff Croker does here, posing with a wicker shield near the ram's head. Nevertheless, many of them had to endure showers of scalding liquid and stones thrown from windows or the roof while working their weapon. To protect them from this barrage several sheriffs procured testudos or mobile sheds with metal roofs that shielded the operators during the assault. Notwithstanding the ram's triumphs over tenant resisters both the government and the landlords had to endure a steady stream of nationalist vituperation over this resort to so-called state terrorism in order to defend the rights of property.

EVICITION PHOTOGRAPHS

Presenting a complete contrast to paintings and prints of cabin interiors are the series of eviction photographs in the Lawrence Collection in the National Library of Ireland. During the latter 1880s, by which time photographic studios had sprung up in the principal cities and towns, the enterprising William M. Lawrence of Sackville Street, Dublin, hired photographers like Robert French and bought pictures of eviction from competitors to sell to customers. Realizing the sensation value of small armies of police and soldiers assembled at eviction sites to protect the crowbar brigade or the ram gang, Lawrence packaged sets of glass lantern slides showing the results of the ram's pounding of house walls aided and abetted by the RIC. As Fintan Cullen has pointed out, one of Lawrence's best customers for the eviction series was the radical nationalist Maud Gonne, who used them to illustrate her tirades in the 1890s against Irish landlordism and British imperialism at rallies in England and on the Continent.¹²

Several Lawrence photographs show evicted families standing or sitting outside their empty dwellings next to their pathetic possessions. Besides their reluctance to stray far from their beloved home, some hoped that the agent would grant them a last-minute reprieve by readmitting them as tenants provided they scraped

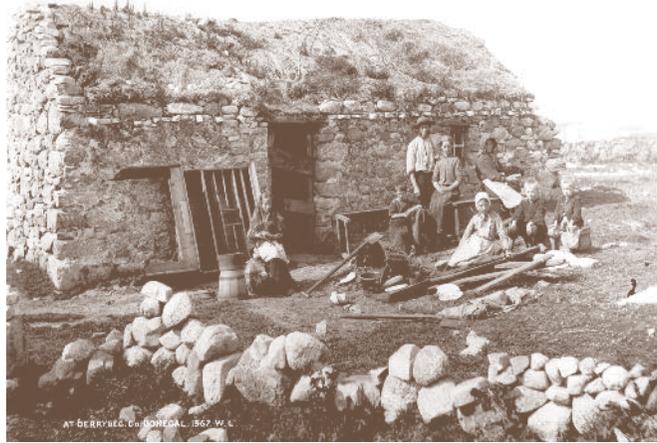


Fig. 6: W. M. Lawrence's *At Derrybeg Co. Donegal*, courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.



Fig. 7: W. M. Lawrence's *An Eviction on Captain Arthur Hill's estate at Gweedore, County Donegal, c. 1887*, courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.

together a fraction of the rent and arrears due. On the other hand, evicted families might wait for the sheriff's party and police to disappear over the horizon so that they could re-enter their homes illegally, replace their furnishings, and rekindle the turf fire.

The Lawrence photograph, *Eviction Scene (Ireland)* (fig. 5), reveals a wooden chest, two small tables, a butter

churn, and two bundles of household goods wrapped in sheets outside the evicted cottage. In another picture, *At Derrybeg Co. Donegal* (fig. 6), the visible contents of the household include a butter churn, a plain kitchen dresser, a creel, as well as a spade, slane, and several plates. A long trestle table lies on its side against the wall on the right near the six children.

A photograph (fig. 7), taken on the Plan of Campaign estate of Captain Arthur Hill at Gweedore, County Donegal around 1887, reveals a solid chair along with a small chest stuffed with goods, a butter churn, a cooking pot, a drum-like water container made of staves, and an upturned child's potty chair on the left. No dresser can be seen. Half the cottage lies in ruins and the bailiffs have nailed three boards to the doorway to prevent reentry. The barefoot mother, her husband, and three young children have good reason to despair.

EVICITION PRINTS

Supplementing these eviction photographs are prints in the *Illustrated London News* and the *Graphic* that also depict household goods placed outside the cottage or cabin. In "An Eviction In the West of Ireland" (fig. 8) the gifted artist, Aloysius O'Kelly, provided an iconic image of the First Land War.¹³ Here an unusually solicitous RIC constable escorts the frail grandfather out of his cabin, while his weeping family stands or sits amidst their pathetic possessions: a table, two chairs, a bedstead, a cabinet with doors, a butter churn, two baskets, a besom, and the ubiquitous iron pot. The sub-sheriff or agent sits impassively on his horse while the police cordon keeps the crowd well away from the site.

An even more heart-rending image came from the pen of Claude Byrne whose sketch, "All That Is Left: Scene At A Mayo Eviction" (fig. 9), foregrounds a thin young girl sitting alone on a table in the driving rain. Shivering from the cold and wet, she awaits the return of her family, who has gone off in search of food and shelter. Around her are strewn a chair, stool, spade, creel filled with pots and dishes, and several bundles. The caption suggests that this poor child might not survive the cold, wet night outdoors. This print must have stirred considerable empathy, if not indignation, among

58 English viewers who were utterly unaccustomed to such scenes at home.

A glimpse of furniture without a home appeared in R. Caton Woodville's poignant image, "The State of Ireland—Evicted: A Sketch On The Road in Connemara" (fig. 10). The desperate three-generation family in this print has been stranded on a remote, snow-filled road because their old carthorse has collapsed. Inside the tumbrel-like cart may be seen a dresser, chest, chair, and sundry blankets.

Among the eviction images published during the First Land War was "Within and Without—Results Of The 'No Rent' Policy, Castle Island, Co. Kerry" (fig. 11). The four panels in this print include the interior of a rat-ridden cottage stripped bare of furniture, a homeless but well-dressed family sheltering under a makeshift lean-to in a ditch and heating a pot, and Land Leaguers building a shelter for some evicted tenants at Derhee.

At the outset of the Third Land War, F. C. Dickinson sketched an eviction scene in County Roscommon for the *Graphic*. "The Land War In Ireland: An Eviction On The De Freyne Estate" (fig. 12) features a respectable widow sitting outside her empty house while the bailiffs carry out her belongings. She is surrounded by two handsome chests, two tables, a dresser, and a chair along with a teapot and two bundles of carefully wrapped household effects. A goat is tethered to the table on which the top-hatted agent perches. She was one of numerous victims of eviction on this estate during the renewed anti-rent agitation backed by the United Irish League in this turbulent county.

Writing about the Aran Islanders during his sojourns there at the turn of the century, J. M. Synge stressed their love of seemingly primitive possessions: "the home-made cradles, churns, and baskets are all full of individuality, and being made from materials that are common

here... seem to exist as a natural link between the people and the world that is about them." Witnessing an admittedly rare eviction on Inishmaan on June 11, 1898, he noted that the victim—an old woman—"shook with

ily cursed both him and them in Irish.¹⁴ Synge used his box camera to capture this poignant event as five RIC constables stand outside the cottage and neighbors gather to console the victim (fig. 13).



Fig. 8: Aloysius O'Kelly, "An Eviction In the West of Ireland," *ILN*, Mar. 19, 1881.



Fig. 9: Aloysius O'Kelly, "All That Is Left: Scene At A Mayo Eviction," *ILN*, Apr. 17, 1886.



Fig. 10: R. C. Woodville, "The State of Ireland—Evicted: A Sketch On The Road in Connemara," *ILN*, Mar. 20, 1880.

uncontrollable fury as she saw the strange armed men who spoke a language she could not understand driving her from the hearth she had brooded on for thirty years. For these people the outrage to the hearth is the supreme catastrophe." When the police embarked for the mainland, an angry old woman, whose son had acted as the bailiff at the eviction, heart-

CONCLUSION

Fleeting and fragmentary as they may be, these post-eviction pictures convey some of the trauma and violence of losing the family homestead and its cherished contents. Both the Lawrence photographs and the *ILN* prints of battered, burnt, or ruined cottages highlight the human casualties of the Land Wars and leave the viewer wondering about the fate of those families who lost all their worldly goods along with the essential comfort of a warm hearth and a thatched roof over their heads. These graphic images of eviction convey the trauma, violence, and despair arising out of the loss of the beloved homestead where the family had lived for generations.

For good reason, memories of dispossession died hard in both Ireland and Greater Ireland overseas—if they died at all. As for urban evictions in the early twentieth century, the ex-revolutionary and distinguished public servant, C. S. Andrews, had some vivid memories of neighbors being turned out in a working-class district of Dublin:

I understood the argument well enough to know that if the rent was not paid, we might possibly be evicted and young as I was, I knew what that meant. The dread of eviction was in the very bones of every Irish Catholic child from the famine days and indeed evictions were the common lot of the tenement dwellers around Summerhill.... Any day you were almost

certain to see an eviction taking place with all the household goods piled pitifully on the pavement and women and children crying amidst their sticks of furniture, their pots and pans and their mattresses. The bailiffs looked as miserable as the people they were evicting.¹⁶

To illustrate this point a lament found in the National Folklore Collection, recorded in 1935, deserves quoting:

The three great sorrows an Irish man or woman can meet with:

To hear a child crying with the hunger.

To see their own house burning.

To see the sheriff's men tearing the house asunder, and throwing yourself and your children out on the roadside. An eviction.¹⁷

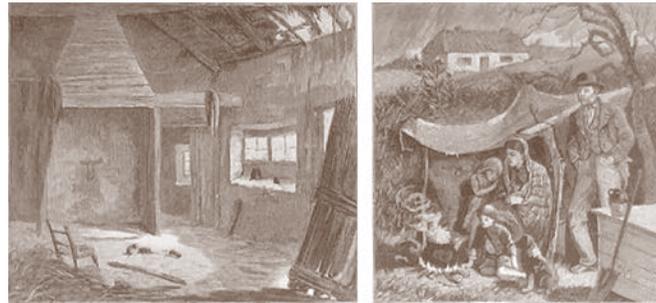


Fig. 11: “Within and Without—Results Of The ‘No Rent’ Policy, Castle Island, Co. Kerry,” the *Graphic*, Jan. 7, 1882.

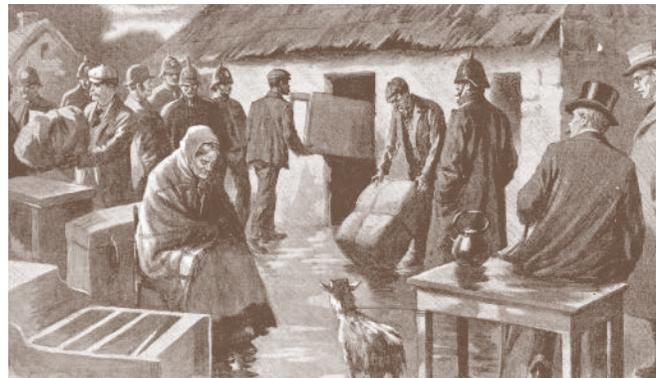


Fig. 12: F. C. Dickinson, “The Land War In Ireland: An Eviction On The De Freyne Estate,” the *Graphic*, Sept. 13, 1892.



Fig. 13: J. M. Synge, *An Eviction on Inishmaan* (From Lilo Stephens, comp., *My Wallet of Photographs: The Collected Photographs of J. M. Synge*, [Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1971], plate 34).

- 1 The images in this exhibition have drawn heavily on the groundbreaking scholarship found in Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006) and Peter Murray, ed., *Whipping the Herring: Survival and Celebration in Nineteenth-Century Irish Art* (Cork: Crawford Art Gallery; Kinsale: Gandon Editions, 2006).
- 2 Brian P. Kennedy, “The Traditional Irish Thatched House: Image and Reality, 1793–1993,” in *Visualizing Ireland: National Identity and the Pictorial Tradition*, ed. Adele M. Dalsimer (Winchester, MA: Faber and Faber, 1993), 165–79.
- 3 E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Heritage* (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1942), 57–66 and *Irish Folk Ways* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), 39–58; Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), xiv–xix, 327–51, 354–65, 370–76, 379–401, 405–22.
- 4 E. De Mandat-Grancey, *Paddy At Home* (London: British Library, 1887), 110.
- 5 *Illustrated London News (ILN)*, Dec. 16, 1848.
- 6 For resistance to eviction in the 1880s, see L. Perry Curtis, Jr., *The Depiction of Eviction in Ireland, 1845–1910* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2011), 112–18, 139–42, 194–253.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 81–129.
- 8 Brendan Rooney alludes to “the claustrophobic intensity” of this picture in “An Irish Eviction, county Galway, Ireland, 1889,” *Whipping the Herring*, 136. See also Rooney’s biography, *The Life and Work of Harry Jones Thaddeus, 1859–1929* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003) and Brian P. Kennedy, *Irish Painting* (Dublin: Town House, 1993), 94.
- 9 For the Plan of Campaign and Balfour’s syndicates, see Curtis, *Depiction of Eviction*, 159–93 and Laurence Geary, *The Plan of Campaign, 1886–1891* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1986).
- 10 For further details, see Curtis, *Depiction of Eviction*, 159–223.
- 11 The battering ram—otherwise known as “Balfour’s Maiden”—is discussed in *ibid.*, 224–53.
- 12 Fintan Cullen, “Marketing national sentiment: lantern slides of evictions in late nineteenth-century Ireland,” *History Workshop Journal* 54, no. 1 (Autumn 2002): 162–79. For a valuable guide to photography in nineteenth-century Ireland, see Liam Kelly, *Photographs and Photography in Irish Local History* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008).
- 13 *ILN*, Mar. 19, 1881. See also Niamh O’Sullivan, *Aloysius O’Kelly: Art, Nation, Empire* (Dublin: Field Day, 2010), 46–47.
- 14 J. M. Synge, *The Aran Islands*, ed. Tim Robinson (1907;

reprint, London: Penguin Books, 1992), 14, 43–47.

- 16 C. S. Andrews, *Dublin Made Me: An Autobiography* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1979), 23.
- 17 William Reddy of Billerough, County Cork, July 28, 1935, MS 128,1.178, National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin. Quoted with permission.

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE IRISH RURAL INTERIOR

Charles E. Orser, Jr.

STUDENTS OF THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF THE PAST EMPLOY A DIVERSE NUMBER OF SOURCES in their research, regularly examining unpublished letters and diaries, oral remembrances, and pieces of extant vernacular architecture. With the 2006 publication of Claudia Kinmonth's *Irish Rural Interiors in Art*, social historians have more fully recognized the role of visual art in offering information about the lives of Irish country people—a realization that provided impetus for the current exhibition, *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story*.¹

Within the past few decades, both academic scholars and the general public have increasingly acknowledged the importance of the unique information archaeological excavation reveals, as each new project unearths artifacts that provide greater insight into the realities of life in the past. Although only now beginning in earnest, archaeological research focused on early nineteenth-century home sites in rural Ireland offers fresh perspectives on what we already know and adds important new details about the inside story of daily life in the countryside—details that confirm, supplement, and sometimes contest information provided by print, architectural, or visual sources.

Beginning in 1993 and continuing every summer until 2007, I directed excavations at nineteenth-century rural home sites in Counties Roscommon, Sligo, and Donegal in the Republic of Ireland. My students and I excavated parts of five houses in Roscommon and two

each in Sligo and Donegal. Our analyses of the excavated artifacts, when compared with often sketchy historical records, indicate that the houses in Roscommon were occupied from about 1800 to 1848, when their residents were forcibly evicted. People lived in one of the Sligo houses from about 1795 to 1865 (the other excavated house dated to the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and was associated with a mid-level gentry family); the residents of the Donegal house were probably there from about 1810 to 1865 (the other was a nineteenth-century estate manager's home and possibly the temporary home of the landlord). The houses in Roscommon, being completely invisible on the ground surface, were located through a combination of map analysis and geophysical field research. Partial aboveground wall remains indicated the sites of the Sligo and Donegal houses.

The two house sites in County Roscommon were well known historically because they were located at Bal-

lykilcline, a much studied nineteenth-century townland.² Ballykilcline was administered by the well-documented, albeit ill-fated, Mahon family from 1793 until 1834.³ After 1834, when the Mahons lost the lease, Ballykilcline became a Crown Estate administered by the Commissioners of Her Majesty's Woods, Forests, Land Revenues, Works, and Buildings; Queen Victoria thus became the tenants' landlady. Major Denis Mahon, the last Mahon landlord of Ballykilcline, was murdered in November 1847.⁴

Through their many field projects, archaeologists have learned that human life in the absence of material things is impossible—and rural Ireland is no exception. As the editor of William Carleton's *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (1842–44) observes, the people of rural Ireland inhabited “a world however poor” that was “richly endowed with *things*: fiddles, crosses, coffins, spades, bottles and more bottles.”⁵ Archaeologists regularly encounter this world of things with almost every shovelful of earth they excavate. Our excavations have provided thousands of tangible examples of the objects Irish farmers once used inside their homes during the first half of the nineteenth century—artifacts of all types, including fragments of glass bottles, metal scissors and tiny thimbles, iron reaping hooks and kettle

62 pieces, glass rosary beads, and white clay smoking pipes (plate 69). We even found a ceramic nesting egg used to encourage laying hens (plate 70).

The Ballykilcline house excavations are particularly noteworthy because the forces of the Crown evicted its residents in 1847–48 at the end of a protracted rent strike the tenants had begun in 1834. Families facing eviction would have had neither the time nor the ability to remove their personal possessions before seeing their houses wrecked, dismantled, and knocked down. Contemporary images of evictions indicate that people's possessions were thrown into the road where they were likely to be broken and trampled underfoot.⁶ For archaeologists, this violent history means that almost everything that would have been inside a home at the time of eviction could remain buried in the soil and thus be available for discovery during scientific excavation.

One of the most poignant artifacts we found at Ballykilcline was a tiny silver-plated brass thimble marked with the words “Forget Me Not” (plate 71). Thimbles with such slogans, mass-produced and common in the early nineteenth century, are generally unremarkable. The importance of the Ballykilcline thimble, however, rests in its human context. In the late 1990s, a group of the evictees' descendants living in the United States created the Ballykilcline Society; remembering their ancestors' trials as evictees and celebrating their successes as immigrants are important goals of members. The tiny thimble stands as a physical reminder that real people with tender feelings toward one another experienced and were intimately affected by the events of the townland's past.

The characteristics of mass-produced ceramics make them an especially rich area of archaeological study, particularly in the case of nineteenth-century rural Ireland where researchers have been reluctant to study these artifacts. Because the archaeology of nineteenth-century Ireland is a wholly recent enterprise, almost everything we learn from each excavation is unique, fresh, and important. Ceramic shards constitute some of the most important objects found at any modern-era archaeological site, but they have special significance when found at the former home sites of nineteenth-century

Irish farm families. This significance may surprise many people, especially those living in old homes and regularly discovering shards in their gardens.

But ceramics have immense archaeological importance for several reasons. They have long been a staple of archaeological research wherever it has been practiced. Archaeologists have learned that ceramics—objects manufactured from fired earth—have visible characteristics that help them interpret the past. The stylistic elements, vessel forms, and production characteristics can serve as documents with as much authority as any written word. Archaeologists working with nineteenth-century materials have an advantage over many of their colleagues because written records can often provide fairly tight dates for ceramic styles and types. Nineteenth-century ceramic producers, working in a fiercely competitive industrial environment, often kept accurate records of their glaze formulas, stylistic motifs, and other features particular to their firms. Archaeologists, in turn, can use these carefully recorded trade secrets to great advantage.

Ceramics can also reflect the social and economic attributes of their past owners. Families with considerable disposable incomes may have regularly purchased the newest and most fashionable sets of dishes whereas poorer families may have been forced to use out-of-date, mismatched pieces. Different ethnic groups also may have purchased different kinds of vessels. Although those subsisting on a diet of soups and stews might acquire mostly bowls, regular consumers of meat and potatoes would obtain plates and platters.

Ceramics also have a distinct advantage over many other kinds of artifacts because, being fired to hardness in ovens or kilns, they are likely to remain unharmed in the soil for many years. The glazed and highly fired ceramics of the nineteenth century can usually withstand all but the harshest chemical environments. As a result, archaeologists regularly unearth hundreds and often thousands of shards even from relatively small excavations. Abundance was certainly the case for my excavations in rural Ireland, for ceramic shards were the most numerous artifact type we found at each of the sites, accounting for several thousand pieces. Many of

these fragments could be reassembled to show the kinds of vessels rural Irish farmers had used in their homes. A final reason that ceramics are important—in relation to this exhibition specifically—is that many of the artists painting rural Irish interiors included ceramic objects in some fashion, even if only in the background or periphery of their images.

In addition to the large number of shards that came from our excavations, a remarkable aspect of the ceramic collection is its variety. The two houses at Ballykilcline yielded sixty-five individual vessels with eight different decorative styles in many colors; the County Sligo Barlow site yielded sixty vessels with ten different styles; and the County Donegal Brogan house site yielded fifty-one vessels in eleven different styles (plate 72). This variety means that the families in these four houses used at least 176 different ceramic vessels during their occupations. These findings are remarkable because the houses were only partially excavated (clearly more shards remain to be found) and because the residents—incorrectly described as “peasants” by both contemporary observers and modern scholars—were not previously thought to have had much in the way of mass-produced material culture. A commonly held perception is that rural Irish farmers used only what they could make from wood and other locally available, perishable materials.⁷ Archaeological excavation disproves this view and substantiates that the rural inhabitants of nineteenth-century Ireland were not simple, backward-looking peasants uninterested in the latest material things. They were clearly engaged in the growing consumer market that was sweeping all of Ireland in the early nineteenth century, even the countryside.

Artists depicting Irish rural interiors most prominently represent blue transfer-printed plates, platters, and cups, typically showing such vessels in the background, stored on shelves or in cupboards. Transfer-printing was a technical process of ceramic decoration invented in England around 1760; the technique provided precisely executed designs that could be mass produced and identical. A potter would hire an artist to engrave a scene or design in reverse image on a copper plate. When the artist had completed the copper plate, the potter or an

apprentice would roll colored pigment over its surface. Workers would then carefully press a sheet of tissue paper on the copper plate, thereby infusing the engraved image upon it. Removing the sheet from the plate, they would press the tissue on the body of a damp piece of ceramic, and the image would appear, in proper perspective, on its surface. Once fired, this design would be affixed to the hardened vessel, and a clear glaze applied over the image would permanently protect it.

Industrial manufacturers quickly adopted transfer printing because it provided several advantages that were well suited to the developing world of mass production. A single engraved plate could be used many times over to produce a uniform image on several sets of dishes. Individual plates, platters, cups, saucers, tureens, sugar bowls, and pitchers—even those produced on different days—could all carry an identical image. The development of the transfer-printing process also meant that producers could rapidly change their designs to incorporate topical subjects and accurately represent people and places in the news. Consumers equally liked transfer-printing because of the greater uniformity and detail in the etched designs (when compared to hand-painting) and because they could select from a wide variety of stylish designs and pictures, including various images of flowers, historical personages and buildings, romantic scenes, and even nursery rhymes and pithy sayings.

A number of paintings in this exhibit depict blue transfer-printed dishes: Boyne's *The County Chronicle* (plate 1), Brenan's *Committee of Inspection (Weaving, County Cork)* (plate 28), Dillon's *The Gramophone* (plate 64), Kirwan's *Untitled* [One woman spinning and another woman sewing in kitchen] (plate 7), Mulvany's *A Kitchen Interior* (plate 3), O'Kelly's *Mass in a Connemara Cabin* (plates 43–44), Power O'Malley's *Her Family Treasures* (plate 55), Stannus's *An Irish Interior* (plate 18), and Whelan's *Interior of a Kitchen* (plate 60). Excavations substantiate that these artists accurately portrayed the kinds of dishes that rural residents would have had in their homes. In fact, blue transfer-printed ceramics were the most widely distributed and most popular decorative style during the nineteenth century; accordingly,

we found blue transfer-printed ceramic shards at all the excavated house sites (plate 73).

When the ceramic collections are examined closely, however, we can discern an important difference between the archaeological findings and the artists' depictions. By painting blue transfer-printed dishes, the artists seem to imply that such ceramics found in rural homes comprised matching sets. But our excavations show that rural Irish consumers—or at least those who lived in the houses we excavated—probably did not have the desire, or perhaps simply the opportunity, to purchase sets of dishes that exhibited identical images. The archaeology at the two houses at Ballykilcline alone yielded twenty-six different blue transfer-printed vessels in at least eight different patterns, again demonstrating the variety of ceramics present in early nineteenth-century rural Irish homes.

Of course, it is quite possible that the artists were not interested in the level of detail required to depict the fine differences between various transfer-printed images. Their intent might have been simply to show that residents of rural Ireland owned blue and white dishes, with precise detail being irrelevant. But even if we ignore the relatively small number of the paintings, it is intriguing that the artists almost universally depicted only blue-decorated, white-bodied ceramics. We know that early nineteenth-century refinements in the potter's art meant that an increased number of colors, rather than just blue, could be used on the extremely white bodies of the newest ceramic pieces. Consequently consumers could obtain transfer-printed dishes decorated in various shades of red, green, brown, yellow, and purple. Our excavations reveal that the residents of all the houses readily accepted many colors of transfer-printed dishes (plate 74).

One of the most compelling pieces from Ballykilcline is a piece of a black transfer-printed teacup decorated in the "Belzoni" pattern, comprised of a series of hunting scenes and produced by the Enoch Wood and Sons pottery in Staffordshire, England, from 1818 to 1846 (plate 75).⁸ Both ceramic collectors and historical archaeologists know this pattern well because of its widespread popularity among consumers. Given the

variety of colors among the transfer-printed ceramics in the early nineteenth-century rural home, we might perhaps conclude that the painters' use of blue-on-white transfer-printed designs simply constituted a compositional convention.

Most artists working in rural Ireland seldom included hand-painted wares in their paintings even though such dishes were widely used during the nineteenth century and were generally less expensive to purchase than transfer-printed wares. Our archaeological collections from the sites include numerous examples of such hand-painted ceramics. Most depict flowers (in blue alone or in blue, green, and red) or simple bands of color (generally in blue), but two of the most interesting pieces are fragments of two matching cups from Ballykilcline. These show hand-painted dragons in deep cobalt blue (plate 76). The producer of these fascinating pieces is currently unknown.

Several artists working in Ireland during the Famine period attempted to evoke a sense of poverty by depicting the absence of ceramics and other objects in the homes. For example, to symbolize such want Alfred Downing Fripp's *Interior of a Fisherman's Cabin, Galway* (plate 10) portrays a striking absence of personal possessions; the watercolor implies that the residents have sold or pawned virtually everything they owned in an effort to survive. Reason dictates that destitute families probably did not possess many material objects even in the best of times and that many families made homeless by eviction were probably forced to sell their possessions if they could find buyers. We all understand that it takes money to make purchases; people without money usually do not own much in the way of personal possessions. Numerous images made during the Famine reinforce this notion by depicting the horror of empty houses devoid of all but the most basic things—perhaps a rough table and one or two simple chairs.

We also get some sense of material poverty by examining the man's coat in Erskine Nicol's *Outward-Bound (Dublin)* (plate 20). We can assume that this potential immigrant may have already disposed of his personal property to obtain the fare for passage to America. Many nineteenth-century authors such as William Carl-

64 ton and Anthony Trollope, whose textual images are as stark and evocative as those of the visual artists, worked in the same vein as Nicol, also highlighting the lack of personal possessions among the poorest Irish.⁹ But even in the face of the destitution, disease, and want that accompanied the Famine, oral tradition maintains that the material world of the very poor was still filled with objects. We know, for example, that men and women seeking food were required to bring their own vessels with them to receive the Indian corn dispensed as outdoor relief.¹⁰ Such a simple historical fact suggests that rural farm families may have kept some of their ceramic objects as long as possible, if only to obtain a meager handout. Material poverty was, of course, a condition of life in much of early nineteenth-century rural Ireland. As tenant farmers, rural families did not have direct control over their land; their circumstances could be adversely affected by a harsh landlord and by outside political or economic forces beyond the control of even the most attentive landlord. Rural life in the poorest homes was undoubtedly very different from that lived in the houses of landlords and estate agents.

Mass-produced ceramics provide further insights into the material circumstances experienced by the poorest nineteenth-century Irish farmers. Excavations at the houses in Counties Sligo and Donegal, specifically, brought to light a kind of ceramic that potters outside Ireland directed toward the so-called “out-market”—consumers without a great deal of money to spend but who nonetheless wanted ceramic dishes. This unique style of ceramic is termed “sponge-printed” or “stamp-decorated” earthenware. Potters, principally located in Scotland and England, sent these white-bodied, brightly decorated dishes throughout the world, where archaeologists have found them at sites as diverse as those associated with the Inuit in Labrador and with indigenous subsistence farmers in Belize. A Scottish potter is credited with inventing the process in 1835, and its peak popularity was the 1840–80 era. Long after 1880, some potters continued to produce stamp-decorated ceramics; today they are still made in many places around the world.¹¹

Potters decorated sponge-printed earthenware by

carving a sponge root into a desired shape—most commonly floral, geometric, and circular designs—and then dipping the root into a colored pigment. The potter would then push the infused root against the side of a ceramic vessel, thereby leaving its pattern behind. Glaze applied over the decoration would preserve and protect the decoration throughout the object’s life. The sponge-printing process resembles that of today’s school children, who make simple stamps using shaped potatoes (plate 77).

Sponge-printed ceramics were notable because of their vivid colors, with bright shades of blue, rust, red, brown, green, and pink predominating. Present-day collectors of these pieces have noticed the “ingenuous appeal” of their “country charm” and their “bright fancy character.”¹² The sponge-printed ceramics found at the houses in Sligo and Donegal tell us that these farmers probably did not have a great deal of disposable income, but that even with limited resources they were interested in brightly colored tableware. The presence of these dishes, along with those from Ballykilcline and the other sites, reveals another important cultural fact: during the early nineteenth century, the dietary habits of rural farmers were changing from communal dining around a common kettle—as frequently remarked upon by English travelers—to a pattern of table-based, individual dining that is more familiar to us today.

Coarse earthenware is a type of ceramic that artists of the rural Irish house interior have largely overlooked. All the ceramics already discussed in this essay are earthenware, but ceramicists would refer to them as fine earthenware, a type still commonly used everyday. Such fine or refined earthenware has a hard, white body and is typically made into thin-walled vessels. Being fired at a lower temperature, coarse earthenware is not as hard and has a red- or buff-colored body, much like today’s common clay flowerpots. In nineteenth-century Ireland, coarse earthenware was usually fashioned into thick-walled utilitarian vessels; its producers tended to apply glaze to the vessel’s interior or exterior (and sometimes to both surfaces) because coarse earthenware is permeable.

Another important distinction between nineteenth-

century coarse and fine earthenware is its historic mode of production. Unlike mass-produced fine earthenware, coarse earthenware production was typically a family-based craft industry. Generations orally passed down knowledge of collecting the clay, throwing the pot on the wheel, stoking the kiln, and firing and glazing the pots. This history has led at least one Irish ceramic historian to call these wares “country pottery.”¹³ The craft nature of coarse earthenware production in rural Ireland means that we know little about it, despite its being widespread throughout the countryside until well into the twentieth century. As Megan McManus notes in *Ireland’s Traditional Crafts*, “It is perhaps ironic, when we consider the techniques of the archaeologists, that we know so little about the locally made domestic earthenware that ordinary people used in Ireland in the comparatively recent past.”¹⁴

The Irish coarse earthenware industry has been overlooked for several reasons. The buildings used in production were probably small and were either not noticed or were not deemed noteworthy by observers. Outside visitors, moreover, seldom approved of these local wares even when they did notice them. For example, Isaac Weld, who prepared the survey of County Roscommon published in 1832, viewed these wares as badly made and old-fashioned.¹⁵ He wrongly believed that they would quickly disappear from rural Ireland. Belonging to a craft industry, the producers of coarse earthenware were probably not well known outside their local areas. Samuel Lewis, who made an island-wide survey published in 1837, noted the presence of only twenty-three distinct “coarse” potteries in the whole of Ireland. My library and field research indicates, however, that many more such potteries undoubtedly existed and remain undocumented.¹⁶

Excavations at Ballykilcline alone yielded 2,798 shards of coarse earthenware having twenty-six different glaze colors (ranging from black and browns to yellows and greens, usually applied only on the inside) and eight different body colors (dark red to buff) (plate 78). These various colors reflect the different clay compositions and the range of firing temperatures, but the differences among glaze colors may also indicate the individual pot-

ters' conscious decisions. This diversity in clay and glaze colors may represent production in different regions, but the current lack of research makes any conclusions merely tentative.

Being earth-toned, coarse earthenware vessels can be difficult to discern in the artists' often dark depictions of rural house interiors. Whereas fine earthenware was generally intended for table use, coarse earthenware was utilitarian and intended for outdoor use or specifically in dairies and kitchens or near the hearth. The vessel forms at Ballykilcline and the other sites were predominantly milk pans, but pitchers, storage jars, and crocks also appear in the collections. In some cases, artists did show coarse earthenware vessels, but often relegated them to the periphery—where we find them in Francis William Topham's *Figures in an Irish Cabin* (plate 12) and in David Wilkie's *The Irish Whiskey Still* (plate 5). The bowl in Harry Jones Thaddeus's *The Wounded Poacher* (plate 33), though prominent, is a late nineteenth-century vessel that was undoubtedly mass-produced in an industrial setting.¹⁷

Locally made coarse earthenware was so prominent in the nineteenth-century Irish rural home that it serves as a powerful symbol of rural Ireland.¹⁸ That nineteenth-century observers almost completely overlooked such ceramic ware tells us more about their own personal perspectives than the significance of the objects themselves. Coarse earthenware ceramics were obviously important to rural Irish farmers. And, as locally made objects, they have a different story to tell us about life in the nineteenth century than the foreign-made, though much better documented, white-bodied fine earthenware.

Non-archaeologists may be surprised that professionals spend so much of their time examining and thinking about the tiny shards of ceramics and the many other broken objects they collect at their excavation sites. From our present-day vantage point, dishes, thimbles, and broken bottles may seem rather insignificant. After all, we only use dishes at most three times a day, and we do not view scissors as especially important to our daily existence. But these tiny fragments are the things with which we have chosen to surround ourselves, and

in cases where historical records are nonexistent or perhaps biased, such objects have much to reveal about the material dimensions of a past life. They can be enlightening to historians even when written records are available. When such small “things” appear in pictorial representations—as well as in personal letters, official accounts, and oral histories—they provide a depth of understanding that is more evocative and meaningful than the story of the past would be without them.



NOTES

- 1 Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).
- 2 Mary Lee Dunn, *Ballykilcline Rising: From Famine Ireland to Immigrant America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008); Charles E. Orser, Jr., ed., *Unearthing Hidden Ireland: Historical Archaeology at Ballykilcline, County Roscommon* (Bray: Wordwell, 2006); Robert James Scally, *The End of Hidden Ireland: Rebellion, Famine, and Emigration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- 3 Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger: Ireland, 1845–1849* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 325; Peter Duffy, *The Killing of Major Denis Mahon: A Mystery of Old Ireland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008); Padraig Vesey, *The Murder of Major Mahon, Roscommon, 1847* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008).
- 4 The precise reason for Mahon's murder remains contested. People in the Strokestown area, the market town in which Mahon lived, tell a romantic tale. They say that one of the boats that carried the Mahon evictees to America sank on the way, drowning the beloved of a man yet to be evicted. Filled with anger and a sense of loss, the grieving and vengeful man murdered Mahon. Historians recount a more prosaic account having to do with a mixture of tenant-farmer anger over high rents, the persistent and often widespread unrest in County Roscommon, and the horror of the evictions themselves. The second reason seems to ring most true, but we must also give some credit to local tradition, which in Ireland can remain especially vibrant.
- 5 William Carleton, *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, ed. Barbara Hayley, 2 vols. (1842–44; reprint, Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1990), 1:5. Emphasis in original.
- 6 Charles E. Orser, Jr., “An Archaeology of a Famine-Era Eviction,” *New Hibernia Review* 9, no. 1 (2005): 45–58. Also see L. Perry Curtis, Jr.'s essay in this volume (53–60).
- 7 A reader unfamiliar with the archaeological research would obtain this view of rural Irish material culture from such popular works as E. Estyn Evans's *Irish Folk Ways* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957) and Kevin Danaher's *The Hearth and Stool and All! Irish Rural Households* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1985). Such works provide much useful information, but say little if anything about the mass-produced products that obviously entered the Irish home.
- 8 Jeffrey B. Snyder, *Romantic Staffordshire Ceramics* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer, 1997), 171.
- 9 William Carleton, *The Black Prophet: A Tale of Irish Famine* (London: Simms and M'Intyre, 1847), 33; Anthony Trollope, *The Kellys and the O'Kellys*; or, *Landlords and Tenants* (1848; reprint, London: Penguin Books, 1993), 54.
- 10 Cathal Póirtéir, *Famine Echoes* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan,

- 1995), 139–48.
- 11 J. Arnold Fleming, *Scottish Pottery* (East Ardsley: EP, 1973), 195; Henry E. Kelly, *Scottish Sponge-Printed Pottery: Traditional Patterns, Their Manufacturers and History* (Glasgow: Lomondside Press, 1993), 15; Graeme Cruickshank, *Scottish Spongeware* (Edinburgh: G. D. R. Cruickshank, 1982).
- 12 Elizabeth Collard, *Nineteenth-Century Pottery and Porcelain in Canada*, 2nd ed., (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1984), 145.
- 13 Mairead Dunlevy, *Ceramics in Ireland* (Dublin: National Museum of Ireland, 1988), 23–26.
- 14 Megan McManus, “Coarse Ware,” in *Ireland's Traditional Crafts*, ed. David Shaw-Smith (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 186–90.
- 15 Isaac Weld, *Statistical Survey of the County of Roscommon Drawn up under the Direction of the Royal Dublin Society* (Dublin: R. Graisberry, 1832), 403–4.
- 16 Samuel Lewis, *A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1970). A map of these sites appears in Orser, *Unearthing Hidden Ireland*, 75. See also Charles E. Orser, Jr., “Investigating the Redware Industry of Early Nineteenth-Century Rural Ireland,” prepared for the Heritage Council, Dublin (Grant HG/AY99/17; 1999).
- 17 See Brendan Rooney's essay in this volume (31–40).
- 18 Charles E. Orser, Jr., “Vessels of Honor and Dishonor: The Symbolic Character of Irish Earthenware,” *New Hibernia Review* 5, no. 1 (2001): 83–99.

READING PICTURES: READING ALOUD IN RURAL IRISH SOCIETY

Kevin O'Neill

ONE OF THE MOST REMARKABLE IMAGES IN THIS EXHIBITION IS JOHN BOYNE'S *THE COUNTY CHRONICLE* (1809) (plate 1), a painting that provides us with an *entrée* into the complicated social and political realities of Irish rural communities during the Age of Revolution. Painting within easy memory of the country's violence in the 1790s that culminated in the failed United Irishmen's Rebellion of 1798, Boyne presents us with a dramatic scene in which a barber-surgeon reads the *County Chronicle* newspaper to a community formed in a public house. He stands on a chair surrounded by the tools of his trade: scissors in his pocket, a bleeding bowl with an indentation for the patient's arm—and a wig at his feet, complete with a cat and wig-box.

We can only speculate about how typical such a scene of public reading aloud was in this or other public houses in early nineteenth-century Ireland. Does the artist depict an unusual event occasioned by the dramatic news conveyed by the paper's story, the report of a possible French invasion? Or is he painting a scene of a very routine reading of the *County Chronicle*, one that would have occurred whenever a new issue of the paper arrived at the public house? What was the likely reception of this news? Did this group represent a community of readers with a shared set of values and opinions about the French? And, if so, what sort? Given the deeply divided nature of Irish society at this time, we cannot predict how any randomly selected group of men and women might have responded to the news of an imminent French invasion. But in view of the cata-

strophic violence of the past, by 1809 when Boyne created the image, even supporters of the French Revolution and the United Irish revolutionary movement may have faced another potential crisis with more fear than hope. Of course, patrons of a particular public house were hardly a random group. Customer preference for a pub often represented neighborhood or workplace convenience, but for some individuals social or political community may have warranted significant travel.

By this late date of the Napoleonic era invasion scares had become part of the ebb and flow of Ireland's own political passions and divisions. Such alarms were often false, but sometimes real. And with the poor communications available to most residing in rural areas, even the most well-informed could rarely make any sort of realistic assessment of an individual threat.

An example of the atmosphere that could be provoked by such an alarm is available to us in the diary of the Quaker Mary Leadbeater (1758–1826), who described the response to the very real invasion scare of 1796. That threat was no doubt Ireland's most serious of the Age of Revolution as a French fleet accompanied by the United Irish leader Theobald Wolfe Tone actually made its way to Bantry Bay, County Cork in December of 1796. Mary Leadbeater had traveled from her home in Ballitore, County Kildare to the large commercial town of Carlow to attend a Quaker meeting that month. The people of landlocked Carlow had no way of assessing the reality of the danger, but the rapid mobilization of British military forces in the area was significant enough to raise the threat level and frighten the Quaker community of which Mary Leadbeater was part. In her diary she recorded the sense of excitement and dread that surrounded the meeting:

Snow had fallen last night... The passing of Expresses, the various reports, & above all the uncertainty increase the panick. Tom P[?] come from Ballitore, informs us that our house had been thronged with soldiers last night on their march, & more expected.

Under these tumultuous impressions we went to meeting. Mary Ridgeway spoke of when the judgments of the Lord are in the earth the people learn righteousness . . . John Grubb spoke of the coming of the day of the Lord.

After meeting it really was a confused scene! Friends some going, some endeavoring to go, & others concluding upon staying, their horses being presst, & no carriages to be had, the weather very cold, the soldiers thronging into town, & those who parted uncertain whether they should be permitted to meet in quiet again.¹

The sense of urgency and even apocalyptic threat conveyed in this diary entry is very different from the lightly humorous touch that Boyne has used in his painting. But as Claudia Kinmonth notes, even the comic touches in his composition may carry darker undertones. A central part of the painting's story concerns the two military men who occupy one narrative grouping. A red-coated soldier from a Scottish regiment is engaged with a civilian who seems to be enjoying his companion's attention—a loan of a military hat and perhaps the generosity of a mug of beer. Yet in this time and place such generosity often had an ulterior and dangerous motive—recruitment. Kinmonth points to the parallel play between the cat and dog as a foil to the interaction between the soldier and civilian, a parallel conveying the artist's warning regarding such encounters.² Boyne provides yet another parallel construction in the other soldier's seductive gesture to the young woman. Though more secretive because occurring behind the mother's back, this third interaction seems less dangerous; from her expression one surmises that this woman is better suited to resist this particular military advance. But in each of the three cases Boyne lightheartedly suggests the danger of such seductive encounters.

Although composed of individuals with varying degrees of illiteracy, members of such gatherings of readers and listeners clearly had access to the "*Chronicles*" of their time. It takes little imagination to envision the pos-

sible commentary and conversation about the news that would have followed the barber's reading—a discussion that both the literate and the illiterate could join since all now had access to what was printed. But Boyne does not give us many clues as to the nature of this reception; clearly his focus is upon a moment of public reading in which the barber-surgeon, elevated above the crowd, conveys the news to his audience. Although Kinmonth reads the figure's superior position as a reflection of his relatively high social status among this crowd, it is noteworthy that Boyne has presented us with a scene in which only a minority of the company seems to actually be listening to the elevated reader.³ Both the women and the soldiers seem occupied by their own pursuits. Only four figures are directly looking at the barber-surgeon, including a child and the Scottish soldier's companion whose expression may imply that he is a bit the worse for drink.

