

Transformative Nationalism and Class Relations in Irish Famine Fiction, 1896-1909

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Introduction

Class is a central issue in Irish Famine fiction published in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, and often functions as a nexus for the treatment of other themes, such as land ownership, nationalism, and the question of Irishness. A key feature of many works of Famine fiction is their focus on class relations during the Famine. Many texts have upper (middle) class protagonists, who are often idealized and, unlike many of their relatives and friends, invariably selfless in their efforts to mitigate the effects of the crisis and support the suffering peasantry. Such depictions normally attempt to elicit sympathy for Ascendancy characters by representing charity and philanthropy, shared victimhood, or nationalist heroism, though there is often overlap between the three.

Philanthropy is the primary manifestation of upper and upper-middle class solidarity with the famishing poor, and indeed benevolent women from these classes are one of the mainstays of the cultural memory of the Famine, as scholars such as Christine Kinealy and Margaret Kelleher have demonstrated.¹ However, in fictional representations of the Famine the acclamation of charity is not the only strategy used to suggest that Irish class relations were based on a moral economy rooted in an idealized form of feudalism which was premised on perfect harmony between tenants' deference for their (soi-disant) social superiors and the paternalist responsibility the landholding classes bear for the welfare of the poor. Many narratives also feature characters from the higher classes who, sympathizing with the plight of the poor, become active nationalists and are gradually radicalized by Young Irelander rhetoric (and frequently embrace Catholicism as the *sine qua non* of Irishness). In this essay, I will discuss two novels by Irish women novelists which feature such characters: Louise Field's *Denis* (1896) and L.T. Meade's *The Stormy Petrel* (1909). In these novels, central characters embrace Irish nationalism in spite of their class position and the disapprobation voiced by other

¹ See Christine Kinealy, *Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland: The Kindness of Strangers* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); and Margaret Kelleher, *The Feminization of Famine: Expressions of the Inexpressible?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

members of the elite. In so doing, they naturally assume positions of leadership in nationalist movements (which are often local) – which ironically means that they reinforce social stratification while ostensibly seeking to reconfigure class hierarchies – and sometimes even surrender their lives for the cause in stereotypical messianic acts of self-sacrifice.

As I will argue, these texts employ a paradigmatic type of Irish nationalism as an instrument for reimagining class relations in a rapidly changing Ireland. Field and Meade published their novels during an era when the position of the Ascendancy became increasingly precarious due to social and political developments such as the Land Acts. Functioning as vehicles for the exploration of social issues, the characters of Field's and Meade's narratives hark back to Maria Edgeworth's Big House novels, in which upper-class families and their homes symbolize developments in Irish society at large, and Sydney Owenson's national tales, which explore British-Irish relations and their political and social ramifications in Ireland through romance.² While *Denis* and *The Stormy Petrel* in certain regards map onto a well-established Irish literary tradition, they use the Famine to reimagine the position and function of the Irish upper and upper-middle classes. In so doing, they suggest that despite their socio-economic position and dependence on British rule for their own authority, some members of these classes can be genuinely Irish, too – as is indeed suggested by the name of the two main landlord families in these novels: both are called O'Hara.

Landlordism and the Irish Future

In the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth century, farmers in Ireland became increasingly independent, as a series of Land Acts radically transformed Irish society, curbing the most blatant excesses and removing a number of inequities enshrined in the Irish system of landlordism, and progressively transferring ownership of the land to the classes who actually worked it. Between 1870 and 1916, a series of political measures improved tenant security and introduced policies to ensure a greater number of farmers could afford to own the farms they ran.³ This included the revolutionary 1903 Land Purchase (Ireland) or Wyndham Act, which effectively ended landlordism.⁴ These developments were largely a response to continued agitation in Ireland, in particular between 1879 and 1882, when

² See Mary Jean Corbett, *Allegories of Union in Irish and English Writing, 1790-1870: Politics, History, and the Family from Edgeworth to Arnold* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), and Ina Ferris, *The Romantic National Tale and the Question of Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

³ For a general overview of these developments, see Philip Bull, 'Irish Land and Politics', in Matthew Cragoe and Paul Readman, eds, *The Land Question in Britain, 1750-1950* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 126-45.

⁴ Bull, *Land, Politics and Nationalism: A Study of the Irish Land Question* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1996), 3.

the Land League spearheaded the Land War to force the government to legislate what was commonly referred to as the ‘Three Fs’: fair rents, fixity of tenure, and free sale. A result of this transformation was the gradual decline of the squirearchy which had defined Irish society since the Cromwellian conquest of Ireland (1649-53). As Philip Bull writes, in Ireland ‘land was a major issue for most of the nineteenth century’.⁵ The question of land and property and the role of landlords in Irish society was an inherently sectarian and colonial issue, and remained a major area of conflict well into the twentieth century.⁶

The Famine threw into sharp relief the injurious effects of a tenure system that condemned the land’s primary occupants to a very precarious existence. Much of the discussion about the so-called Irish Question, both in Ireland and in Great Britain, centred on the interdependent issues of landlordism, property, and land tenure. According to Bull, the Irish case was characterized by a set of conditions that made the Irish land question qualitatively different from similar issues in Great Britain. The question of legitimacy was central. Because of the country’s status as a *de facto* colonial society and the fact that the British dominion on the island could to a large part be traced back to the Cromwellian project of expropriation and plantation, ‘a strong perception of illegitimacy attaching to the dominant and officially sanctioned land settlement’ held sway in the country.⁷ In *Labour in Irish History* (1910), James Connolly epitomizes this view on the role of the landlord class:

The landlord class [...] remained resolutely loyal to England, and while the middle class poets and romancists were enthusing on the hope of a ‘union of class and creeds,’ the aristocracy were pursuing their private interests against their tenants with a relentlessness which threatened to depopulate the country, and led even an English Conservative newspaper, the *London Times*, to declare that ‘the name of an Irish landlord stinks in the nostrils of Christendom.’⁸

Rather than an Irish elite, Connolly describes the typical Irish landlord as somebody whose overbearing interest is financial gain. As a result of this self-interest, the class ‘remained

⁵ Bull, ‘Irish Land and Politics’, 126.

⁶ For a discussion of the change and decline of landlordism between the 1870s and the early 1900s, see Terence A.M. Dooley, ‘Landlords and the Land Question, 1879-1909’, in Carla King, ed., *Famine, Land and Culture in Ireland* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2000), 116-39.

⁷ Bull, ‘Irish Land and Politics’, 127.

⁸ James Connolly, *Labour in Ireland: Labour in Irish History and The Re-conquest of Ireland* (Dublin: Maunsel and Company, 1922), 7.

resolutely loyal' to the government, and as such remained 'strangers' in Ireland. Moreover, the depopulation of the country is due to the landlords' aggressive profit maximization strategies.

This deep-seated distrust and even hatred of the class was further augmented by the fact that the system of landholding current in England since the middle ages had not become naturalized in Ireland, and common class and religious power structures which contributed to the normalization of the system in England were absent in Ireland. The Established Church was a minority institution without