The presence of two soldiers in the company of this public house underscores the level of militarization of Irish society during the era, but it tells us little about the politics of the group—or even of the soldiers. The appearance of working men in the foreground—recognizable by their rough smocks—and the artist's own origins in Ulster suggest an Ulster populist setting. But whether such a grouping might be favorable to a United Irish republican or to Orange loyalist perspective is impossible to say. Although uncertainty reigns both for those in the painting and for those of us who wish to read it, Boyne clearly had a message to convey, a story to tell. His wry inclusion of his own image—the man under the clock in the back right, looking directly at us with his hand covering his mouth—conveys his own sense of simultaneous inclusion in and detachment from the scene, and perhaps from the political drama of the time.⁴ In covering his mouth, is he censoring his own comment, underscoring the ambivalence that the painting presents about the international forces from far outside this public house that so affect its inhabitants? There were of course many good reasons to avoid clarity on such issues in Ireland after 1798. The "white terror" that followed the collapse of the rebellion with its summary executions, the burning of villages such as Mary Shackleton's

Ballitore, mass transportations to Australia, and the continued resistance of the remnants of the United Irish army led to a long period of hyper-political sensitivity, censorship, and fear.

Perhaps this ambivalence—or censorship—about political matters helps us to understand the rarity of images like Boyne's that capture moments of public reading in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Irish society. For Ireland, images of reading are so limited that the historian Toby Barnard laments "the lack of painted and posed conversation pieces" that might reveal the context in which Irish reading took place.⁵ But Boyne's *County Chronicle* is an excellent example of an image that informs us of an important reading context that characterized the early phase of popular literacy in Ireland. The image was painted during a critical era in the early nineteenth century, at a moment in which popular literacy was advancing, perhaps very quickly, but before the formation of the national school system of state-funded primary education that did not begin to affect Irish society until the 1840s.⁶ The evidence contained in Boyne's painting is especially important because we know relatively little about the actual development of literacy in Ireland in the era before the establishment of the national schools. We do know that during the second half of the eighteenth century Ireland experienced a robust growth in an English language print trade, that schools devoted to educating the Catholic community proliferated, and that the growing politicization of Irish society facilitated a lively pamphlet and broadside culture. All of these factors suggest that during that period we can definitely identify a literate public, one that included members of all classes and sects in Ireland.⁷ But we do not know nearly enough yet about who read what, or when, where, or how they read it. Did schooling lead to the creation of households in which children but not adults could read? Or was there a substantial group of adult learners seeking simple, but adult reading materials? And were new readers seeking out new reading material conveying the ideas of Enlightened Europe—or relying upon the old standards?⁸

That this transition to popular literacy took place at the same period as and was intimately connected to the

transition from Irish to English as the country's primary language in many areas underscores the importance of the process of learning to read, even as it also complicates our understanding of that process. The growth of literacy occurred unevenly geographically and was deeply influenced by social and religious factors. Although we may reasonably theorize that reading ability spread from east to west, and we might surmise that it moved from elite to more humble groups, we know very little about the nuances of such changes or the larger meaning which literacy had for Irish society. We do not know for, instance, to what extent English language proficiency was achieved as an oral skill before the emergence of the national schools or to what extent literacy in English led or lagged behind the growth in print media.

These are important questions because their answers would help us to assess the relevance of Benedict Anderson's notion of "imagined communities" to Ireland. The popular dissemination of print culture is central to Anderson's concept of political modernization and nationalism. His understanding of this process is nuanced and carefully grounded in specific national experiences, but it can be oversimplified to conform to a Whig interpretation of literacy that links the spread of reading to progress of all sorts—an interpretation ironically close to the Enlightenment's own interpretation of literacy.⁹ And although it is obvious that literacy levels correlate strongly with economic growth and modernization, simple notions of rising literacy and "improvement" can be misleading. Connection to the cosmopolitan, especially in a colonial situation such as in Ireland, could carry forces corrosive to traditional social and cultural values and structures that protected rural communities and individuals. In the Irish case, the growth of literacy appears to have been pernicious, consciously or unconsciously, to the Irish language and the cultural and social structures of rural communities. Irish oral culture, closely linked to the Irish language, carried with it both a moral economy and a worldview that valorized a communal society insulating many rural Irish people from cultural domination by Anglo-Protestant colonial culture.

A notable characteristic of Irish society in its transition to literacy was the frequency of just such reading aloud as Boyne depicts in *The County Chronicle*. Such instances of social reading served multiple purposes. In a mixed community where some but not all adults could read, reading aloud permitted non-readers to participate in the new and growing forms of communication. And in a society where reading material was expensive and in short supply, reading aloud fostered more efficient transmission of new print material. As in Boyne's painting, one newspaper could be read aloud for the benefit of a community of listeners. In these ways reading aloud not only enabled the non-readers in a community, but also provided a type of continuity with Irish oral culture that used similar social gatherings both to pass on news and to provide cultural iteration. Of course, there was a powerful new dimension to this new oral gathering: whereas the *shanachie* of oral tradition recited stories of local or regional origin that reiterated and reinforced local social and cultural norms, the new reading circles broadcast ideas and stories from a surprisingly wide reach. During the eighteenth century these sources were often not only geographically broad—but also reflected the new thought and culture of the Enlightenment.

Of course, not all or even most reading aloud was performed with such wide or new horizons. The practice also reinforced existing communities of readers who might participate for a very traditional purpose—such as the Bible reading that pre-dated the eighteenth century in many Protestant communities.¹⁰ And as Barnard points out, there were other forms of public reading that were quite traditional and which worked to enforce tradition and authority. From the pulpits of churches and chapels, the magistrate's bench, and the loyalist societies of many sorts, public readings repeated lessons of obedience to legal and social superiors—and we should not underestimate their power. The numbers of such conservative communities seem to have grown during the eighteenth century alongside radical ones. So rather than thinking of the growth in readers and readings as an enlightened or progressive force, we might best think of this period as one of a rapidly escalating contest between traditional and modern authority in which the

power of the written, printed, and read word increased over time. Although we need to keep Barnard's point regarding the conservative power of some readings in mind, it is likely that the efforts of the United Irishmen and their allies to politicize popular culture greatly increased the subversive register of such activity from 1791 on. The United Irishmen, moreover, were very aware of the linkage between traditional Protestant religious forms of reading and their subversive project; indeed, many of them saw little difference between these modes of thought. As true sons of the Enlightenment, they believed deeply in the power of independent thinking for the literate and illiterate alike—so long as the individual had access to ideas, a point made directly by Leonard McNally in 1795: "Every man who can read or can hear and understand what is read to him begins in religion as in politics to think for themselves."¹¹

It is, of course, impossible to know how large a role this sort of very public reading aloud played in the development of communities of readers and listeners. Certainly smaller, more domestic circles of reading aloud were more frequent occurrences. Again the diary of Mary Leadbeater provides us with a window on this rarely visible terrain. Her diary and letters record many instances of reading aloud in domestic situations—but very frequently with non-family members present. The material read aloud varied widely—representing a cross section of eighteenth-century publications. During the 1780s and 1790s she records public readings of the speeches of Edmund Burke, Hooke's *Roman History*, Raynal's *Philosophical and Political History of the Institutions and Trade of the Europeans in the Two Indies*, Walker's *Geography*, the poetry of Ann Yearsley, MacPhearson's *Ossian*, John Woolman's *Journal*, various anti-slave-trade pamphlets, and various political pamphlets, including those of Theobald McKenna, an early advocate of Catholic emancipation and subsequently a United Irishman.¹² The reading aloud of these works represented a social rather than a private moment. Obviously such social readings facilitated the dissemination of new publications in a semi-literate society, but it is much less clear how and why such readings functioned for fully literate groups. Perhaps such moments, especially when they

70 involved radical texts, helped to foster a sense of unity in struggle, which in turn might have helped to provide a sense of security in an environment that was becoming increasingly marked by censorship and state aggression against its subjects.¹³ We have no way of knowing how representative such wide-ranging public readings of works both literary and political were. Certainly the Leadbeater and Shackleton households had easier access to this material than most, and they were passionately curious about the issues of their society. There is some evidence that this sort of practice was not uncommon among Irish Quakers in the concern expressed by several conservative Friends about the growing interest of Friends in such secular reading.

For example, in 1786 a leading Quaker, Mary Dudley, warned the Dublin Yearly Women's Meeting to avoid "unprofitable books," for knowledge "puffeth up."¹⁴ Her fellow Friend Deborah Darby warned Quaker youth in 1788 "against reading speculative books—she hoped there were few present who were amused with such writings as were designed to establish the kingdom of Antichrist." Darby went on to acknowledge that "many had read the history of their own times, & the histories of the Romans," but she urged them instead to read the history of the Quakers. She also "recommended to Mothers the practice of collecting their children before they retired to rest; & after sitting awhile in silence with them as ability was afforded, either administer suitable advice, or read to them a portion of some books, she thought the *Dying Sayings* proper for the purpose."¹⁵ Such cautionary advice confirms both the centrality of reading to Quaker life and a deep concern over the content of reading materials posed by the "unprofitable" and "speculative" works that characterized much of late eighteenth-century popular reading.

The discussion of the spread of literacy has understandably focused upon the dramatic increase in the publication of such books. But several of the images in this exhibition suggest that Robert Darnton's dictum that "books do not merely recount history, they make it" may need to be amended to focus on more ephemeral forms of reading.¹⁶ As these images and much textual evidence suggest, letters were also an important form

of reading material during the transition to popular literacy. We might even consider whether letters and other forms of manuscript writing were not the primary source of reading material in many non-elite households. At the very least, we should rethink the linkage normally made between literacy and printed materials, and hence between reading and the growing dominance of urban elite culture. And, we might improve our understanding of this world by reconsidering the classification of letters as private affairs. For many, letters were a primary form of gathering the news, and as such they were frequently read aloud in the same way as newspapers, pamphlets, and published religious works—and served the same multiple functions.

Letters often functioned in the same way as newspapers—but with an important difference: like some forms of contemporary electronic communication, they placed the powers of reporter, editor, and broadcaster in the hands of every person able to write. So the focus on the proliferation of print may obscure an equally important, but much more obscure development: the growing number of people who could write for themselves. Prior to this period, the power to write and with it the power to record documents as essential to Irish life—as, for example, leases, rent books, countless court documents and tax and tithe records, estate surveys, sermons, pamphlets, and letters of application and reference—was largely limited to the predominantly Protestant participants in the world of legal, church, and economic affairs. But the growing numbers of vernacular writers who could write their own narratives and comment on the public events of the day in letters to their friends and family provided an important new part of the republic of letters. And, perhaps to a greater extent than reading, the democratization of writing represented a shift in the paradigm of word power towards the less powerful. A warning letter from "the sons of Moll Maguire" to a rack-renting landlord might not be great literature, but it was a powerful form of expression.

Linde Lunny suggests that letters during this era represent a midway point between private communication and the newspaper, noting that a letter's news value could exceed that of a newspaper because of the trust

that existed between correspondents—a trust that was notably lacking in an age of very partisan journalism.¹⁷ An example of such a letter that also illustrates the engagement of young women with high politics can be found in one written in August 1775 by Dublin teenager Arabella Forbes to her seventeen-year-old childhood friend Mary Shackleton. Forbes wrote in response to an earlier letter in which Mary Shackleton, living in the small village of Ballitore, County Kildare, had asked Arabella, living in Dublin, for news and opinion about the emerging American crisis.

After beginning with an observation validating this form of personal communication over "those which have a constrained formal manner or which were wrote for the Public Eye" and claiming in humility that "I cannot say any-thing about ye Americans as I am no Politician," the young Arabella goes on to do just that:

I will inform you of all the news I can collect. We hear the Americans are determined not to make any concessions & that Lord North & the Ministry are also determined to make them submit to the King. Lord Bellamont is raising 200 men & will lead them himself also a Mr. Roche & some other Gentlemen are I hear following Lord B's plan. Pray of which side are you a Bostonian or a Courtier?

I am for Boston. Do you coincide with me in this particular most people do; every creature almost, laments that they are obliged to fight against their Countrymen & say they would think half so much if they were going to lose their lives against the French or Spanish but to fight against their Countrymen is a terrible thing I must own I am of their opinion in this respect. I have now given you as much as I can of the American affair.¹⁸

This familiarity with both London politics, suggesting access to newspapers, and local opinion, confirms Arabella as a young woman with an active engagement in public issues. It also confirms an Irish dimension to the

argument that Carla Hesse has advanced about France witnessing a remarkably rapid transition of women's expression from the oral to the written word during this era.¹⁹ We might note that in Ireland this rapid transition involved not only women, but a very large part of the male population who had been excluded from English language communications by language and literacy barriers. For both men and women the republic of letters was expanding.

A very different sort of letter about America is the subject of another painting in this exhibition, James Brenan's *News from America* (1875) (plate 26), which illustrates the central place of the "American Letter" to nineteenth-century rural Irish families. In this carefully composed painting, Brenan provides his viewers with the outline of a domestic tale. The young barefoot girl reads the letter, most likely from an older sibling, to the gathered family while her father leans in, cupping his hand to ear to ensure his reception of the news. Such letters did not just carry news and often money, but served as a sign, often the only sign, of the missing family member's continued connection to his or her family. This was not just an emotional link, as older siblings played an essential role in helping to bring out their younger brothers and sisters—not only in purchasing tickets for passage, but in arranging for work and a place to stay in a new and very different world. Perhaps the evident tension on the father's face relates to his concern over such an implied but very fragile commitment.

Here we see a partial answer to one of the questions posed earlier in this essay, for it is a child, the youngest person in the image, who reads this letter to her family. Painted in the 1870s, at a time when the national school system was well on its way to creating one of the most literate rural populations in Europe, Brenan's *News From America* appears near the end of this educational trajectory—with only the older generation now containing a significant illiterate group. Assuming the opening of a national school in the early 1840s, a child who entered that system at seven would be in his or her mid-forties in 1875. Not unlikely then, many men of the age of this father would not have had any opportunity to attend such a school.

Although the Irish social and political worlds, settings, and moments depicted in *The County Chronicle* and *News from America* are far apart, both images point with great clarity to the importance of the written or printed word read aloud. Whether in the public house or the family home, such oral performance of written and printed language connected people of different positions into the literate world and engaged them with news from near and far, defining and binding communities of interest together. Such a combination of literacy and orality was a central component of Irish rural society throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, serving as a bridge not only between the literate and illiterate, but between oral and written culture and tradition, and between the English and Irish language communities.

Joep Leerssen has noted another aspect of this transition, the transference of a critical body of traditional Irish language literature and culture into an English speaking Ireland. For Leerssen this transfer was the foundation of modern Irish culture and national identity.²⁰ His is a bold argument and should provoke us into further exploration of the pathways by which Irish language culture passed and did not pass into English speaking and reading Ireland. Whatever the outcome of such research, these long parallel periods of engagement between the Irish and English languages, oral and literate culture, and vernacular and published writing may help to explain the richness of the English language as spoken and written in Ireland.



NOTES

- 1 Mary Shackleton, *The Diary of Mary Shackleton*, Dec. 27, 1796, MS9321, National Library of Ireland (NLI).
- 2 Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 212.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 211.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 213.
- 5 Toby Barnard, "Reading in eighteenth-century Ireland: public and private pleasures," in *The Experience of Reading: Irish Historical Perspectives*, eds. Bernadette Cunningham and Máire Kennedy (Dublin: Economic and Social History Society of Ireland, 1999), 67.
- 6 The national school system was launched in 1831, but most communities did not have functioning national schools until after 1840.
- 7 For discussions of popular literacy see Barnard, "Reading in eighteenth-century Ireland," 60–77 and Kevin Whelan, "The Republic and the Village," in *The Tree of Liberty: Radicalism, Catholicism and the Construction of Irish Identity, 1760–1830* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), 59–96.
- 8 Dr. Garret FitzGerald, who has already documented the language shift in Irish society, was well advanced in preparing a major study of the rise of literacy in the pre-national schools era at the time of his death. For the language shift see Garret FitzGerald, "Estimates for Baronies of Minimum Level of Irish-Speaking amongst Successive Decennial Cohorts," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 84 C (1984): 117–55.
- 9 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).
- 10 Ray Gillespie, "Reading the Bible in seventeenth-century Ireland," in Cunningham and Kennedy, *Experience of Reading*, 10–38.
- 11 Quoted in Whelan, *Tree of Liberty*, 63.
- 12 Nathaniel Hooke, *The Roman History: The Building of Rome to the Ruin of the Commonwealth*, 11 vols. (London: J. and F. Rivington et al., 1751–70); Guillaume Thomas François Rynal, *Histoire philosophique et politique établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* [*Philosophical and Political History of the Institutions and Trade of the Europeans in the Two Indies*], 11 vols. (1770; reprint, Genève: Jean-Léonard Pellet, 1780); John Walker, *Elements of geography with the principles of natural philosophy, and sketches of general history* (Dublin: Robert Jackson, 1788); Ann Yearsley, *A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade* (London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1788); James Macpherson, *The Works of Ossian, the Son of Fingal, translated from the Galic [sic] language* (Dublin: Peter Wilson, 1765); John Woolman, *The Journal of John Woolman* (Philadelphia: Joseph

- Crukshank, 1774); Theobald McKenna, *Address to the Roman Catholics of Ireland, relative to the late proceedings, and on the means and practicality of a tranquil emancipation* (Dublin: J. Rice, 1792).
- 13 Kevin O'Neill, "Mary Shackleton Leadbeater: Peaceful Rebel," in *The Women of 1798*, eds. Daire Keogh and Nicholas Furlong (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998).
- 14 Mary Shackleton, *The Diary of Mary Shackleton*, July 1786, MS9311, NLI.
- 15 Mary Shackleton, *The Diary of Mary Shackleton*, July 10, 1788, MS9313, NLI. The *Dying Sayings* refers to John Bunyan, *Grace abounding ... his dying sayings* (Glasgow: John Robertson, 1770).
- 16 Quoted in Bernadette Cunningham, "Introduction: The experience of reading," in Cunningham and Kennedy, *Experience of Reading*, 2.
- 17 Linde Lunny, "Reading and orality in early nineteenth-century Ulster poetry: James Orr and his contemporaries," in *Oral and Print Cultures in Ireland, 1600–1900*, eds. Marc Caball and Andrew Carpenter (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010), 119–36.
- 18 Arabella Forbes to Mary Shackleton, Aug. 1775, MS # PP1/11 (23), Kildare County Library.
- 19 Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 30–33.
- 20 Joep Leerssen, *Hidden Ireland, Public Sphere* (Galway: Arlen House, 2002), 11–15.

PAINTING PRINT: READING IN THE IRISH CABIN

Andrew A. Kuhn

RURAL IRELAND: THE INSIDE STORY CHRONICLES THE DAILY LIVES OF IRISH COUNTRY PEOPLE by entering their intimate domestic spaces and exploring the material objects in these interiors. This essay attempts to place the visual record of such spaces in conversation with the period's print artifacts: the broadsides, chapbooks, journals, newspapers, and prints that not only entertained and informed tenants and cottiers, but sometimes adorned the walls of their cabins. In her study of Irish interiors, Claudia Kinmonth points out how "until recently accounts of the history of Ireland's education have concentrated on texts, and the comparatively few recent secondary accounts include virtually no analysis of illustration."¹ My project represents a far from exhaustive account of print artifacts found in rural Irish interiors, for such a task would necessitate a detailed region-by-region study of the island, work that is still in its infancy.² But by exploring visual images and the materiality of print as it appeared in the home, I consider literacy, reading habits, and the role of printed matter in nineteenth-century rural Ireland.

The visual evidence of the era testifies both to the availability and the various uses of print objects in domestic settings. If we look closely at paintings depicting Irish rural life, we may discover, for example, a book or broadside tucked away on the margins of the canvas, barely visible among the many other things in the cabin. Given the relatively small visual archive of Irish interiors, the occasional appearance of such printed material—a broadsheet tacked to a wall or a chapbook on a table—suggests the growing role of written texts in shaping the nineteenth-century popular imagination. Developments such as stereotyping, lithography, and the steam-powered press revolutionized reading by increas-

ing the volume and variety of available reading material and decreasing its price.³ The organization of mass education in the early decades of the nineteenth century coupled with a new supply of inexpensive literature fueled a rise in literacy among the laboring classes.⁴ Such evidence of an Irish culture in transition appears in both visual and textual sources.

The movement toward universal literacy and the increased presence of books and broadsides in rural homes followed the uneven mechanisms of print production and distribution. Traveling hawkers, schools, and libraries provided texts, but only a detailed focus on particular institutions can tell us about the actual read-

ing practices that accompanied growing rural literacy. In the absence of accounts by tenants and cottiers detailing how and what they read, the material objects themselves and cultural representations of them in paintings and illustrations can help us reconstruct the reading habits of country people. Such sources, including several visual artifacts in this exhibition, provide information about the general practice of reading and the social consequences of rising literacy in a society increasingly reliant on the written word.

But the bibliophile encounters problems with visual evidence, for artists rarely drew printed and manuscript materials with enough detail to reveal titles, distinctive bindings, illustrations, or other identifying markers. Images appear, at best, as suggestive or impressionistic rather than as detailed evidence about the reading material found in the Irish home. For example, Erskine Nicol (1825–1904), a Scottish artist working in Ireland during and after the Famine, is celebrated for his close attention to the everyday objects and scenes of rural life. Books, letters, and broadsides are scattered among his settings, adding additional layers to the narratives that shape the paintings. In the illustration "Listenin' to Raison" (1909) (plate 23), where a typical cabin hearth provides the backdrop for a man to speak "reason" to his beloved as

74 she prepares the day's meal, a ragged and torn document hangs on the wall to the left of the doorway. Nicol's representation of this worn sheet offers the bibliographer of nineteenth-century Ireland little visual detail with which to work; yet a closer look at the relationship between the original painting, its reproduction as a book illustration, and a nineteenth-century Irish folk lyric reveals the complex circulation and re-appropriation of the visual and literary components of popular culture.

"Listenin' to Raison"—based on Nicol's now lost painting *Molly Brierly* (exhibited in Glasgow in 1901)—appeared as the frontispiece of Mrs. S. C. Hall's *Tales of Irish Life and Character* (1909).⁵ Since the original oil has disappeared and the image lives on in Hall's volume, its meaning has become intertwined with that of its companion stories and the world of print more generally. "Listenin' to Raison" therefore participates in popular print culture both through its internal visual evidence pointing to the existence of printed objects in the Irish cabin, as well as through its context within the printed text. The reproduction of Nicol's painting is accompanied by a bit of popular verse that was printed on the guard sheet between the frontispiece and title page of the book:

For if you and I were one
All confusion would be gone,
An' 'twould simplify the matter entirely,
An' 'twould save us so much bother
When we'd both be one another,
So listen now to raison, Molly Brierly.
*An Old Irish Song*⁶

Although Nicol made his early reputation as a Scottish genre artist, his images of rural Irish life earned him an enduring presence in the London art scene. In addition to his English workspace, he maintained a summer studio at Clonave in Westmeath, where the local rural Irish community provided the subject matter for some of his most famous paintings. In "Listenin' to Raison" the artist reveals his intimate knowledge of local popular folk culture by illustrating the air "Molly Brierly." The Irish novelist, songwriter, and artist Samuel Lover

(1797–1868) wrote "Molly Brierly" in the first half of the nineteenth century under the title, "I'm not myself at all." The song, popular in Ireland as well as in England and the United States, survived in broadsides and songbooks printed throughout the Atlantic world. When the 1909 edition of Hall's work was printed, Lover's ballad had slipped into the anonymity of true popularity. Nicol's image portrays a narrative that those familiar with the song would easily identify: a luckless and probably intoxicated suitor attempts to reason with Molly Brierly about their marriage prospects as she looks away, amused but unimpressed. The blank sheet of paper that hangs by the door in the illustration, therefore, suggests an absence that is filled by the narrative of the folksong. The story of Molly Brierly and her suitor would have circulated on a broadsheet like the one that Nicol paints, but leaves blank. His placement of the broadsheet accords with the location of such print items in the Irish cabin—as a decorative element on its wall. Another of Nicol's paintings, exhibited in 1851 and illustrated as "Inconveniences of a Single Life" in *Tales of Irish Life and Character* (plate 24), shows the broadside's location in the rural home even more clearly. We can identify the slender slip of paper bearing a crude woodcut with letterpress below as unmistakably one of the commonest types of ballad sheets available in nineteenth-century Ireland and Britain.⁷

Based on such internal evidence, one might conclude that the broadside hanging on the wall next to the door in Nicol's "Listenin' to Raison" contains the very song that the earlier painting narrates, the printed object entering into direct conversation with image and folksong. Yet because the sheet of paper in Nicol's image is unreadable, as are print objects in most artistic representations of Irish interiors, the work retains its anonymity—fittingly so perhaps, because instability and uncertainty characterized Ireland's nineteenth-century print trade. Few records about individual printers or sellers survive, and the kind of strict governmental control with its attendant bureaucratic recordkeeping that supports the careful reconstructions of English and French print practices did not exist in Ireland.⁸ Consequently, the visual evidence offered by paintings and the details of

the bibliographic artifacts themselves provide valuable glimpses into a lost history.

Although too frequently neglected in literary and historical scholarship, broadsheet ballads provide crucial information about the reading habits of a rural Irish population living on the periphery of a more literate and urban culture. Carrying the latest news, opinion, and entertainment to a mass audience, the broadside primed audiences for the introduction of the periodical press, establishing the groundwork for the country's growing sense of a national language, culture, and history.⁹ The far-reaching appeal, for example, of a figure like the Irish poet and songwriter Thomas Moore (1779–1852) clarified the importance of popular song within cultural and political accounts of the nineteenth century. Still, the various pathways through which songs traveled from person to person and community to community often remain unmapped because of the difficulty of recreating such transactions. When a song or a bit of gossip is passed along, few signs of such interaction remain, but if that same material appears in print, the record of the composition and subsequent physical movement of the printed object can offer the investigator a traceable path. Broadsheets and other forms of print facilitate historical reconstruction, giving the ephemeral a physical embodiment. The paintings of Irish interiors in *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story* hang silent on the walls, but looking closely at the broadsides within them can make the images sing.

Typically characterized by cheap paper, broken type, and slipshod printing, the broadside was simply a sheet with printed letters and a woodcut illustration. Speed and quantity took precedence over accuracy and craftsmanship. Economic necessity led many printers to produce these popular commodities, for they provided a steady flow of capital into their establishments. Producing and distributing broadsides served printers since the rapid creation of these slips of paper provided short-term employment between larger projects. Type could be set in minutes, old woodcuts could be reused, and hundreds of copies could be quickly printed on damaged or remainder stock from other projects—ready to sell to hawkers. A book, on the other hand, could take

weeks or months to print, and newspapers required large amounts of copy and the skill of numerous typesetters. The broadside industry also offered employment to a range of individuals in the distribution network. Filling the roles of distributor and retail purveyor, hawkers singing in streets and fairs peddled folk songs and current events to a public increasingly hungry for entertainment and knowledge of contemporary controversy.¹⁰

Broadsides also bridged the gap between orality and literacy. Lyrics printed on them were often sung in public places to both literate and illiterate audiences, and the wide availability of these printed items undoubtedly led to their use as reading primers for both children and adults. Nicol's paintings suggest that occupants of the cabin might have read and sung the lyrics of these inexpensive, decorative items on their walls as they went about their daily chores or relaxed by the hearth. By entertaining those engaged in repetitive domestic tasks such as weaving and milking, the broadside provided both the soundtrack and visual ornament that accompanied everyday life.

Recalling his own childhood in Donegal in the late nineteenth century, poet and folklorist Seumas MacManus (1869–1960) describes his quest for reading material at rural fairs. His account suggests how even late in the nineteenth century broadside ballads continued to make their way into rural homes:

Ballads were easier to get than books, a great deal. They were the everyday reading of Donegal. No man ever thought of leaving a fair without a new ballad in his pocket. He wasn't fit for a fair, if he thought otherwise. And it only cost a ha'penny from the ballad-singer. The old stand-byes you bought in a broad-sheet of twelve for a penny, at the Stannins [small shops set up under canvas tents]—and plenty of stirring, real Irish, ones were mixed in them. The street-ballads were the boy's first literature, and first love—and they never lost their place in his heart.¹¹

The public house, with its intoxicating mix of

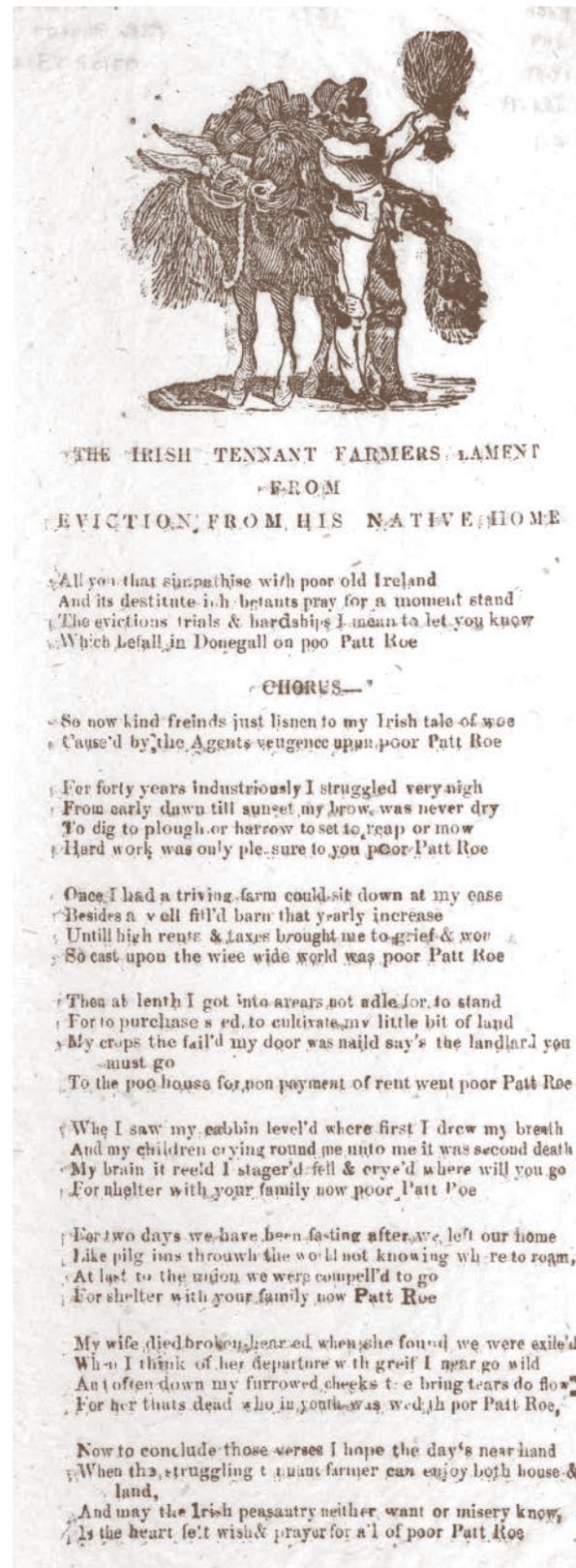


Fig. 1: "The Irish tennant farmers lament from eviction from his native home" (Dublin: Peter Brereton, c. 1868).

community, drink, and song, proved the perfect home for the circulation of broadsheets. In *St. Patrick's Day/ Irish Matchmaker* (1867) (plate 19), Charles Henry Cook (c. 1830–1906) places the broadsheet at the center of a scene of holiday celebration. Cook's object-filled painting also includes a faded reproduction of Nicol's post-Famine emigration image *Outward-Bound (Dublin)* (c. 1852) (plate 20), hanging under a shelf on the back wall of the country inn. At the narrative center of Cook's painting is the controversy caused by a young Irish woman's dancing with a red-coated British soldier in the back-left center of the image—as several onlookers gaze with amusement, suspicion, and disdain. The risky situation of what Kinmonth calls this "somewhat contentious couple" is suggested by the symbolism the painting evokes through a range of coded objects.¹² Kinmonth notes how the soldier's abandoned stick resting in the lower-left corner points over the broadsheet ballad on the edge of the central table toward a reproduction of Nicol's image of an emigrating Irishman on the quays. She suggests that the visual line created by the stick reminds viewers of the threat of emigration for those who, like the dancing girl, challenge the values of the local community.¹³

The inexpensive lithograph on the wall and broadside ballad on the table of Cook's painting evidence a vibrant print culture within a rural Irish community. *Outward-Bound* suggests, moreover, the popularity of Nicol's work in a readily accessible form. With strong narrative frames, the artist's images sold well, and those unable to afford original oil paintings could purchase printed engravings on the mass market.¹⁴ These widely disseminated images that so vividly evoke nineteenth-century rural society exist on the level of both fine art and popular culture; technologies of reproduction thus gave paintings the chance to live many lives. In Nicol's case, the circulation of *Outward-Bound*—first as painting, then in print reproduction and in Cook's reimagining of the lithograph in his own oil painting, and finally in a more sophisticated color reproduction tipped into William Harvey's *Irish Life and Humour in Anecdote and Story* (1909)—suggests the work's wide dissemination to a range of markets. In the form of inexpensive prints,

76 journal illustrations, and everyday items such as paper banknotes, fine art began to reach a mass audience. Whereas some saw this burgeoning visual culture as a means of educating and acculturating the working class, others were deeply suspicious of the corrupting aspects of a popular visual literacy rooted in poor print reproductions of masterworks.¹⁵ Nevertheless, reproductions increasingly found a market in nineteenth-century Ireland.

The subject of Nicol's *Outward-Bound* offers yet another example of common nineteenth-century print ephemera: the advertisement. The lithograph depicts how a collage of ads pasted to a quayside wall captures the attention of a tattered Irishman clutching his *shillelagh*. With a single coin in hand and urged on by posters advertising passage to New York or Quebec, the man carefully considers emigration to North America. Through these ephemeral emigration ads that the figure peruses, Nicol suggests that such advertisements might have been among the last print objects many Irish men and women would have read on their native soil.

The presence of the second print object in *St. Patrick's Day*—the broadsheet ballad on the table—indicates Cook's turn to another cue suggesting the transmission of community values: broadsheets often included songs dedicated to the fate of a couple endangered by circumstance. Lover's "I'm not myself at all" is an example of such work, but the broadside was also a medium for news, gossip, and cultural critique aimed at the diverse needs of communities across Ireland. The surviving output of Peter Brereton, broadside printer in Dublin during the second half of the nineteenth century, suggests the competing interests navigated by shrewd members of the print trade. Employing identical woodcuts and similar typography, Brereton produced titles such as "The Irish tennant farmers lament from eviction from his native home" (fig. 1) and "A new song call'd The Papist Ass" (fig. 2) to serve the ideological needs of different audiences. Cook's inclusion of the broadside in *St. Patrick's Day* indicates both the ideological work and entertainment value of such artifacts.

Through his use of the broadside ballad and Nicol's image, Cook registers the growing importance of the

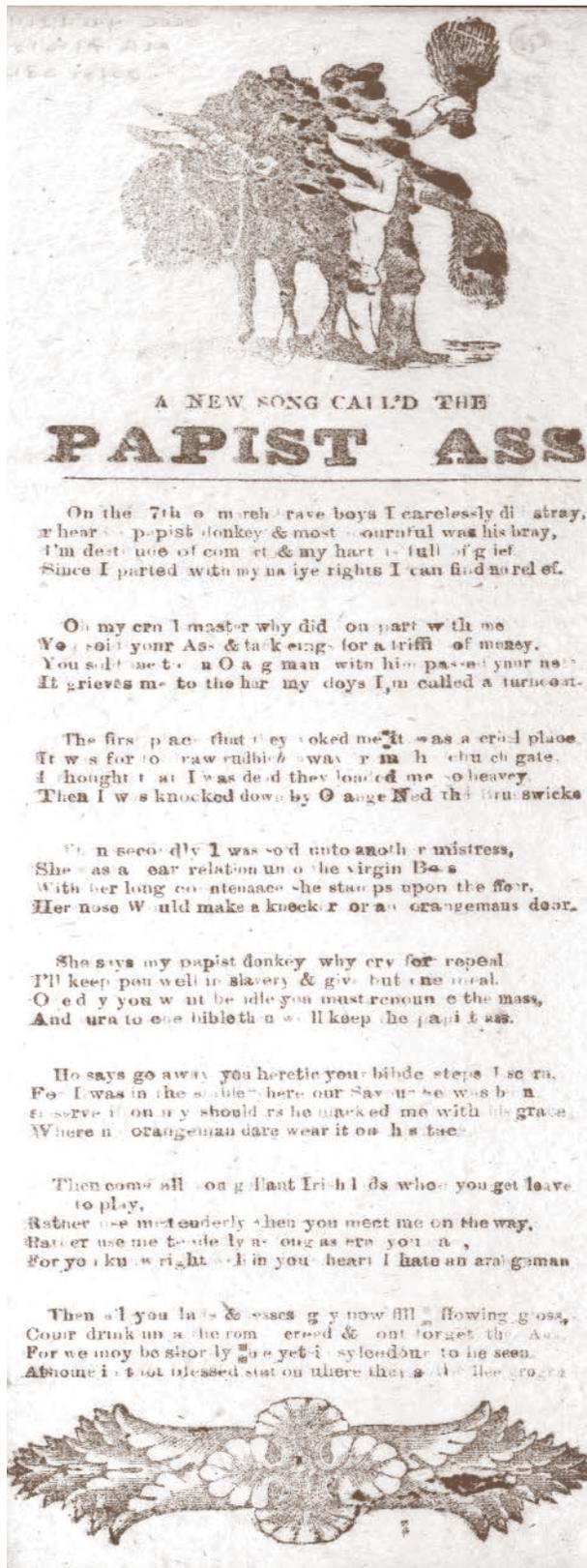


Fig. 2: "A new song call'd The Papist Ass" (Dublin: Peter Brereton, c. 1867).

cheap print and art reproduction in rural Ireland. Both of these phenomena had close ties with the periodical press, which was largely responsible for the introduction of new technologies that radically increased the presence of printed images in Irish culture. Like the broadside, chapbook, and art print, periodicals altered the interior spaces of rural society. Samuel Lover, for instance, found a worthy subject in Irish cabin interiors in his texts and illustrations for the *Irish Penny Magazine* (1831), a non-sectarian publication aimed at a large market. He wrote and illustrated a regular column entitled "National Proverbs," in which an image of country life was placed above a short story purporting to explain the origins of a particularly Irish turn of phrase. In "The Couple-Beggar" (1833) (fig. 3), a jovial celebration in a cabin marks the wedding day of two young lovers. The man in the center of the illustration holds a small chapbook at arm's length as the music and merriment reach a peak. Below the image, Lover's text warns of the desire to "marry in haste and repent in leisure," but the drawing places the chapbook, presumably full of songs, at the center of this important cultural ritual and moment of communal reverie.

The labors of attaining literacy, however, required that more serious texts accompany books of song; the chapbook, a short and inexpensively produced book marketed to a mass audience, featured genres such as chivalric romance, criminal biography, histories, and religious tracts.¹⁶ But by 1811, with the formation of the Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in Ireland (better known as the Kildare Place Society), an important new organization assumed the role of arbiter of popular literary taste. This philanthropic society sought to offset the deleterious effects of popular culture by flooding the market with inexpensive chapbooks that subtly promoted Protestant values. In order to compete, the Kildare Society determined to produce new works and distribute them under the guise of popular narratives. Consequently, its published volumes rarely carried authorial information and withheld the identity of the sponsoring organization. After a few initial attempts at authoring books themselves, the Dublin members of the society realized that their badly written attempts had

failed to sell.

In his capacity as the Kildare Society's literary advisor, one who reacted to the sorts of doggerel and romance found in broadsides and many chapbooks of his day, Reverend Charles Bardin (c. 1788–1841) played a central role in the making of nineteenth-century Irish print culture. This Protestant minister began to write and edit works, eventually producing fifty-two books for the society. His weaving of moral and practical instruction into his tales proved popular with interdenominational audiences; thousands of Kildare Society volumes were distributed and read in homes and schools across the country. The small and tattered books visible on the floor of James Brenan's (1837–1907) *The Schoolroom/Empty Pockets* (plate 29) or on the corner bookshelf of Howard Helmick's (1840–1907) *The Schoolmaster's Moment of Leisure* (c. 1888) (plate 41) suggest the size and uses of such educational tracts. Both paintings, however, offer a strong critique of national schools, which, upon their introduction in 1831, began to supplant the educational initiatives of the Kildare Place Society. Brenan and Helmick's images contain numerous books and loose sheets of paper scattered about, but significantly, nobody appears to use these educational materials. Brenan's unsupervised schoolboys argue, converse, and play while torn books are splayed out on the floor. Although one pupil in the background of the classroom seems to write, the painting conveys a sense of neglect and disorder in the schoolroom.¹⁷ Similarly, Helmick's scene focuses on the tensions between schoolhouse discipline (the switch on the table and fool's cap on the boy) and the flute-playing leisure of the schoolmaster—rather than the work and pleasure of the educational process. The discarded papers suggest not a vibrant print culture that contributes to national literacy, but the inadequacies of Irish educational policy.

The images and texts in *The Cottage Fire-Side* (1821), one of the less popular, because more didactic, works issued by the Kildare Society, offer especially useful material for the study of Irish interiors and print culture. The book's narrative develops as a series of conversations on topics as diverse as filial love, potatoes, vaccinations, sav-

ings banks, and, predictively, the pig. Its preface situates the reader in the familiar rural cabin and attempts to shape the moral and practical contours of that setting:

The object of the following Book is to give, in familiar language, such instructive advice as may



Fig. 3: Benjamin Clayton (c. 1805–54), “The Couple-Beggar,” wood engraving after a drawing by Samuel Lover (1797–1868), *Irish Penny Magazine* 1, no. 5 (Feb. 2, 1833): 37.



Fig. 4: “Inside of William’s Cottage,” wood engraving, *The Cottage Fire-Side* (1821; reprint, Dublin: Napper and White, 1826), 117.

be not only useful, but interesting to those for whose perusal it was intended. The reader, it is hoped, will not think that such characters as are here introduced are altogether imaginary;—similar topics are often the subjects of discourse in the cottages of our industrious peasantry; and we have reason to know, that few parts of Ireland are

so unfortunate as not to contain several capable of giving good advice, and many also willing to receive it.¹⁸

The volume identifies a female readership, writing about and for women of the largely Catholic tenant and cottier class through a stereotypical view of feminine docility and domestic responsibility. With his firmly Protestant Irish ideological aims, Bardin extols the benefits of subservience and deference to a benevolent landlord, hygiene, education, the medical establishment, and state financial institutions. These Kildare Society chapbooks offered Ireland's political and economic elites a rare opportunity to weigh in on significant issues in a forum less polemical or combative than public debate or pamphleteering.

The woodcuts illustrating *The Cottage Fire-Side* stress the value of reading, supporting Protestantism's emphasis on literacy as essential for scriptural knowledge. In one image of the ideal Irish family, a father instructs his young children from the large family Bible while the mother spins flax as part of the household economy (fig. 4). The image illustrates the life of William, a wise, virtuous, and sober local man, who after a day's work spends his evenings by the fireside teaching his children to read and telling stories to educate and entertain them.¹⁹ Family life for this industrious Protestant family is centered around a table holding a Bible and candlestick, a form of light found only in prosperous rural homes. The carefully lined-up platters, mugs, and dishes typically displayed on kitchen shelves, assert the family's orderliness. But despite Bardin's insistence on feminine literacy, gender roles remain clearly divided: the son looks over the Bible held by his father whereas the daughter gazes at her own future in her mother's spinning. The emphasis on reading is central, yet the image on this woodcut bears little relation to the life of a typical rural tenant. Even a quick survey of the interiors represented in *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story* suggests the differences between William's cottage and the homes painted by Francis William Topham (1808–77) (plates 12–13), Alfred Downing Fripp (1822–95) (plates 9–10) or even to the more pros-

78 perous tenant interiors depicted by Nicol (plates 23–24). In *The Cottage Fire-Side* woodcut, we instead see a refined orientation of space around a central table, an arrangement foreign to the dark, hearth-centered kitchens in typical small tenant or cottier households. Although *The Cottage Fire-Side* was far too didactic to be a bestseller, its respectable sales figures indicate the success of this early self-help book that reached thousands of schoolhouses and cabins.²⁰

Paintings of the same period capture the increasing importance of books in domestic life for middle-class Irish families. In Robert Gibbs's (fl. 1808–34) *The Reading Lesson—A Family Group* (1834) (fig. 5), that symbolic center of Irish life, the hearth, now lends its light and warmth to a prosperous family gathered for reading. A young girl sits on her instructor's lap and reads aloud to the delight of the onlookers; the figures in the foreground observe the two during the recitation, while those in the background close their eyes as they enjoy the sound of the child's voice. In addition to offering visual testimony of the lived experience of books such as those produced by the Kildare Society, the painting suggests the gap between those who could read and those who were illiterate—still a very large proportion of the Irish population in 1834.²¹ The young child, her instructor, and her mother gaze at the words of the text as she reads them, but the other figures merely close their eyes, in imitation of the sleeping child sprawled across the mother's lap, still too young for a reading lesson. Everyone involved with the scene is smiling except the children, who express, perhaps, the boredom and frustration of the struggle for literacy.

Like the broadside, the chapbook that the family in Gibb's painting reads connects literacy and orality. Reading aloud was common practice within households, allowing everyone to take part in the news of the day, adventures in far-away places, and instruction in the tasks of cooking, farming, and sewing. Though largely anonymous as an author, Bardin shaped the reading practices of a nation through such texts; nevertheless, his wholesome and morally uplifting works were always under threat from the more subversive and increasingly popular literature of the marketplace.



Fig. 5: Robert Gibbs (fl. 1808–34), *The Reading Lesson—A Family Group*, 1834. Oil on canvas, 14 x 10 in., Gorry Gallery, Dublin.

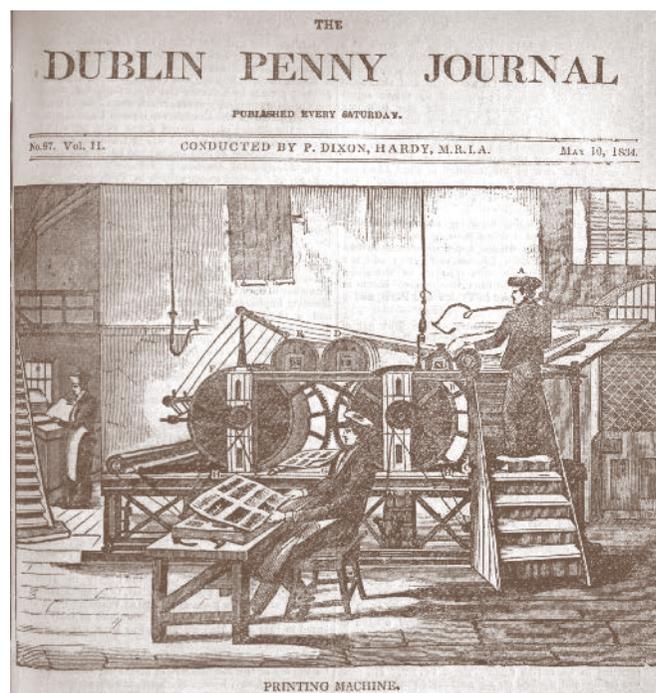


Fig. 6: Benjamin Clayton (c. 1805–54), “Printing Machine,” wood engraving, *Dublin Penny Journal* 2, no. 97 (May 10, 1834).

This strategy of marketing texts at low prices to a wide audience spilled over into the publishing of periodicals. Such inexpensive texts experienced great success from the 1840s as the *Irish Penny Journal* (1833–34) and the *Dublin Penny Journal* (1832–36) altered the flow of information within Ireland. John Boyne's *The County Chronicle* (1809) (plate 1) depicts how earlier public readings of periodicals brought local people together, offering political and social information otherwise unavailable to rural communities. The town's barber-surgeon, identified by the scissors in his coat pocket, stands on a box to proclaim the local paper's latest news while a man in the background checks the almanac posted on the wall of the public house. Ireland's early nineteenth-century political tensions provide the context for the image, as the many characters, distinguished by their dress and their various reactions, hear about the threat of French invasion during the Napoleonic wars. Capturing the political and social interactions of those gathered in this public space, Boyne suggests how the growing role of print culture and increased literacy became catalysts for the involvement of Irish country people in civic life.²²

Without the major revolutions in technology at the beginning of the nineteenth century, popular print culture would have never taken hold of the imagination of Irish men and women. Advances in stereotyping, lithography, wood pulp paper, and steam power gave the century its textual flavor. Philip Dixon Hardy, editor of the *Dublin Penny Journal*, often ran stories and illustrations conveying his enthusiastic support for advances in print technology. The article “A familiar description of printing in all its branches” and its accompanying engraving (fig. 6) demystify the inner workings of the pressroom and of the production of print artifacts that would make their way into the rural cabin. Through both images and text, the article describes stages of the print process: from the compositor's desk at the back of the illustration, through the large multi-roller press, to the emergence of the printed periodical at the editor's table in the foreground.

Although in some recent numbers of a contemporary *Journal*, an elaborate description of the

process of printing has been given to the public, still, as numbers of our readers never see that publication, and as our *Printing Machine* is rather a novelty, being the only one of the kind in Ireland, we have determined to devote our present number to a familiar description of printing in all its branches.²³

Hardy was quick to show off the new technologies that efficiently and speedily brought the printed word into Irish homes. The steam-powered press depicted in the engraving on the initial page of the journal produced three thousand impressions in an hour, a huge increase over the two hundred fifty or so possible on the hand press.²⁴ Hardy's article educated a mass reading audience and sought to open up markets by familiarizing potential customers with the capabilities of the newest machines. The *Dublin Penny Journal* illustrated rapidly changing trends in Irish print culture, for by the end of the nineteenth century the technologies Hardy described in his imagery and text led to the dominance of periodicals and mass-produced books rather than of broadsides and chapbooks—and an ensuing transformation of Irish reading habits.

The paintings and printed items in *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story* play a role in illustrating a complex network of printed artifacts found in the Irish cabin: chapbooks, broadsides, and periodicals, but also advertisements, political membership cards, warrants, leases, prayer cards, and a host of other ephemera and official documents. Just as the hearth, furniture, ceramics, tools, and utensils found in the Irish cabin define a way of life and a cultural tradition, the visual evidence of these printed objects suggests the rural community's association with a larger and increasingly active world of print culture.



NOTES

- 1 Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 243. Kinmonth's observation holds true for the study of reading practices in general. Scholars such as Niall Ó Ciosáin and J. R. R. Adams have laid the groundwork for investigating print and popular culture in nineteenth-century Ireland, but the visual records documenting the presence and uses of printed materials in that culture have yet to be explored. See Niall Ó Ciosáin, *Print and Popular Culture in Ireland 1750–1850* (1997; reprint, Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2010) and J. R. R. Adams, *Print and the Common Man: Popular Culture in Ulster, 1700–1900* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University of Belfast, 1987).
- 2 See Antonia McManus, *The Irish Hedge School and its Books, 1695–1831* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002); Ciara Breathnach and Catherine Lawless, eds., *Visual, material and print culture in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010); Martin Fanning and Raymond Gillespie, eds., *Print Culture and Intellectual Life in Ireland, 1660–1941* (Dublin: Woodfield Press, 2006); Bernadette Lally, *Print Culture in Loughrea, 1850–1900: Reading, Writing and Printing in an Irish Provincial Town* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008).
- 3 The nineteenth-century revolution in print technology brought cost- and time-saving techniques like the adoption of steam presses and stereotyping (printing from metal plates rather than individual type) that greatly reduced the cost of printing—allowing for larger print runs, more individual titles, and a relative ease in reissuing bestsellers.
- 4 Ó Ciosáin, *Print and Popular Culture*, 32–33.
- 5 Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 13.
- 6 Anna Maria Hall [Mrs. S. C. Hall], *Tales of Irish Life and Character* (Edinburgh: T. N. Foulus, 1909), n.p.
- 7 See Leslie Shepard, *The Broadside Ballad: A Study in Origins and Meaning* (Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates, 1962).
- 8 Ó Ciosáin, *Print and Popular Culture*, 59.
- 9 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006).
- 10 See Colin Neilands, "Irish Broadside Ballads: Performers and Performances," *Folk Music Journal* 6, no. 2 (1991): 209–22.
- 11 Seumas MacManus, *The Rocky Road to Dublin* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 141–42.
- 12 Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 189.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 189–90.
- 14 W. W. Fenn, "Erskine Nicol, A.R.A.," in *Some Modern Artists and their Work*, ed. Wilfred Meynell (London: Cassel, 1883), 150–52.
- 15 See Laurel Brake and Marysa Demoor, "Introduction: The Lure of Illustration," in *The Lure of Illustration in the Nineteenth Century: Picture and Press* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1–16.
- 16 Ó Ciosáin, *Print and Popular Culture*, 12.
- 17 Kinmonth suggests that Brenan's painting, conveying the general feeling of neglect in a national school, may well be a work entitled *Bankrupt*, exhibited in Dublin in 1888. See Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 258.
- 18 *The Cottage Fire-Side* (1821; reprint, Dublin: Napper and White, 1826), 7–8.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 118.
- 20 Adams, *Print and the Common Man*, 104.
- 21 The census of 1841 is the earliest study of literacy in Ireland. Forty-seven percent of the population over five years old was able to read, according to the census findings. For a nuanced account of the census results on literacy see Ó Ciosáin, *Print and Popular Culture*, 37–55.
- 22 Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 211–13.
- 23 "A familiar description of printing in all of its branches," *Dublin Penny Journal* 2, no. 97 (May 10, 1834).
- 24 *Ibid.*

CLERICAL ERRORS: READING DESIRE IN A NINETEENTH-CENTURY IRISH PAINTING

Joseph Nugent

AN ARM RAISED IN BLESSING, HEADS BOWED IN SUPPLICATION: FROM THE PEAT-stained walls of a traditional Irish cottage, the Sacred Heart of Jesus gazes down with loving care. *Mass in a Connemara Cabin* (c. 1883) (plate 43, fig. 1), by Aloysius O’Kelly (1853–1936) offers a comforting image of the pious Irish home through the happy convergence of priest and people. And yet ... a misplaced missal, an upturned hat, a priest somewhat too young, a young girl too demure, a cottage surprisingly clean—and need that image on the wall be torn just as it is? With unexpected solecisms such as these, the artist entices viewers to give his painting another look. Comforting myths about Irish piety, O’Kelly suggests, might deserve a reassessment.

Despite the painting’s title, here is no rude cabin, but a solidly respectable dwelling, its thick stone walls visible at the window, a second room evident at back, and above, a loft with a mattress. These householders are people of some substance, for the good-sized dash churn implies ownership of at least one cow. And this rural home boasts an indoor lamp, as well as an oleograph of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The dresser, carved and beveled, exhibits the family “delph” (as the Irish generically termed their dishware): plates, bowls, a decorated jug, and five cups in a line, each with its matching saucer. Displayed on the top of this piece of furniture, ubiquitous in the more comfortable rural home, rests a willow-patterned serving dish that suggests Sunday roasts served in this kitchen. Behind the painter

we must imagine the hearth, around which family members would gather on simple stools that have been removed for this event. Only the plain but finished kitchen chair remains, a fit resting place for the priest’s top hat. O’Kelly depicts a rural Irish family graced with the singular honor of hosting the “stations”—a Mass in their own home.

Thanks in large part to Niamh O’Sullivan’s discovery and interpretation of the painting, Aloysius O’Kelly is now acknowledged as among the first rank of Irish artists.¹ In his employment as Special Artist for the *Illustrated London News* in the early 1880s, during the rural agitation known as the Land

Wars, O’Kelly documented the struggles of the Irish poor against their landlords, graphically describing the ugliness of boycotts and the cruelty of evictions. The artist’s depiction of the relationship between a priest and his flock in *Mass in a Connemara Cabin* should be



Fig. 1: Aloysius O’Kelly (1853–1936), *Mass in a Connemara Cabin*, c. 1883. Oil on canvas, 54 1/4 x 72 in., on long term loan to the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin from the people of St. Patrick’s, Edinburgh and the Trustees of the Archdiocese of St. Andrews and Edinburgh (showing details).

82 viewed within the context of his nationalist politics and sympathy for Irish tenants. O’Kelly knew the people of Connemara well and lived among them—perhaps in this very dwelling—when he painted the image.² This richly detailed work offers several visual elements that open up the social and political world of rural Ireland in the 1880s.

But by 1883 the holding of stations was a custom already under threat. O’Kelly’s painting focuses on a moment of transformation of the Irish church, one that can justly be termed “revolutionary.”³ By the dawn of the new century, twenty years after the scene here depicted, Irish Catholics had submitted to a harsh and proscriptive clerical authoritarianism that permeated every aspect of their daily lives. *Mass in a Connemara Cabin* serves as a visual document, an early window onto a newly developing relationship between the Irish priest and his parishioners that began to collapse only late in the twentieth century.

THE PRIEST

Resplendent in white, the young priest dominates the painting—the kitchen in which he stands and the figures worshipping below (fig. 2). Its floors swept, the room has been made spotless in anticipation of his coming, the kitchen table transformed into an altar to receive the precious instruments of the Eucharist. Mass is now in progress, and O’Kelly captures a moment after the Consecration when the clergyman has turned to face his peasant congregation. Tall, fresh-faced, smooth-featured, good-looking, he stands in full view, erect but somewhat ungainly—self-conscious, uneasy, curiously flushed. He looks forward, not into the eyes of his people, but above their heads, gazing into some unknowable place. From the copious folds of his richly embroidered vestments, his right arm stretches forward. Behind him on the chair, he has placed his everyday clothing, the black top hat and coat that he wore upon entering this dwelling. Before and beneath him, his kneeling parishioners are gathered in their best homespun garments, which honor the importance of this communal ritual. They do not (dare not?) look into the eye of this young man on the threshold of his ministry. Only a single

child, seemingly expressing our own puzzlement at a figure so slight, yet one before whom old women prostrate themselves, peers quizzically at his face.

The priest looks no more than twenty-five years old, only recently ordained at the National Episcopal Seminary at Maynooth College; with its Gothic architecture



Fig. 2: Detail of priest, Aloysius O’Kelly (1853–1936), *Mass in a Connemara Cabin*, c. 1883.

and air of bourgeois rectitude, the seminary exists a world away from this rural cabin. For seven years, this young man had risen from his straw bed at five o’clock each morning in an unheated room, prayed on his knees, and prepared for Mass. He endured a two and a half hour wait before being fed in an unheated refectory; on winter mornings, some students’ fingers were too numb to eat the meager provisions. A scanty break-

fast was followed by an avalanche of classes—Rhetoric, Rational Philosophy, Logic, Metaphysics and Ethics, Dogma, Canon Law, Mental and Natural Philosophy, Sacred Rhetoric—long hours of study, a barely edible dinner, more classes, more study, a light supper, prayer, then a welcome rest at ten o’clock at night in a room lit only by the candle he himself provided. Near him was the “gaunt” infirmary, where some students lay dying of tuberculosis.⁴ Those who remained often returned home sick and anemic.⁵

The path to the Irish priesthood was never likely to be easy, for discipline was ever the imperative. The National Seminary was founded in 1795 by Parliament and an Irish hierarchy anxiously eyeing the mayhem of revolutionary France, where many Irish priests had hitherto been trained. The college’s trustees were dominated by Catholic bishops, nobility, and gentry at one in their distrust of radicalism among their subordinates. On the day he entered, the young seminarian was handed a copy of the *Regula Pietatis et Disciplinae Domesticae*—the *Rule of Piety*—that would shape every day of his life.⁶ With the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1869, life became harder still for young men like the one in O’Kelly’s painting, as the government ceded control to a group no less invested in authority and power than itself—the Irish hierarchy. The “semi-monastic austerity” now enforced reflected a rigorous new Catholicism promulgated by Cardinal Paul Cullen, papal intimate and archbishop of Dublin since 1852.⁷ Cullen demanded a trained cadre of priests, modernized and Romanized, to rule the new Irish church he planned. His bishops turned their eyes on a Maynooth they judged improperly lax: “The whole system might become,” said Bishop David Moriarty in a nicely Tridentine turn of phrase, “more absolute” and above all “humility and obedience” must be impressed upon the youth.⁸ Maynooth “need[s] nothing,” the powerful Visiting Committee proclaimed in 1871, “except active, unceasing and general regulation.”⁹ Cullen’s demands made St. Patrick’s College an uneasy place in the years that O’Kelly’s young priest would have begun his training.

The experiment was to be carried out in splendid seclusion. The order went out that “the gate to the

outside world was always to be closed.”¹⁰ Ingress and egress were equally denied in order to guard against the temptations of secular society. Once a week, on Wednesday, a chaperoned walk passed through the village in prim procession. Outfitted in the authorized garb, however, “neither picturesque nor canonical” (black pantaloons, short black gaiters, and an odd high-standing clerical collar), the student was unlikely to abscond.¹¹ Some, like Joseph O’Connor, however, leaped over the wall, although knowing what lay before them: “home folk would give us the cold shoulder and speak of us in hated breath.”¹² The young man in the picture who remained at the college would have seen his family once a year on his visit home to the West; even there, he was monitored, his return to Maynooth permitted only after his impeccable behavior had been certified by his parish priest. Others refused to return, risking ever to be known as a “spoiled priest.” With some justification, the anti-Catholic polemicist M. J. F. McCarthy was to assert that the Maynooth seminarian “is kept under a restraint not unlike that which prevails in asylums for harmless lunatics, or penitentiaries.”¹³

If there was no socialization with the outside world, there was little enough within the walls. Behind Maynooth’s locked gates, an “architecture of containment”¹⁴ ensured that “everywhere the walls went up, physical and psychological.”¹⁵ Armed with new powers, deans and monitors spelled out the new rules in minute detail, patrolling the grounds and governing every aspect of the students’ behavior. Such was the relentless surveillance that O’Kelly’s young priest endured that all movement across the campus had to be undertaken two-by-two in long snaking lines. Fraternizing with the servants at the seminary was unthinkable: “Let none of them attempt to enter the bed-chambers of the attendants, servants, the kitchen, pantry and other such places” the *Rule of Piety* warned.¹⁶ Even among fellow students, communication was difficult, for although talk was generally permitted, silence was the norm.¹⁷ Team games were prohibited although croquet had “a decorum suited to aspiring ecclesiastics.”¹⁸ The religious imperative of celibacy was stealthily policed in this intensely homosocial universe. Young men knew that friendships were looked

upon with great suspicion and that so-called “special friendships” were monitored with particular care: “The students are absolutely prohibited from visiting one another’s rooms on any pretense whatever.”¹⁹ If fraternizing raised eyebrows, privacy was no less suspect; thus the young seminarian’s room door must be always open. These were lonely times.

Worse was to come as his ordination approached—and as hardly a month passed “without two or three voluntary or compulsory defections.”²⁰ Feverish antici-



Fig. 3: Detail of Sacred Heart, Aloysius O’Kelly (1853–1936), *Mass in a Connemara Cabin*, c. 1883.

pation sometimes tipped into “Sacred Dread,” a terror before the power that the priesthood would bestow upon him; many saints had endeavored to escape ordination “by cutting off their fingers, or otherwise maiming their bodies,” according to Cardinal Herbert Vaughan.²¹ But the privation and loneliness of all those years would surely be dispelled on the day of his ordination, the glorious culmination of his short life to date. Then, in the words of the curate of Kilcloon in Joseph Guinan’s eponymous novel, “all [would be] bidden to the joyous marriage-feast to celebrate the espousal of the young

priest with his peerless bride without spot or blemish, Holy Church, to whom he would plight his troth for ever and aye.”²² Joined by a hundred or so others, the aspirant lay prostrate at the altar of Maynooth’s chapel before the bishop. With the words “receive the power to offer sacrifice to God, and to celebrate Masses for the living and the dead,” he was finally elevated, as Catholic dogma had promised him, to a place “higher than angels.” And after—“love’s young dream may be sweet,” wrote Guinan, “but sweeter far is the joy of living for the young priest during the first days after his ordination; his Nirvana, his rebirth to a second childhood of new and untasted delights.”²³

This consummation was not to last. “I was not a priest for a week,” Guinan’s fictional curate concedes, “until I found that in the eyes of even the most familiar friends, of the relatives who had known me from childhood, I had been transformed by my ordination into a superior being, reborn to a new and higher life which had little in common with theirs.”²⁴ Canon Patrick Augustine Sheehan felt the same cosmic gap: “What [a] gulf, yawning and impassable, is between [us].... The priest moves through his people, amongst them, but not of them! Consecrated by solemn oaths ... he walks his solitary way through life.”²⁵ And for the church, that was as it should be, for “the difference between the priest and the good layman should be as great as that between heaven and earth.”²⁶ “It is not to be denied,” Cardinal Henry Manning sighed, “that the life of a priest is a life of austere loneliness.”²⁷ Ordination would have brought no respite from isolation, but rather even deeper loneliness, to the young man in O’Kelly’s painting.

In *Mass in a Connemara Cabin*, the artist highlights such continued isolation through a series of visual tropes. O’Kelly has contrived an elevation that makes the young priest literally stand apart, with a seemingly elongated body adding to the effect. His stiff and erect stance contrasts with the stooped bodies of his flock. Most distinctive is the splendid white cassock in which he is enveloped, so different from the earthy browns and reds in which almost all in his congregation are painted. The grandeur of the vestments themselves emphasizes the comparative fragility, physical and emotional, of the

84 youth who wears them. His personal aesthetic appears distinctly antagonistic to his cabin surroundings: his clean-cut image, modern and middle-class, seems out of kilter with the rough-hewn Connemara peasantry before him—with all but one.

For the young woman kneeling before the priest is of a piece with him. In her demeanor she is divided from the austere community of worshippers about her while her detached expression suggests some internal isolation. Although remote, she and the priest are so united by O’Kelly’s skillful artistry that she glows with the same intense light that illuminates him. Her radiant face elevates her above her fellow worshippers, and although she kneels, her erect stance echoes that of her priest. Moreover, her uncovered head, with her straight hair pulled back behind her ears, reflects his. In her dress we see the same contours that appear in his priestly *alb*; her flowing dress is similarly pleated, her high waist drawn in—faintly erotically—as is his by the girdle, the full sleeve of each bent at the elbow. His decorated *chasuble*, white with a border, appears in miniature as a scarf about her shoulders. She is very young, and he, of course, is far too young.

O’Kelly’s scene in a Connemara cabin occurs under the signature of the Sacred Heart (see plate 90 for a representative example), placed centrally in the painting (fig. 3). The viewer’s eye is drawn to that image by the framing lines of sight created by the window on one side and the open door and dresser on the other. Two further details direct the viewer’s gaze—the priest’s raised arm, parallel to that of Jesus and the upraised arms of one kneeling woman, at once reflecting the angle of Jesus’s arm and pointing to the image. The red of that heart bleeds out to suffuse the painting with the distinctive color of this ubiquitous icon of the Irish home, the domestic face of Jesus. Its reassuring glow had spread with great rapidity throughout the land ever since the solemn consecration of the country to that cause in 1873.

The warm redness in which this scene is bathed is symbolic: devotion to the Sacred Heart rests on the belief that the human heart was the seat of love and affection. The image’s origins in the ancient cult of the wounds of Christ appears startlingly erotic to modern

eyes.²⁸ By the 1850s, the face of Jesus in these representations had become increasingly sensuous, but also androgynous. At once offering itself as a refuge for the lonely and imploring the viewer’s sympathy, the image became suffused with warmth: the heart itself, described as “the furnace of ardent love,” serving as a powerful comfort in the cold world of post-Famine Ireland.²⁹ In the image, the prim Victorian language of romantic desire is transmuted into a vehicle for spiritual longing.



Fig. 4: Detail of top hat, Aloysius O’Kelly (1853–1936), *Mass in a Connemara Cabin*, c. 1883.

“When we enjoy the presence of one whom we love, our heart, by a mysterious but irresistible attraction, leans towards his heart,” an 1874 manual instructed.³⁰ Prolonged gazing into the eyes of Jesus was advanced as the key to his heart: “Take care to have an image of the adorable Heart of Jesus. Place it so that your eyes may fall on it often.... Cover this picture with divine kisses.”³¹ In sermons the language of adoration remained strikingly physical: “The object of our reverent worship is no visionary symbol, or shadowy figure,” insisted Canon

Sheehan, “but the real, living, pulsing Heart of our Divine Lord ... that beats in the breast of the glorified Humanity of Jesus ... that throbs under the fingers of the Priest.”³²

Aloysius O’Kelly, however, did not paint *Mass in a Connemara Cabin* to suggest some venal impropriety—Fenian though he was. Were he inclined to attack the Catholic Church in his art, he might have chosen as its representative what he perceived as the uglier faces of Irish religious authority, an anti-Fenian bishop, perhaps. To choose as the emblem of the emerging church a young priest of innocent expression, not ground down by years of harsh training and as yet unspoiled by the office, was to rebuke the church authorities who would have it otherwise. *Mass in a Connemara Cabin* is an optimistic painting that places its faith in a human nature that can survive years of bodily and emotional deprivation and still assert the value of love—even if necessarily covert love.

O’Kelly, a man of the world who had lived in Paris where Catholics gave their churchmen more latitude with their desires, recognized that emotion’s multifaceted nature. As a realist unwilling to deny the humanity of a young man, even if a priest, nor obscure the beauty of a young girl, even when on her knees, he seeks rather to reflect on the natural attraction that would exist between them: a lonely young man long isolated from human contact and a beautiful young girl caught in his resplendent presence.

THE HAT

The silk hat silhouetted in stark blackness against the pristine altar-cloth sits upturned on a simple peasant chair (fig. 4). An austere stranger in a countryman’s space, the hat’s formal rectitude stands in counterpoint to the colorful congregation bent in supplication. In a composition whose energy emerges largely from O’Kelly’s unlikely juxtapositions, here is an object of unambiguous meaning. In this painting the priest’s hat sets out to do what hats were designed to do in the real world of nineteenth-century Ireland: to impress upon the viewer the status, power, and prestige of the man who wore it.

The silk hat here reminds us that by background, training, and aspiration the Catholic priest was to be viewed by his flock as a man apart, a gentleman. The “devotional revolution”—whereby the church undertook a thoroughgoing transformation of Irish religiosity—provides the broad historical background of O’Kelly’s *Mass in a Connemara Cabin*.³³ The Land War of 1879 to 1882, in which pauperized tenants struggled against their landlords, lies in the immediate past. For the success of the church’s ambitions, the priest, the church’s agent on the ground, must be seen to have not just the reality but also the trappings of power; the hat O’Kelly sets on the chair of the rural home is a striking symbol of this power. Fashion historian Diana Crane notes that until recent times, the hat was “the article of clothing that performed the most important role in proclaiming social distinctions among men.”³⁴

The young priest depicted here had surely grown up in a world familiar with silk hats. Since its inauguration in 1795, the National Seminary at Maynooth had seldom opened its gates to the children of the poor. Charging substantial fees limited intake to the respectable classes, and private letters of recommendation from parish priests contributed as well to such limitation. By 1808, four out of five clerical students were the sons of “graziers” or large farmers,³⁵ and a goodly number were the children of “opulent merchants.”³⁶ Priestly wealth had scandalized the German Fr. Joseph Prost, traveling in Ireland thirty years before O’Kelly’s painting was completed. “Those who came from this institution [Maynooth] take on more the airs of ‘Gentlemen’ rather than becoming apostles of the poor,” he complained.³⁷ And in 1871, a new fee of £30 per annum was imposed on young seminarians. The change was symbolic as well as financial, for it marked, wrote a contemporary student, “the end of the old order.”³⁸ If that old order was selective, the new one, to which the young man in this painting belongs, was more nakedly elitist—and powerful.

Soon, high silk hats and the spiraling of priestly vanity that accompanied the church’s ascent in the social order were to become the norm. Adopting the honorific “Father” was one small but significant way in which

a curate such as the young man here would assert his preeminence. Walter McDonald recalled that when he entered Maynooth in 1871, priests at the seminary “were plain ‘Mister.’”³⁹ The semantic shift was thus symptomatic of a general inflation in the church’s self-regard and ambitions. “It was about the same time,” wrote McDonald, “that the custom began to prevail in Ireland of addressing all bishops as ‘the Most Reverend’ ... every priest who is not quite a young curate has come

DENIS MORAN,
Clerical Tailor,
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£2 15s. Od.



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**THE CLERICAL SUIT
OF IRISH MANUFACTURE,**
17 £5 0s. Od.

Fig. 5: The well-dressed Irish priest. Advertisement from the *Irish Catholic Directory*, 1883.

to be addressed as ‘Very Reverend.’” “As a national Church,” he protested, “we are given to that form of flattery which makes every captain a major or a colonel and every sub-constable a sergeant.”⁴⁰ Maynooth was manufacturing gentlemen, not just producing priests.

Nineteenth-century conventions of class, involving a mastery of manners, etiquette, and of the niceties that defined social relations, were honored in the

national seminary; the young priest-to-be was trained to be “courteous and condescending to persons of a low station.”⁴¹ “The humblest people,” Dr. Moriarty had explained to the Maynooth Commission “are pleased and gratified by delicate and refined manners in a clergyman.”⁴² The system he propounded “imposes upon them a gentlemanly restraining ... it improves their manners.”⁴³ Such attention to Victorian proprieties reflects the church’s stake in respectability and its investment in the *embourgeoisement* of Irish society that was transforming the social landscape of the country. The church’s far-sighted leader, Cardinal Cullen, recognized that in an era of increasing social stratification, the future of the island would be in the hands of the rising professional classes.⁴⁴ Ergo, the priestly state should become a profession.

Cullen was determined to form the clergy into a controlling order imbued with authority by reason of rank. To that end, he enforced strict behavioral norms, for example, the prohibition on drinking in public and attending race meetings or the theater. He introduced standard fees for services such as baptism, marriage, and burial and contrived to have Maynooth College become part of the Catholic University of Ireland. The consequence was to produce a man whose “natural” social equals were among the professional classes, now nearly as often Catholic as Protestant. When the Corsican journalist Paschal Grousset traveled on the holiday ferry from Kerry in 1887, he remarked how comfortably the “sleek, fat, and prosperous” clergy blended in with the merchants, judges, and barristers with whom they had shared their vacation.⁴⁵ He noted their watches on gold chains, and their traveling bags of good bright leather, and that “their very umbrella has a look of smartness.”⁴⁶ “The only prosperous trade in Ireland,” he scoffed, is “the clerical trade.”⁴⁷

If the priest would be a gentleman, he must look the part. Sartorial and behavioral standards were most immediately set by his opposite number in the parish, the Church of Ireland vicar; the people were “accustomed,” as Donal Kerr points out, “to an Anglican clergy drawn from the gentry and the middle class.”⁴⁸ Why should the Catholic priest be any less refined or elevated? He,

86 like his Protestant counterpart, must be mounted on a horse for official business—funerals, sick calls, and parish visits. He must learn to ride, as did William Carleton’s eponymous “priestling” in *Denis O’Shaughnessy Going to Maynooth*, with “all the lordliness of the parochial priest.”⁴⁹ And he must be dressed appropriately (fig. 5). No longer permissible were the improprieties that Fr. Prost had noted in Enniskillen, where the local clergyman arrived for Mass “in a dress coat and a black neck-tie.”⁵⁰ The priest must now walk out in a standard uniform when in the public eye; for his black suit, cassock, and Roman collar would advertise his separation from the common crowd. The silk hat with which he topped off the outfit would suggest not his distinctness, but his social equality with those at the elevated level of society to which he now belonged. At the pinnacle of that society was the other silk hat wearer of the parish, the landlord. O’Kelly’s foregrounding of the hat is a reminder that although the Land War was a contest over rents and property, it was also about authority—and about deference due.

Mass in a Connemara Cabin provides no visual suggestions of what historian Tom Bartlett terms the “explosion of rhetoric, rage and resistance” that had only recently ended outside the doors of dwellings such as this rural cabin.⁵¹ As the Land War became a battle for the ownership of the farms of Ireland and for the dwellings that stood on them, Connemara priests were early and committed participants. Months before Charles Stewart Parnell founded the Irish National Land League in August 1879, a letter signed by “the clergy and the people of Connemara” had “proclaim[ed] to the world” its opposition to the “vile and . . . detestable . . . system” of landlordism.⁵² In the west of Ireland, as elsewhere, the League’s unit of organization was frequently the parish, its meeting place the chapel gates, its secretary the priest.

The “new order” of young priests was particularly active in organizing and fundraising. One such curate, fresh from the seminary, is Canon Sheehan’s fictional young priest in the novel *Luke Delmege* (1901). Recently ordained, Luke is a thoroughly modern man—idealistic, forward-looking, and keen to show that he can lead.

Pressed by his new flock to become president of the local branch of the League, he agrees. At the inaugural meeting, Luke thrills his parishioners with a “sensational speech” in support of the first resolution: “that we, the members of the Rossmore branch of the Land League hereby solemnly bind ourselves not to take off our hats to any man in future, except the priest.”⁵³ The plot of Ireland’s Land War may have been the toppling of the landlord; its subplot was his replacement by the priest.

Twenty years later, fresh-faced young curates such as Luke Delmege had become the parish priests of an Ireland that expressed deference chiefly to them. “As one meets him in the small towns of the West,” wrote the French traveler Paul Dubois, “with his high hat and sombre garb, his great strong frame and ruddy face leaves a striking image in the mind. As he walks by . . . every hat is lifted, but he answers only with an amiable word addressed to each, for if he returned salutes his hat would very soon be worn out. He seems,” concluded Dubois, “to be a king in his kingdom.”⁵⁴ Through much of the next century, the people’s hats would continue to be doffed to these new parochial monarchs of Ireland.



NOTES*

- * I would like to thank my colleagues at Boston College; Marjorie Howes, Kevin Kenny and Mike Cronin; my research assistant, Ali McDonald; and the editorial staff at *Éire-Ireland*, for help with this essay.
- 1 Niamh O’Sullivan, *Aloysius O’Kelly: Art, Nation, Empire* (Dublin: Field Day, 2010). *Mass in a Connemara Cabin* (plate 44), recently discovered in a New York rectory, was exhibited in that city in 1899. The oil painting (plate 43) was returned to Ireland in 2002, following its rediscovery in St. Patrick’s Parish, Edinburgh. It was first shown in the Paris Salon in 1884, later at the Royal Academy, and in the Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin, in 1889.
 - 2 Niamh O’Sullivan, “*Mass in a Connemara Cabin*: Religion and the Politics of Painting,” *Éire-Ireland: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Irish Studies* 40, nos.1–2 (Spring/Summer 2005): 126–39.
 - 3 See Emmet J. Larkin, “The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850–75,” *American Historical Review* 77, no. 3 (1972): 625–52.
 - 4 Patrick Corish, *Maynooth College, 1795–1995* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1995), 234.
 - 5 For examination of the young man’s progress to the priesthood, I draw in particular upon the writings of five clerical students, contemporaries or near-contemporaries of the figure depicted in *Mass in a Connemara Cabin*. Each has left us a memoir or semi-autobiographical novel(s) describing or pertaining to their path to ordination: Joseph O’Connor (entered Maynooth 1895, never ordained), *Hostage to Fortune* (Dublin: Michael F. Moynihan, 1951); Canon Patrick Augustine Sheehan (ordained 1875), *My New Curate: A Story Gathered from the Stray Leaves of an Old Diary* (Boston: Marlier, 1900) and *Luke Delmege* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1902); Joseph Guinan (ordained 1894) *The Island Parish*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son, 1908) and *The Curate of Kildoon* (Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son, 1912); Gerald (Jeremiah) O’Donovan (ordained 1893), *Father Ralph* (London: Macmillan, 1913); and Walter McDonald (ordained 1876) *Reminiscences of a Maynooth Professor* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1967).
 - 6 “Report Of Her Majesty’s Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Management and Government of the College of Maynooth,” (Dublin: Alexander Thom and Sons, 1855), 131 (hereafter cited as “Maynooth Report”).
 - 7 O’Connor, *Hostage to Fortune*, 105.
 - 8 Emmet Larkin, *The Roman Catholic Church and the Home Rule Movement in Ireland, 1870–1874* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 333.
 - 9 Corish, *Maynooth College*, 228.
 - 10 *Ibid.*, 229.

- 11 John Healy, *Maynooth College: Its Centenary History* (Dublin: Brown and Nolan, 1895), 427.
- 12 O'Connor, *Hostage to Fortune*, 128.
- 13 Michael John Fitzgerald McCarthy, *Irish Land and Irish Liberty: A Study of the New Lords of the Soil* (London: R. Scott, 1911), 364.
- 14 James M. Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).
- 15 Corish, *Maynooth College*, 229.
- 16 "Maynooth Report," 31.
- 17 P. Murray and R. O'Kennedy, "Dear Old Maynooth," *Irish Monthly* (Mar. 1891): 135–42.
- 18 Corish, *Maynooth College*, 281.
- 19 "Maynooth Report," 35.
- 20 O'Connor, *Hostage to Fortune*, 125.
- 21 Cardinal Herbert Vaughan, *The Young Priest* (London: Burns and Oates, 1904), 33.
- 22 Guinan, *The Curate of Kilkloon*, 6–7.
- 23 Ibid., 12.
- 24 Ibid., 72.
- 25 Herman Joseph Heuser, *Canon Sheehan of Doneraile: The Story of an Irish Parish Priest as Told Chiefly by Himself in Books, Personal Memoirs, and Letters* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1917), 365.
- 26 Pope Pius X quoted in G. Montague, ed., *The Popes and the Priest of Today: A Selection of Papal Documents* (Dublin: Claymore and Reynolds, 1956), 15.
- 27 Cardinal Henry Edward Manning, *The Eternal Priesthood* (New York: Catholic Publication Society, 1875), microfilm, 159.
- 28 See *Eigentliche Abbildung der Wunden*, issued by J. P. Steudner, Augsburg in the late seventeenth century in James Peto, *The Heart* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 106. Peto finds in this extraordinary illustration that the wounds of Christ take the unmistakable form of vaginas, and the nail, a penis. This similarity, "found repeatedly in Christian imagery," according to Peto, reflects the relationship between "spiritual, divine love and a more physical yearning.... This was seen as a legitimate way of entering into a relationship with Christ, harnessing earth-bound passions in the service of an altogether holier love of Jesus." Peto, *The Heart*, 105.
- 29 Marion Morgan, "The Sacred Heart of Jesus in Roman Catholic Tradition," *One in Christ* 24, no. 3 (1988): 223–36.
- 30 R. F. R. Pierik, *Catechism of the Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus* (Baltimore: Murphy, 1874), 25.
- 31 Ibid., 73.
- 32 Canon Patrick Augustine Sheehan and M. J. Phelan, *Sermons* (New York: Benziger, 1920), 72.
- 33 Larkin, "The Devotional Revolution," 625–52.
- 34 Diana Crane, *Fashion and its Social Agendas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 82.
- 35 K. Theodore Hoppen, *Ireland Since 1800: Conflict and Conformity*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1999), 76.
- 36 James H. Murphy, *Nos Autem* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1996), 2.
- 37 Joseph Prost, Emmet J. Larkin, and Herman Freudenberger, *A Redemptorist Missionary in Ireland, 1851–1854: Memoirs by Joseph Prost* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1998), 30.
- 38 Walter McDonald, *Reminiscences of a Maynooth Professor* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1967), 56.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 "Maynooth Report," 41.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Ibid., 40.
- 44 Already by 1861 one third of the merchant and professional classes was Catholic: thirty-two percent of physicians and surgeons, thirty-four percent of barristers, attorneys and solicitors, twenty-nine percent of civil engineers, and thirty-one percent of architects. Murphy, *Nos Autem*, 49.
- 45 Paschal Grousset, "Ireland's Disease: The English in Ireland, 1888," in *The Tourist's Gaze: Travellers in Ireland, 1800–2000*, ed. Glenn Hooper (Cork: Cork University Press, 1987), 142.
- 46 Ibid., 143.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Donal A. Kerr, *Peel, Priests, and Politics: Sir Robert Peel's Administration and the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, 1841–1846* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 247.
- 49 William Carleton, *Denis O'Shaughnessy Going to Maynooth* (London: George Routledge, 1845), 43.
- 50 Prost, *A Redemptorist Missionary*, 54.
- 51 Thomas Bartlett, *Ireland: A History* (New York: Cambridge, 2010), 318.
- 52 D. B. Cashman, *The Life of Michael Davitt: With a History of the Rise and Development of the Irish National Land League* (Boston: Murphy and McCarthy, 1881), 91.
- 53 Sheehan, *My New Curate*, 397.
- 54 Paul DuBois, *Contemporary Ireland [L'Irlande Contemporaine]* (Dublin: Maunsel, 1908), 494.

HOWARD EATON HELMICK REVISITED: MATRIMONY AND MATERIAL CULTURE THROUGH IRISH ART

Claudia Kinmonth

THE RECENT EMERGENCE OF PREVIOUSLY UNDISCOVERED WORK BY HOWARD EATON Helmick (1840–1907) on the art market has spurred new interest in the Irish images of an important American artist.¹ The inclusion of several paintings in *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story* and my involvement with that exhibition and its accompanying catalogue at the McMullen Museum offer further impetus to assemble and examine some of Helmick’s specifically Irish work. Recent research has also unearthed previously elusive biographical information; for the first time a photograph of the artist himself has even come to light (fig. 1).² Boston College’s exhibition probably represents the first prominent exhibition of Helmick’s Irish work in America since the artist’s death after a long illness on April 28, 1907, in Washington, DC.

In 1985, the National Gallery of Ireland purchased Helmick’s *Reading the News, Proclamation of the Land League* (1881) and placed the painting on permanent display. Since then, the first major public Irish institution to include a selection of the artist’s work was Cork’s Crawford Art Gallery in its 2006 exhibition *Whipping the Herring: Survival and Celebration in Nineteenth-Century Irish Art*, closely followed by the National Gallery of Ireland’s *A time and a place: Two Centuries of Irish Social Life*.³ Although smaller exhibitions of Irish genre painting had occurred in Ireland, none previously included Helmick’s work.⁴

Details of the artist’s training and background enhance our appreciation of his choice of subject matter and method. The son of a clerk, Howard Eaton Helmick was born in Zanesville, Ohio, allegedly in 1845. However, recent research shows that according

to early census records and his 1865 American passport application, he was probably born earlier, on May 10, 1840.⁵ His initial training was in the artistic department of the Ohio Mechanics Institute in Cincinnati; but moving with his parents and siblings to Philadelphia, he soon began to study under P. F. Rothermel at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts from 1862–64. The year after he graduated, the twenty-five-year-old Helmick applied for a passport in Washington; according to his friend Julian Hawthorne, “Some tragedy in his domestic life had sent him abroad.”⁶ But having emigrated to Europe, he stayed for about twenty-five years before finally returning to Washington, DC.⁷ From 1866–72 he studied in Paris, under Alexandre Cabanel (1823–89) at L’École des Beaux-Arts. We can easily see the influence of Helmick’s accomplished and award-winning teacher,



HOWARD HELMICK.

Fig. 1: “Artist Helmick Unsung In His Own Country,” the *Washington Times*, Jan. 28, 1914.

90 who was Napoleon III's favorite artist and specialized in carefully detailed narrative, historical, religious, and neoclassical paintings.⁸ Helmick was one of Cabanel's many pupils who showed work at the Paris Salon. Between 1868 and 1872, six of this American artist's titles are listed in French, and at the time he was apparently only "the second foreigner who was ever received there."⁹ Upon his return to America, he collaborated with the writer Clarence Cook to produce a generously illustrated biographical article entitled "An American Wilkie" that looks back on the artist's early career.

His student days were passed in Paris, where he and Henry Bacon were pupils of Cabanel; and when the Franco-Prussian war fluttered the studios of Paris and sent the artists adrift, he went with others to England, and after some stay in London wandered over to Ireland, where he found, in that land of changing lights and shadows in human life, as in nature, so many picturesque subjects, that before long he had all he could do to supply the demand for his pictures. It was a field till then almost undiscovered ...¹⁰

After settling in London from 1872 or 1873, Helmick became established and began to exhibit at the major British galleries. By 1879 he was an elected member of the Society of British Artists and by 1881, of the Society of Painter-Etchers.¹¹ Making a name for himself as a figure painter and etcher, yet accomplished in both oils and watercolors, he was "one of the first to take to color etching, his illustrations having appeared in some of the leading publications."¹² He exhibited many oils and watercolors, mainly in England; a study of their reviews and of the titles that survive from the various galleries and arts societies at which he exhibited gives us information about where Helmick lived, the price of his paintings, and sometimes about who bought and lent his work subsequently. According to Hawthorne, who once accompanied him to Ireland and watched him work, "If ever an exhibition is held of a collection of his works, the art world will have a sensation." Helmick's friend

explained that a dealer visiting the artist's studio would "pay him five hundred or a thousand pounds for the picture on the easel, and carry it off to be sold to a patron for twice or thrice as much."¹³

Many Helmick works that have come on to the commercial market recently can be linked to specific titles, but the long established practice of commercial galleries to add a vague title loosely to a painting for convenience makes it difficult to name any work with certainty. Specific titles were apparently unimportant to him during his life, so a painting's name is sometimes different from its engraved version, or the image is renamed when used as an illustration.¹⁴ On occasion, when an oil painting has a surviving old label or inscription on the reverse of the canvas, together with an exhibition number, identification can be made confidently. If a canvas has a legible date—and Helmick did usually sign and date his finished works clearly—then a link to a title also appearing in an exhibition index can be made. Occasionally a critic's description is sufficiently detailed to connect a surviving painting to its proper title. When the paintings appear as engravings, as some did serialized in the *Magazine of Art*, then positive identification is easier.¹⁵

Close scrutiny of Helmick's surviving work, set against years of research into the interiors of the Irish farmhouse and of a broad range of artists whose work was inspired by such interiors, informs my analysis of those aspects of Helmick's paintings dealing with the interdependent themes of matrimony, arranged marriage, and material culture in the context of the nineteenth-century rural farmhouse.¹⁶ Helmick's recurring interest in these themes is evident in his paintings and engravings, particularly from the 1870s and 1880s. In this period, working either from Dangan Cottage, Galway, or in the southwest in Kinsale, County Cork, he made repeated visits to Ireland. We know these locations primarily from studying the addresses that he supplied to London's Royal Academy (RA) whenever he exhibited work there.¹⁷ When describing Kinsale, a small picturesque coastal town in the extreme southwest of Ireland, Hawthorne wrote, "Helmick, in his roamings in quest of genre, had discovered it, and every winter afterwards had set up his easel there. The winter climate is deli-

ciously mild, so that you may sit at your open window in your shirt sleeves, as Helmick did to paint."¹⁸ Shedding further light on the range of the artist's interest, Hawthorne adds,

Nor are there any other girls so good to be painted, nor any youths more fit to woo them, nor any aged crones or gaffers more picturesque, nor any "interiors" more suitable to contain them. Then take the genius of Helmick, and the spell is wrought! ... Helmick guarded his discovery as a lover his mistress.¹⁹

Detailed analysis of the arrangements depicted by Helmick and his fellow genre painters assumes knowledge of the objects used in rural farmhouses and sometimes of their specific meanings. Further light can be shed by examining the work of a range of other artists who painted similar interiors, as well as by the usual, more predictable historical sources within an interdisciplinary methodology: written texts, rare probate inventories, object analyses, travel journals, reports on the poor, poetry, anthropological studies, statistics, and early diaries.

In London, Helmick exhibited nineteen pictures at the Royal Academy between 1873 and 1887 and also showed nine works as an elected member of the Royal Society of British Artists (RSBA).²⁰ Further afield, the Royal Institute of Fine Arts in Glasgow lists seven of his titles, Liverpool eleven, and more appeared in Manchester and Birmingham. That there was much less of a market for his work in Ireland presumably explains why Helmick only exhibited twice in Dublin, the second time with a painting that was lent rather than offered for sale (*Matchmaking, West of Ireland* in 1889).

Parallels can be drawn between his work and the more widely known art of William Hogarth, who undoubtedly influenced Helmick with his series *Marriage à-la-Mode* of the previous century. As Professor of Drawing, Painting, and the History of Art when he returned to Washington to teach at Georgetown University, Helmick was obviously well versed in art history. Indeed his London friendship with fellow American exile James

McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) reinforces this link as Whistler was also a member of the Hogarth Club. Both men spent evenings at the Arts Club at 17 Hanover Square (another of Helmick’s exhibiting addresses) and “were sufficiently friendly for JW to suggest Helmick came to live in the same studio being built in Tite Street in 1881.”²¹ The two artists were involved with etching as well as painting, exhibiting at London’s Royal Academy simultaneously in 1879, among other venues.²²

Like many other artists choosing to depict Irish life during the nineteenth century, Helmick drew on the language and precedent of the Dutch genre painters who, using ordinary people as their central themes, made narrative works or “conversation pieces” fashionable throughout Europe. Irish genre painters appropriated the same language of symbolism employed by their earlier Dutch models through the use, for example, of animals carefully placed to indicate female sexuality (the cat) or male virility or faithfulness (the dog). Even the most naïve painters used this symbolic method to direct messages to their audiences, whose ability to decipher and discuss them was taken for granted.²³ In their portrayals of people, the nineteenth-century Irish painters tended to be more sympathetic than their Dutch models; certainly none were as crude as Adriaen Van Ostade (1610–85), whose drunken peasants were deliberately boorish. The work of the prolific Scottish painter Erskine Nicol was singular in its portrayal of stage Irish men with grotesque features, images presumably aimed at racist English readers of *Punch*; yet Nicol was also capable of serious political statements through other paintings, for example *Notice to Quit* (1862)²⁴ and *The Emigrants* (1864),²⁵ or of sympathetic depictions of the rural Irish, as in “*A thing of beauty is a joy for ever ...*”/ *Interior Westmeath Cabin* (plate 21).

Native Irish artists James Brenan (1837–1907) and Charles Henry Cook (1830–1906) had already paved the way for Helmick’s narrative paintings of Ireland. Visiting foreigners had also explored aspects of Irish rural life with the sharpened focus of outsiders, often detailing what Irish painters perhaps considered unremarkable or commonplace. The celebrated Scottish artist Sir David Wilkie (1785–1841) was touring the west

coast in the summer of 1835, as was William Evans of Eton (1798–1877). These visitors to Ireland were soon followed by Francis William Topham (1808–77), who worked together with Alfred Downing Fripp (1822–95), Henry Mark Anthony (1817–86), and Frederick Goodall (1822–1904) during the 1840s—all finding the poor Irish interior an appealing subject for their watercolors and oils. These artists also managed to weave symbolic stories into their crowded interiors, conveying messages through the strategic placements of things that one might expect to see in an Irish farm house—but of things now juxtaposed so as to suggest meanings and introduce topics that were often controversial, political, or had parallels in other paintings.

Another talented painter whose work encompassed Irish genre was Aloysius O’Kelly (1853–1936). Like Helmick, he trained at L’École des Beaux-Arts, and both men exhibited subsequently at the Royal Academy during the 1870s and 1880s. In 1883, when O’Kelly’s masterpiece, *Mass in a Connemara Cabin* (plate 43), was shown at the RA, Helmick’s similarly accomplished interior *The Dispensary Doctor—West of Ireland* (plate 39) was also on view.²⁶ Helmick was eight years older than his Dublin-born contemporary and had already exhibited nearly a dozen Irish titles at the Academy before O’Kelly began to show Irish work in London. We might speculate about how well the two knew each other or each other’s paintings; both were patriotic about Ireland, and although he lived for several years in London, Helmick was known to be disparaging about the English.²⁷

He would also have been well aware of the greater number of genre works produced by artists exhibiting in England, where farmhouses were better furnished and, with the Poor Law to assist them, the so-called “peasants” were better clothed and fed than their Irish counterparts. English genre painting included a symbolism comparable to that found in Irish works, but tended to be more moralizing in its messages about Victorian virtues such as frugality, sobriety, and industriousness. English genre art also had a wider buying audience; since artists choosing to depict Irish country people had to contend with more rags and poverty, their work

reached a smaller market. Those members of the Irish landed gentry sufficiently wealthy to purchase art were more likely to spend on portraits of themselves, their houses, or their horses than on images of their poor tenantry. Discussing the myth of the rural idyll in English genre painting, Christiana Payne observes that, “artists had a vested interest in making their images attractive. Victorian picture-buyers and critics particularly liked ‘pleasing’ images.” She notes how in 1848 John Eagles asked, “Is the man of business, in this weary turmoil of the daily world, to return to his house, after his labour is over, and see upon his walls nothing but scenes of distress, of poverty, of misery, of hard-heartedness ...?”²⁸

The comparatively rare images of Irish interiors often appear to be the work of touring artists who had been forced to paint indoors during inclement weather although their intention may have been to paint outside: for example, the rain is clearly visible through the open door of Jack B. Yeats’s kitchen scene “*A Cottage on Mullet Peninsula*” (1905). As a result of such exterior conditions faced by the artist, we gain a detailed view of the interior, for example, of a fireside-curtained bed in the home of a weaver’s family—an image that Synge describes in his article accompanying Yeats’s illustration.²⁹

Helmick’s marriage series, arguably the most important of his work, represents the most celebrated group of paintings he did in Ireland. Their significance reflects his special understanding of the intricacies of arranged marriage in the country; he was sufficiently intrigued by what he saw to lay out such matrimonial customs as a detailed pictorial story that his audiences would have read and deciphered as they would a ballad or a play. He presented his narratives with such clarity and understanding that the images can be (and often are) used to explain to uninitiated modern audiences how Irish farmers arranged the marriages of their adult offspring in order to secure the economic future of the family farm. Helmick’s comprehension of and curiosity about this topic led him to paint a series of at least five paintings, with more works focusing in particular on romance and women. Studies of priests and businessmen were included in this group only where relevant to the mar-

Long hours of work while sitting to sketch, partaking of hospitality, and sharing meals and conversation in the homes of the rural poor, enabled Helmick, like other genre artists, to become well versed with Irish customs. He was probably familiar with the work of a fellow etcher and illustrator, the visiting English artist Francis William Topham, who similarly had based his rural interiors on close observation. Topham's well-known watercolors of the interiors of western fishermen and farmers' homes in the 1840s (plates 12–13) provide rare insights into how people dressed and arranged their houses. In their depictions of dressers, outshot beds, and people eating communally from potato skibs, his paintings represent some of the earliest and most detailed of rural Irish interiors, a subject that the English artist understood well after having spent hours in such kitchens. Topham was, in fact, greeted with “joyful recognition” when he returned for a second sketching tour to Galway's Claddagh, partly because he paid poor people to sit for him.³⁰ Helmick's understanding of rural Irish matchmaking was similarly informed by repeated visits to the west and southwest of Ireland over several years—as well as by his establishment of studios where he was based. Contemporary critics of both artists' genre paintings were particularly impressed when they perceived these works as so true to life at a time when color photography had not yet begun to steal the show and foreign travel was unusual.

An understanding of the system by which landed farmers arranged marriages through “matches” between their eldest daughters or sons and eligible partners enhances the modern viewer's appreciation of Helmick's series. For example, an oil painting that appeared on the Dublin art market in 2011 shows four figures pausing during their work in a hayfield and is temporarily entitled *Couples Making Hay* (fig. 2).³¹ In the foreground a young couple talk, while to their left and in the background an older couple with their backs to the viewer

retreat. The palette of the predominant green and yellow of the crop contrasts with the red of the girl's shirt and petticoat, then typical colors of women's attire in the west of Ireland. Women were equally involved in outdoor work at harvest; they also prepared the food and drink in a wrapped basin and earthenware jug seen behind the red-haired girl.

Well into the twentieth century, many farmers' daughters had their marriages arranged for them and were expected to marry for the future economic good



Fig. 2: Howard Helmick (1840–1907), *Couples Making Hay*, 1875. Oil on canvas, 21 ½ x 28 in., Gorry Gallery, Dublin.

of the farm, rather than for love. Matchmakers were brought in to balance the bride's dowry with the value of the farm that was being passed on to her groom, his family's eldest son. Often, for convenience, the son from the neighboring farm was the marital choice; thus the same families who would gather together at harvest time to help bring in their crops might also be the ones whose offspring would be married by arrangement. But this painting's narrative invites viewers to speculate about whether the young woman is being approached controversially for love, rather than through arrange-

ment. Often the couple would be in their late twenties by the time such matches were made, a time when the mother was no longer able to milk the cows and the farm work could be easily handed over. With marriage came the shifting of work patterns from old to young, a change that Helmick suggests quite overtly by placing the elderly couple behind, literally retiring into the background. Wearily they stoop to turn the crop, their bodies offering a contrast to the vigor of the youthful figures in the foreground.

Arranged matches were not usually made between laboring cottier families without land, but rather between comparatively wealthy—the so-called “strong farmer”—families. Wealth is signified here not only by the house in the background, but also by the clothing worn by the figures. The boy wears fitted knee breeches, stout work boots, a Tam o'Shanter hat, and a bawneen jacket; all typical of Galway. Young women covered their heads only after marriage, in contrast to the mother in the background, and the girl in the painting has her apron tucked up fashionably to reveal her red petticoat.

The inclusion of several of Helmick's paintings in the form of engraved illustrations for the *Magazine of Art* has provided valuable information about the nature of his work. Several of these engravings are particularly important because the paintings upon which they are based have yet to be found. The journal text by Katharine Tynan (1861–1931) accompanying the engravings adds reliable detail to Helmick's narratives. The series “Irish Types and Traits” focuses on arranged marriage and its alternative for farmers' sons or daughters who chose a more romantic route—the “runaway” match. The daughter of a County Dublin farmer, a poet, a prolific novelist, and friend of W. B. Yeats, Tynan provided a text full of light-hearted yet well-informed detail about nineteenth-century accounts of matches made between neighboring farmers.

A father having a marriageable son looks

about amongst his neighbours for a girl whose portion [dowry] will about match what he is prepared to give his boy. Then the girl being found, there is a consultation with her father, and a meeting takes place at the home of either, at which, the bargaining being satisfactorily concluded, the match is made. The girl's father begins by offering a smaller sum than he means to give ... then he advances it bit by bit, throwing in now five pounds, now a cow, till he has reached the limits of his intentions. Then hands are clapped into each other with tremendous emphasis, the girl and the boy, who have been waiting while their fate hangs in the balance, are called in and informed of the happy result.... There is seldom any rebellion against the system, which seems to work well.³²

Helmick's illustrations and some of his yet undiscovered paintings focus on every aspect of these "mercenary inspired unions," with their foundations of cattle, cash, and land.³³ His familiarity with the subject is evident in his narrative detail, and the Catholic priest's vestry forms the setting for several of the paintings. Tynan's remark that "occasionally the young people will choose for themselves" informs readers of the *Magazine of Art* about Helmick's engraving "The Wayward Daughter." She describes the bitter complaint of a cattle-dealer from Tipperary:

Aye; it's enough to drive a man mad ... that boy of mine married a girl at a dead loss; not a penny to her fortune; and that wasn't bad enough, but the little hussy of [his] a daughter, who had the hair hangin' down her back, goes out and brings me home a lad, another at the same price.

Despite the father's annoyance at not being involved with these matches, Tynan insists "there is no degradation attaching to it in anyone's mind." She suggests that

One cannot doubt that her obstinate face and attitude, her mother's apologetic concern, and the priest's look of stern and sorrowful reproof, all point to a drama in which love and a lover play leading parts. She means plainly to go her own way ... perhaps she will have nothing to say to some "strong" farmer, whose attractions of cows and pigs, parlour and jaunting car, are counterbalanced by his fifty years.



Fig. 3: Howard Helmick (1840–1907), *The Wayward Daughter*, 1878. Oil on canvas, 27 1/4 x 24 1/4 in., South Shields Museums & Art Gallery, Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums.

In the recently discovered and closely similar oil painting, *The Wayward Daughter* (fig. 3), symbols of Catholicism adorn the well-furnished vestry; the crucifix and holy water stoup on the wall between the adults' heads render explanatory text unnecessary. The young woman's stance and sidelong glance at the priest show she will control her own destiny; she faces away from the adults, and even her bare feet suggest the path she will

take. As she walks away, her head is framed by the holy portrait on the wall behind her. But unlike her mother, who wears the matronly bonnet, her head is uncovered and her hair hangs down in a way that Tynan reads as rebellious.

Priests generated considerable income from conducting marriage ceremonies, and in some instances marriages were delayed while money was raised for the fee. According to Mrs. S. C. Hall, some couples, were forced to

begin life with empty walls, their savings barely sufficient to recompense the priest for uniting them. We have known some instances in which Roman Catholics have been married by a clergyman of the Church of England, in consequence of the small expense of the ceremony.³⁴

The Wayward Daughter overtly suggests this clerical income through the priest's comfortable furnishings: the fur rug under the elegant gate-leg table, the mirror, wall clock, and accoutrements for reading, writing, lighting, and making tea. This painting was exhibited at London's Royal Academy (no. 537) in 1878, with Helmick's address given as Dangan Cottage, Galway. The same image made another appearance in the Royal Jubilee Exhibition in Manchester, in 1887 (no. 52).³⁵

Intriguingly, when painting about wayward women, Helmick used the same Galway address as the American artist and writer Josephine Lizzie Cloud (a.k.a. Elizabeth C. Waters). Cloud also used the Dangan Cottage, Galway address when she exhibited her work at the Paris Salon in 1876, and when showing in London in the late 1870s, both artists used the 64 Albany Street, London address from which to exhibit. Not surprisingly given such proximity, Cloud's travel writing demonstrates an awareness of the same subjects about which Helmick paints, for many of their images are similar. In *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Cloud writes about a father bargaining between two priests over the level of his daughter's marriage fee, mentioning

94 the Protestant clergyman who might “marry them for nothing.”³⁶

Two surviving paintings by Helmick show patients attending a doctor’s dispensary; see *The Dispensary Doctor—West of Ireland* (plate 39).³⁷ Around 1876–79, the period when Cloud and Helmick shared the same address in Galway, it seems likely that together they observed such dispensaries since Cloud’s description so accurately matches what Helmick paints. In her 1878 article “The Connemara Hills,” she describes her “delight with the beautiful scenery around us” as they approach the village of Roundstone. She notes that the place had

no shops, except one in connection with the post-office, and a smaller establishment where they sold whiskey and tobacco. A few anxious individuals were standing about the doorway of a dispensary, as if the medicines given them could supply the life and strength which their poor food and hard lives could not afford.³⁸

Helmick’s two dispensary paintings bring the viewer into what appear to be two different interiors; but both images’ arrangements of medical equipment, pestles and mortars, glass jars and containers for medicine create a revealing backdrop for a frieze of rural people whose faces do indeed express anxiety. The doctor in each situation has an assistant, and his work centers on a table at the rear of a boarded room where the old men and young women patients are offered no privacy for their discussions or examinations. Cloud’s illustrations and descriptions are as meticulously observed as Helmick’s oils. On arrival at the hotel in Roundstone, she makes her usual connections with her native America, as she is shown into “a parlor where gigantic sofas and repellent chairs of the fashion of the Empire were in incongruous association with a Connecticut clock guarded by two china dogs.”³⁹

Helmick was equally capable of observing and describing such contrasts, but with the brush rather than the pen. The contrast between the rural poor and



Fig. 4: H. Werdmüller, “A Present for his Reverence,” *Magazine of Art*, Jan. 1888. Engraved illustration after Helmick’s oil on canvas *Presents to his Reverence* exhibited in 1877.



Fig. 5: F. Babbage, “Matchmaking,” *Magazine of Art*, Jan. 1888. Engraved illustration after Helmick’s oil on canvas.

the comfortable clergy evident in *The Wayward Daughter* is again emphasized in “A Present for his Reverence” (fig. 4), an engraving after Helmick’s oil painting of

similar title, *Presents to his Reverence*.⁴⁰ Despite the small difference in the title, it seems likely to be the painting upon which this engraving by H. Werdmüller is based; but the actual oil has yet to come to light. The comparatively lavish interior repeats some of the furniture seen in *The Wayward Daughter* but adds a paneled oak chest, an elaborate candlestick, and a fur rug atop a huge carpet upon which the girl’s bare feet contrast starkly. Simple baskets of vegetables are brought in as offerings from a farmhouse that probably had an earthen floor. With his back to the viewer, the priest seems to lean forward, rather than rise, as he greets the young woman and his housekeeper, identified by her key. Tynan’s commentary explains how “the influence of the priest is unimpaired and unimpaired,” and how

the priest’s house is very splendid in the eyes of his people—the mixture of learning and art, the big books in unknown tongues, and the coloured prints or engravings of sacred subjects gratifying the blind instincts of the people for knowledge and colour and form.⁴¹

A similar setting of a priest’s studious comfort appears in *Candidates for Marriage/ The Cleric’s Interruption* or more probably *Candidates for Matrimony*⁴² (plate 38), yet another of Helmick’s works to focus on marriage. Looking over his shoulder from his studies, the priest is surprised by a young man, nervously leading his girlfriend by the hand into potential marriage. The priest would conduct the ceremony and the arrangements as to date, place, and price would need to be discussed. The young girl looks slightly bewildered, the boy stands subserviently, literally cap in hand; among viewers the scene raises speculation about the motives for such a youthful, perhaps premature, match. The survival of

this oil adds color to the previous clerical interiors, for the painting features a similarly large carpet, generous fireplace, open corner cupboard, wall clock, and elegant

chairs with cabriole legs.

Helmick's gentle sense of humor and parody that lightens his approach to certain traditions may have appealed to an English Protestant audience but is less likely to have gone down well among the Catholic Irish. His portrayal of the typical rural priest is usually in an elegantly furnished interior, looking over-fed or even slightly drunk—for examples note *A Fine Vintage* (1882) and *The Evening Tiptle* (n.d.).⁴³ Other examples show him warmed by a nicely decorated fireplace, or indulged and pampered by his spartanly attired or barefoot flock: *The Wayward Daughter, A Present for His Reverence, Candidates for Marriage/Matrimony*.

Both visual and textual evidence suggests that arranged marriages were normal and accepted for most elder offspring of landed farmers. Tynan's text accompanying the engraving "Matchmaking" (fig. 5) after Helmick's painting (probably of the same title) demonstrates how "marriage is clearly a matter of business."⁴⁴ Here the fathers are literally at the center of the proceedings and of the painting, as they count out the worth of the potential bride on their fingers and gaze across at her on the right. The importance of their work is emphasized by the fine pad-footed table (unusually smart for the farm kitchen) where they sit and the rush mat beneath their feet. Reviewing this painting when it was shown in the Royal Academy in 1880, the *Art-Journal* did its best to interpret the narrative:

The Marriage Settlement is being discussed.... The bride-elect sits spinning ... while the groom-elect stands sheepishly against the door [cap in hand] as far from her as feasible. The two fathers are engrossed in argument. The girl's mother—or possibly her future mother-in-law—touches her to rouse her to the important discussion.... It is realistic and well painted.⁴⁵

The 1880 reviewer Mary Hay suggested coy unconsciousness on the part of the young woman, who would have been well aware of the proceedings: resigned

acceptance might be a more appropriate interpretation. Hay also suggests that the woman warming her hands by the fire to the left is a deaf grandmother, whereas Helmick's placing of her with her head turned, sitting in the place of honor beside the hearth, indicates that she is the groom's mother, listening avidly to the proceedings traditionally controlled by men. The woman standing—her hand resting on the table, looking relaxed,



Fig. 6: Howard Helmick (1840–1907), *Her First Love*, 1878. Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 in., Gorry Gallery, Dublin.

at home, and reassuring—is far more likely to be the bride's mother rather than mother-in-law. The artist appropriately places the young couple on the periphery of the painting as they were indeed on the periphery of the proceedings. The soon-to-be bride is in her own house, sitting at the flax spinning wheel, displayed in her best light as a useful potential worker on the farm. According to Irish economic and social historian K. H. Connell,

who discusses how she would be perceived by her future father-in-law, "the ideal daughter-in-law is not necessarily the ideal wife ... [he] hoped to find, not simply the appropriate dowry, but strength and submission, the promise of fertility and skill in a woman's duties in the house and on the land."⁴⁶

Until the original oil painting for *Marriage Settlement—West of Ireland* is found, information about color and technique can be gleaned from a study of Helmick's oil *Matchmaking*, almost identical to the engraving of the same name, which predates it by two years and focuses on the mother and daughter. Sitting on the same "Sligo" chair and taking the same stance, the bride-to-be pauses from spinning.⁴⁷ The artist also depicts the same Dutch three-legged spinning wheel, with its sophisticated foot treadle and distinctive distaff holding the flax cleanly up in the air, ready for spinning into thread to make linen. In both images the daughter holds the thread and with both hands is about to feed it onto the spindle. Traditional women's work such as the spinning of flax and wool not only enabled rural people to knit or weave cloth to make their own clothes, but also added significantly to the farm's income. Wearing a yellow and orange homespun shawl and the red petticoat typical of the west, the girl's mother rests her hand symbolically on the handle of the dash churn.

These staved and bound vessels used to churn butter were "made to measure," reflecting the number of cows and the milk produced on each farm. Symbolic of fertility, the oak staves were bound with metal hoops, superseding earlier churns encircled with hoops of hazel or sally; having one hoop made of rowan as an addition on the churn was considered lucky. Varying regionally in design, churns with their feminine, anthropomorphic profile were typical of the north and northwest, suggesting that Helmick painted this work in his Galway studio. Visitors entering the kitchen were expected to take a turn plunging the dash; since butter making—a domestic task often surrounded by superstition—was unpredictable, everything about the churn's shape and operation had to be "right."

O'Kelly places a dash churn as the centerpiece of

96 one his subsequent genre paintings *Kitchen, West of Ireland* (c. 1882, undated, unfinished) in a similarly symbolic stance, within an image alluding to the theme of romance.⁴⁸ The floor of this farmhouse has black and white tiles that are more reminiscent of a Vermeer interior than of a real Irish farm kitchen. Behind the churn we see an earthenware setting pan of milk; to the left, on the edge of the rush matting, a wide copper preserving pan leans up beneath a hooded cloak. Women were closely associated with the nurturing of milk cattle, which commonly formed part of their dowries, and these implements were all used by farm women in their round of work. In *Her First Love* (fig. 6), the painting's inclusion of so many of the same objects found in *Matchmaking* reinforces the probability that it was a study for a lost painting.

Next in Helmick's marriage series, and one of the most dramatic, is *Bringing Home the Bride*, signed and dated 1883 (fig. 7). Described in detail in my book *Irish Rural Interiors in Art*, the narrative depicts the bride arriving after her wedding (usually in her own house) into the kitchen of the groom's family.⁴⁹ Her new mother-in-law with whom she will now live greets her; the older woman appears to be wiping her hands—or symbolically washing her hands of the household duties. This moment was sometimes marked by a ritual handing over of the fire tongs, representing the transfer of responsibility for housework from one generation to another. That the parents-in-law usually remained living in the farmhouse, perhaps with a bed designated for them beside the fire, was not always easy for the incoming bride. To the left the father-in-law is seated, but with his hand already out for the money that formed part of her dowry.



Fig. 7: Howard Helmick (1840–1907), *Bringing Home the Bride*, 1883. Oil on canvas, 23 x 32 in., Gorry Gallery, Dublin.



Fig. 8: Howard Helmick (1840–1907), probably *The Knotty Point*, 1877. Oil on canvas, 18 1/2 x 22 1/2 in., Gorry Gallery, Dublin.

The bride's father follows, weighed down by the bedroll over his shoulder. A "web of linen" was frequently part of the expected fortune coming with the bride, along with dowry chests and even other items of furniture. The bride's dowry is further suggested by the cow that Helmick knowingly frames in the doorway, showing little more than her potently symbolic udder. Traditionally, any money coming in with the bride's dowry was used as part of the marriage settlement of the groom's sister, a figure we see sitting by the fire on the far right. Well aware of this custom, Helmick paints her with her head turned, interested in the proceedings that will affect her future. The flagged floor and open corner press displaying ample ware, as well as the hanging nets and fish, suggest a comparatively wealthy household, involved in fishing as well as farming.

Other paintings that have entered the public domain in recent years include what may well be *The Knotty Point*, signed by Helmick and dated 1877, with an inscription on the reverse: "Joyce ... character in Galway" (fig. 8).⁵⁰ The inscription reinforces what we know of the artist's western haunt and of his habit of painting from life. We have no evidence to suggest that Helmick repeated entire paintings, a practice of some other commercially oriented artists, but occasionally he did make repeated use of the same models: the man on the left appears to be the same model used in *The Schoolmaster's Moment of Leisure* (plate 41). An interest in law, solicitors, summonses, arguments, and legal advice comes up frequently in his work and can be seen in his listed titles as well as his surviving works. The title *The Knotty Point*, is unconfirmed, but from what we know of how Helmick exhibited, often his paintings were shown the same year or the

year after they were dated. Perhaps the double entendre suggested in the title fits well, as the gesticulating advisor on the left points his fingers at the farmer, who sits on the bench as his client. This advisor also appears as one of two men modeled among Helmick's many paintings of priests, in *The Theologians*, with a closely similar companion figure.⁵¹ The suggestion that the figure on the left in *The Knotty Point* is advising and the formally attired man on the right is being advised is reinforced by the former's position alongside a mahogany writing desk, crowded with papers, a scroll tied up in legal red tape, a candle in a brass candlestick, and a hanging bill spike. His confident, assured look contrasts with the disturbed expression on the farmer's face, whose fist is clenched upon his knee. The elderly man may just have sat down, his walking stick leans against the form, with the weights and pendulum of the wall clock swinging beside him. The long trousers, up-turned collar, red cravat, and Caroline felt hat, even if frayed and worn, were fashionable at the time. His advisor wears a swallowtail coat and breeches neatly buttoned at the knee, in an earlier formal style that endured until the end of that century.⁵²

Helmick also repeatedly focused on the subject of education. Previously only known as an engraving from the *Magazine of Art*, *The Schoolmaster's Moment of Leisure* can now be seen as a watercolor (plate 41).⁵³ That image seems likely to relate to the oil that Helmick first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1874 as no. 326, along with *The Country Dancing Master*, *West of Ireland* (plate 36) from an address in London. Music and education were early concurrent themes; the previous year he had shown *The Irish Piper* and by 1881 *Le Maître d'École de Village*, *The Poor Scholar* (RSBA, 1882), *The Village Schoolmaster*, *The Disciplinarian*, and *A Schoolmaster*. A watercolor by the latter title lent by Helmick himself appears in the 1888 Irish Exhibition in London, along with seven other titles, including *The Village Schoolmaster* (fig. 9).⁵⁴ Helmick may have been aware of earlier depictions of this subject by Irish painters such as Nathaniel Grogan (1740–1807) with his *The Country Schoolmaster* (n.d.) and William Mulready (1786–1863) with *Idle Boys* (1815) and *Last In* (1835), both of whom chose

punishment as their subjects, making the American artist's depiction appear comparatively light-hearted.⁵⁵

In *The Schoolmaster's Moment of Leisure*, Helmick alludes to violence with the switch made of a bundle of twigs on the pedestal table. Discomfort is written on the face of the humiliated child who has been kept in after his friends have gone home and who wears the paper cap



Fig. 9: Howard Helmick (1840–1907), probably *The Village Schoolmaster*, 1881. Oil on canvas, 23 ¼ x 19 in., Gorry Gallery, Dublin.

of a dunce in the corner. In Inishbofin, even into the late twentieth century, people remembered such humiliation when their schoolmaster “put a fool’s cap on you, a big piece of paper.”⁵⁶ Earlier illustrations show boys wearing a straw collar, another conspicuous and uncomfortable garment of punishment. The artist habitually uses furniture to communicate, and here the tripod table with one broken leg suggests the support of some

wealthy individual, providing cast-off broken furniture for the schoolroom. Some schools made do with blocks of turf or straw hassocks for their pupils to sit on, or they simply stood instead. The same small stools with wedged legs or long forms would also have been found in cabin kitchens. No wall charts or maps adorn the walls, for so-called hedge-school teachers relied on their reputation for academic prowess and had barely any pedagogical equipment. Accounts were paid off by barter, with food or fuel for the schoolroom fire in winter carried in by the barefoot pupils. Beside the candlestick on the table, the crucifix makes clear that this is a Catholic school. The master plays his flute, echoing the moment of leisure in the title. Despite such poverty, the master was well respected and supported by the rural community, whose educational and political needs he served.

Another recently discovered oil painting focusing on education is probably the one exhibited as *The Village Schoolmaster* in 1888, also shown at the Irish Exhibition in London.⁵⁷ This portrait is more peaceful than the previous one, showing the master alone in a corner of his schoolroom, concentrating on preparing a quill pen; next to him on the table is an inkwell and piece of paper. The low light raking in across the scene from the window on the left suggests that it is early morning, and he awaits his pupils. Since the sixth century, some of the best feathers for making into writing quills were the flight feathers of geese that were easily available in rural Ireland. For hardening the tip, the feather had to be heated or dipped into alum, then shaped carefully and split using a blade (hence the “pen knife”) to hold ink and create an even line. Each quill might last about a week before it had worn and required further attention; such time-consuming and laborious work would be taught by the schoolmaster to his pupils. By the nineteenth century, metal dipping nibs, the forerunners of the fountain pen, were being mass produced. *The Village Schoolmaster* therefore implies that either the master is old fashioned or that he could not afford the newer ready-made pens for his school. This schoolroom seems better appointed than the previous one, as it has a poster on the wall,

98 piles of books, and a good Sligo chair. But education was indeed in disarray at that time, and James Brenan (1837–1907), an Irish contemporary of Helmick’s, later painted his own narrative version of this topic, *The Schoolroom/Empty Pockets* (1887) (plate 29). Because of their rather explicit critique of the educational system in Ireland, the two paintings must have caused quite a stir when hung together at the Irish Exhibition in London in 1888, the Brenan then displayed with its probably original title, *Bankrupt*.⁵⁸

Many more of Helmick’s Irish paintings remain undiscovered, and as they appear on the market, the incomplete jigsaw puzzle of his life as an artist may become more complete. Comparatively little is known of his personal life, but it seems increasingly likely that one woman—whose name (or names) appear repeatedly at the same address as Helmick’s and whose work is undoubtedly overlapping and uncannily similar—may now be more formally linked with him. As discussed in *Irish Rural Interiors in Art*, an undated painting by Helmick bears a striking similarity in setting and detail to a line drawing published by Cloud: of a woman by a cabin hearth with some men sitting at a barrel for a table.⁵⁹ Another of Cloud’s many clever drawings from the four articles that she wrote and illustrated for *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* may hold a clue to the appearance of one of Helmick’s missing Royal Academy paintings. In the same year that he exhibited *The Irish Piper* (n. 1094 at the RA), J. Lizzie Cloud’s “The Piper” (fig. 10) appeared as an illustration for her 1873 article “A Lone Woman in Ireland.” So far the only known image of a piper by Helmick is an etching entitled *An Irish Apollo Piping to the Graces*, which appears to be of the same seated figure of a musician we see in Cloud’s illustration.⁶⁰

In that 1873 autumn when the two *uilleann* pipers were drawn and the two exiled American artists were, apparently, dancing to the same happy tune, a Mrs. Howard Helmick set sail from Cardiff, Wales to her native New York with her and her husband’s two young children.⁶¹ Nothing more of her is as yet known, but at least one of the children, George Helmick, eleven years old when he emigrated, was living in Washington, DC with his widowed grandmother (Howard’s mother)

by 1880. The same federal census documents indicate that young George’s mother was born in New York.⁶² Because women generally adopted their husbands’ full names upon marriage, her own identity is difficult to



Fig. 10: Josephine Lizzie Cloud a.k.a. Elizabeth Waters (c. 1835–unknown), “The Piper,” 1873. *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, Nov. 1873.

research further, but we might surmise that Howard’s liaison with Cloud precipitated his wife’s departure with their children.

Josephine Lizzie Cloud (variously signing herself Miss. or Mrs.) appears to have been the nom de plume of Mrs. Elizabeth C. Waters, as there was a passport application in the latter name in 1870 stating that she was from Philadelphia, born about 1835.⁶³ Thereafter, as Josephine Lizzie Cloud, she published illustrated articles and exhibited paintings; although far fewer in number than Helmick’s, her works were often shown at

the same locales as his. In 1878 she listed her address as 64 Albany Street, NW London—as did Helmick the following year—when she exhibited *The Connemara Postman* at the Society of British Artists. Only a monochrome photograph of this oil survives, but it illustrates one of her favorite themes of a letter being read aloud to an old woman, a visual reminder of the emotional and economic importance of letters between the “old world” of Ireland and the “new world” of America. Herself an exile from America, she may have revisited this theme with *The Later News*, a painting yet to come to light, but shown by her at the RA in 1875; Helmick also painted this theme with *The Emigrant’s Letter*.⁶⁴ One of Cloud’s illustrations for her series of articles in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, “An Irish Fishing Village,” is a minute but extraordinarily detailed study of eight men digging potatoes with spades. Undated, but strikingly similar, is Helmick’s version of the subject *On his own Ground*.⁶⁵

The last few published or exhibited works of Cloud’s coincide with the period in which Helmick’s son William J. Helmick was conceived and born in England. Thereafter Mrs. Elizabeth C. Waters lived as a lodger in Fulham in 1881 and emigrated from Liverpool to Philadelphia with “Master Wm. Helmick” in 1889.⁶⁶ The United States census of 1900 shows Howard living in Washington, DC together with Elizabeth and William; only upon the artist’s death was this son acknowledged publicly in Howard Helmick’s obituary. The notice of his requiem Mass held in a Catholic church perhaps helps explain why he resorted to such secrecy in order to continue, until his death in 1907, his respectable career as Howard Helmick, Professor of Art History at Washington’s Georgetown University.

Helmick’s work reveals a fascination with the rules of matrimony and arranged marriage in Ireland—an interest presumably informed by his time in London and Paris, where members of the aristocracy were equally concerned with arranging the marriages of their children for the economic good of their families. In his own personal life, however, Helmick was evidently keen to conceal his role as a secret lover and the father of a child born out of wedlock. It is intriguing to set his paintings, so often of women being led into marriage reluctantly,

rebellious against it, or being controlled by their families, against his own less regulated life.

Without further research about the elusive figure of Lizzy Cloud, it is difficult to postulate more than similarities of style and subject matter between the two artists. It appears, however, that Cloud's thematic choices in her art often preceded related ones addressed by Helmick, suggesting not only her role as the male artist's muse, but also her own artistic vision. Because of her anonymity in an unmarried partnership with Helmick and the secrecy surrounding their relationship, details of her training or background remain inaccessible. As early as 1873 she writes confidently about Ostade, Rembrandt, and Raphael when describing the aesthetics of poor Irish interiors, so the couple must have shared intellectual interests, as Helmick ultimately took up his professorship in art history.

Official census records do mention Elizabeth C. Waters, but Cloud is far less easy to trace: her name has not yet been found on any official records; she appears, rather, only on exhibition registers as an author and as a name inscribed on the backs of paintings. Given her intellectual and cultural status, the link between Waters and Cloud, Elizabeth and Lizzie, reinforces further the notion of an alias being used. More information may yet emerge to clarify with certainty who was the mother of William J. Helmick, who became a "naturalized clerk in the city post office" and whose immigration to America occurred in 1887, the last year that Helmick exhibited work at London's Royal Academy.⁶⁷ Although the three adults are listed at the same Washington, DC address in 1900, only at his father's funeral in Washington in April 1907 was William J. Helmick formally described in the *Washington Times* obituary as the artist's son.⁶⁸ Before that, every record lists him as a nephew, presumably to avoid casting any shadow of shame over his out-of-wedlock birth in England to cohabiting parents. It seems increasingly likely that his mother was Josephine Lizzie Cloud, who abruptly, perhaps inevitably given her gender and unconventional social position in the Victorian era, stopped showing paintings around the time of William's birth (June 1879) in England.

The celebrated American painter James McNeill

Whistler, whose artistic influence in Paris and London is well documented, has been discussed in association with Helmick. Whistler had various lovers who were also his models, his wife posed for many of his drawings and paintings, and he had several illegitimate children. The friendship between Helmick and this charismatic and controversial American contemporary provides a context within which Helmick's personal life, his affairs, and his offspring might be framed.

In view of Howard Helmick's role as one of the most accomplished outsiders to paint Irish rural life and of Lizzie Cloud's position in his career and as an artist in her own right, I would hope that this exhibition's sampling of his paintings might lead to the discovery of more previously unknown work by both talented Americans.



NOTES*

- * This work was made easier and more enjoyable by the addition of new material from Thérèse and James Gorry (Gorry Gallery, Dublin). Special thanks is also due to the invaluable uncovering of American census records and immigration documents pertaining to Cloud and Waters by Adeane Bregman of the University Libraries, Boston College. I would also like to thank Kathleen Williams (Boston College), and Professor Vera Kreilkamp for editing, Rebecca Milner, curator (Manchester Art Gallery) and Brendan Flynn, curator (Fine Art), Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery. Thanks are also due to Gillian Buckley for providing photographs.
- 1 Previously documented as born in 1845, it seems likely that Howard Helmick was actually born five years earlier, on May 10, 1840. According to census records, George and Harriet Helmick were listed, noting Howard as their son, "aged 20 born about 1840 in Ohio Artist," along with four other children (Howard Helmick, 1860 census, Philadelphia Ward 14 Division 1, Philadelphia, PA, M653, roll 1164, page 116, image 120, Ancestry.com [July 6, 2011]). Subsequently his passport application of October 11, 1865 states, "Howard Helmick born May 10, 1840 in Ohio Aged 25, 5 feet 7 inches tall, forehead high, eyes blue, nose small, mouth small, chin oval, hair brown, complexion fair, oval face" (Howard Helmick, Passport Application, National Archives and Records Administration [NARA], Washington, DC; Passport Applications, 1795–1905; ARC Identifier 566612/MLR Number A1 508; NARA Series: M1372; Roll #134, Ancestry.com [July 6, 2011]). His otherwise seldom used second name "Eaton" appears in 1876 when he exhibits two paintings in Glasgow; see Roger Bilcliffe, *The Royal Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts 1861–1989, A Dictionary of Exhibitors at the Annual Exhibitions*, Vol. 2: E–K (Glasgow: Woodend Press, 1991), 212.
 - 2 "Artist Helmick Unsung In His Own Country," *Washington Times*, Jan. 28, 1914.
 - 3 Peter Murray, ed., *Whipping the Herring: Survival and Celebration in Nineteenth-Century Irish Art* (Cork: Crawford Art Gallery; Kinsale: Gandon Editions, 2006), 19–21, 23, 27, 34, 36–38, 130, 144–45, 156–57, 194–95, 220. Also Brendan Rooney, ed., *A time and a place: Two Centuries of Irish Social Life* (Dublin: National Gallery of Ireland, 2006), 7, fig. 6; 68, 32, 34–35, 43, 57, 129, 130–31.
 - 4 For example, Christine Casey and Bo Almqvist, eds., *Folk Tradition in Irish Art: An exhibition of paintings from the collection of the Department of Irish Folklore, University College Dublin* (Dublin: Newman House, 1993). See also Adele M. Dalsimer and Vera Kreilkamp, eds., *America's Eye: Irish Paintings from the Collection of Brian P. Burns* (Boston: Boston College Museum of Art, 1996). Neither of the preceding included any works by Helmick and were exhibitions drawn only from single collections.
 - 5 The 1850 census records state, "Howard [Helmick] age 10

- born in Ohio ... son of Harriet & clerk George Helmick” (Howard Helmick, 1850 census, Philadelphia Spruce Ward, Philadelphia, PA, M432, roll 813, page 355A, image 184, Ancestry.com [July 6, 2011]).
- 6 Julian Hawthorne, *Shapes that Pass* (London: John Murray, 1928), 119.
- 7 Mary Sayre Haverstock, Jeannette Mahoney Vance, and Brian L. Meggitt, eds., *Artists in Ohio, 1787–1900, A Biographical Dictionary* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2000), 396.
- 8 Andreas Blühm, ed., *Alexandre Cabanel: The Tradition of Beauty* (Cologne: Wallraf-Richartz-Museum and Fondation Corboud; Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2011).
- 9 “Helmick Dies After Much Ill Health,” *Washington Times*, Apr. 29, 1907.
- 10 Clarence Cook and Howard Helmick, “An American Wilkie, with original illustrations by Howard Helmick,” *Quarterly Illustrator* 2, no. 8 (Oct.–Dec. 1894): 357–59. There are several interesting Irish illustrations here, probably not reproduced since 1894.
- 11 *American Art Annual* 6 (1908): 110. This became The Royal Society of British Artists in 1887 and The Royal Society of Painter-Etchers and Engravers in 1888.
- 12 “Necrology of Art,” *Brush and Pencil* 19, no. 4 (April 1907): 43. This obituary mistakenly states that H. H. died at home in New York, rather than Washington, DC.
- 13 Hawthorne, *Shapes*, 119.
- 14 An illustration called “Matchmaking” (“Painted by Helmick. Engraved by F. Babbage”) appears in Katharine Tynan, “Irish Types and Traits,” *Magazine of Art* 2 (1888): 132. It is as identical as one could expect to Helmick’s painting from which it is engraved, yet when the painting was exhibited at the RA it was titled *Marriage Settlement—West of Ireland*. A detailed review that year confirms it as the same painting (location unknown). See Mary C. Hay “The London Royal Academy,” *Art-Journal* 6, no. 7 (1880): 220; Algernon Graves, *The Royal Academy of Arts: A Complete Dictionary of Contributors and their work from its foundation in 1769 to 1904*, 8 vols. (1905; reprint, Bath: Kingsmead Press, 1970), 2:63.
- 15 Tynan, “Irish Types and Traits,” 19–25, 127–32, 210–13.
- 16 See Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Country Furniture, 1700–1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). Both books expand on many topics explored briefly in this catalogue essay.
- 17 Graves, *Royal Academy*, 2:63. In 1878 and 1879 he provides Dangan Cottage, Galway as his address, and he provides it in 1877 when exhibiting in Glasgow. See Bilcliffe, *Dictionary of Exhibitors*, 212.
- 18 Hawthorne, *Shapes*, 279.
- 19 Ibid. Also see Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 183, fig. 181.
- 20 Jane Johnson, *Works Exhibited at The Royal Society of British Artists 1824–1893 and The New English Art Club 1888–1917* (1975; reprint, Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors’ Club, 1993), 220.
- 21 A letter from Hawthorne to Whistler reads: “My dear Whistler.... Do you remember our nights at the Arts Club—you and Helmick and I? I wish, by the way, if you know where Helmick is, you would give me his address. The last I heard of him, two years ago, he was ill.” Julian Hawthorne to James McNeill Whistler, Jan. 11, 1889, University of Glasgow, Special Collections Mss Ref., code GB 0247, MS Whistler H156, record no. 49807.
- 22 Graves, *Royal Academy*, 2:63, 4:250.
- 23 Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 41, figs. 41, 42.
- 24 Ibid., 134, fig. 136.
- 25 Bruce Arnold, *Irish Art: A Consise History* (1969; reprint, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 127, fig. 121.
- 26 Graves, *Royal Academy*, 2:63, 3:6.
- 27 Julian Hawthorne quoted in Brendan Rooney, “Howard Helmick (1845–1907),” in *The Art of a Nation: Three Centuries of Irish Painting*, ed. William Laffan (London: Pym’s Gallery, 2002), 67.
- 28 Christiana Payne, *Toil and Plenty, Images of the Agricultural Landscape in England, 1780–1890* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 43–44.
- 29 Hilary Pyle, *The Different Worlds of Jack B. Yeats: His Cartoons and Illustrations* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1994), 132, fig. 707.
- 30 Francis W. Topham quoted in Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 18–20.
- 31 Claudia Kinmonth, ““Couples Making Hay,”” in Gorry Gallery Catalogue, *An Exhibition of 18th-21st Century Irish Paintings & Antique Prints: May 29, 2011*, lot 26. The original title of this painting has yet to be ascertained.
- 32 Tynan, “Irish Types and Traits,” 23–24.
- 33 Lady Edith Gordon, *The Winds of Time* (London: John Murray, 1934), 129.
- 34 Mr. and Mrs. S. C. Hall, *Ireland its Scenery, Character etc.*, Vol. 1 (London: How and Parsons, 1841), 164.
- 35 Graves, *Royal Academy*, 2:63.
- 36 J. L. Cloud, “An Irish Wake,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 60, no. 358 (Mar. 1880): 540–41. They both shared London addresses in 1878 (64 Albany Street), Cloud was at Dangan Cottage, Galway in 1876, both artists used that address in 1877. They both exhibited at the Paris Salon, and the RA. Lois Marie Fink, *American Art at the Nineteenth-Century Paris Salons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 330, 335.
- 37 Easily confused, but both illustrated in Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 241, fig. 230; 242, fig. 231.
- 38 J. L. Cloud, “The Connemara Hills,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 59, no. 353 (Oct. 1879): 666–67.
- 39 Ibid., 666.
- 40 The oil was exhibited as no. 381 in 1877 at the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists, for £105 (*Royal Birmingham Society of Artists Catalogue*, Autumn 1877). Helmick’s address is given as 108 Albany Street, London. He exhibited six oils from 1876 to 1884, all from London addresses. I am grateful to Brendan Flynn of Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, for researching this information. *Presents to his Reverence* was shown subsequently at the Royal Society of British Artists in 1881–82 for £100, then in the Liverpool autumn exhibition in 1882, as no. 158, for £200 (Johnson, *Works Exhibited*, 220). H. H. exhibited nine works at the RSBA between 1875, when he was elected a member, and 1885, when *Presents for his Reverence* appeared as no. 144. H. H. exhibited eleven works at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool between 1876 and 1887. In 1886, *Presents for his Reverence* was no. 158, at £200. I am grateful to Alex Kidson, until 2010 curator at Liverpool Museum, for uncovering this information from unpublished manuscripts.
- 41 Tynan, “Irish Types and Traits,” 130.
- 42 Algernon Graves, *A Century of Loan Exhibitions, 1813–1912* (1913; reprint, Bath: Kingsmead Press, 1970), addenda, 1960. A painting was entitled *Candidates for Matrimony*, dated 1878 and exhibited in Liverpool on loan from G. C. Dobell in 1886. Together with it, both prior to 1876, were *Before Matrimony* and *After Matrimony*, from the same lender.
- 43 “*A Fine Vintage*, 1882,” in Gorry Gallery Catalogue, *An Exhibition of 18th, 19th and 20th Century paintings Apr. 25–May 8, 1986*, lot 23. *The Evening Tiptle*, Phillips Fine Art Sale No. 24541, July 25, 1983, lot 260.
- 44 Tynan, “Irish Types and Traits,” 128–30.
- 45 Hay, “The London Royal Academy,” 220.
- 46 K. H. Connell, “Marriage in Ireland after the Famine: The Diffusion of the Match,” *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland* 19 (1955–56): 89.
- 47 Kinmonth, *Irish Country Furniture*, 51–53.

- 48 Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 120.
- 49 Ibid., 152–65.
- 50 Previously tagged *The Legal Advisor*, but because it is dated 1877, is probably entitled *The Knotty Point*, as shown at RA in 1877 no. 1019. See Claudia Kinmonth, “‘*The Knotty Point*,’” in Gorry Gallery Catalogue, *An Exhibition of 17th–20th Century Irish Paintings, May 19–June 2, 2010*, 15–16. “*The Knotty Point*” also exhibited in 1878 for £75 in Glasgow. See Bilcliffe, *Dictionary of Exhibitors*, 212.
- 51 See “*The Theologians*, 1879,” in Gorry Gallery Catalogue, *An Exhibition of 18th, 19th and 20th Century Irish Paintings, Oct. 30–Nov. 12, 1992*, lot 25.
- 52 Mairead Dunlevy, *Dress in Ireland* (London: Batsford, 1989), 162–65.
- 53 Tynan, “Irish Types and Traits,” 19.
- 54 Ann M. Stewart, ed., *Irish Art Loan Exhibitions 1765–1927, Index of Artists*, Vol. 1: A-L (Dublin: Manton, 1990), 319–20.
- 55 Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 244, 247–50, 243–59.
- 56 See Claudia Kinmonth, “*The Schoolmaster’s Moment of Leisure*,” in Gorry Gallery Catalogue, *An Exhibition of 18th–20th Century Irish Paintings, Mar. 5, 2008*, lot 39.
- 57 Stewart, *Index of Artists*, 319. See Claudia Kinmonth, “*The Village Schoolmaster*,” in Gorry Gallery Catalogue, *An Exhibition of 17th–20th Century Irish Paintings, Dec. 5 2010*, lot 22.
- 58 Stewart, *Index of Artists*, 74–75.
- 59 Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 219–23; 221, figs. 213, 214.
- 60 Cook and Helmick, “An American Wilkie,” 36.
- 61 The manifest of passengers sailing from Cardiff, Wales to New York (September 11, 1873), records “Mrs. H. Helmick born about 1841 age 32 Cardiff, Wales, Nanie Helmick born about 1862 age 11 female, George Helmick born about 1866 age 7 male” (Mrs. Howard Helmick, Arrival 1873, New York Passenger Lists, 1820–1957, New York, M237, roll 381, line 4, list number 970, Ancestry.com [July 6, 2011]).
- 62 Census documents note: “Harriet Helmick widowed Age 60, born about 1820 in West Virginia, father and mother from Pennsylvania, listed living with a servant woman, two daughters, three granddaughters and three grandsons, one of them George Helmick age 16 born about 1864, at school, born in Virginia, father born in Ohio, mother born in New York” (Harriet Helmick, 1880 census, Washington, DC, roll 122, page 392A, Enumeration District 40, image 0785 Ancestry.com [July 6, 2011]). At this time, dates of birth were recorded vaguely, but dates seem concurrent with George (and his elder sister Nanie), having been born when H. H. was still in the US previous to emigrating to Europe.
- 63 Mrs. Elizabeth C. Waters, Passport Application, NARA, Washington, DC, Passport Applications, 1795–1905; ARC Identifier 566612/MLR Number A1 508; NARA Series: M1372; Roll # 167, Ancestry.com (July 6, 2011).
- 64 Graves, *Royal Academy*, 87. “Necrology of Art,” 43, states that Helmick’s painting *The Emigrant’s Letter* is included in the permanent collection of The Corcoran Gallery, as yet unfound.
- 65 Illustrated in Cook and Helmick, “An American Wilkie,” 359.
- 66 The London Census of 1881 records a widowed Waters lodging in Chelsea at 2 Portland Place and having been born in Pennsylvania (Elizabeth C. Waters, Census Returns of England and Wales, 1881. Kew, Surrey, England: The National Archives of the UK (TNA): Public Record Office (PRO), 1881. Class: RG11; Piece: 65; Folio: 3; Page: 3; GSU roll: 1341014. Ancestry.com [July 6, 2011]). The passenger list for the ship *British Prince*, arriving in Philadelphia from Liverpool in July 1889, notes, “Waters, E. C. Mrs. 39 Native and citizen of USA Occupation Lady Helmick, Wm Master 10 Native and citizen of USA Occupation” (Waters, E. C. 1889, Philadelphia Passenger Lists, 1800–1945, T840, roll 13, line 6, Ancestry.com [July 6, 2011]).
- 67 The 1910 census records “1533 Wisconsin Avenue DC, William J. Helmick age 30 Nephew born in England father born in Ohio, mother born in Ireland immigrated in 1887(9) Naturalized clerk in the city post office. Elizabeth Waters C widowed Head Age 69 born in Pennsylvania father and mother born in Pennsylvania no children” (William J. Helmick and Elizabeth C. Waters, 1910 census, Precinct 7, Washington, DC T624, roll 152, page 1A, Enumeration District 0132, image 1161, FHL number 1374165, Ancestry.com [July 6, 2011]). Previous to this, the 1900 census lists “Howard Helmick, artist, living with Nephew William J. Helmick (born June 1879) aged 20, born in England, mother born in Ireland college student and Elizabeth Waters Housekeeper b. July 1843 widowed” (Howard Helmick, 1900 census, Washington, DC, T623, roll 158, page 8B, Enumeration District 20 Ancestry.com [July 6, 2011]).
- 68 *Washington Times*, Apr. 30, 1907.

REPURPOSING THINGS IN IRISH PAINTING AND THE IRISH LITERARY REVIVAL

Marjorie Howes

THINGS TELL STORIES. THE COMPLEXITIES OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OBJECTS AND narratives lie at the heart of this exhibition and are evoked by its title, *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story*. This relationship forms a rich point of contact between literature and the visual arts. The questions that Bill Brown, a literary scholar and a pioneer of “thing theory,” asks of literary texts—“How are objects represented in this text? And how are they made to mean?”—can be asked just as appropriately and productively of paintings.¹ One approach to what things mean sees them as cultural artifacts: things tell the stories of the communities that produce, purchase, and consume them.² A contrasting approach seeks to treat things in themselves, insisting on what Brown calls the “otherness of objects as such.”³ In this view things tell their own stories. Both methods of reading objects are potentially useful. The first connects them to the human world in which they exist, whereas the second emphasizes the ambiguity and multiplicity of the narratives they generate.⁴ Literature and the visual arts are concerned with the means of representation as well as with what is represented. As disciplines, they explore both their subject matter and how that subject matter is made to mean. The conscious appropriation and manipulation of things, by people depicted in paintings and literary texts and by painters and writers themselves, emerges as a major preoccupation in visual and literary works, one that offers an alternative and complement to reading things for their inscrutable thingness or for their cultural representativeness. This essay examines how a few painters in *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story* engage with the human and artistic manipulation of things and suggests that this engagement was shared by literature of the same period.

The uses and value of material culture were a significant issue for the writers of the Irish Literary Revival, which began in the 1880s and continued up through Irish independence and beyond. Examining the subtle complexities of Revivalist things, Paige Reynolds argues that on one hand the Revival “aggressively touted its

antipathy toward things” in part to enforce a distinction between materialist England and “spiritual” Ireland. “Anti-materialism,” she concludes, “offered the Revivalists a logical ideological weapon in their struggle against imperial culture, given the practical facts that England was rich and Ireland was poor, and that trade laws made

Ireland a dumping ground for English commodities while interfering with Irish exportation.” On the other hand, she shows that Revivalist writers often embraced material culture and things, for example by advocating native Irish manufactures as alternatives to “the corrupt English commodities littering Ireland.”⁵

The complexity Reynolds uncovers in the Revival’s engagement with objects also appears in an essay by Augusta Gregory, who was, with W. B. Yeats, a key founder of the Literary Revival. In May of 1900 Gregory published “The Felons of Our Land” in London’s *Cornhill Magazine*. Although the essay documents how Irish people have developed a “spiritual vision” in response to a history of material failure and privation, she finds her evidence for such spirituality within the mundane material things and practices of rural life. Gregory defines felony as “a crime in the eyes of the law, not in the eyes of the people,”⁶ and examines Irish material culture as part of an ongoing struggle between British colonial power and Irish resistance. Faced with the superior power and resources of the British state, Gregory argues, country people negotiated their relationship to colonial authority, in part, by appropriating and repurposing objects. For example, she reports that “the chief ornament of many a cottage is the warrant for the arrest of a son

104 of the house framed and hung up as a sort of diploma of honour.”⁷ Like the term “felon,” the warrant means one thing to the British authorities—a legal order to arrest a criminal—and something else to the Irish—the unjust persecution of a nationalist hero. By making the warrant part of the decor of their homes, the Irish have inserted it into an alternative, subaltern narrative and fashioned it into a piece of their own material culture. The unequal power relationship between the Irish and the British and the original significance of the warrant are of course still part of the object’s meaning; so the warrant signifies both Irish vulnerability and resourcefulness, but its appropriation has created new layers of meaning, new stories. Irish country people have crafted a new narrative based on their manipulation of the warrant, and Gregory creates another, in part by placing her analysis of that manipulation in a colonial context.

In “The Felons of Our Land” the framed arrest warrant is just one in a series of examples in which Gregory reads Irish material culture for the way it helps the Irish negotiate the conditions of their lives and contest the interpretations of history and political life that the British Empire seeks to impose on them. This series includes relics from executed nationalists, cheap ballad books, popular practices at fairs, and pilgrimages to unofficial gravesites. “Irish history,” Gregory writes, “having been forbidden in the national schools, has lifted up its voice in the streets.”⁸ British authorities offer an official, imperial version of history; the Irish propose an alternative, anti-imperial history embodied in their material culture. This culture is not the untainted Irish folk culture, untouched by Anglicization, which some writers of the Revival sought to imagine or recover. Rather, it is dependent on the hybrid material culture produced by British rule in Ireland and works by appropriating rather than purifying or rejecting that culture.

Gregory’s embrace of Irish things that bore the marks of British domination was somewhat unusual during the Revival. Other important writers denigrated materialism and material things more generally and sought to uncover or create Irish popular traditions that would be free of English influence. Two years after Gregory wrote her essay, W. B. Yeats published his ef-

fort to characterize Irish popular culture in the *Cornhill Magazine*. In “What is ‘Popular Poetry?’” he recounted his earlier desire to replace the kind of poetry that was actually popular in Ireland at the time and “had never ceased to fill the newspapers and the ballad-books” with a different style of “popular” poetry, one that would be more Irish and more aesthetically accomplished. He formulated another version of the Irish popular tradition, one that was based on Irish oral and folk culture, rooted in ancient pagan religion rather than the lived Catholicism of the population—a tradition untainted by English literature or imperial power.⁹ Yeats sought to create a new Irish popular culture; Gregory found one ready at hand. His was confined to literature; hers included material objects and practices.

At the center of such differences lay (among other things) rapidly changing and highly contested representations of the Irish country people. The 1880s, 1890s, and the first decade of the twentieth century were important and contentious years in the formation of the Revival, as literary writers, antiquarians, journalists, folklorists, and politicians all looked to the rural Irish, especially in the West, as emblems of national identity and conducted debates over how to interpret and depict these country people. James Brenan’s (1837–1907) *Patchwork* (1891) (plate 30), painted just as these debates were beginning, uses the objects in the image to engage similar questions about how the material conditions and practices of the Irish could be “made to mean.”

On first viewing, *Patchwork* might suggest that Brenan has simply tried to convey a sad scene of isolation, privation, and hard work for an elderly woman, a figure he depicts as scarcely distinguishable from the object world of the painting. She sits alone, in the center of the image and bends laboriously over her work. The colors of the clothing she wears are echoed by those of a set of clothes hanging on the wall at the right, and her shadow on the wall similarly threatens to absorb her into the world of inanimate objects. Other elements of the scene suggest inertia; the fire is low, and the kettle and tin pail stand idle.

But if the painting emphasizes the difficult and tenuous nature of the woman’s existence, other aspects

of the material culture it depicts insist equally on her successful survival. The fire may be low, but it is burning, the straw creel is full of turf, and the woman may be tired, but she is working. In addition, the stairs on the right suggest a way up and out of the confined space she is currently in; they indicate that the house is much larger than what we can see within the picture’s frame. Two-storied houses were relatively rare among the rural Irish, but during the nineteenth century as the stratification of rural society increased, some strong farmers and successful traders added second floors onto their originally single-storied houses.¹⁰ And the flagstone floor would have been beyond the means of poor cottiers. The old woman may be a servant within such a house; in any case, Brenan makes it clear that she does not inhabit the kind of one-room cabin depicted by several painters in this exhibition, notably Alfred Downing Fripp and Francis William Topham (plates 9–10, 12–13).

The “patchwork” in question is not just the woman’s labor; it is also her life. The painting’s title registers not simply privation and vulnerability, but also purposeful, artful appropriation and survival in the face of hardship, as do Gregory’s examples of framing the arrest warrant and other counter-hegemonic popular practices. Brenan’s painting, therefore, does not merely employ things to define his central human figure; it takes as a major theme her active manipulation of objects and makes that manipulation a metaphor for the inventive way she negotiates her life and circumstances.

In contrast, Howard Helmick’s (1840–1907) *The Bachelor* (1880) (plate 37), which also depicts an elderly, solitary figure, surrounds that figure with an apparently richer object world, only to insist on his isolation and passivity. The bachelor’s clothes are respectable and not obviously ragged; the ceramic jugs on the table and the pewter pitcher and ladle hanging on the wall are more elaborately manufactured and expensive items than anything in *Patchwork*. But the man’s face is downcast, and he holds his hands towards a fire that appears to give little light or warmth. He is turned away from his possessions; their orderly arrangement suggests static display rather than active appropriation. In keeping with the arguments of Yeats and other Revivalists who

characterized the Irish as anti-materialistic, the bachelor seems detached from the material objects around him. The well-thumbed book—perhaps an almanac or a Bible—that has obviously offered inspiration and/or information in the past hangs idly on the wall. Irish history does not raise its voice in any of these household items. Rather than suggesting labor and resourcefulness, Helmick's title emphasizes what the bachelor does not have—a wife—and casts him as representative of a larger social malaise: the astronomically high rates of late marriage and permanent celibacy in post-Famine Ireland. Bachelors like him were an all too common and much discussed feature of rural society. Helmick's point may be, in part, that the bachelor fails to manipulate or even appreciate the material objects in his modest but comfortable home as a way of negotiating the circumstances of his life.

In *Patchwork*, on the other hand, Brenan's emphasis on the repairing and repurposing of objects highlights the interpretive dilemmas generated by such negotiations. For example, mending and patching clothing were common employments for Irish women, especially elderly women and widows. Brenan himself was interested in the plight of poor rural women who worked with textiles from home, and he sought to improve conditions for those engaged in lace manufacturing.¹¹ But if his depiction of the woman accurately reflects the fact of female employment, his painting is more ambiguous about the meanings of such work. Do the articles of clothing hanging over the woman represent the exhausting signs of her labor looming over her? Or do they indicate a thriving home-based business and reflect the common practice of hanging clothes from walls and ceilings in Irish houses with limited space, damp floors, and few storage places? Do the man's breeches that she is mending signify her gendered subordination or a valuable social connection? Does the large tear in the breeches suggest the potential scope of her skill and accomplishment or the impoverishment of her community? Brenan's painting invites us to connect the objects to the woman, and to each other, through a number of different narratives.

Such multiple possibilities were equally on offer for

the many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century observers who commented on the significance and state of Irish clothing. Robert Scally notes that “the dress of the men, women, and children, whether homespun, second-hand, or merely ragged, was close to uniform and easily recognized by friend or outsider as a badge of townland poverty.”¹² But such pervasive shabbiness provoked competing assessments. Some writers interpreted ragged clothing as indicating Irish poverty and calling forth compassion, whereas others found something to criticize—either a lack of industry or decency in the Irish poor or a frivolous attachment to finery they could ill afford.¹³ Claudia Kinmonth's discussion of *Patchwork* introduces an anecdote from William Carleton and remarks how it reveals “the lengths people would go when caring for their precious clothing.”¹⁴ His story involves a man whose mother sews patches onto the sleeves of his good coat to protect them when he needs to work in it, and rips them off again on Saturday night so the coat looks as good as new for Sunday. Kinmonth reads Carleton's story as equally embodying scarcity and resourcefulness. Thus both she and Gregory analyze the manipulation of objects to create related narratives about how nineteenth-century Irish material culture embodies creativity and survival in the face of privation.

By the early nineteenth century, descriptions of the Irish dressed in rags or wearing next to nothing were so common that Lady Morgan (Sydney Owenson) could parody the stereotype in *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806). The novel's hero, Horatio Mortimer, has been banished for the summer to his father's Irish estate, and traces the origin of his “confirmed prejudice” against the Irish to his childhood reading of the seventeenth-century travel writer Fynes Moryson, who, Mortimer claims, recounted that as “late as the days of Elizabeth, an Irish chieftain and his family were frequently seen seated round their domestic fire in a state of perfect nudity.”¹⁵ Over the course of the novel, Mortimer is educated out of his prejudice and into a sincere admiration for Ireland and the Irish—and representations of clothing and textiles play an important role in this process.¹⁶

The relationship between Irish clothing and Irish stereotypes features in another important turn-of-the-

century work, Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*. Edgeworth's narrator Thady Quirk is, on the surface, a loyal and bumbling retainer to a landowning family. On the novel's first page we learn that he wears his coat as a cloak or mantle, never putting his arms into the sleeves to keep them “as good as new.”¹⁷ Edgeworth's overt intention is to ridicule Thady rather than to admire the inventive measures he takes to preserve his precious clothes. But Thady is, on another level, a wily trickster figure, instrumental in engineering the Rackrent family's downfall; Edgeworth added a footnote glossing his discussion of his coat that ties his subversive potential to his clothing. The note—a quotation from Edmund Spenser, a colonial administrator in Ireland vehemently hostile to the indigenous people—describes the Irish mantle as “a fit house for an outlaw, a meet bed for a rebel, and an apt cloak for a thief.”¹⁸ Other early commentators agreed; the mantle was a much discussed and politically charged item of clothing, so much so that the early English conquerors in Ireland banned it.¹⁹ Like the warrant and the patchwork, the mantle makes Irish poverty and weakness inseparable from resourcefulness and survival. Brenan's 1891 painting engages both the rich cultural and political history of Irish clothing and the purposeful manipulation of material culture that Revivalists like Gregory and Yeats were busy describing and debating during the last two decades of the nineteenth century.

Brenan's representational strategy depended on the scarcity and poverty of the object world in *Patchwork*. In contrast, other painters, such as Charles Henry Cook (1830–1906), created similarly complex and ambiguous narratives using an opposed strategy, one that involved the rich proliferation of objects. Cook's *St. Patrick's Day/ Irish Matchmaker* (1867) (plate 19) uses a series of coded objects to reference a wide range of well-established cultural traditions, both literary and visual. Offering an elaborate but somewhat ambiguous narrative, the painting depicts thirteen people gathered at an inn on St. Patrick's Day in the atmosphere of carousing and celebration that marked that holiday in the Irish countryside. The central dancing couple, a young woman and a British soldier, are being watched by nearly everyone else in the picture; such spectators obviously also

106 function as stand-ins for the viewer. As a group, these spectators mirror the interpretive dilemmas the couple poses. The man entering from the right holds his hand over his mouth in shock and presumably disapproval, and the *uilleann* piper and his companion are frowning. But other responses to the couple are harder to gauge, such as those of the woman serving drinks and the man seated at the left.

The seated man in the foreground, top-hatted with legs apart, wears a knowing smile that can be interpreted as either resigned or conspiratorial. Whether he himself is a ballad singer or has purchased the ballad sheet on the table next to him from someone else, the sheet's presence invokes the traditions of popular literature and song in Ireland, many of which featured stories of seduction, romance, and betrayal. With the possible exception of the people glimpsed in the front room and the frowning seated man in the top hat behind the table, the ballad singer is the only figure in the painting who fails to look at the dancing couple. But he and the ballad sheet occupy the center of the image. The other figures are arranged around him, and the floor beneath him is brightly lit, directing the viewer's eye towards him. He sits in front of the dancing pair, literally between the viewer and the couple, as if to emphasize his role in mediating the viewer's interpretation of them. He gazes away from them as though he is imagining them rather than observing them—as though he is, in some sense, the author of the scene.

But what story is he telling? On another level, of course, the ballad sheet invites the viewer to supply the story. Augusta Gregory's essay on felons claimed that Irish popular ballads offered anti-imperial versions of Irish history:

At little Catholic bookshops, at little sweet and china shops in country towns, one finds the cheap ballad books, in gaudy paper covers, red, yellow, and green, that hold these summaries of a sad history.... And at fairs and markets the favourite ballads are sold singly or in broadsheets by the singers at a yet lower price.²⁰

Gregory's reading of the songs encourages us to see Cook's reference to the ballad tradition as suggesting that the painting should be read as a national allegory, in which, as in many traditional songs, Ireland is cast as a wronged maiden, seduced or conquered and then betrayed by British power. Her analysis, which emphasizes the ballad sheet's place in the commercial culture of rural Ireland characterized as "cheap" and "gaudy," accords well with the festive St. Patrick's Day scene and the money on the table near the ballad sheet. Cook's image, then, suggests her focus on the messy hybridities of a living popular culture, subjected to British and commercial forces but actively negotiating with them. The British soldier's seduction of an Irish woman becomes a narrative of colonial victimization, an allegory enabling the Irish to tell the story of English rule as precisely that: a story of victimization. To counter the more benign stories England circulated about Ireland's place in the British Empire, an alternative vision of Irish history, embodied in the ballad, lifts up its voice in the street and the pub.

A few years later Gregory exploited the potentially subversive nature of street ballads in her one-act dramatic work *The Rising of the Moon* (1907), a play with only two major characters, a police sergeant and "A Ragged Man." A dangerous Irish nationalist has escaped from prison, the police are searching for him, and the sergeant is posted by a quay to prevent the fugitive from escaping by water. The ragged man poses as "a poor ballad singer"²¹ seeking to sell ballad sheets to sailors, but, like the Irish outlaw's mantle, his clothes are a disguise; eventually he is revealed to be the wanted felon. Over the course of the play, he convinces the sergeant to let him escape, using his stock of nationalist ballads as his major persuasive tool. These ballads reveal that the ragged man and the sergeant share a common national culture; as the ragged man remarks: "to think of a man like you knowing a song like that."²² The songs reconnect the sergeant with his national identity and buried past—when he sang the same songs and might have joined "some plan to free the country."²³ Gregory's point is not that the sentiments in the ballads are in themselves persuasive enough to make the sergeant abandon his mission as a servant of the crown. Rather,

it is that the ballads, and the broader subaltern popular culture they represent, constitute a shared nationalist resource for all Irish people; their story is already the sergeant's story, even though he has temporarily forgotten his past. The play's conflation of the ballad singer with the nationalist hero/felon neatly embodies Gregory's theory of the revolutionary potential of Irish material culture and popular practices.

However, other nineteenth-century observers such as Yeats thought of Irish street ballads as vulgar, adulterated, Anglicized bits of popular culture, and contrasted them unfavorably to the kind of traditional Irish folk culture he considered more authentically Celtic. David Lloyd has shown that popular ballads, especially street ballads, were widely condemned by Irish nationalists throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century and during the turn-of-the-century Revival as well.²⁴ A number of commentators, ranging from Yeats to his enemy D. P. Moran, castigated the Irish for slavishly embracing and imitating English culture. In "What is 'Popular Poetry'?" Yeats condemned Irish journalism because "it does not see, though it would cast out all English things, that its literary ideal belongs more to England than to other countries."²⁵ Such critiques might generate a new narrative out of Cook's painting, one in which the young dancing woman is betraying her native Irish culture by succumbing to the blandishments of a corrupt, imperialistic England whose cultural influence in the Irish countryside is evidenced by the ballad sheet.

So while the ballad sheet and possible ballad singer in *St. Patrick's Day* signal its relationship to narratives in popular literary sources, exactly which narratives the image invokes remains an open question. A similar ambiguity attends Cook's inclusion of another art object within his own painting, Erskine Nicol's (1825–1904) lithograph *Outward-Bound (Dublin)* (c. 1852) (plate 20) that hangs on the wall at the right. Nicol depicts a ragged Irishman reading an advertising poster for the boat to North America; its companion lithograph, *Homeward-Bound* (not pictured), features the same man, now well dressed and in New York, contemplating a journey back to Ireland. Unclear, however, is whether the presence of *Outward-Bound* on the wall of the inn

implies forced emigration for the woman dancing with a red-coated soldier as punishment for sexual transgression or suggests a liberating escape from rural Ireland's prying eyes and strict moral codes. Traditionally nineteenth-century Irish and Irish-American cultures interpreted emigration as involuntary exile, but growing evidence suggests that such views often represented a nostalgic retrospective reading of the experience rather than an accurate reflection of emigrants' immediate experiences or motives. Scholars generally agree that women were somewhat less likely than men to see their emigration as exile, which may support the second reading of the lithograph's presence in Cook's painting.²⁶

Other objects in *St. Patrick's Day* function differently, flaunting their connections to more canonical and elite symbolic and cultural traditions. Kinmonth observes that the doors at each side of the painting are reminiscent of a stage set, suggesting that Cook's image gestures towards drama. And her thorough reading of the various objects in the painting emphasizes their coded symbolic quality: she notes that in *St. Patrick's Day* "the artist has placed symbolic objects which the Victorian audience could interpret like text."²⁷ These objects include the shamrocks, key, rose, daisy, primrose, lovers' knot, empty casket, empty birdcage, dead birds, vine leaf, wild oats, coins, watch, and feathers and drops of blood on the floor. Indeed, nearly every object in the painting has, not just a potential symbolic value within the scene, but one that participates in a well-established representational tradition: Irish folk culture, the language of flowers, traditions of romance, still life, bacchanalian imagery, and biblical traditions. The lovers' knot and rose, for example, are well-worn emblems of romance. In Cook's painting they are crossed in the center of the foreground and the rose appears damaged; both visual details suggest a narrative about people who are, in some way, crossed in love. The vine leaf, bottle, dead fowl, and wild oats connote the pleasures and dangers of bacchanalian excess. As these examples illustrate, the symbolic meaning of many of these objects is so familiar as to be clichéd.

Cook is not simply using a range of objects to contribute to the story or stories his painting tells; he is

also drawing attention to his own ability to manipulate a wide range of objects that are famous for what they have been made to mean. Cramming so many highly coded things into the painting verges on parody. Many of the objects in the image can, of course, also be read for what they might tell us about the material culture of the Irish countryside or scrutinized as objects themselves. But we miss an important aspect of Cook's painting if we think that is the only story the things in it are supposed to tell. The self-referential quality of the excessive, even parodic allusiveness embodied in the object world of *St. Patrick's Day* indicates neither the objects' historical representativeness nor their sheer "thingness." Instead, that quality calls attention to Cook's artistry, his knowledge of cultural traditions, and the relationship he imagines between the viewer and his painting.

Howard Helmick's *Between Two Fires/Rival Suitors* (1885) (plate 40) provides an instructive contrast. Like *St. Patrick's Day*, it depicts a pub scene in which a number of spectators view an unfolding story that involves a young Irish woman's potential romantic entanglement with a British soldier. The man seated on the table in the center of the painting and the soldier contend for the affections of the young woman standing on the left. The man's light clothing contrasts with the dark attire of the other men in the room, draws the viewer's eye to him, and connects him visually to the young woman, whose shawl is a similar shade. The color of his clothing is one of several subtle clues that Helmick uses to suggest that he is the more appropriate and/or the more successful suitor; that he and the young woman are exchanging glances is another. The soldier's cap is askew, and he has his hand on the man's upper arm as if to restrain him; the overturned tankard with its contents spilled onto the floor suggests a physical struggle. The soldier holds a short riding crop and a sword hangs from his belt while the man seated on the table holds a longer whip, possibly a buggy whip, that occupies a prominent place in the center of the painting and forcefully separates the women from the soldier. Apart from this whip and the tankard, the floor before the figures is completely bare; the only objects visible on the wall are an undecipherable poster and some hanging tankards. The rich trove

of highly traditional and symbolic objects that *St. Patrick's Day* presents so ostentatiously is almost completely absent in Helmick's *Rival Suitors*. The objects that are present, the whips and sword and the other evidence of struggle, emphasize one thing: violent conflict. Even the knitting needles the young woman holds appear, in this context, like small weapons. Yet the narratives generated by Helmick's focus on this fact of conflict are not without ambiguity. They may or may not, for example, include a reference to historical allegories of rivalry between the Irish and the English for the possession of Ireland. But Helmick does not engage with the conscious manipulation of objects as an important theme as do Brennan and Cook.

The artists of *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story* pursue different strategies for making objects mean; the stories they tell invoke collective cultural practices and large historical trends, but also the individual responses and situations of artists and figures in paintings. Writers and artists alike posed questions about what the material culture and circumstances of rural Ireland meant and how they should be represented, but they came to different conclusions. Various writers produced different assessments of Irish popular culture and its objects such as ballad sheets or ragged clothing. Both *Patchwork* and *St. Patrick's Day* depict scenes in which potential narratives proliferate, even though they do so using radically different painterly strategies—one involving a spare object world, the other a lavish one. *Patchwork* and *The Bachelor* present seemingly similar aged and isolated figures, but Brennan suggests the woman's individual response to her circumstances, whereas Helmick's bachelor is closer to a rural type or a recognizable example of a larger social problem. And although *St. Patrick's Day* and *Rival Suitors* take up similar themes surrounding transgressive romance, each painting manipulates the things surrounding the lovers differently. For both writers and visual artists, the capacity of Irish objects to tell multiple stories about rural Ireland made them so compelling. An exhibition such as *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story* allows scholars to add yet a third approach to examinations of things themselves and things as cultural artifacts: the study of how individuals—artists and non-artists—art-

108 fully appropriate and repurpose objects as they respond to and make sense of their world.



NOTES

- 1 Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 18.
- 2 For a helpful summary, see Toby Barnard, *A Guide to Sources for the History of Material Culture in Ireland, 1500–2000* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005).
- 3 Bill Brown, “Objects, Others, and Us (The Refabrication of Things),” *Critical Inquiry* 36 (Winter 2010): 186.
- 4 This distinction should not, of course, be drawn too sharply. Historians and archaeologists acknowledge that artifacts are far from self-explanatory, and literary proponents of thing theory inevitably link objects to human subjects, even as they resist reducing things to the status of mere metonyms.
- 5 Paige Reynolds, “Synge’s Things: Material Culture in *The Aran Islands*, *Riders to the Sea*, and *The Playboy of the Western World*,” in *J. M. Synge and Modern Irish Drama: Centenary Essays from the Synge Summer School*, ed. Patrick Lonergan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2010), 202. See also her “Introduction” to the special issue on Irish things, *Éire-Ireland: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Irish Studies* 46, nos. 1–2 (Spring/Summer 2011): 7–19.
- 6 Lady Gregory, *Selected Writings*, eds. Lucy McDiarmid and Maureen Waters (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 254–55.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 256.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 W. B. Yeats, “What is ‘Popular Poetry’?,” in *The Yeats Reader*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1997), 363–69.
- 10 See F. H. A. Aalen, “Buildings,” in *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape*, eds. F. H. A. Aalen, Kevin Whelan, and Matthew Stout (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), 156.
- 11 Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 55, 106.
- 12 Robert James Scally, *The End of Hidden Ireland: Rebellion, Famine, and Emigration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 32.
- 13 Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 106. Kinmonth elsewhere emphasizes “Irish material culture was frequently misunderstood” by contemporary commentators who were ignorant of Irish life and influenced by prejudices of various kinds (Claudia Kinmonth, “Rags and Rushes: Art and the Irish Artefact, c. 1900,” *Journal of Design History* 14, no. 3 [2001]: 167–85).
- 14 Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 107. She cites anecdote from William Carleton, *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, 4th ed., vol. 1 (Dublin: W. F. Wakeman, 1835), 50–52.
- 15 Lady Morgan (Sydney Owenson), *The Wild Irish Girl*, in *Two Irish National Tales*, ed. James M. Smith (1806; reprint: Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 107.
- 16 See Julie Donovan, “Text and Textile in Sydney Owenson’s *The Wild Irish Girl*,” *Éire-Ireland: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Irish Studies* 43, nos. 3–4 (Fall/Winter 2008): 31–57.
- 17 Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent* (1800; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 8.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 For a useful discussion of the mantle’s political history, see Helen Burke, “‘Integrated as Outsiders’: Teague’s Blanket and the Irish Immigrant ‘Problem’ in Early Modern Britain,” *Éire-Ireland: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Irish Studies* 46, nos. 1–2 (Spring/Summer 2011): 20–42.
- 20 Gregory, *Selected Writings*, 257.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 364.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 369.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 David Lloyd, “Adulteration and the Nation,” in *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 88–124.
- 25 Yeats, “Popular Poetry,” 368.
- 26 On the tendency to re-cast voluntary emigration as involuntary exile, see Kirby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). On the differences between men and women, see Patrick O’Sullivan, ed., *Irish Women and Irish Migration* (London: Cassell, 1995); Hasia Diner, *Erin’s Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); Janet Nolan, *Ourselves Alone: Women’s Emigration From Ireland, 1835–1920* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989); David Fitzpatrick, “The Modernisation of the Irish Female,” in *Rural Ireland 1600–1900: modernisation and change*, eds. Patrick O’Flanagan, Paul Ferguson, and Kevin Whelan (Cork: Cork University Press, 1987).
- 27 Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 189–90.

THE INTERIOR YEATS: SKETCHBOOKS AND VERNACULAR CULTURE IN THE WORK OF JACK YEATS

Nicholas Allen

JACK YEATS (1871–1957), YOUNGEST SON OF THE STRUGGLING PORTRAIT PAINTER JOHN Yeats and younger brother of the poet William Butler Yeats, was a painter, illustrator, and writer. His varied career progressed in phases from drawing to oil painting and the writing of literature. During his life he also created cartoons, staged plays for children, and avoided every opportunity to reflect self-consciously on his work. Today, the oil paintings created in the first half of the twentieth century dominate public perception of Jack Yeats's achievements. These images accompany and imaginatively correspond with the great and then contemporary revolution in literature associated with the work of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. Although this combined visual and literary effort of cultural innovation coincided with the wider movement of Ireland away from the British Empire, the history of this relationship has been described unevenly by cultural critics. It appears sometimes that Jack Yeats's oils have become wallpaper for a cultural movement whose relationship with the visual arts is being thought through with precision only now.¹ The reasons for this critical blindness to visual culture and its relationship with history and literature are partly historical and partly institutional, but always interrelated.

Yeats sketched throughout his life, carrying cartridge paper books in his coat pocket. The various subjects he explored in these sketchbooks, over a hundred of which are held in international public collections and in private hands, form a connecting thread in his life. They provide a chronology and a cartography to the places he visited and, since at various points in his life he bequeathed them as gifts, they give information about his friendships. Lastly, and more obliquely, they offer a glimpse into Ireland's interior domestic spaces, a window that more frequently survives in the country's

fiction. Significantly, the revelation of the interiors of households in Yeats's sketchbooks illustrates the complexity of Ireland's position within the late imperial world. The lines of definition demanded by separatist nationalism blur and fade in these pencil drawings as the occasional color of a globalized interior life outshines the gray monotone of the separatist imagination. If, as recent critics argue, Yeats's oil paintings gesture toward forms of human association still unrealized in the Irish republic that emerged in the wreckage of revolution, then the sketchbooks offer points of light in the darkness

of a difficult past. Yeats's persistence in working at them throughout his long career suggests how necessary they became to him. Whereas the thick impasto of his oils suggests strong physical movement, the nerves that join these painterly tendons are the sketches, quivering links between the world as experience and experience as image. All the while, the material ground of these images remains the intimate domestic subjects they render.

The works on display in *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story* consist of a small number of images taken from sketchbooks that the artist presented as gifts to the revolutionary and writer Ernie O'Malley. The occasion was Yeats's gratitude to O'Malley for having organized the National Loan Exhibition of Yeats's work held in Dublin in 1945; the subjects of these sketchbooks were various, some touching upon the shared American experience of Yeats and O'Malley. Yeats visited the United States only once, in 1904, whereas O'Malley spent several years in the late 1920s and early 1930s living there. The American sketchbooks were included in the gift to the writer and remain one of the treasures of the Jack Yeats legacy; his images of Manhattan from the arriving boat exist as magical evocations of early twentieth-century New York City.

O'Malley is best known for his memoir *On Another*

110 *Man's Wound* (1936), which recounts his experience as a volunteer during the War of Independence and, in so doing, redraws Ireland as a local landscape of global inflection. The places O'Malley had viewed while living in New Mexico and traveling south of the border filtered into his prose construction of Ireland, subtly changing the imaginative texture of the island's turbulent past. The mountains through which he walked and the country roads through which he cycled are colored by the writer's self-education in art history and by his experience of the Americas in the years he spent writing the memoir.² The blended palette of this prose found its visual correspondence in Jack Yeats's art, a connection the writer discovered as he became familiar with the artist's work. Returning to Ireland after marrying Helen Hooker, an American heiress, O'Malley began to collect Yeats's paintings, an investment that saw return in the growth of the two men's personal relationship.

The Irish art critic, poet, and curator Thomas MacGreevy was among the first to argue that the assumed value of Yeats's art lay in its *national* significance. Both historically and imaginatively, this body of work existed at the intersection between the political and the aesthetic; its imagery became a prism through which multiple interests could find confirmation of their legitimacy. Yeats, however, worked to avoid becoming a symbol of other peoples' interests—although his studied detachment ironically corresponded with that sense of self-sacrifice so central to the militant republican tradition. Central to both the form and content of Yeats's determinedly unfashionable work was the discovery of meaning in the otherwise disregarded. (The artist wrote children's plays about pirates while Ireland was dreaming of the Red Branch warriors; he illustrated pseudonymously for *Punch* when many of his contemporaries viewed commercial art with disdain.) His concern for neglected spaces opens a door into the dusty room of his Irish interiors.

In one sketchbook, a watercolor of a stack of boxes or display cases hidden underneath the staircase of a two-floor building (plate 45), offers only some limited information as to the location, ownership, or scale of the place. The staircase indicates a two-story home, which

in conjunction with a door glazed with glass panes, suggests some prosperity—perhaps a strong farmer's home or even a recess of a big house. The viewer's eye is drawn to the trophies of those who live here: six glass-fronted cases, stacked in declining size towards the ceiling, which itself slopes upwards with the stairs. Viewed from the ground floor and presumably from inside an entrance doorway to the room, the cases contain birds in various forms of activity, with one exhibiting an animal that appears to be a fox. These displays offer clues as to the owner's intentions, for the country scenes within them suggest a connection to the landscape, such as that provided by hunting in the Irish countryside. The stuffed animals, moreover, exhibit life by its very absence, much like the diorama exhibitions that nineteenth-century natural history museums provided on a far grander scale. The choreography of starched feathers brings order to a wild world, now experienced through its smaller parts.

Yeats's watercolor little resembles the cloud and landscape paintings that his contemporary Paul Henry (1877–1958) mastered. Henry created what was to become an iconic Irish national landscape imagery that was recognizably different from that of the pre-independence territory; but in Yeats's display case sketch only the hint of a blue sky appears in the painted interiors of the glass-fronted boxes. The curious vertical stack of birds and animals further undoes any idea of the “natural” life upon which Henry relied. Sitting on top of the cases in Yeats's image are domestic objects: pottery and bottles, one of which appears to have liquid in it. In the middle of this grouping is a statue, which may have a baby in its arms, possibly the Virgin and Child. Somewhat hidden behind these objects sits a clock, which would be difficult to read except from the height of the stairs; clock time, the image seems to imply, diminishes in importance the closer one exists to the outdoor cycles of life on a farm, the open land, or the sea. And in bringing his art's focus from the outside to the interior, Yeats inverts Henry's aesthetic. Rather than recreating a mythic vision of the Irish West, he contacts a material world that is embedded with human experience.

Aside from a few suggestions of the class status of

the house depicted, this image reveals relatively little of the artist's subject—or of the artist himself. Clearly the curiosity of the scene has caught Yeats's attention, for the miniature theater of the display cases appealed to the same interest he took in his plays for children. Additionally, the picture suggests Yeats's confidence in occupying another's domestic space for his own artistic ends; sketching the outlines of a drawing or composing a watercolor takes time, and sitting in someone else's hallway is different from painting *en plein air*. This image emerges from a fugitive moment, and as such it is associated with other scenes that flicker through Yeats's sketchbooks; these can include individual objects taken out of any context, such as a drawing of a candlestick (plate 46). These exercises in form and light tend to be more finished than drawings that depict multiple objects or ones that extend their focus from interior decoration to the people who inhabit the spaces the artist sketches. The drawings that include figures can be found throughout Yeats's archive, much of which is collected in the National Gallery of Ireland.³ On occasion figures in these images appear very like the stock characters that tend to surface in many of Yeats's mid-period oil paintings; in these a watching character becomes the cornerstone of many of the compositions, for example, with the little boy who surfaces in works like *Bachelor's Walk: In Memory* (1915) or *Communicating with Prisoners* (1924).

Yeats was fascinated with the figure of the onlooker, and in the sketchbooks he seemingly plays such a role himself. Such human figures can usually be found in the bottom corners of oil paintings, but their positioning shifts depending on the scale of the work; the effect, emerging as a pattern between paintings, is unsettling. By making the image self-conscious, Yeats causes these watchers to break the illusion of representation on which painting depends—a technique relating certainly to the practices of modernism. Such self-consciousness in his imagery raises the issue of Yeats's attitude to the avant-garde movements that had revolutionized visual art since the beginning of the twentieth century. He has left little written evidence of his interest in major contemporary figures, Irish or international, and reflected little on the practice of his own art. Samuel Beckett

admired Yeats's painting, as did Joyce, but the bridge between such admirers and the visual artist was largely constructed by the writers, who grasped some correspondence between their own elusive artistry and Yeats's playfully vibrant images. Until his late work, rather than deconstruct the image by rearranging its formal building blocks into some new sequence, as did the cubists, Yeats adhered to a representational style, one disturbed only by the dissonant onlooker figure in the painting. The viewer perceives, for example, an image of Jack Yeats himself among the onlookers in the famous painting *The Liffey Swim* (1923).

This visible imprint of himself in his art is the logical next step of Yeats's technique in the sketchbooks; in these works the immediacy of the imagery suggests, always, the proximity of the artist, sometimes to the extent of his capturing bits of conversational moments in his sketches. In one drawing we view a man looking from the right corner foreground of a kitchen toward a woman who leans on a dresser in the background, jugs, plates, and what appear to be measures for cooking placed upon it (plate 47). The effect of such a stacking of objects in these sketches of Irish interiors suggests, seemingly, an excess of things, a certain packed quality within the houses the artist has entered. The recurrent visual evidence of a rural people's loving possession of things demonstrates a more permeable membrane between destitution and subsistence than either a nationalist propaganda or the romantic Revivalist theater would have us believe. Neither does Yeats convey the impression of domestic work as female slavery, for in the same image the woman is well dressed, her hair tied up neatly. Even as the poor worked in reduced circumstances, the body becomes a site of display. Thus for Yeats these rural Irish men and women are never excluded from a social contract that takes visual cues from their conscious arrangement of what little they had.

The scene in *What would you think . . .* is unremarkable visually, colored in washed out shades of brown and blue. The watching man resembles Jack Yeats in profile, although the identification is not definite. Written in capitals in the left front corner are the words, "What would you think of an English girl who couldn't speak

English"—a fragment inviting some speculation about the artist's motivation. From the poses of both figures we might assume that neither can speak to the other and that the man addresses a woman whose first and only language is Irish. This apparent language barrier evokes a separation between artist and subject that extends beyond the normal assumption that just as words constitute literature, images constitute art. If the artist postulates a language gap between himself and the image he creates, he is also always conscious of a missed world, a lived experience that his pictures cannot touch.

Yeats worked on the borders of popular culture even as he made art from the refuse of public space; like Baudelaire he created the fabric of art from the rags of experience—an explanation perhaps of the intimate distress of these sketches. Drawn on paper and bound by wire hoops, the images make a portable scrapbook of objects resting for use in a future moment, the necessity of which is yet unknown. This melancholy awareness becomes personal in the small-scale theater of Yeats's sketches, but appears more difficult to grasp on the larger stage of an oil painting where the artist's distance from the Irish-language world of the West becomes obscured by thick waves of paint and bright colors drowning the watery shades of self-consciousness that convey his interior doubt in the sketches. As he so often does in his images of the western coast and its communities, in this drawing of a man and woman Yeats has his subject look outside the frame; moreover, a streak of light on the woman's face suggests the outdoors or the sea.

In his greatest works Yeats conveys regret, suggesting why he was drawn repeatedly to images of childhood, never abandoning the imagery of a now lost youth; even as an old man, he continued to make sketches of pirates and their treasure. These recurring childhood memories clarify in one sketchbook drawing of a painting (plate 48), which itself contains a picture on the wall of a straight-backed man wearing a naval hat. The painting making up the sketch focuses on a small girl learning to walk as she moves from the left frame toward the right where her mother holds out a hand. The image also contains allusions to other sketches, such as the candlestick on the mantelpiece that suggests the previously not-

ed image of this familiar object in the rural home. Such small recurring motifs, including the images of pictures on the wall, confirm the miniature patterns of Yeats's interests. The scene in *Mother and child* is warm and domestic, with the smoke from a fire billowing behind the figures. The sketch offers few clues about where the central image within it is mounted: a brown vertical line behind the painting suggests either on a ribbed wall on a free-standing wooden support. Both are possible. Nor does anything within this sketch insist that it illustrates an Irish scene—except that the private space depicted appears decorated with objects whose utility suggests Ireland's involvement in a complex economy. The setting is stocked with objects of various utility and decoration, evoking a characteristic aspect of Irish interiors that Yeats knew well from his drawings of shops in the west of Ireland. Other drawings, particularly his illustrations of country shops, concentrate repeatedly on the ways in which the inner architecture of Irish rural life was decorated with things for sale: all kinds of dry goods show the impact of the merchant economy on even the most far-flung corners of the island. One drawing shows a shop counter with a flour sack beside it, on which there is the image of a Native American in headdress standing atop a running buffalo; to the right and behind this is a tin of tea emblazoned with Erin's harp.

The coastline and islands that Yeats had traveled with John Millington Synge in the early 1900s were on the edge of an Atlantic that carried the world's flotsam to Ireland's shores; one sketch in the National Gallery of Ireland even illustrates a buoy from New York half buried in a Galway field after reclamation from the sea. Such drawings reveal the artist's eye for the middle ground of private experience, for lives caught between the larger forces of globalization and capital exchange and evoked through the vernacular arts of prints, furniture, and fine china making their way into rural Ireland, like lost travelers resting by the wayside. The consequences of such exchange are visible in the images where private goods are dispersed in public space—not only in the western shops that Yeats drew, but also in the casual space of street experience that he captured in his jaunts through Dublin and country towns.⁴

Yeats was a dedicated walker, who treated the roadside as an Edwardian palace of varieties. Plate 49 depicts three objects in line, each an oddity: an indistinct image of what is termed an Oxford frame,⁵ a blue “cartboard [*sic*] to hold sheep on side walk,” a wooden spinning wheel. Possibly the beginning of another sketch of an interior, this drawing makes clear how the outside world seeps into private space through the acquisition of objects. The relationships between these objects are askew: how does the picture in its Oxford frame—sitting at an angle to the other things and with the phrase “framed on wall” written beside it—belong with the box and the spinning wheel? Furthermore, the sketch poses a question of scale: if the sheep are drawn to size, the picture and the wheel are imports from Brobdingnag. What appears at first to be a straightforward drawing of various objects is, particularly in its perspective, something quite different. The drawing appears to evoke the artist’s sense of Ireland as a concertina island, a place of expansion and contraction, its movements traceable mostly by the movement of objects through it, the pressure of and resistance to global exchange.

Such a shifting perspective again becomes evident in Yeats’s sketch of a train station in Ardrahan, a village on the line to Gort, south of Galway (plate 50). Jack Yeats, the younger and quieter of the Yeats brothers, was undoubtedly at the station to transfer between trains on the way to or from Lady Augusta Gregory’s estate at Coole Park, the gathering place of the Revivalists. Many sketches of his visits to Coole survive because of the gift to Ernie O’Malley, and here history is not without irony. As a fighter for Irish independence, O’Malley had chosen to train his republican volunteers in the demesnes of big houses like Coole in order to strip the men of their inbred respect for Anglo-Irish landlords.

The thick strands of associations between objects, commodity trade, emigration, and empire braid through the Ardrahan sketch. The interior landscape of the station consists of several images from elsewhere or other times, seemingly making the place simply a transit point between spaces—as if Ardrahan existed somewhere other than in Ireland. The station wall is decorated with advertising posters and pictures, and as so frequently in

rural Ireland in the period, the advertisement is for a shipping line: a red-hulled boat breaks the horizon of deep blue water. From the west of Ireland, an area with a long tradition of emigration, many departed across the Atlantic or alternatively left for Britain from Galway Bay. But to the right of the shipping poster are three “Scenes in Ireland,” all of which appear to be built up of differing shapes, one identifiable as a round tower that reflects, perhaps, the presence of one in Ardrahan itself, where the ruins of such a structure still exist. Even with this seeming proximity the real Irish place exists in the posters, not in the drafty concourse of a rural train station. Again, the image suggests the degree to which the mechanics of empire had extended into the Irish countryside; certainly by the late nineteenth century the railroad network in Ireland was one of the most advanced systems by which British influence reached remote rural regions of the island, easing communication, travel, and the exchange of goods.

On occasion, in some of his most striking images, Yeats used the sketchbook like an easel, extending his drawings across two pages on the horizontal. One depicts the interior of a country cabin decorated with the bare necessities of life (plate 51). Beginning at the left frame, we see a wooden storage chest beside a door, with stairs without banisters leading to an upstairs space. In the middle stands another large trunk, a dresser, and an assortment of hanging pots and pans with a small table below. The classic Irish furniture in the rural kitchen holds the usual milk jugs and plates, arranged as if for display. Unusually, there are flashes of red on the crockery, bearing out Charles E. Orser, Jr.’s observation that the rural Irish purchased multi-colored ware for their homes.⁶ Such colors indicate a certain level of comfort and pleasure in display, as does the neat scrubbed interior of the house. To the right in front of a stone block wall and lightly smoking hearth sits a vacant stool; a round platter of bread cooks over the heat suggested by a slight rim of red. Yeats must have made this water-color sketch from the farthest middle point of the house, with his back against the wall behind him. A third of the image is empty of content but for occasional lines that suggest a stone floor. Everything appears well cleaned,

and no windows are visible, unless the scribbles above one of the trunks represent a rain-swept opening. The image is dynamic in its dullness, its deep browns suggesting the typical dimmed light of the Irish interior, generally unrelieved by bright colors of pictures or furnishings.

The blunted form of natural light evident in the sketch suggests cabin interiors, typical rural spaces that have little in common with the imposing and tall-windowed Georgian or Palladian big houses strewn over the Irish landscape. In a damp, cold climate, cabins were built to keep the weather out. Light disappeared with the coming of the rain that ushered in the claustrophobia of a smoldering fire and dark interior corners. Although such inside darkness might bring welcome relief to those working in the harsh elements of field and seashore, the breezy freedom of Paul Henry’s landscapes and cloudscapes signal escape from the drafty interiors of the Irish cabin. But sun and open air are strangers to Yeats’s inside spaces, which exist in another dimension from Henry’s images: shadowy and well-worn, as a place of respite but also of limitation. Yeats conveys such a dual perspective vividly in his sketches of the rural homes he visited, for part of his impulse to draw these scenes must have been the recognition of their strangeness. Although he knew country living through the family homes of his comfortable Anglo-Irish Sligo relatives or his own house in Devon, the artist’s discovery of another class’s cabin interior represented, virtually, notes from a new world. In these sketchbooks, Yeats becomes the artist on a voyage of discovery, reporting to himself the conditions of an Ireland that existed outside the mythic dimension of Revivalist literature or landscape art.

His discoveries can surface in strange places. We see the sketch of a manicured tree, which has been coaxed by its master into the shape of a perfect circle, dense in the greenery of its compacted leaves (plate 52). The image becomes a symbol of the Ascendancy’s transformation of an indigenous Irish landscape into manageable form. Yet draped on top of the tree, we also see odd shirts, sheets, and trousers hung out to dry; this casual use of the perfectly planned and no longer natural

shape suggests the layered complexities of a vernacular culture as it interacts with and colonizes the marker of another social class in the countryside. Although Ireland exists within grand narratives of politics and history, the translation of these ambitious narratives into the everyday creates intimate effects that Yeats caught so frequently in his sketchbooks. The hybrid impression of these interactions at the local level creates the paradox of the Irish interior—a private space that nevertheless maps a series of public interactions, from the trade of empire to rural subsistence. Such an effect again reveals itself in the sketch of a barn interior that an artist, with an eye ever alive to shape and form, draws as supported with pillars resembling those found in a classical temple (plate 53). In this image, a perfect row of empty stalls face the green tone of a field outside. The artist stands, seemingly, in the middle, discovering the rural interior as a shelter, but one also open to the elements.

In his final poems, Jack Yeats's brother, W. B. Yeats came to an appreciation of this vacated space. His late poem "The Circus Animals Desertion," published in *Last Poems* (1939), reads as a rebuke against time and its illusions: the poet finds life a mess of discarded objects, himself caught in a room of "old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can." The poem's speaker lies down in the filth, surrendering to the mortal pulse of time's passing. But Jack Yeats had no need of such despair; instead he had long grasped the interior as a space of worldly transaction—of which he was both agent and observer. His sketches are finally a stay against meaninglessness, for if little enough in themselves, together they create a map of Ireland's complex cultural cartography, a map tracing the historical aura of objects that have lost their exchange value. The material history of Ireland's interior spaces becomes a story of orphaned objects, the details of which are visible brilliantly in Yeats's sketches.



- 1 For an account of his life and art see Bruce Arnold, *Jack Yeats* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). Other relevant works include: Hilary Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Oil Paintings*, 3 vols. (London: Deutsch, 1992); Roisin Kennedy, "Jack Yeats and Dublin," in *The Only Art of Jack B. Yeats: Letters and Essays*, ed. Declan Foley (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2009); David Lloyd, "Republics of Difference: Yeats, MacGreevy, Beckett," *Field Day Review* (2005): 42–66.
- 2 For an account of the intersection between art, literature, and cultural politics in this context, see Cormac O'Malley and Nicholas Allen, eds., *Broken Landscapes: Selected Letters of Ernie O'Malley* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2011).
- 3 National University of Ireland, Galway recently acquired a fascinating set of such images related to the Galway Races and Lady Gregory's house at Coole Park. These Galway sketches in particular are populated with a bustling number of traders and travelers, the drawings made with flexible lines that indicate movement and vitality.
- 4 See, for example, a painting like *A Fair Day, Mayo* (1925).
- 5 An Oxford frame is a popular nineteenth-century picture frame, with crossed corners that extend out beyond the picture in a kind of decorative excess.
- 6 See Charles E. Orser, Jr.'s essay in this volume (61–66).

INTERIOR PLEASURES: WOMEN'S WORK AND CONTEMPLATION IN THE IRISH RURAL

INTERIOR

Paige Reynolds

MANY OF THE PAINTINGS ON DISPLAY IN *RURAL IRELAND: THE INSIDE STORY* REPRESENT traumatic events taking place in private settings, whether the terrible news of a young man's arrest in Margaret Allen's *Bad News in Troubled Times* (1886) (plate 42), the sufferings of a rural lawbreaker in Harry Jones Thaddeus's *The Wounded Poacher* (1881) (plate 33), or the communal mourning of a child in Frederic William Burton's *The Aran Fisherman's Drowned Child* (1841) (plate 6). Yet a number of others focus on pleasurable experiences unfolding in domestic spaces: the delights of a country dance in Daniel MacDonald's *The Dancing Master* (c. 1848) (plate 16), the promise of an impending marriage in Howard Helmick's *Candidates for Marriage/The Cleric's Interruption* (1881) (plate 38), the celebration of a holiday morning in William S. Brunton's *Christmas Morning in an Irish Country Shop Keeper's—Giving the Customary Present* (1854) (plate 17), an exuberant dance in Gerard Dillon's *The Gramophone* (c. 1950) (plate 64). Several of Michael Augustin Power O'Malley's twentieth-century Irish paintings depict the quiet satisfactions to be found in interior spaces. In these works the artist captures women in the midst of labor, while identifying instances of contemplation, craftsmanship, and instruction. These portraits do not casually idealize rural life, nor do they highlight only the harshest aspects of women's lives and labor in Ireland. Instead, by portraying Irish women enjoying brief private moments in relatively secure domestic settings, Power O'Malley offers an alternative to these two familiar modes of representation.

Born in Dungarvan, County Waterford on January 14, 1877, Power O'Malley spent much of his life abroad, traveling between Ireland and his adopted home of America and studying or living in France, Italy, and Bermuda.¹ He initially exhibited his work at Dublin's Gaelic League Hall in 1913, and his painting *The Old Quarry* (c. 1924) won first prize at the 1924 *Aonach Tailteann*, the Free State's celebration of Irish sport and

culture. Fans of his work included Elizabeth ("Lolly") Yeats, a sister of W. B. Yeats and founder of the Cuala Press, and the Irish feminist and revolutionary Maud Gonne; the former claimed that his painting was "as clever and far more sincere than most of the paintings I have seen in France" and reportedly provided the artist a letter of introduction to the American lawyer and patron of Irish arts, John Quinn.² During his career of

interpreting and portraying Irish life for American audiences, Power O'Malley became an illustrator for *Life*, the *Literary Digest*, *Harper's*, and *Puck* magazines and provided images for books by Padraic Colum and Father John Condon. He also found employment in Hollywood, where he consulted for the director John Ford, painted scenery for Cecil B. DeMille, and served as the art director for *Song O'My Heart* (1930), which introduced film audiences to the Irish tenor John McCormack.³

Peter Murray suggests that in his paintings and illustrations Power O'Malley "clung to a poetic vision of the past," one that powerfully appealed to the American public and its significant Irish-American population.⁴ Murray further observes that the artist ignored the "harsher realities of the West of Ireland where rural depopulation, impoverished small-holdings and emigration were everyday staples of life," opting instead to present "an idealized view of a self-contained, insular and strongly devotional agrarian society."⁵ He accurately discerns in Power O'Malley's work the tendency to direct attention away from impoverished settings, suffering individuals, and traumatic events. However, in his portraits of female figures in domestic spaces, Power O'Malley neither romanticizes nor naturalizes the conditions of Irish rural life during the early decades of

116 the twentieth century. Instead, by focusing on moments of reverie in women's lives, he identifies a space between these extremes in which Irish countrywomen enjoy some tranquility amid their everyday activities.

Power O'Malley was not alone in glossing over the "harsher realities" of rural life in Ireland. With few exceptions, the early twentieth-century cultural movement of Irish Revivalism advanced a romantic view of life in rural Ireland, a perspective that was embraced and disseminated further by the architects of the new Irish state. In a speech delivered on St. Patrick's Day of 1943, the Taoiseach Eamon de Valera famously asserted that

The Ireland that we dreamed of would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis for right living, of a people who, satisfied with frugal comfort, devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit—a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. The home, in short, of a people living the life that God desires that men should live.⁶

De Valera's idealized representations of rural living were undermined by the realities of sustained Irish poverty and the ongoing emigration of rural dwellers seeking better circumstances abroad. Terence Brown notes that the years following the Second World War were characterized by a "universally demoralized rural scene" thanks to "the crisis in rural life of the 1940s from which the countryside did not begin to recover until the late 1960s and Ireland's entry to the EEC [European Economic Community] in 1973."⁷ This demoralization has been captured in writing such as Patrick Kavanagh's long poem *The Great Hunger* (1942), which challenged the Irish veneration of rural life, and John B. Keane's play *The Field* (1965), which demonstrated how individual integrity could be compromised by a thirst for land. In

a similar vein, Power O'Malley's painting *Himself and Herself* (1930) (plate 57) stages the privations of the era in its representation of a barren rural cottage interior with an open wall hearth. The seated figures, an older man and woman, are sketchily painted in dark, earthy colors and placed at a distance from one another, the man sitting in repose while the woman knits in the shadows. In this painting of a relatively bare cottage interior, the artist refuses to idealize the couple's impoverished circumstances. By focusing on aging country people, the painting suggests that the time-honored practices of Irish rural life are dying out.

For rural Irish women such as the elderly figure knitting in *Himself and Herself*, the twentieth century is commonly regarded as a period of all work, no play. Cultural histories have documented that women were not only charged with providing the moral compass for the family, but were also swamped with the work required to maintain that home: to feed the family, mind the children, attend to domestic animals, and clean the house. In her study of women's work from 1890 to 1914, Joanna Bourke has traced how women moved from toiling in the fields to unpaid labor in the domestic sphere. There were, as she demonstrates, practical economic reasons for the state to encourage women to retreat into home rather than compete in the market: better housework would improve the future working population, reduce emigration by increasing male employment, and expand the demand (and thus the market) for commodities.⁸ This economic logic was buoyed by political and religious ideologies, particularly those accompanying the founding of the Free State. As Maryann Valiulis observes, the new state advanced political and ecclesiastical norms advocating that women remain in the home. Such a retreat, sanctioned by Article 41 of the Irish Constitution, manifested itself in legislation refusing women the right to serve on juries, to sit for the highest examinations in the civil service, or to work for certain factories; new legislation also made them subject to the marriage bar requiring that a woman working in public service resign her position after she married.⁹ This entrenchment of Irish women in domestic roles was enforced not just by legal strictures or by cultural

ideals tied to patriarchy or bourgeois propriety: until the middle of the twentieth century, many rural homes lacked electricity and even running water, so the need for unpaid labor in the face of ongoing poverty helped to secure the logic of separate spheres.¹⁰

The contemporary poet Eavan Boland contends that such domestic burdens thwarted the access of Irish women to history. As she writes in "It's a Woman's World" (1982),

as far as history goes
we were never
on the scene of the crime.

When the king's head
gored its basket,
grim harvest,
we were gristing bread

or getting the recipe
for a good soup.¹¹

"History" here is male, public and political, as well as violent and gruesome. For Boland, the requirements of household work prevented women from participating in or even shaping the heroic past. Women's roles were, rather, defined by small domestic acts—gristing wheat for bread or gathering recipes for meals—tasks that are essential but frequently ignored. In many poems, Boland draws attention to this overlooked history, most recently in her essay collection *A Journey with Two Maps: Becoming a Woman Poet*.¹²

Although Power O'Malley has been charged, somewhat justly, with idealizing the status of women in rural Ireland, he—like Boland—might be described instead as shedding light on domestic moments overlooked by history. In several portraits in this exhibition, he attends to ordinary episodes unfolding in the interior spaces of twentieth-century rural Ireland. *Her Family Treasures* (c. 1925) (plate 55), *And Sheila Was Spinning* (c. 1935) (plate 59), and *Portrait of the Artist's Daughter in a Pub/Ruth in the Pub* (c. 1927) (plate 56) draw particular attention to women's labor.¹³ Each depicts a woman in a familiar

context, focusing on quotidian moments occurring in the private domestic sphere of the home or in the social space of the local pub, in order to evoke the pleasures of the Irish countrywoman's daily life. In these images—snapshots of the commonplace—female figures pause in the midst of their work and gaze outside the frame of the picture, on occasion looking directly at the viewer. Rather than focusing on the desperate poverty and dire circumstances characterizing much of Irish rural life during this period, these paintings situate women in secure surroundings, dressed well and encircled by the material comforts of the middle classes.

The three portraits convey instances of idealized domesticity, moments of stillness displayed for the viewer. They enter into a long tradition of painting women in interior spaces, one famously embodied by the seventeenth-century images of Johannes Vermeer (1632–75). Trained at institutions such as the National Academy of Design, Power O'Malley was well versed in the history of art; he would thus have been well acquainted with the pictorial tradition of Dutch genre painting that appears in his portraits, a tradition that similarly captures women in mundane domestic settings and activities. To some extent, the appeal of a genre painter such as Vermeer rests in the pleasure of recognition derived from an encounter with familiar scenes. For Power O'Malley, this appeal was potent since he made his living by recreating scenes from his native Ireland and selling them to Irish-American audiences yearning for nostalgic representations of their lost homeland.¹⁴

In these paintings of women at work, Power O'Malley accurately identifies the significance of female labor in rural Ireland. His portraits elevate routine tasks, transforming work like cleaning, spinning, and serving into eloquent and appealing symbols of rural life for his audiences. The images award particular and meaningful attention to women at rest: as posed subjects for the artist, these figures appear briefly at a remove from domestic labor. The women now labor for the artist, posing in the private sphere, surrounded by the props of their work. They are briefly separated from domestic toil by some interruption that encourages stillness, a momentary idleness in an interior space.

Her Family Treasures depicts a young woman polishing the family's valued china, asking us to consider material objects as prompts for female reverie. In this painting, the woman dries what appears to be a platter of blue and white transfer-ware as she faces the viewer.¹⁵ An example of chinoiserie, the platter appears to be decorated with images copied from original Chinese porcelain, a popular decorative motif found on more costly hand-painted Dublin delftware.¹⁶ In *Irish Rural Interiors in Art*, Claudia Kinmonth describes how families presented their most valued china (transfer-printed wares, sponge-ware and other ceramics) in kitchen dressers.¹⁷ These objects were not for everyday use, but instead were placed on display in order to project to visitors the family's social or economic status (plate 68). These ceramic pieces were frequently a gift, souvenir, or heirloom that embodied the family's social history. As such, they serve a function similar to that of Power O'Malley's paintings, which were appreciated by Irish-American audiences nostalgic for the homeland; both are material objects that exemplify and exhibit social history.

In *Her Family Treasures*, the dishware is not conspicuously displayed in a dresser, but instead rests on the table next to the woman polishing a piece. This nearby assortment of china conveys not only the value of such material objects, but also the labor they exact—the task of polishing that awaits the young woman. Her neutral expression allows for the various pleasures that might be found in her efforts: the satisfaction of a job well done, the enjoyment of the china's aesthetic beauty. As well, the ceramics may inspire daydreams. Because it depicts images of the Orient, the platter she handles offers her concrete evidence of an exotic world beyond the borders of a generally inward-looking Ireland—but significantly, of a foreign land not commonly associated with the traumas of Irish emigration. That the dishware is clustered on a nearby table rather than on exhibit in the kitchen dresser connotes the privacy of this moment and suggests the significance of female interiority, even as we are aware that the woman directs her gaze to something or someone outside of the image's frame.

In *Her Family Treasures*, the ceramic dishware thus reads as a prompt for reverie—for contemplation of

an experience apart from the quotidian demands of daily domestic life—even as the painting suggests that such pleasures are embedded in a daily domestic task. The image also demands that we reconsider the value of routine domestic labor. Polishing china is household work necessarily repeated in domestic time: as dust gathers, polishing follows. The woman's work can be read as both tedious and comforting, as labor and meditation, as a burdensome task or a tactile pleasure. By refusing to depict the polishing of these “treasures” that are valued by the image's “her” in a negative light, the painting encourages a more ambiguous, even positive, representation of routine. The somewhat idealized nature of this portrait might deny the harsh realities of domestic labor in the rural Irish home, but it also demands that we attend to the ambiguities that define such routine, a point made by Ben Highmore in his study of everyday life and housework.¹⁸ Given the attractive appearance of the woman depicted—her well-coiffed hair, her neat clothes, her carefully applied lipstick—the painting also suggests that the attention she grants the china reflects the similar care she bestows to her own well-being and appearance. Again, ambiguity attends within the portrait: is she another pretty object subject to the gaze of the viewer or is she a woman who has the time and energy to value aesthetics in her work, her surroundings, and her self?

Power O'Malley places a small painting on the wall behind the woman polishing that, in this particular context, might offer a further revision of traditional notions of Irish rural labor. Conspicuously housed in a gold frame, the painting depicts a sailboat that might be used for sport and leisure set in a calm sea on a bright day. This boat is not the traditional currach manned by hard-working Irish fishermen tossed on a violent ocean, an image invoked by Robert Flaherty's film *Man of Aran* (1934) and by iconic twentieth-century artists such as Paul Henry (1877–1958), Seán Keating (1889–1977), and Maurice MacGonigal (1900–79). Power O'Malley's painting-within-a-painting offers, rather, a familiar rural setting (the sea) and practice (boating) framed in a positive, even romantic light. The sea now exists for sport, not as a dangerous source of food for survival or a perilous barrier to be traversed by island dwellers. Here

118 Power O'Malley presents Irish rural activity as neither onerous nor dangerous. But the image of the isolated sailboat may hold additional resonance for the Irish-American audiences of his work. In seventeenth-century Dutch genre art, the tradition to which the composition of this small painting-within-a-painting alludes, maritime themes carried particular weight; they frequently represented domestic turbulence or loss, perhaps of a lover at sea. For Power O'Malley's audiences this image of the lone sailboat might then represent another aesthetic image embodying the feelings of loss and isolation that attended their journey or the journey of their forebears across the Atlantic from Ireland to America.

And Sheila Was Spinning places a woman next to a spinning wheel in the center of a parlor, spinning yarn and modeling traditional forms of domesticity for a young girl sitting nearby. A woman at the spinning wheel was a conventional subject for Irish paintings of rural interiors, and several portray an older woman educating a younger woman in the craft of spinning and reeling yarn.¹⁹ For example, George Washington Brownlow's *A Spinning Lesson* (1874) (plate 25), set in a more austere rural cottage, suggests the physical activity required by a mother teaching her daughter to spin. Notably, Power O'Malley's painting is not dynamic: the actual spinning of the wheel required a woman to walk towards the spindle as she turned the wheel, sometimes covering as much as thirty miles a week.²⁰ Instead, the artist portrays Sheila standing next to the wheel in repose, with the yarn she has already produced at her feet. She has turned to the viewer as if interrupted in her task, and the young girl who attends her sits comfortably positioned in a chair, watching but not helping her spin.

The "big wheel" for spinning wool was a visual symbol commonly associated with life in the west of Ireland where such women's domestic work supplemented meager rural household incomes. Likewise, Sheila's allusively traditional costume—the soft pampootie-like shoes she wears and the red color of her dress—overtly reference the iconography of the West. That Sheila's dress, the flowers on the windowsill, and the hearth fire are all bright red also links them visually to the color's associations with the natural and vibrant. The young girl

in the painting is dressed in less eye-catching green and gray, and her costume of a pullover sweater and skirt better fits its historical moment. The colors and modern style of her apparel suggest that she remains outside of the dynamic identified by the color red, although whether this occlusion results from her youthfulness or from the loss of traditional crafts passed from generation to generation is unclear. The girl looks beyond the woman spinning, her gaze unfocused, either to a point beyond Sheila and the spinning wheel or to the vista outside the window, arguably suggesting an alternative future for Ireland's young women.

The parlor was traditionally assumed to be the sphere of women, and the young girl's presence in that space suggests a still surviving legacy passed between generations of Irish mothers and daughters. By placing this familiar spinning scene in a parlor suited to a family of some means, Power O'Malley implies that traditional crafts remain alive in a more prosperous and modern context. However, small cues suggest that the legacy is in danger—the color scheme, the interrupted labor of the mother, the seeming disinterest of the girl. This room has at its margins a fireplace with a mantel, not the open fire for cooking that Power O'Malley placed at the center of the cottage in his more traditional depiction of impoverished rural life, *Himself and Herself*. And the mass-produced objects on the hearth in *And Sheila Was Spinning*—the clock, the statue, the framed picture—remind viewers that the spinning wheel is becoming increasingly anachronistic in the more modern industrial moment in which the painting is set.

Portrait of the Artist's Daughter in a Pub/Ruth in the Pub depicts a young female figure standing at the bar or possibly sitting at a pub table with her arms folded, lost in thought. Unlike the diligent Pegeen Mike of John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), who busily manages her father's shebeen (plate 54), this young woman is captured at leisure, however briefly. The painting offers yet another depiction of a woman engaged in the normal activities of daily life, for Ruth appears in a mode of reverie, looking beyond the artist. Her preoccupied gaze insists again on a private female interiority inaccessible to the artist or the viewer, a state

confirmed or enhanced by the bar or table separating the woman from the viewer. Situated in a traditional setting of the pub, Ruth is dressed in somewhat androgynous modern clothes, her hair styled according to contemporary fashion. Power O'Malley, therefore, creates a tension between the traditional setting and her modern appearance, a repeated trope in his portraits.

Portrait of the Artist's Daughter suggestively invites us to read this young woman as at leisure, enjoying a drink in a public space. But the history of the Irish shebeen, which married private home and public drinking house, troubles any clear separation between domestic and commercial space. So although Ruth appears to be at rest, the referents of the painting suggest we should read the image as another instance of women's labor. The painting's insistent allusions to Édouard Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1881–82) indicate that Power O'Malley depicts the female figure at work.²¹ Like Manet's masterpiece, his painting places a woman behind a counter littered with bottles and glasses and in front of a mirror. But Power O'Malley has adapted the scene, moving it from the lush setting of a Parisian *boîte* to an Irish pub. Manet's female figure looks wearily at the viewer, whereas Ruth avoids the artist's (and the viewer's) gaze. Her look is concentrated, focused elsewhere, even distracted. Manet's figure stands at the bar with her arms open in a welcoming gesture, but Ruth's arms are folded, serving as a barrier between her and the outside world. Manet's large mirror reflects the busy spectacle unfolding at the café-concert with its elegant audience; in the mirror, we see the reflection of the barmaid's back as well as the face and torso of a male customer arriving at the bar she tends. Power O'Malley's portrait instead offers a much smaller mirror perched behind Ruth in which we observe a male figure standing across from her—in this instance, an older bearded man.

The contrast between these two works suggestively highlights the differences between life in the glittering Parisian capital of the fin-de-siècle and in a humble rural setting in Ireland roughly half a century later. Both images have the qualities of a still life, directing our attention to the objects surrounding the figure of the lone woman. Manet's iconic painting draws attention

to the wealth of goods available for sale at the bar and to the barmaid's modish dress and her accessories. The luxurious trappings of Parisian life are absent in Power O'Malley's pub; the far starker Irish interior signals the dearth of commodities in a country characterized by widespread poverty, restrictive trade practices, and a widespread ambivalence about material culture generated by English imperialism and nursed by religious doctrine. The Manet painting is cluttered with well-dressed people and beautiful objects, including bright oranges, fresh-cut roses, and glittering chandeliers. The Power O'Malley painting is peopled almost exclusively by objects connected with drink—primarily plain glasses and unlabeled bottles—in contrast to the colorful vessels holding the expensive liquors and champagnes found on the marble bar at the Folies-Bergère.

In both *Portrait of the Artist's Daughter* and *And Sheila Was Spinning*, the artist deploys the familiar pictorial trope of a mirror placed in the background of the scene. Power O'Malley's use of that visual convention suggests his project of holding up a mirror to nature, of realistically capturing a moment of rural Irish life. But even as a mirror reflects reality, it distorts: the size and placement of these mirrors within these paintings implies that the reflection inevitably obscures, limits, or even eliminates aspects of the scene at hand. Like the mirror convention he employs, Power O'Malley's portraits similarly edit out the poverty and degradation of Irish rural life of the period, as well as the various forms of oppression and hardship suffered by rural women. Given their dates and settings, the paintings might be read as a problematically romantic perspective on rural life, one that prevented audiences from recognizing and comprehending the deprivations endured by the rural Irish poor. But they can also be read as subversive images that identify and isolate instances of female interiority and contemplation, moments that allowed women respite from the demands of rural life.

Even as they display Irish countrywomen at work, Power O'Malley's three portraits depict occasions of female interiority. In her account of women, domesticity, and the family, Clair Wills notes that national, religious, and economic forces conspired in modern Ireland to

advance “a valorization of domesticity without privacy or intimacy.” She tracks the tensions of “embracing modernization through the family . . . [while] holding secular individualism at bay,” citing Dipesh Chakrabarty's assertion that “the bourgeois individual is not born until one discovers the pleasures of privacy.”²² Power O'Malley's portraits capture those bourgeois pleasures. They represent a distinctly middle-class rural ideal to their audiences, one that harnesses the familiar iconography of de Valera's “cosy homesteads.” But the domestic scenes in Power O'Malley's paintings fail to advance a feminine ideal wholly in line with the conservative tenets espoused by the Irish church and state. Instead he suggestively depicts a rural modernization that allows the individual a respite from the labors of maintaining home or community. The only male figure in these three portraits is the small, shadowy reflection in the mirror of *Portrait of the Artist's Daughter in a Pub*. And although *And Sheila Was Spinning* depicts two female figures, we observe no overt connection between the mother and child, a relationship that might have been established by obvious markers such as shared color schemes, clear evidence of instruction or mutual labor, or even joint interest in the task at hand. The women in Power O'Malley's three paintings appear autonomous, not simply isolated. They are placed in familiar domestic settings found in a traditional rural society (the parlor or pub), but they remain apart from their context, outside the enforced intimacies of the traditional local community, the parish, the extended stem family, or even of the more “modern” nuclear family.

These portraits can be—and have been—viewed as nostalgic. In fact, Power O'Malley's supposed rose-colored depiction of Irish rural life may explain the artist's popularity among his contemporary American audiences and his relative neglect in Ireland. From across the ocean, the disturbing fact of Irish rural poverty, which he chooses not to portray in these appealing portraits, may have been easier for Irish-American audiences, awash in nostalgia for their homeland and surrounded by the trappings of an increasingly available middle-class life, to ignore or dismiss. However, when viewed closely, Power O'Malley's paintings also offer an entic-

ing revision of familiar and reductive notions of rural women as little more than workhorses with no private selves, victims of Ireland's belated entry into a modernity of running water and the other accoutrements of modern domesticity.



- * My thanks to Mario Pereira, Marjorie Howes, and Vera Kreilkamp for their comments on early versions of this essay, to Peter Murray for approximated dates for the Power O'Malley paintings discussed here, to Diana Larsen for information about Irish ceramic ware, and to Marietta Whittlesey for help obtaining biographical information about the artist.
- 1 Biographical information concerning Michael Power O'Malley is scarce and frequently contradictory; this date of birth derives from his birth certificate. His last name, always cited as Power O'Malley, merges the name of his biological father, Michael Power, and his stepfather, Dennis O'Malley, whom his widowed mother Bridget Hannigan married. Biographical information for this essay was drawn from: Peter Murray, "Michael Augustin Power O'Malley," in *Irish Expressions: Landscapes in Light, Sound and Movement: An Exhibition of the Works of Power O'Malley* (New Rochelle, NY: Iona Council on the Arts, 2002), 2–7; Theo Snoddy, "O'Malley, Power," in *Dictionary of Irish Artists: Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: Merlin, 2002), 486–87; Marietta Whittlesey (granddaughter of Power O'Malley), interview by Paige Reynolds, Aug. 16, 2011.
- 2 Lolly Yeats to Power O'Malley, n.d., collection of Marietta Whittlesey. The Maud Gonne anecdote appears in Snoddy, "O'Malley," 486.
- 3 "Michael Power O'Malley Dies: Painter Noted for Irish Scenes," *New York Herald Tribune*, July 4, 1946.
- 4 Murray, "O'Malley," 6.
- 5 Ibid., 5.
- 6 Eamon de Valera, "The Ireland that we dreamed of" (speech), Mar. 17, 1923, transcript excerpt and SMIL audio, 2:49, RTÉ Libraries and Archives, http://www.rte.ie/laweb/ll/ll_t09b.html.
- 7 Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Cultural History, 1922 to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 141, 145.
- 8 Joanna Bourke, *Husbandry to Housewifery: Women, Economic Change, and Housework in Ireland, 1890–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 281–82.
- 9 Maryann Valiulis, "Virtuous Mothers and Dutiful Wives: The Politics of Sexuality in the Irish Free State," in *Gender and Power in Irish History*, ed., Maryann Valiulis (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), 100–114.
- 10 See Jenny Beale, "Maidens and Myths: Women in Rural Life," in *Women in Ireland: Voices of Change* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986), 20–40; Catriona Clear, *Social Change and Everyday Life in Ireland, 1850–1922* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); Catriona Clear, "Women of the House in Ireland, 1800–1950," in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Vols. 4 and 5: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, eds. Angela Bourke et al. (Cork: Cork University Press; New York: New York University Press, 2002), 5:589–96; Catriona Clear, "No Feminine Mystique: Popular Advice to Women of the House in Ireland, 1922–1954," in *Women and Irish History*, eds. Maryann Valiulis and Mary O'Dowd (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1997), 189–205; Mary Daly, "'Turn on the Tap': The State, Irish Women, and Running Water," in Valiulis and O'Dowd, *Women and Irish History*, 206–19.
- 11 Eavan Boland, "It's a Woman's World," in *An Origin Like Water: Collected Poems 1967–1987* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 121.
- 12 Eavan Boland, *A Journey with Two Maps: Becoming a Woman Poet* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011).
- 13 These estimated dates are provided by Peter Murray, Director of the Crawford Art Gallery, Cork.
- 14 Power O'Malley regularly exhibited and sold his work in America. In a 1937 letter to the painter, Padraic Colum, the Irish writer and critic who lived in America, expressed regret for missing a recent New York exhibition of O'Malley's work. See Padriac Colum to Michael Power O'Malley, Dec. 12, 1937, collection of Marietta Whittlesey. O'Malley was associated with American artistic collectives such as the Society of Independent Artists, regularly exhibited work throughout the east coast and southwest, and had his work purchased by private American collectors and museums, including the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas and the Library of Congress. See Snoddy, "O'Malley," 486–87.
- 15 Transfer-ware is a type of ceramic in which an etched ink image is laid over a ceramic surface; the image is then "transferred" from the print to the ceramic surface when it is fired and glazed. Because transfer-ware is not painted by hand, it is less expensive and more widely available than hand-painted ceramics. For examples of blue and white transfer-ware resembling the example in the portrait, see Robert Copeland, *Blue and White Transfer-Printed Pottery* (Oxford: Shire, 2008). More particularly, the dishware in the painting may suggest an example of "willow ware"—ceramics derived from Chinese models and produced by English artists. See Leslie Bockol, *Willow Ware: Ceramics in the Chinese Tradition* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer, 1995) and Joseph J. Portanova, "Porcelain, The Willow Pattern, and Chinoiserie," New York University Virtual Commons Module, accessed Dec. 1, 2011, <http://www.nyu.edu/projects/mediamosaic/madeinchina/pdf/Portanova.pdf>.
- 16 Peter Francis, *Irish Delftware: An Illustrated History* (London: Jonathan Horne, 2000), 89–94.
- 17 Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 39–78.
- 18 Ben Highmore, "Homework: Routine, Social Aesthetics and the Ambiguity of Everyday Life," *Cultural Studies* 18, nos. 2–3 (Mar./May 2004): 306–27.
- 19 Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 87–98.
- 20 Ibid., 87.
- 21 "Édouard Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*" The Courtauld Institute of Art, Art and Architecture, accessed Dec. 2, 2011, <http://www.artandarchitecture.org.uk/images/zoom/dfa409925e5fba2126fb40cbc171592339f2857c.html>. Theo Snoddy cites an undated clipping from *The Leader* that Maud Gonne sent to John Quinn; that expressly likened the work of Power O'Malley to that of Manet. See Snoddy, "O'Malley," 486.
- 22 Clair Wills, "Women, Domesticity and the Family: Recent Feminist Work in Irish Cultural Studies," *Cultural Studies*, special issue, 15, no. 1 (2001): 46. Citation of Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?," *Representations* 37 (1992): 9.

MATERIALS FOR COMPOSITION: GERARD DILLON'S MODERNIST INTERIORS

Kelly Sullivan

IN 1951, GERARD DILLON (1916–71) INVITED TWO FELLOW BELFAST-BORN PAINTERS TO Inishlacken, an island off the Connemara coast. With Dillon and George Campbell as the senior artists, James MacIntyre, younger by a decade, considered his month on the island a kind of apprenticeship. The craggy landscape covered with ruined stone houses and punctuated with bright-colored foliage and marks of human habitation excited and intrigued the young artist, but he quickly found its variety overwhelmed his sketches. Dillon and Campbell provided a lesson in interpreting place: they “were able to look at a landscape and reproduce it with all the unimportant elements eliminated, so that their work succeeded time after time.”¹ This stripping away of elements in order to create a two-dimensional representation of space had become Gerard Dillon’s signature style. Often labeled “faux-naïf,” his paintings of the landscape and interiors of the West of Ireland display a seemingly childlike simplicity and bold, colorful patterning.

Moreover, like the nineteenth-century painters represented in *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story*, Dillon celebrated traditional rural Irish life as a subject for art even as he, a modernist, observed and recorded the technological and social changes reshaping life in the West. He was one of several contemporary artists to turn to this landscape; Paul Henry, Charles Lamb, and Maurice MacGonigal all traveled to Connemara and the western seacoast for inspiration. Yet unlike Henry, the best known of these painters, Dillon focused almost entirely on working men and women, domestic and farm animals, and on interior scenes. Ireland’s monastic and pre-Christian art also influenced his stylistic choices.

He traveled to Monasterboice and Newgrange with the artist Nano Reid, and paintings like his *West of Ireland Landscape* (c. 1945) mimic the medieval carvings split into different panels; his subjects are thus simplified, according to his biographer, James White, “into symbols of the area, just as the as the carvers and illuminators of the Celtic past had done.”² Although White reports that Dillon was sometimes accused of sentimentally glossing over the hardships of rural life, such critiques of his imagery ignore the innovation he brought to his traditional subjects.³ The artist’s modernist aesthetic simultaneously celebrated the simplicity and continuity of traditional values in a rural landscape and subtly revealed the dis-

tortion, flux, and conflict that arose when tradition met with technological progress.

Like many modernist visual artists in the first half of the twentieth century, Dillon distorted perspective, flattened surfaces, and created geometric, collage-like effects; in his five images of rural interiors in this exhibition (plates 63–67), every object strives to reveal itself. Lamps turn their shades out to the viewer, surfaces face up at odd angles, and tables and chairs expose their tops to display a catalogue of trinkets and tools, the material possessions of rural Irish households. Yet Dillon’s paintings reveal not only the surfaces and objects found in the interiors of rural cabins in Connemara, but also the interior lives of the inhabitants of those remote homes. Outwardly naïve, his oil paintings are, in fact, complex geometric representations of the material culture of cabins and bungalows, rooming houses and London flats; they share a symbolic language at once personal and historical.

Dillon’s enduring nationalism was a shaping influence in his choices of subject matter. As a self-taught painter, he was born and raised on the Falls Road in Belfast, later emigrating to London where he lived for years in the basement flat of his sister’s home. He emerged into prominence in Dublin during World War

122 II or “the Emergency,” when neutral Ireland’s art scene was livelier than London’s during the Blitz.⁴ Dillon had first experienced the rural Irish countryside on a 1939 cycling trip around the island, a transformative journey that led him to envision the people of the western seaboard as “visible symbols of the country he had dimly dreamt of and idyllically desired to belong to.”⁵ By 1943 he had visited the Aran Islands, and in the following decade he traveled frequently to Connemara, with long stays in Roundstone, on the island of Inishlacken off Roundstone Bay, and on the Renvyle peninsula. In a 1951 article for *Ireland of the Welcomes*, he writes that “Connemara is the place for a painter,” and he titled a 1964 article with accompanying illustrations for the same magazine “Connemara is Ireland to Me.”⁶ His biographer argues that the artist’s travels to the West were “the most important development of his life,” in large part because Connemara represented an Ireland devoid of the political fracture Dillon had experienced growing up in Belfast during and just after the War of Independence.⁷ Such romantic views of the West reveal how Dillon’s cultural nationalism mirrors that of the Irish Revival writers a generation before.

Born in the year of the 1916 Rising, Dillon grew up in a political environment shaped by his mother’s ardent nationalism. His Connemara paintings date from the early decades of the Free State when de Valera’s government espoused a frugal life of self-reliance and moral integrity. But Dillon’s fascination with the western landscape has deeper roots than his political convictions. With the earlier Revivalists, he envisioned the Irish-speaking farmers and fishermen of the West as “the last living representatives of Celtic purity” and viewed the western landscape, especially its remote islands, as the “chief shrines of this Ireland of the mind.”⁸ Like other post-Independence artists and writers, he was deeply influenced by John Millington Synge (1871–1909), the playwright and literary anthropologist of rural Ireland whose interpretations of the West both record and react to the transformations wrought by a modernizing culture as it meets an agrarian community. Most of Dillon’s paintings from Connemara were created in the 1940s and 1950s, after a period of momentous world-

wide change both in technology and in aesthetic culture. Such changes, although slow to arrive in rural Ireland, did not bypass the countryside altogether. With their fusion of romantic, nationalist, and personal symbolism, Dillon’s images depict the influence of modernization through its impact on the people inhabiting Ireland’s rural cabins and remote islands.⁹

NEW TECHNOLOGIES, OLD ROOMS: THE GRAMOPHONE AS SYMBOL

In an unpublished 1937 essay, Dillon writes about his domestic arrangements as a young man newly arrived in London. Because he lived “alone in an empty room in an empty house” and earned little as a housepainter in those early years, he had

Only a bed and a cupboard, the bottom part of an old dresser that acted as everything for me, desk and food and clothes cupboard. For light I had a beautiful brass oil lamp ... had an old portable winding gramophone and one record ... this I played continually until the deep notes became nutty and rich.¹⁰

He notes that although hard up and surviving very modestly at the time, he now began to paint in earnest. Many of his early images depict ordinary interior scenes including rooming houses, flats, and empty buildings in London, resembling the spaces he worked on as a housepainter/decorator. This interest in the everyday persisted in his paintings of Ireland. Ordinary objects develop from realistic representations of a material world into a personal and markedly modern set of symbols.

Dillon’s interior studies of western cabins echo the sparse, yet rich, material world he recorded in his early work as a painter in London. But by simplifying interior spaces to their most essential geometric elements, Dillon celebrates the dressers, pots, mantels, and “ornaments” of rural homes, seemingly rendering these things symbolic. Chief among these objects are oil lamps, which recur in his paintings, as well as gramophones

and record players—most prominently in *Self-portrait in Roundstone* (c. 1950) and *The Gramophone* (c. 1950). In addition to any personal associations these objects had for the artist, lamps and gramophones signal changes in the material culture of mid-twentieth-century Ireland that he recorded in his images of the West. When viewed alongside the nineteenth-century paintings in *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story*, Dillon’s work both demonstrates the persistent continuity of a traditional life and alerts viewers to the opposite: the transformations in lifestyle and technology rural Ireland was undergoing.

The Gramophone (plate 64) offers the viewer an intimate look at a moment of private celebration set in the timeless interior of a traditional Irish farmhouse. Safely ensconced within the whitewashed walls of the kitchen, the primary living and visiting space of the cabin, an elderly man with patched clothing and a characteristic tweed cap dances while a cat and dog look on. The interior itself typifies rural Irish homes of the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. The fireplace mantel and the dresser both shine in their vibrant blue gloss paint while the whitewashed walls reflect light into what would otherwise be a dark interior.¹¹ When placed opposite the hearth, the dresser with its display of transfer-ware ceramics helps triangulate the composition, as evidenced by many paintings in this exhibition where the hearth acts as the visual focal point of rural homes.¹² Yet Dillon’s disarmingly simple visual surface obscures the complex composition of the painting: here the dancing man partially blocks the hearth, with the glowing turf fire and the pot on the chain most visible. Instead of the fire, the gramophone itself seems to anchor the visual triangle and emit an invisible but vibrant aural focus, channeling its sound through the “morning glory” horn that points to the man and the space he has cleared in the center of the room.

In the rural West, gramophones would have been relatively rare in the first half of the twentieth century. German-American Emile Berliner (1851–1929) invented the first player that used flat discs and a stylus to produce sound in 1888, and by 1898 Berliner’s “Gramophone Company” was operating out of Covent Garden.¹³ The first discs were made of wax and zinc soon

to be replaced by ones composed of shellac and laced with slate, which allowed the needle to wear out instead of the disk. By the 1930s wireless sets came equipped with inputs for gramophones, and eventually the coming of electricity encouraged those with enough money to purchase Radiograms, free-standing floor units housed in wooden cabinets with electric motors. The gramophone in Dillon's painting, however, appears to be a Pathé Frères Tournaphone wind-up model featuring the unforgettable red "morning glory" horn first produced in 1904 (fig. 1). Pathé, a French company, provided competition for English and American gramophone companies, and primarily used German manufacturers to make its machine, although it ceased production altogether after World War I.¹⁴

Although it is difficult to track the number of portable record players and gramophones imported into Ireland in the first half of the twentieth century, such new technology undoubtedly played a role in how communities socialized, shared music, and shaped popular culture. The production of gramophones and of phonograph recordings was a global industry, and, in the early years of the twentieth century, one led primarily by American and British manufacturers.¹⁵ The record industry boomed worldwide after World War I, and by 1929 there were about a million records sold in Ireland. In context, however, this figure is relatively small: that year, Germany sold nearly thirty million records, the United Kingdom about fifty million, with Finland and Norway comparable to Ireland. Such figures indicate that in Western Europe a gramophone had become a middle-class luxury, with one expert estimating that perhaps one-third to one-half of all households in North America and Europe had one.¹⁶ But such figures would have been skewed toward urban regions like Dublin. Figures for radios are more readily available because these devices required a license for use, and radios played a crucial—and similar—role in modernizing rural society (fig. 2). Although only about ten to twelve thousand Irish homes had radio licenses in the 1920s, by the outbreak of World War II that figure had risen to one hundred-seventy thousand (with



Fig. 1: A Pathé Frères tournaphone gramophone with distinctive "morning glory" horn. Image courtesy of The Museum of Technology, The Great War & WWII.



Fig. 2: Neighbors gather around a wireless set in Clonmel, County Tipperary. The smiling child to the left of the scene is Joe Pyke, a co-founder of the Clonmel Gramophone Society. Photo by Christy O'Riordan, © RTÉ Stills Library.

at least twenty-five thousand unlicensed sets). By 1941, one in nine Dubliners had a radio, but in the western counties of Donegal, Galway, and Kerry, the numbers were far fewer—more likely one in thirty.¹⁷ Yet as Hilary Bracefield observes, for disseminating music the development of the gramophone was far more influential than the proliferation of radios: "as long as one person in a village had a gramophone and some records, everyone could hear the music without difficulty."¹⁸

In Ireland, electrification holds an important symbolic place in the national imaginary.¹⁹ The Free State established the Electricity Supply Board in 1927 and began work on Ardnacrusha, a massive hydro-power site on the Shannon River; in 1945, the government set up the Rural Electrification Scheme with the stated goal of bringing electricity to every home in Ireland.²⁰ The Scheme transformed rural life and brought electricity to nearly all homes on the mainland by the mid-1960s.²¹ Yet despite the success of large-scale Irish modernization, very rural regions like the far Connemara coast of Roundstone, and the island of Inishlacken where Dillon often painted, were some of the last places to see electricity arrive. Dillon's painting suggests, then, some modernizing influence of technological change in mid-twentieth-century rural Ireland despite an infrastructure that made progress slow in the most isolated regions.

By 1950, the Pathé Frères Tournaphone would have been outdated technology in most regions of Europe where middle-class consumers could switch to electrified Radiograms. In Connemara, where island communities would not yet be on the electrical grid, however, the wind-up gramophone represents the force of technological change, which the artist here envisions not as loss but as creating a space for privacy and joy. The composition of *The Gramophone* draws the viewer from the music-making machine through its invisible sound waves to the dancing man, where his knee and the twinned hearth and dresser siphon us off into the new possibilities of the space beyond, hinted at by the open doorway with its hanging umbrella and great coat.

Such technological luxuries could also symbolize decadence and greed. In Sean O'Casey's *Juno*

124 *and the Paycock* (1924), a play set in the early twenties during the Irish Civil War, the urban Boyle family bring home a gramophone bought on credit, a material presence in their shabby Dublin tenement, and one that is later stolen from them in order to credit another debt. In his 1930 stained-glass representation of the play, Irish artist Harry Clarke (1889–1931) focuses prominently on this gramophone (fig. 3); with its gaudy, lavish horn, Clarke’s music player looks strikingly similar to Dillon’s. But in Clarke’s glass, by contrast, the record player contributes to the image’s sense of claustrophobia. The central figure in this work—a man as shabbily dressed as Dillon’s dancer—clasps his hands and scowls, and the paper banners, bottles, and even the window’s leading hedge him in. Dillon depicts a rural world to which change comes more slowly—even benignly—and where, in 1950, the “new” portable gramophone would not yet represent the antique it was becoming in the urban areas of Dublin, Belfast, or London.

In *Self-portrait in Roundstone* (c. 1950) (plate 63), a portable gramophone once again becomes the focus of Dillon’s image. Now, however, the artist depicts himself looking straight at the viewer as he changes the record on the player. Reminiscing about his month-long stay with the older artist on Inishlacken, James MacIntyre writes fondly of a black wind-up gramophone that Dillon would place, lid open, on a box next to the door of their western cabin while singing along the lyrics of the rebel Irish/Australian ballad “The Wild Colonial Boy”: “the shiny chromium head wobbling up and down as it ground out the last few bars.”²² MacIntyre reports that his host also liked to play “a tinny-sounding, scratched version of ‘Danny Boy’ sung by Count John McCormack,” and brought along recordings of jigs, reels, and Percy French songs to the island.²³ Dillon was musical, and had a good voice; White lists him as the singer of two tracks, “I Know my Love,” and “Cailin Deas” on a gramophone recording from 1959, *Ottilie’s Irish Night*, an album by Northern Irish blues singer Ottilie Patterson.²⁴ Such a selection of songs attests to the gramophone’s role as both symbol of

new-found personal freedom and joy and as medium, paradoxically, to celebrate national tradition.

Influenced by perspectival and cubist effects used by European modernists like Marc Chagall, Paul Gauguin, and Henri Matisse, Dillon painted rooms and buildings that seemingly shift to reveal their surfaces, as do the furniture, tabletops, and wall decorations within his imagery. In *Self-portrait*, as in *Gramophone*, he again employs



Fig. 3: Panel four of Harry Clarke’s Geneva Window shows a wind-up gramophone on the table behind Joxer Daly from Sean O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock*. The panel includes lines from the play that read, “Joxer’s song, Joxer’s song—give us wan of your shut-eyed wans.” Image courtesy of the Wolfsonian-Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida, The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection.

contrasting whitewashed walls and bright colors—this time of bed linens and drapes—to create a startlingly simple tonal composition. Here the walls reveal a muddled brush stroke, mimicking the reflection of sunlight and color coming from the opened window and slanting on the textured surface. The paneled ceiling jutting out of the upper-right and left-hand corners of the painting teases viewers, revealing the dimension and depth of the room, but also skewing perspective and working against

the movement of the staircase visible through the open door. Yet the undulating composition of *Self-portrait* and the architectural raking of a painting like *Yellow Bungalow* (1954) or *Old Woman and Washing* (c. 1959–60) also evidence a temporal plane. In *Self-portrait*, the artist invites viewers to capture him in a private, transitory experience, changing the record on his gramophone, much as he might be caught in a photographic image. His overcoat carelessly tossed on the bed and his foot that slides off the canvas indicate that Dillon invokes not just a particular moment in the historical time of the rural West before electrification (yet after its inhabitants had portable record players), but also a moment in personal time, an intimate depiction of the artist at work.

CAUGHT IN THE MOMENT: RURAL TIMES AND MODERN CHANGES

Several works in *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story*, such as *St. Patrick’s Day/Irish Matchmaker* (1867) (plate 19) by Charles Henry Cook (1830–1906) or *Committee of Inspection (Weaving, County Cork)* (1877) and *Words of Counsel* (1876) (plates 28, 27) by James Brenan (1837–1907), are constructed around Victorian stylistic conventions of narrative paintings.²⁵ But Dillon’s spatial and temporal representations observe and record moments of daily life rather than dramatic or narrative action. In this way they are comparable to the paintings of his contemporaries in this exhibition, works such as Michael Power O’Malley’s *And Sheila Was Spinning* (c. 1935) (plate 59) and *Her Family Treasures* (c. 1925) (plate 55), Leo Whelan’s *Interior of a Kitchen* (c. 1934) (plate 60), or Anne Yeats’s curiously peopleless *One Room* (c. 1954) (plate 62). Particularly attuned to criticism that he painted “stage Irish” figures with the “eye of a visitor,” in *Self-portrait* Dillon represents himself as actively working and living in Ireland’s West.²⁶ In his article in *Envoy*, he argued that the Irish painter had to fight against a “story-telling” quality and work for “pure painting”; White interprets Dillon’s struggle against a narrative mode in the paintings as signaling his desire to

abstract and stylize his work rather than simply translate Connemara people and their culture onto his canvases.²⁷ By heightening objects into symbols, Dillon's paintings suggest the changing historical moment in visual art—the transformation from Victorian to modernist forms. Thus he both fixes (or flattens) objects and interiors in historical time, but through his compositional use of material culture, he also clears a space for private time and non-narrative moments—revealing the dual-consciousness of communities caught in flux.

In *The Gramophone*, for example, we see an alarm clock and a Staffordshire ceramic dog displayed next to the traditional oil lamp, all competing with the typical display of transfer-ware in the dresser. These conspicuously displayed material objects—pottery animals, clocks, pictures, candlesticks, and tea canisters—become decorative objects; yet, as folklorist Henry Glassie writes, “they gesture through the possibility of their use toward the dresser and through the dresser to utility itself.”²⁸ Translated from their place of decoration in the rural interior to a place of ornament on canvas, they point to the connection between art and ordinary lived experience. They are both decorative and necessary, represented and real.

For writers and painters the appeal of the western seaboard derived, in no small part, from the sense that the region remained outside of historical time, free from the homogenizing force of modernization. As MacIntyre puts it, “we were on Inishlacken, where time was not all that important and did not have to be measured by a clock.”²⁹ Yet the inclusion of symbolically weighted objects like the record player and the alarm clock over the mantel in *The Gramophone* or the clock at the head of the bed in *Self-portrait* suggests that Dillon's sitters are, in fact, connected to a wider temporality beyond their deceptively isolated rooms. By capturing a particular moment of ordinary time, Dillon conveys the juxtaposition of modern and traditional ornament, revealing change through the simple material objects of a home.

But the tension between tradition and modernity can be read as inhibiting and threatening to rural inhabitants. *Old Woman and Washing* (plate 67) presents Dillon's most conventional rural interior in this exhibition.

The disarmingly simple painting shows a darkly clad woman—so ensconced in her clothing that she is barely visible—sitting next to a stylized open hearth of a sort found in rural cabins in the West. Unlike many interiors in his paintings, the space in *Old Woman* offers only a hint of the ceiling visible in images like *Self-portrait* and *Yellow Bungalow* and provides no visual release through an open window or doorway as does *The Girl in the Cottage, Connemara* (c. 1951–52) (plate 65). The darkened corner of the room at the upper left, rather than contributing to a movement of space, enforces a sense of enclosure, even imprisonment. The whitewashed walls appear to angle into the painting, and only the floor is raked to reveal the sparse furnishings of the room. The distortedly large stool (or “creepie”) in the foreground and the empty and almost child-sized kitchen chair to the right of the hearth—testament to an “aesthetic of plainness”³⁰—give the room its air of expectation or of loneliness. Such visual details, coupled with the old woman's all-ensconcing garb and guardedly crossed arms and legs, convey claustrophobia and unease. The viewer becomes an intruder on the woman's private life, even an eavesdropper on her interior distress.

Dillon includes several familiar objects in *Old Woman and Washing*. A push broom leaning against the wall signals the tidiness of the very small house, and a tea kettle rests next to the fire with a teapot sitting on the floor in front of it. The image also depicts a small pipkin-style cooking pot of a sort that feature in several of the artist's works and a pair of fire-tongs for turning the turf on the fire.

But the painting appears most notable for what it excludes. Although clearly set in the cabin's kitchen, it fails to portray the typical Irish dresser with its display of transfer-ware, a table to arrange cups and plates, or even a mantel over the simple hearth with a lamp or arrangement of knickknacks. Conspicuously displayed, instead, is the woman's washing. The painting's title, the broom, and the tidy arrangement of the sparse furnishings in the house read, simultaneously, as indicators of grueling work endured and pride-of-place felt by impoverished rural housekeepers in the West. In the nineteenth-century, cottiers or tenants sometimes hung clothing

across the kitchen not only for drying by the hearth, as one would expect, but instead as a kind of display or decoration, as in Basil Bradley's (1842–1904) *Soogaun Making, Connemara, Ireland* (1880) (plate 32). The woman in *Old Woman and Washing* may not be as impoverished as her sparse surroundings would imply, but the artist's choice to center the image around the hanging laundry mimics, compositionally, the display of material articles in earlier paintings. Here the three white towels become a focal point, seemingly caught in the illuminating light cast either from an open doorway or window—or from the glow emitting from the burning turf fire. Nearly lost in the darkened corner are two pairs of socks and the draping form of a knit sweater, one much like that worn by the figure in *Self-portrait*.

Dillon's friends have confirmed that he was fond of wearing traditional Irish clothing from the West; when he came to stay with the artist on Inishlacken, MacIntyre remembers his host dressed in “a cream Aran sweater pulled low over his backside, heavy woolen trousers and a pair of boots a navy would have been proud to own.”³¹ Dillon was also particularly fond of the western fisherman's *crois*, a long, colorfully knit woolen belt with fringe at either end, which wrapped around the trousers to hold them up. Around 1950, Dillon made one of these woolen belts for fellow artist George Campbell, so expertly mimicking the native craft that Campbell was outraged to find it wasn't authentic.³² Dillon's ability to knit his own *crois* suggests an aesthetic appreciation of native handiwork—his enduring admiration of vernacular architecture and roof-thatching, the building of curraghs, and even the “straight hard hand-made chairs” he depicted in *Old Woman and Washing*.³³ Like the artisans of the Arts and Crafts movement, he found the simplicity and aesthetic purity of handmade objects more powerful than the technological wonders of the modernizing world. “The curraghs have this same simple man-made feeling to them,” he writes, “not like the slick stream-lined yachts that only leave me wondering who made them or what, like a television set amazes. I might if pushed to it make a house or a curragh, but I'd never attempt a television set.”³⁴ Thus Dillon merges an appreciation for vernacular craft forms with modern

126 art, a marriage revealed by the display of washing that shapes the composition of his painting. Although his subject matter indicates an appreciation for tradition over change, his approach to painting itself—the simple, flattened lines and subtle compositional effects—reveal modernism’s inevitable force in rural Ireland.

In fact, if we read the painting’s composition and tone as a commentary on tradition, the carefully rendered pullover hanging over the empty chair takes on new meaning. Instead of a celebration of hard work and native craft, that piece of clothing serves, as well, as a reminder of mortality and struggle. Suspended next to two pairs of knit socks, it evokes the knit shirt and stocking by which the women in Synge’s play *Riders to the Sea* (1904) learn their brother has drowned: “and isn’t it a pitiful thing when there is nothing left of a man [...] but a bit of an old shirt and a plain stocking?”³⁵ The claustrophobic space and sloping floor of *Old Woman* also contribute to a vision of the painting as stage set: here Dillon negates any sense of time by implying that the sitter and the setting are offered for the purpose not of narrative, but as a tableau or display caught between past and present. His use of blocks of light and dark particularly emphasizes this staged quality; the hearth and the floor in front of it is framed in a bright square of illumination that could be shining from studio lights just off set.

This stage-lighting effect heightens the hearth’s role in the image. Set squarely in the middle of the composition, the hearth becomes the dictating presence on the canvas; it contains the traditional crane with chains for holding the cooking pot at different heights and is mounted on the left in keeping with the folk belief that all significant movement having to do with food, including plowing, casting a net, or taking a pot off a fire, should pass in the same direction that the sun moves across the sky.³⁶ But the old woman’s hearth is also an abstracted shape, reading as the inverse of a window or door. Instead of casting off light, it seems to be artificially lit; rather than warming the woman, she appears cold and guarded by its flame. *Old Woman and Washing* might warn against too much admiration for a

bygone world. This hearth may be “the crucible of continuity” and “the center of space [where] people work to unify time” between the days, seasons, and generations, but it also, Dillon argues, represents an abstraction from time: a museum piece, something staged and cold.³⁷

If *Old Woman and Washing* signals Dillon’s sense of entrapment in history, *Yellow Bungalow* (plate 66) offers a striking contrast in composition, color, and space. Nonetheless, it too provides evidence of the artist’s discomfort with an inevitable transformation of the rural world. The image’s title itself alludes to the modernization of



Fig. 4: This 1956 photo shows a “modern” kitchen in Kinvara, County Galway, updated with radio, electricity, and a fine cooking range replacing the open hearth. Nevertheless, the table has been pulled to a side wall in the traditional manner, and the cooking fire remains the central focus. Image courtesy of the Robert Cresswell Archive, NUIG. Gift of Robert Cresswell.

the traditional cabin, now a bungalow. Instead of painting inside a low thatched house, Dillon had a young couple pose for him in their newly-built bungalow on the road into Roundstone. Although he made preparatory sketches both inside and outside of their home, Dillon painted *Yellow Bungalow* three years later, in 1954, while working as a night porter in London.³⁸ Many painters of the rural West featured vernacular cabins that gracefully accommodated themselves into the landscape, but the nature of such housing had begun to change by the turn of the twentieth century. As early as

1891, the Congested Districts Board launched an improvement scheme, and by 1923, it had “erected or substantially improved over 9,000 farm dwellings, greatly reducing the number of traditional byre-dwellings and almost completely replacing the housing stock in remote western areas and off-shore islands.”³⁹ Most of these early twentieth-century homes, however, were still based on vernacular styles and siting methods. But housing development changed once again after World War I, with the construction of the one- or one-and-a-half story bungalow, the most common new habitation in rural areas. Unlike vernacular nineteenth-century cabins that blended into the landscape through a use of natural building materials and plot positioning that helped guard against weather, modern bungalows tended to be built on visible, exposed sites, often directly facing main roads.⁴⁰

The interior of Dillon’s *Yellow Bungalow* shows a decorating aesthetic very different from that of the cabin in *Self-portrait* or the kitchen in *The Gramophone*. Instead of plastered walls, *Yellow Bungalow* displays beadboard ceiling and walls and beaded baseboards. In place of the stone-flagged or earthen floor (as in *Old Woman and Washing*), this bungalow features a board floor. Refined, smooth surfaces have replaced the texture and shadow of white-wash, providing a modern look of “clean artificial planes.”⁴¹ The most notable difference, however, is the turf-fired cookstove or “cooker” which supplants the central hearth, thereby eliminating the dirt of soot and smoke that discolored walls. The color of this closed cast-iron range’s distinctive silvered hinges are echoed in the plate of fish at the right of the picture. Behind the stove Dillon adds the slightly darker panel of fire-retardant material from which hang tools, including a poker and tongs designed for moving burning turf. The range top holds the traditional ceramic tea kettle and teapot warming on the hot side of the stove, as well as a pipkin-style pot and two empty burners, one with a “lid lifter” slotted into it.

A preponderance of straight lines—the upright and horizontal boards of walls, floor and ceiling, the stovepipe which replaces the chimney, the two-light plate

glass window with its horizontal curtain rod and vertical drapes, the rectangular blue rug before the stove—create a sense of modern cleanliness and order in this bungalow.⁴² The traditional turf fire remains; it glows from the grate as it does in *Old Woman and Washing*, but now the fire’s glow is enclosed in a neat firebox. In *Yellow Bungalow*, the traditional kitchen, with its constant need for cleaning (evidenced by the broom in *Old Woman*), achieves a geometric order (fig. 4). Objects and utensils are constrained by boxes: the turf sits next to the stove in a wooden chest, the fire itself is enclosed, and a screen placed behind the seated man suggests a desire for privacy. Glassie argues that such a movement toward enclosure and containment in traditional Irish kitchens signaled the desire for cleanliness, but also led to “conceptual closure,” and a discontinuity in space and time which ultimately breaks “the endless thread of time spun from diverse fibers at the home’s single center, disturbing the family’s unity.” The act of opening a stove door to poke the fire calls attention to categorization and breaks time’s flow.⁴³ Modernization, then, brings disjuncture.

The composition of the painting also points to disjuncture. The hanging oil lamp provides one vertical line of tension that runs through the seated woman to the cat curled on the reed chair; the jointed stovepipe forms a second vertical slice that seems to divide the couple.⁴⁴ The wicker chair holding the curled cat also blocks off the woman, literally obscuring her from full view and figuratively relegating her to a far corner of the room—and of the painting. Cats and dogs often feature in Dillon’s work, occasionally serving as links between people. But domestic animals also stand in for absent visitors in what might otherwise be social scenes: the solitary man dancing in *The Gramophone*, the young child sitting alone in *The Girl in the Cottage*, or here where the cat occupies the best chair, made of wicker in a style that appears to be a modern-made version of a vernacular rush seating.⁴⁵ Competing with the hanging oil lamp with its glass chimney is the short table lamp of the sort that might be electrified, but in this image, with no evidence of a cord, it is undoubtedly fueled by kerosene or oil. The lamp sits on a small shelf with simple metal brackets for which Dillon has neatly painted in

the screws.

Yellow Bungalow reveals a curious evolution in Irish rural interiors: this “modern” rural kitchen shows no sign of the iconic dresser with its display of dishes. Some households in western Cork and in Fermanagh refer to the dresser as “the shelf,”⁴⁶ a term that may originate from its humbler precursor: a rustic wood shelf that held up a few plates like that in Frances Livesay’s *By The Fireside, Co. Mayo* (1875) (see fig. 1, p. 42)

So Dillon’s modern couple in their bungalow have eschewed the traditional dresser for a sleek new shelf with mass-produced brackets, displaying not “delph” pottery, but a lamp that helps replace the open hearth’s glow.

Compositionally engaging, Dillon’s *Yellow Bungalow* uses its arrangement of objects to heighten interior tensions and animosities. Just as the cast-iron cookstove relegates the turf fire to a box, so too does the composition suggest that the young couple themselves have become disjointed or boxed-in. The woman crosses her arms and focuses her gaze on the young man, indicating a rift or resentment. The middle decades of the twentieth century saw a shift in population, with many younger people leaving rural life for cities. Compartmentalized in her angular corner, the woman may represent modernizing forces and urban aspirations, whereas the young man holding his instrument and music seems to embrace traditional customs and share in an intimate, everyday moment with the painter. Indeed, the tension and discord between the couple may point to an even greater rift: it would not be a stretch to read the stylized geometric arrangement of the woman’s face as a blackened eye, a hint of violence and rage lurking under this orderly world. Dillon’s careful compositions, bright colors, and symbolic material objects both mask and reveal the change and attendant struggle in rural Ireland as modernization arrives.



NOTES

- 1 James MacIntyre, *Three Men on an Island* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1996), 139.
- 2 James White, *Gerard Dillon: An Illustrated Biography* (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1994), 49. See also Riann Coulter, “Gerard Dillon: Nationalism, Homosexuality, and the Modern Irish Artist,” *Éire-Ireland: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Irish Studies* 45, nos. 3–4 (Fall/Winter 2010): 76.
- 3 In an article in *Envoy*, Dillon responded to such criticism with language that seems a direct adoption of John Millington Synge’s: “Is not the West and the life there a great strange land of wonder to the visitor from the red brick city [Belfast]? I suppose these critics call Synge ‘stage Irish’ and deny that his work is art,” *Envoy* 15 (Feb. 1951) quoted in White, *Dillon*, 54.
- 4 See Clair Wills, *That Neutral Island: A Cultural History of Ireland During the Second World War* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 281–87.
- 5 White, *Dillon*, 34.
- 6 Gerard Dillon, “Dear Tourist,” *Ireland of the Welcomes, Dublin: Board Fáilte* 4 (May/June 1955): 30–33; Dillon, “Connemara is Ireland to Me,” *Ireland of the Welcomes, Dublin: Board Fáilte* 13 (July/Aug. 1964): 8–11.
- 7 White, *Dillon*, 10.
- 8 Tim Robinson, “Place/Person/Book,” preface to *The Aran Islands* by J. M. Synge (1907; reprint, London: Penguin Classics, 1992), xv.
- 9 For more on Dillon’s nationalism, see Coulter, “Gerard Dillon,” 63–94.
- 10 Quoted in White, *Dillon*, 32.
- 11 For more on the use of gloss paints in cabin homes see Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 73.
- 12 And fittingly so, for allowing the turf fire of a hearth to burn out brought bad luck and created hard work. In some rural communities, if a family moved to a new house a glowing sod would be taken from the old and carried around the new at sunset thus perpetuating the “heart” of the home. See Máirtín Verling, *Beara Woman Talking: Folklore from the Beara Peninsula* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2003), 31.
- 13 Although we use “gramophone” and “phonograph” synonymously now, originally the term gramophone distinguished Berliner’s invention—a machine that used flat discs instead of cylinders—from Thomas Edison’s phonograph. See Roland Gelatt, *The Fabulous Phonograph 1877–1977*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 60.

- 14 Trevor L. Cass, "A Short History of the Gramophone," The Museum of Technology, accessed Dec. 12, 2011, www.museumoftechnology.org/stories.grams.html. Gelatt provides a complete history of the gramophone in *The Fabulous Phonograph*.
- 15 Christopher Morash, *A History of the Media in Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 98–104; See also Pekka Gronow "The Record Industry: The Growth of a Mass Medium," *Popular Music* 3 (1983): 53–75; and Jones Geoffrey, "The Gramophone Company: An Anglo-American Multinational, 1898–1931," *Business History Review* 59, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 76–100.
- 16 Gronow, "The Record Industry," 62–64.
- 17 Wills, *That Neutral Island*, 202–3; see also Hilary Bracefield, "Gramophone or Radio: Transatlantic Effects of the Development of Traditional Music in Ireland," *Irish Association for American Studies* 13/14 (2004/2005): 115–21.
- 18 Bracefield, "Gramophone or Radio," 115.
- 19 Michael Rubenstein, *Public Works: Infrastructure, Irish Modernism, and the Postcolonial* (Notre Dame, ID: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 133.
- 20 Rubenstein, *Public Works*, 139–56.
- 21 F. H. A. Aalen, Kevin Whelan, and Matthew Stout, eds., *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape*, 2nd ed. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2011), 315.
- 22 MacIntyre, *Three Men*, 22.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 22, 129.
- 24 White incorrectly lists this album as "Ottoline's Irish Night," *Dillon*, 114.
- 25 Note Sighle Bhreathnach-Lynch's essay in this volume (23–30) on the development of genre painting.
- 26 Dillon, *Envoy* 15 (Feb. 1951); quoted in White, 54.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 365.
- 29 MacIntyre, *Three Men*, 129.
- 30 Glassie, *Passing the Time*, 358–59.
- 31 MacIntyre, *Three Men*, 6.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 84.
- 33 Dillon, "Connemara is Ireland to Me," 31.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 33.
- 35 J. M. Synge, "Riders to the Sea," in *Modern Irish Drama*, ed. John Harrington (New York: Norton, 1991), 68.
- 36 E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Folk Ways* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), 66–67.
- 37 Glassie, *Passing the Time*, 354.
- 38 MacIntyre, *Three Men*, 17–18, and Eileen Black and Anne Stewart, *Visions: A Celebration of Irish Art from the Ulster Museum* (Belfast: National Museums of Northern Ireland, n.d.), 77.
- 39 See F. H. A. Aalen, "Buildings," in *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape*, 230.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 Glassie, *Passing the Time*, 385.
- 42 For more on the change from open hearths to cookers, see *ibid.*, 384–91.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 391.
- 44 Black and Stewart, *Visions*, 77.
- 45 Straw-seated *sígán* chairs are a distinctly Irish vernacular style. E. Estyn Evans writes, "high-backed armchairs made entirely of coiled straw rope after the manner of a beehive used to be found in the west, and since they can be paralleled in many parts of Western Europe from the Orkneys to Spain, it's probable that their manufacture is a peasant craft of some antiquity" (Evans, *Irish Folk Ways*, 93).
- 46 Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors*, 47; Glassie, *Passing the Time*, 370–71.

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130 BETH KOWALESKI WALLACE is a Professor of English at Boston College, where she teaches eighteenth-century literature and culture. Her books include *Their Fathers' Daughters: Hannah More and Maria Edgeworth* (1991), *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (1997), and *The British Slave Trade and Public Memory* (2006). She is also the Editor in Chief of the *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literary Theory*.

VERA KREILKAMP teaches Irish Studies at Boston College and co-edits *Éire-Ireland: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Irish Studies*. She wrote *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* (1998) and contributed "Irish Art and History" to *The Palgrave Guide to Irish Studies* (2008). Since 1993, she has worked on five McMullen exhibitions of Irish art, editing and contributing to the catalogues, including *Éire/Land* (2003) and *America's Eye: Irish Painting from the Collection of Brian P. Burns* (1996). Her recent research and other publications focus on nineteenth-century Irish fiction.

ANDREW A. KUHN is a doctoral candidate in the English Department at Boston College, studying twentieth-century Irish literature and print culture. He is the author of an article on the poetry of Ciaran Carson and has lectured on the Cuala Press and the art of Jack B. Yeats. In 2011, he curated *Painter, Illustrator, Author: Irish Art in the Twentieth Century*, an exhibit of Irish book arts at the John J. Burns Library, Boston College. His current research is on the private press tradition in Ireland and the role of the material book in literary interpretation.

DIANA LARSEN, Exhibition and Collections Manager/Designer at the McMullen Museum, has held curatorial positions at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, the Rhode Island School of Design Museum, and at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum where she was an associate in the department of European Paintings, Sculpture, and Decorative Arts. She has curated exhibitions of nineteenth-century decorative arts as well as of English and American silver and porcelain. At the Fogg, she coordinated the production of a catalogue of British silver and catalogued the European textile collection. She taught exhibition planning and

design at the University of Victoria.

KEVIN O'NEILL is a co-founder of the Irish Studies Program at Boston College and a member of the History Department. His research concentrates on the interaction of traditional agricultural societies and a growing world economy with a special focus upon pre-Famine Ireland. His publications include *Family and Farm in Pre-Famine Ireland: The Parish of Killeshandra* (1984, 2003), "Pale and Dejected, Exhausted by the Waste of Sorrow: Courtship and the Expression of Emotion" in *Sexed Sentiments* (2011), and "Nation or Neighbourhood? Mary Leadbeater and Post-Rebellion Reform" in *These Fissured Isles: Ireland, Scotland and British History, 1798-1848* (2005).

CHARLES E. ORSER, JR. is Curator of Historical Archaeology at the New York State Museum, University of the State of New York, Adjunct Professor at National University of Ireland, Galway, former Distinguished Professor at Illinois State University, and founder and editor of the *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*. He has written over eighty-five professional articles and a number of books, including: *Historical Archaeology* (1995, 2004), *A Historical Archaeology of the Modern World* (1996), *The Archaeology of Race and Racialization in Historic America* (2007), *Race and Practice in Archaeological Interpretation* (2003), and *Unearthing Hidden Ireland: Historical Archaeology at Ballykilcline, County Roscommon* (2006).

JOSEPH NUGENT's teaching and research engage with Ireland around the turn of the twentieth century. His writings have appeared in *Victorian Studies*, *The Senses and Society*, and *Éire-Ireland*. His engagement with the Digital Humanities has produced *Walking Ulysses* (www.ulysses.bc.edu), a downloadable smartphone app guide to Joyce's Dublin. He leads "Raidin the Wake," a *Finnegans Wake* reading group and organizes the Boston Joyce Forum. Writing within the confluence of Joyce studies, sensory studies, urban studies, and technology, his recent work relates transformations in the sense of smell to the embourgeoisement of nineteenth-century Ireland.

BRENDAN ROONEY is Curator of Irish Art at the National Gallery of Ireland. His publications include *Thomas Roberts: Landscape and Patronage in Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (with William Laffan, 2009); *The Life and Work of Harry Jones Thaddeus* (2003); and *Irish Paintings in the National Gallery of Ireland, Volume I* (with Nicola Figgis, 2001). He was also editor of *A time and a place: Two Centuries of Irish Social Life* (2006), has contributed articles on eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century Irish art to a variety of books and periodicals, and is currently writing the catalogue of the nineteenth-century Irish paintings in the National Gallery of Ireland.

KELLY SULLIVAN is a doctoral candidate in English at Boston College, and editorial assistant at *Éire-Ireland: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Irish Studies*. She published a novel, *Winter Bayou* in 2005. She holds an Irish Studies Fellowship and Lane Fellowship at Boston College, and was a Fulbright Fellow to Ireland in 2002. Her current research interests include the intersection of visual art and literature in Ireland in the early twentieth century.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION





1. John Boyne (c. 1750–1810)
The County Chronicle, 1809
 Pencil and watercolor on paper
 22 ½ x 28 ¾ in.
 Pym's Gallery, London



2. After N. A. Woods (fl. 1819–55)
An Irish Wake, 1819
 Aquatint
 14 ½ x 20 ½ in.
 Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland



3. John George Mulvany (1766–1838)

A Kitchen Interior, n.d.

Oil on panel

21 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 28 in.

National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin



4. Tom Semple (n.d.)
Untitled [Irish Interior], 1830
Oil on canvas
31 1/2 x 42 3/4 in.

National Monuments Service, Dept. of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht/Office of Public Works, Dublin



5. David Wilkie (1785–1841)
The Irish Whiskey Still, 1840
Oil on wood
47 x 62 1/4 in.
National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh



6. Frederic William Burton (1816–1900)
The Aran Fisherman's Drowned Child, 1841
Watercolor on paper
34 ³/₄ x 31 in.
National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin



7. Att. to William Bourke Kirwan (c. 1814–80?)
Untitled [One woman spinning and another woman sewing in kitchen], c. 1842
Watercolor on paper
5 1/2 x 9 in.
Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland



8. William Bourke Kirwan (c. 1814–80?)
Interior Lenaun September 1842 Reilly's Kitchen, 1842
Watercolor on paper
11 1/2 x 11 1/2 in.
Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland



9. Alfred Downing Fripp (1822–95)

The Cabin Hearth, c. 1843–48

Watercolor on paper

15 x 17 ³/₄ in.

Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland



10. Alfred Downing Fripp (1822–95)
Interior of a Fisherman's Cabin, Galway, 1844
Pencil and watercolor on paper
10 1/2 x 14 in.
Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland



11. Alfred Downing Fripp (1822–95)

The Poachers Alarmed, 1844

Watercolor over pencil, body color, and varnish

14 ½ x 21 ½ in.

The Whitworth Art Gallery, The University of Manchester



12. Francis William Topham (1808–77)
Figures in an Irish Cabin, c. 1844
Watercolor
8 1/4 x 12 in.
Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland



13. Francis William Topham (1808–77)

Cottage Interior, Claddagh, Galway, 1845

Watercolor over pencil on paper

10 x 12 ¼ in.

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Collection Ulster Museum



14. Rev'd John Rooney (alias Joannes Clericus) (1809–50)

Sympathy, 1847

Watercolor on paper

24 1/2 x 19 3/4 in.

National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin



15. Daniel MacDonal (1821–53)
Cottage Interior with Uilleann Piper, c. 1840
Oil on canvas
31 x 35 ³/₄ in.
Crawford Art Gallery, Cork



16. Daniel MacDonal (1821–53)

The Dancing Master, c. 1848

Oil on canvas

23 1/2 x 28 1/4 in.

Crawford Art Gallery, Cork



17. William S. Brunton (d. 1878)

Christmas Morning in an Irish Country Shop Keeper's—Giving the Customary Present, 1854

Pen, ink, and wash on paper

6 ¼ x 9 ½ in.

National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin



18. Anthony Carey Stannus (1830–1919)

An Irish Interior, c. 1860s

Watercolor on paper

9 1/2 x 13 1/2 in.

© National Museums Northern Ireland
Collection Ulster Museum



19. Charles Henry Cook (1830–1906)
St. Patrick's Day/Irish Matchmaker, 1867
Oil on canvas
34 x 44 in.
Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland



20. After Erskine Nicol (1825–1904)
Outward-Bound (Dublin), c. 1852
 Lithograph (after a painting attributed to Nicol)
 13 x 10 in.
 Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland



21. Erskine Nicol (1825–1904)
Interior Westmeath Cabin/“A thing of beauty is a joy forever ... ,” c. 1860
Oil on canvas
12 ¹/₄ x 16 ³/₄ in.
Private collection, courtesy of Gorry Gallery, Dublin



22. Erskine Nicol (1825–1904)
The Tenant, Castle Rackrent, 1880
Oil on canvas
20 1/2 x 15 in.
Brian P. Burns Irish Art Collection



23. Erskine Nicol (1825–1904)
 “Listenin’ to Raison,” 1909

Illustration reproduced from a painting (perhaps called *Molly Brierly*, exhibited 1901)
 in Mrs. S. C. Hall, *Tales of Irish Life and Character* (Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1909), frontispiece.



24. Erskine Nicol (1825–1904)

“Inconveniences of a Single Life,” 1909

Illustration reproduced from a painting (exhibited 1851) in Mrs. S. C. Hall, *Tales of Irish Life and Character* (Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1909), n.p.



25. George Washington Brownlow (1835–76)
A Spinning Lesson, 1874
Oil on canvas
23 ³/₄ x 35 ³/₄ in.
Private collection, courtesy of Gorry Gallery, Dublin



26. James Brenan (1837–1907)
News from America / Letter from America, 1875
Oil on canvas
32 x 35 ³/₄ in.
Crawford Art Gallery, Cork



27. James Brenan (1837–1907)
Words of Counsel, 1876
Oil on canvas
27 x 35 1/2 in.
Crawford Art Gallery, Cork



28. James Brenan (1837–1907)
Committee of Inspection (Weaving, County Cork), 1877
Oil on canvas
27 1/2 x 35 1/2 in.
Crawford Art Gallery, Cork



29. James Brenan (1837–1907)
The Schoolroom/Empty Pockets, 1887
Oil on canvas
27 1/2 x 35 in
Brian P. Burns Irish Art Collection



30. James Brenan (1837–1907)

Patchwork, 1891

Oil on wood

9 3/4 x 12 in.

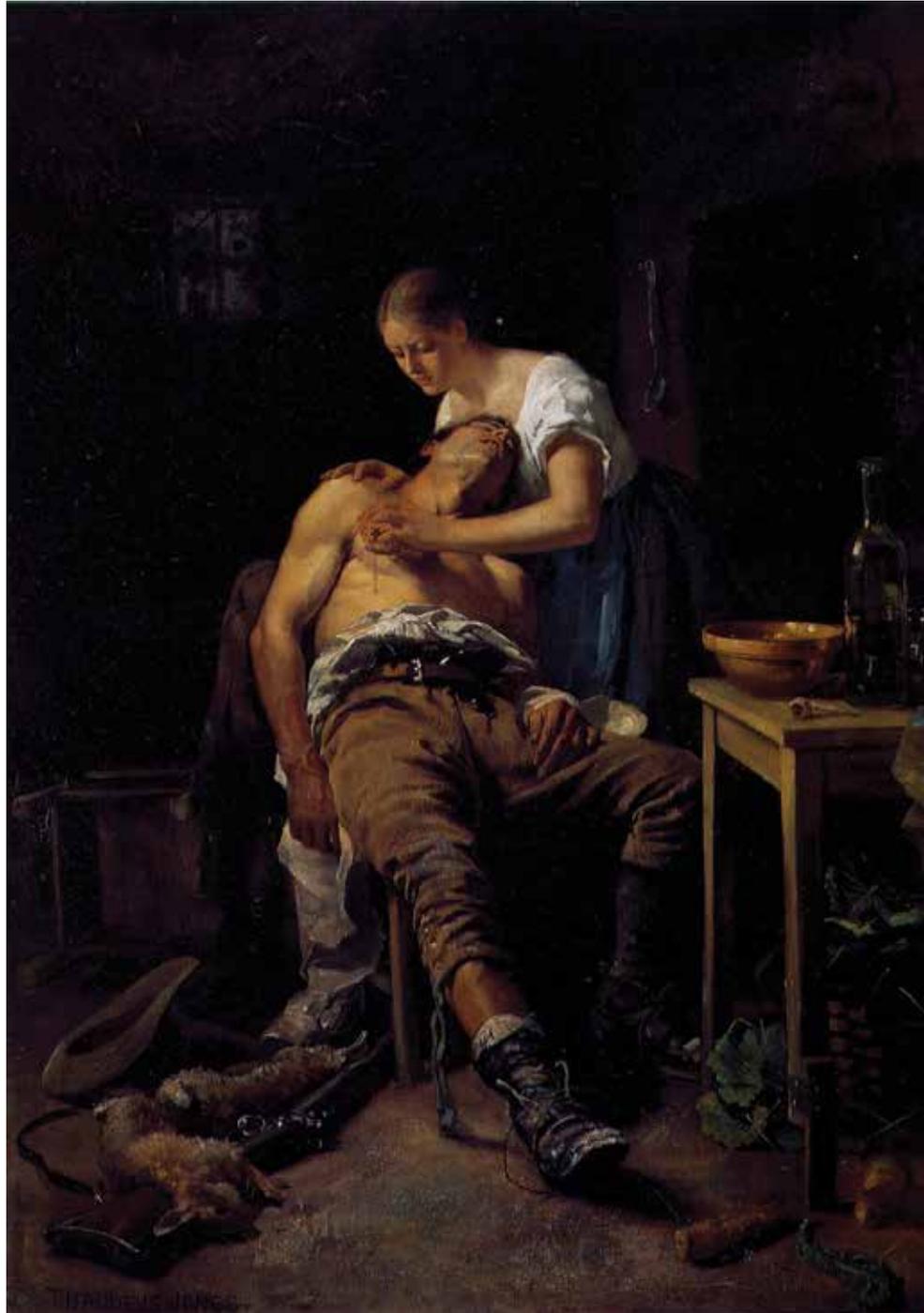
Crawford Art Gallery, Cork



31. Basil Bradley (1842–1904)
Interior of a Cabin, Connemara, Ireland, 1880
Oil on canvas
14 ½ x 22 ½ in.
Private collection, courtesy of Gorry Gallery, Dublin



32. Basil Bradley (1842–1904)
Soogaun Making, Connemara, Ireland, 1880
Oil on canvas
14 1/2 x 22 1/2 in.
Private collection, courtesy of Gorry Gallery, Dublin



33. Harry Jones Thaddeus (1860–1929)
The Wounded Poacher, 1881
Oil on canvas
47 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 33 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.
National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin



34. Harry Jones Thaddeus (1860–1929)
The Poachers, c. 1895
Oil on board
25 x 29 ³/₄ in.
Private collection, courtesy of Gorry Gallery, Dublin



35. Harry Jones Thaddeus (1860–1929)
An Irish Eviction, Co. Galway, 1889
Oil on canvas
47 x 60 in.
Private collection
**not in exhibition*



36. Howard Helmick (1840–1907)
The Country Dancing Master, West of Ireland, 1874
Oil on canvas
24 x 27 in.
Private collection, courtesy of Pym's Gallery, London



37. Howard Helmick (1840–1907)

The Bachelor, 1880

Oil on canvas

31 1/2 x 22 1/4 in.

Pyms Gallery, London



38. Howard Helmick (1840–1907)
Candidates for Marriage / The Cleric's Interruption, 1881
Oil on canvas
29 x 37 in.
Georgetown University Art Collection, Washington, DC



39. Howard Helmick (1840–1907)
The Dispensary Doctor—West of Ireland, 1883
Oil on canvas
23 x 32 in.
Pym's Gallery, London



40. Howard Helmick (1840–1907)
Between Two Fires/Rival Suitors, 1885
Oil on canvas
22 ¼ x 31 ½ in.
Pym's Gallery, London



41. Howard Helmick (1840–1907)
The Schoolmaster's Moment of Leisure, c. 1888
Watercolor and gouache on paper
12 ½ x 10 ½ in.
National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin



42. Margaret Allen (1830–1914)

Bad News in Troubled Times / “An important arrest has been made, that of a young man named—,” *The Freeman’s Journal*, c. 1886

Oil on canvas

38 x 32 in.

Collection of Austin Daly, courtesy of Gorry Gallery, Dublin



43. Aloysius O'Kelly (1853–1936)

Mass in a Connemara Cabin, c. 1883

Oil on canvas

54 1/4 x 72 in.

On long term loan to the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin from the people of St. Patrick's, Edinburgh
and the Trustees of the Archdiocese of St. Andrews and Edinburgh

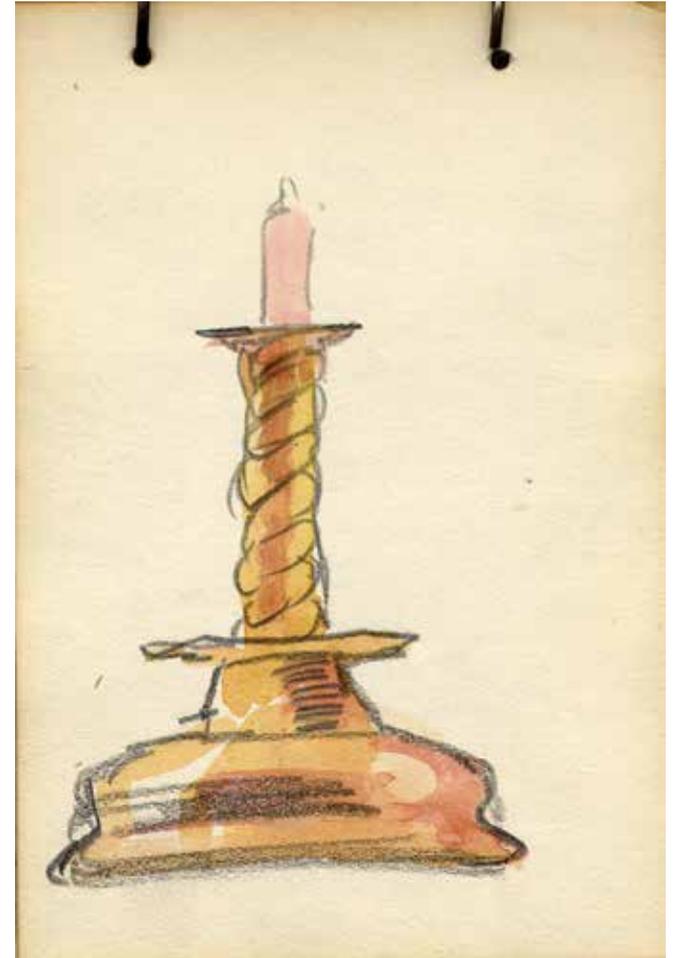
**not in exhibition*



44. Aloysius O'Kelly (1853–1936)
Mass in a Connemara Cabin, c. 1883
Watercolor on paper
16 ½ x 22 ½ in.
Private collection, courtesy of Gorry Gallery, Dublin



45. Jack Yeats (1871–1957)
Display cases, 1899
 Watercolor and pencil
 3 1/2 x 5 in.
 Private collection



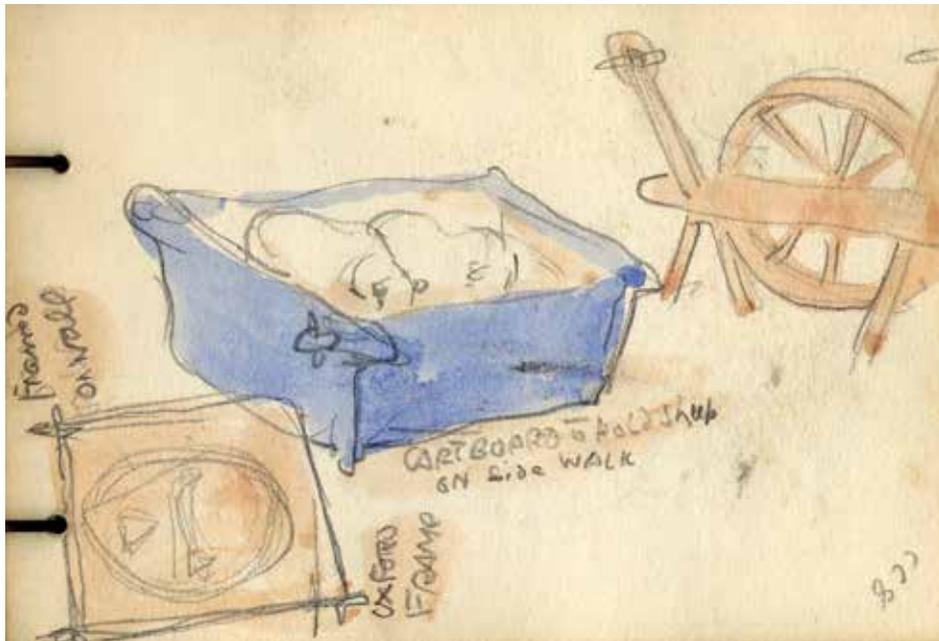
46. Jack Yeats (1871–1957)
Candlestick, 1899
 Watercolor and pencil
 5 x 3 1/2 in.
 Private collection



47. Jack Yeats (1871–1957)
What would you think ..., 1899
 Watercolor and pencil
 5 x 3 1/2 in.
 Private collection



48. Jack Yeats (1871–1957)
Mother and child, 1899
 Watercolor and pencil
 5 x 3 1/2 in.
 Private collection



49. Jack Yeats (1871–1957)
Oxford frame, cartboard, and spinning wheel, 1899
 Watercolor and pencil
 3 1/2 x 5 in.
 Private collection



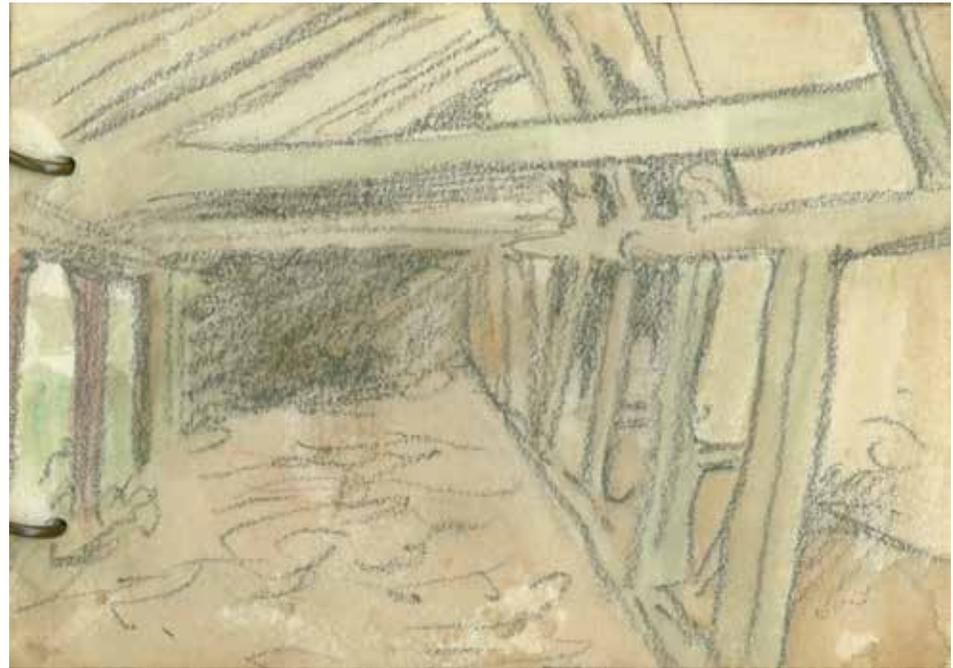
50. Jack Yeats (1871–1957)
Ardrahan Station, 1900
 Watercolor and pencil
 3 1/2 x 5 in.
 Private collection



51. Jack Yeats (1871–1957)
Cottage interior, 1899
Watercolor and pencil
3 1/2 x 10 in.
Private collection



52. Jack Yeats (1871–1957)
Drying tree, 1900
 Watercolor and pencil
 5 x 3 1/2 in.
 Private collection



53. Jack Yeats (1871–1957)
Barn interior, 1899
 Watercolor and pencil
 3 1/2 x 5 in.
 Private collection



54. Seán Keating (1889–1977)
The Playboy and Pegeen Mike, c. 1927
Oil on canvas
38 x 34 in.
Collection of the John J. Burns Library, Boston College



55. Michael Power O'Malley (1877–1946)

Her Family Treasures, c. 1925

Oil on canvas

30 x 25 1/4 in.

Private collection



56. Michael Power O'Malley (1877–1946)
Portrait of the Artist's Daughter in a Pub, c. 1927
Oil on canvas
16 x 20 in.
Private collection



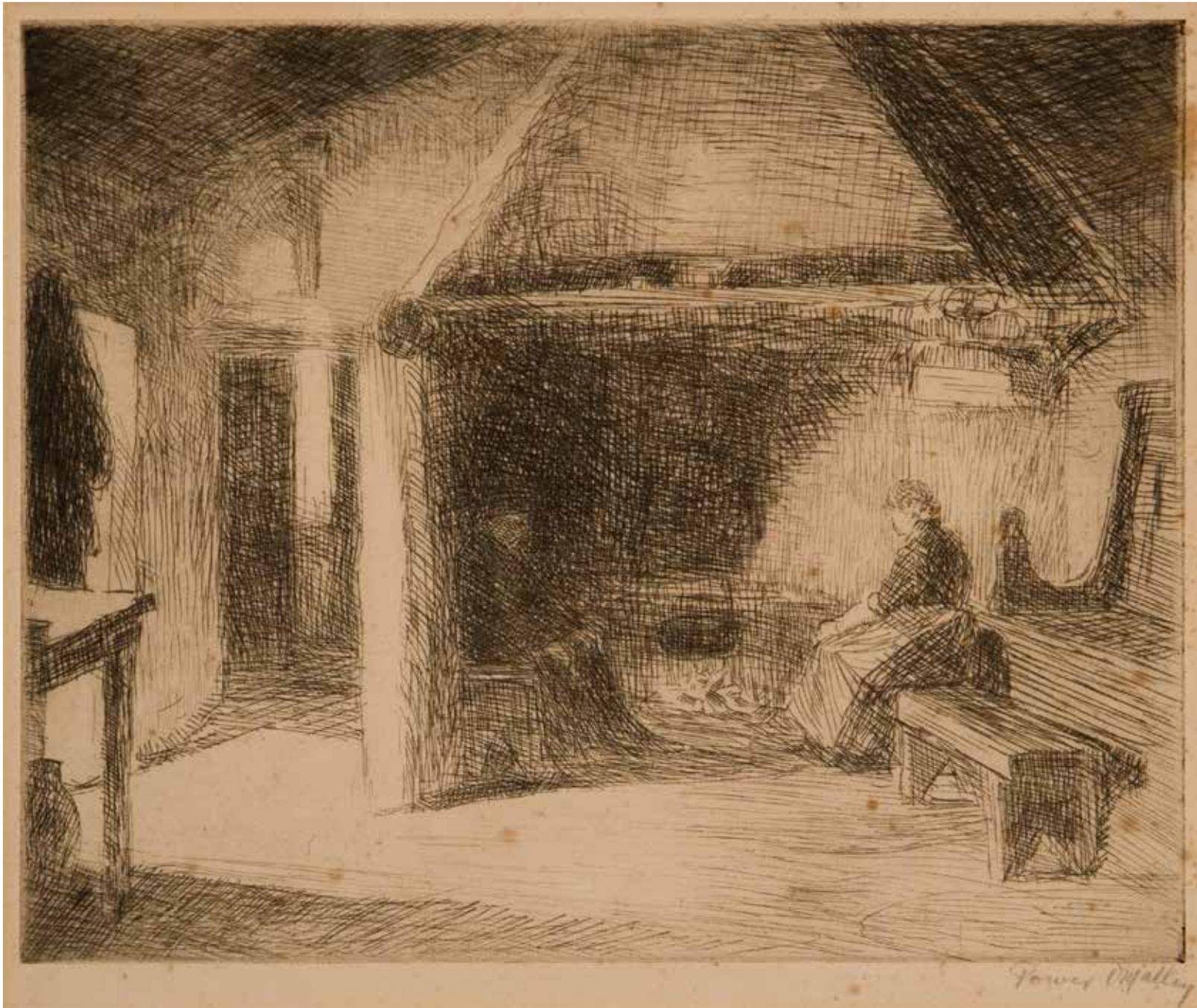
57. Michael Power O'Malley (1877–1946)

Himself and Herself, c. 1930

Oil on canvas

20 x 24 in.

Crawford Art Gallery, Cork



58. Michael Power O'Malley (1877–1946)
Untitled [Possible study of *Himself and Herself*], c. 1930
Etching
8 1/2 x 10 1/4 in.
Private collection



59. Michael Power O'Malley (1877–1946)

And Sheila Was Spinning, c. 1935

Oil on canvas

25 1/4 x 30 in.

Private collection



60. Leo Whelan (1892–1956)

Interior of a Kitchen, c. 1934

Oil on canvas

27 x 22 1/2 in.

© National Museums Northern Ireland
Collection Ulster Museum



61. Alicia Boyle (1908–97)
Potato Washers, Connemara, 1949
Oil on muslin on board
20 x 23 ³/₄ in.
© The Estate of Alicia Boyle
Collection Ulster Museum



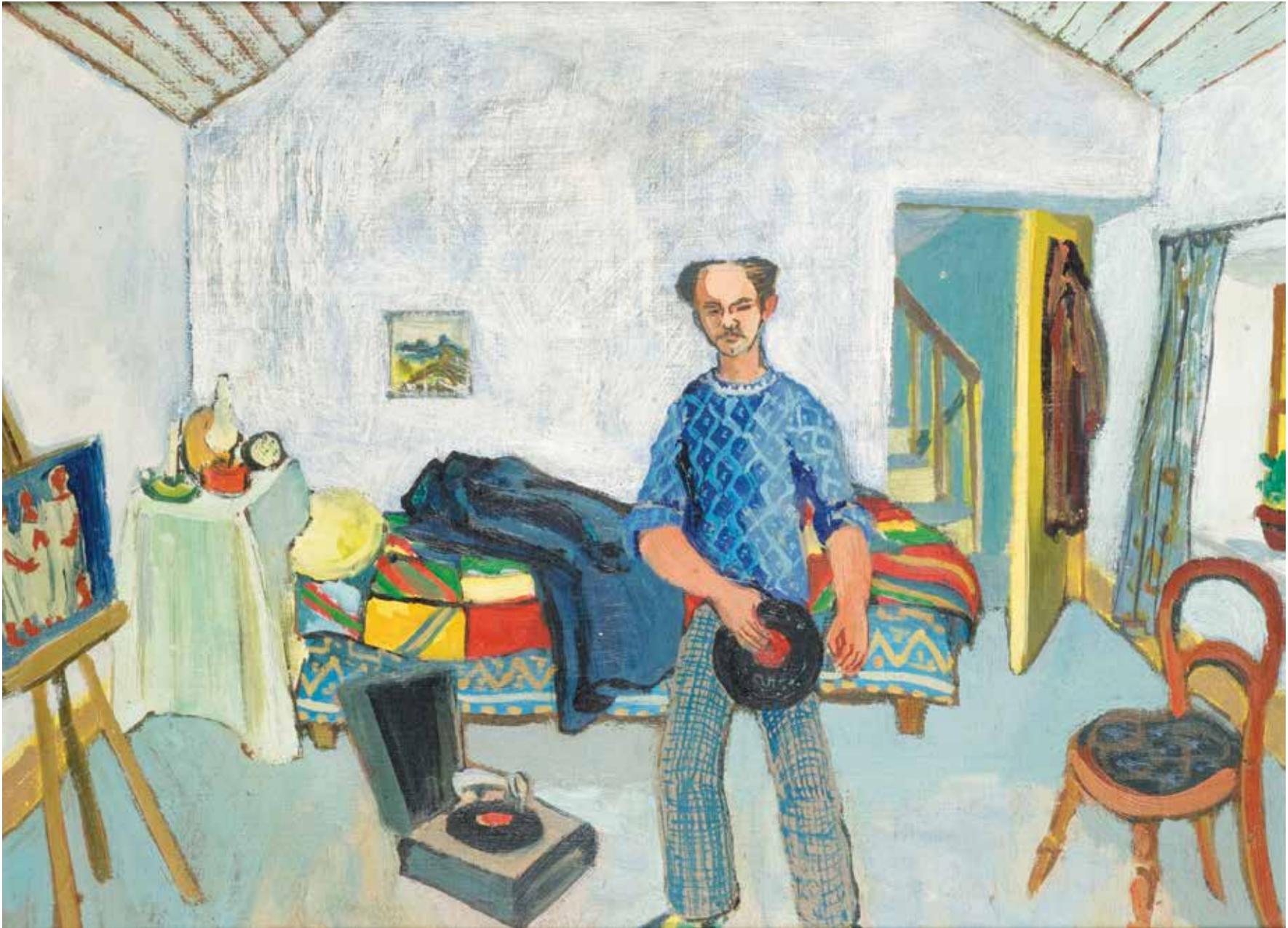
62. Anne Yeats (1919–2001)

One Room, c. 1954

Oil on canvas

16 x 18 in.

© 2011 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London
Collection Ulster Museum



63. Gerard Dillon (1916–71)

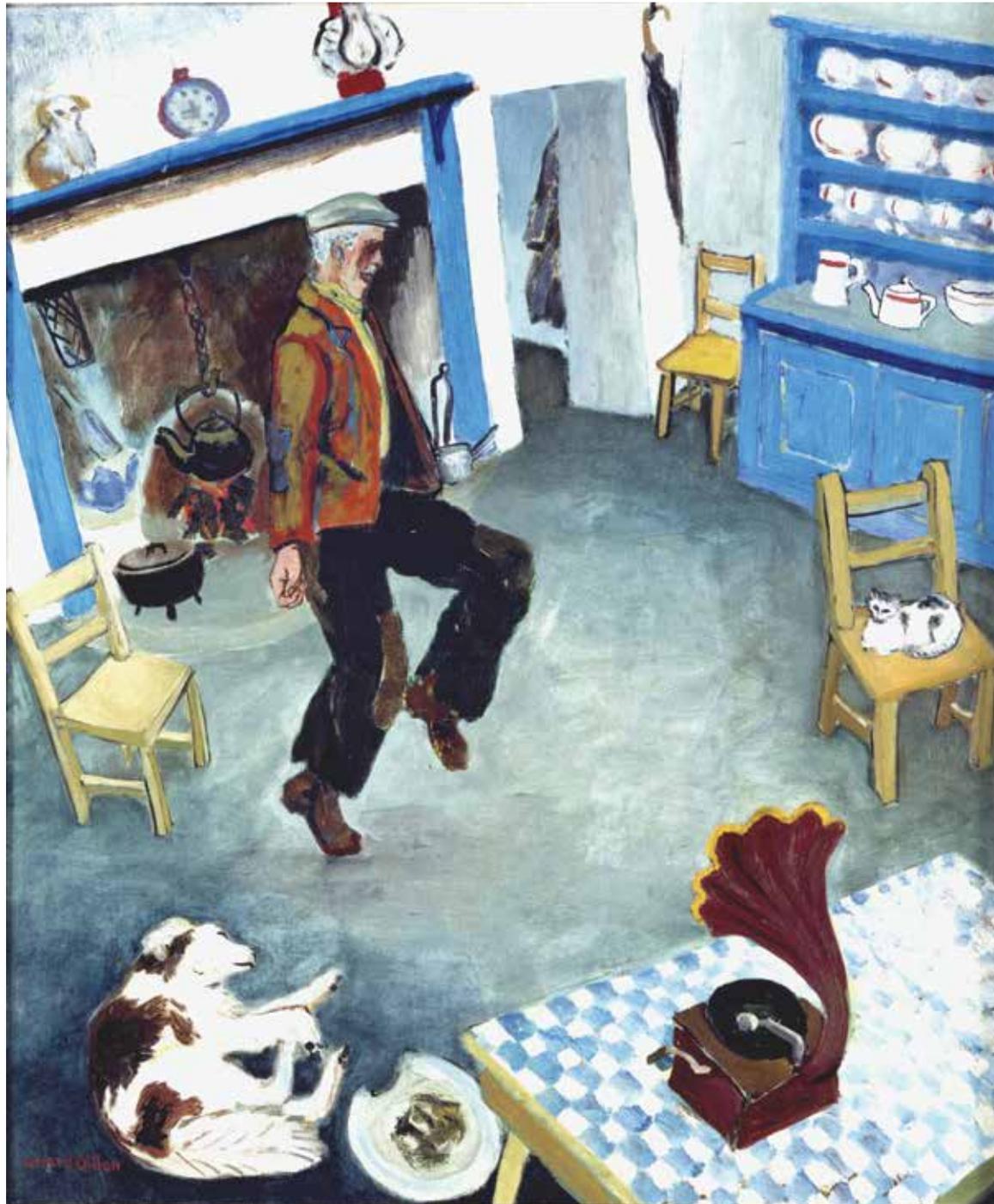
Self-portrait in Roundstone, c. 1950

Oil on canvas

12 x 16 in.

© The Estate of Gerard Dillon

Private collection, courtesy of Emer Gallery, Belfast



64. Gerard Dillon (1916–71)

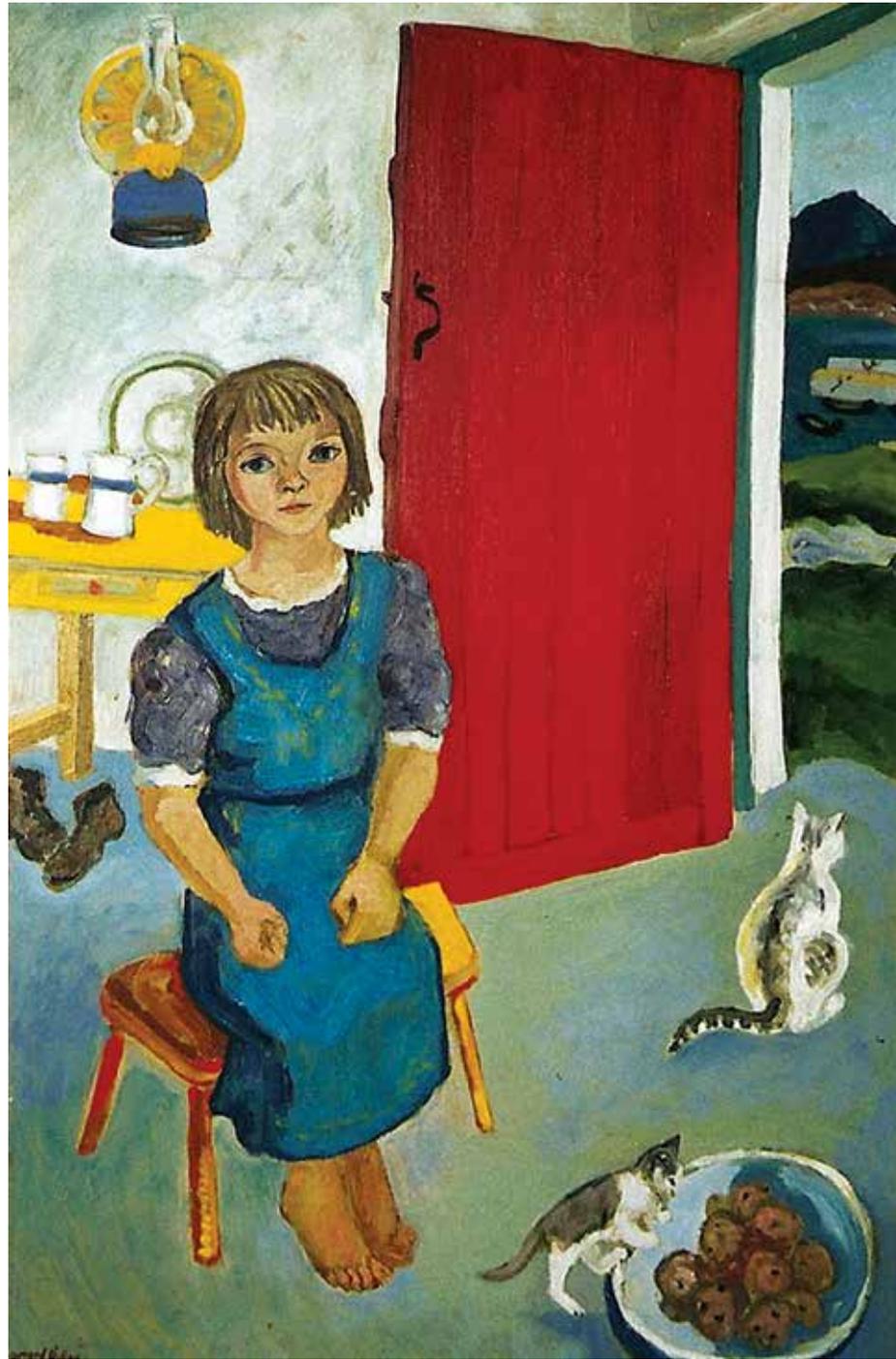
The Gramophone, c. 1950

Oil on canvas

24 x 20 in.

© The Estate of Gerard Dillon

Private collection, courtesy of Mark Adams Fine Art, London



65. Gerard Dillon (1916–71)

The Girl in the Cottage, Connemara, c. 1951–52

Oil on board

29 1/2 x 19 1/4 in.

© The Estate of Gerard Dillon

Private collection, courtesy of Mark Adams Fine Art, London



66. Gerard Dillon (1916–71)

Yellow Bungalow, 1954

Oil on canvas

30 1/4 x 32 in.

© The Estate of Gerard Dillon
Collection Ulster Museum



67. Gerard Dillon (1916–71)
Old Woman and Washing, c. 1959–60
Oil on canvas
20 x 24 in.
© The Estate of Gerard Dillon
Crawford Art Gallery, Cork



68. *Dresser*

Irish, late 19th century
 Painted and carved wood, 85 x 62 1/2 x 19 1/4 in.
 McMullen Museum Collection, Boston College
 Gift of the Patrons of the McMullen Museum

Transfer-printed and sponge-decorated earthenware

Irish and English, c. 19th century
 Collection of Don Slater and Collection of Frances and Brian Kennedy



69. *White clay smoking pipe bowls*



70. *Fine earthenware nest egg*



71. *Silver-plated brass thimble reading "Forget Me Not"*

* Plates 69–78 are from the collection of Charles E. Orser, Jr. on behalf of the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin. All excavated at Ballykilcline, County Roscommon unless otherwise noted.



72. *English-made fine earthenware shards excavated at the Brogan site, County Donegal*



73. *English-made blue transfer-printed fine earthenware shards*



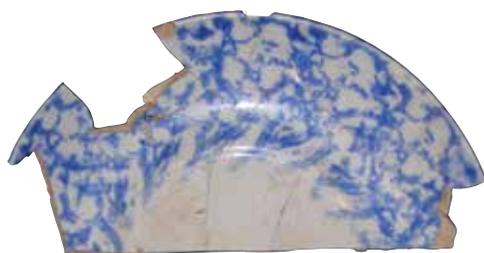
74. English-made transfer-printed fine earthenware shards



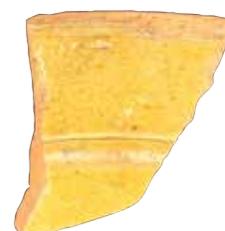
75. English-made black transfer-printed fine earthenware shard with Belzoni pattern



76. Cobalt blue hand-painted fine earthenware shard with dragon design



77. Scottish- or English-made sponge- (top) and cut-sponge- (bottom) decorated fine earthenware shards excavated at the Barlow site, County Sligo and the Brogan site, County Donegal



78. Irish-made coarse earthenware shards



79. *Settle bed*

Irish, c. 1900

Painted wood, 42 x 72 1/4 x 20 in.

McMullen Museum Collection, Boston College

Gift of the Patrons of the McMullen Museum



80. *Bench*

Irish, mid-late 19th century

Painted wood, 18 1/2 x 65 x 11 1/2 in.

McMullen Museum Collection, Boston College

Gift of the Patrons of the McMullen Museum



81. *Ewer & Basin*

English, c. 1870s

Transfer-printed earthenware

11 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 10 x 9 in. (ewer) / 5 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 15 (diam.) in. (basin)

McMullen Museum Collection, Boston College

Gift of the Patrons of the McMullen Museum

Wash Stand

Irish, c. late 19th–early 20th century

Painted pine, 37 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 41 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 21 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.

McMullen Museum Collection, Boston College

Gift of the Patrons of the McMullen Museum



82. *Cradle*

Irish, early 19th century

Oak, 33 x 37 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 18 in.

McMullen Museum Collection, Boston College

Gift of the Patrons of the McMullen Museum



83. *Hedge Chair*

Irish, late 19th century

Various light woods (stripped), 33 x 21 ³/₄ x 22 ¹/₂ in.
 McMullen Museum Collection, Boston College
 Gift of the Patrons of the McMullen Museum



84. *Súgán Chair*

Irish, late 19th century

Painted wood and rope, 33 x 21 ³/₄ x 22 ¹/₂ in.
 McMullen Museum Collection, Boston College
 Gift of the Patrons of the McMullen Museum



85. *Hen Coop*
 Irish, 20th century
 Plaited straw, 15 ½ x 16 (diam.) in.
 McMullen Museum Collection, Boston College
 Gift of the Patrons of the McMullen Museum



86. *Four-legged stool*
 Irish, late 19th century
 Oak with remnants of paint, 13 x 18 ½ x 8 ¾ in.
 McMullen Museum Collection, Boston College
 Gift of the Patrons of the McMullen Museum



87. *Cooking Pot*

Irish, late 19th century

Cast iron, 11 1/4 x 14 3/4 (diam.) in.

McMullen Museum Collection, Boston College

Gift of the Patrons of the McMullen Museum



88. *Cooking Pot*

Irish, late 19th century

Cast iron, 6 1/4 x 10 1/4 (diam.) in.

McMullen Museum Collection, Boston College

Gift of the Patrons of the McMullen Museum



89. *Spinning Wheel*

Irish, 19th century

Dark turned wood, 29 x 28 1/2 x 16 3/4 in.
McMullen Museum Collection, Boston College
Gift of the Patrons of the McMullen Museum



90. *The Sacred Heart of Jesus*

Irish, 20th century

Printed paper/gilt wooden frame, 22 1/2 x 17 1/2 in. (frmd.)

McMullen Museum Collection, Boston College

Gift of the Patrons of the McMullen Museum



91. *Domestic Shrine*

Irish, 19th century

Painted, carved, and turned wood, 28 1/4 x 20 3/4 x 8 in.

McMullen Museum Collection, Boston College

Gift of the Patrons of the McMullen Museum



McMULLEN MUSEUM OF ART
BOSTON COLLEGE

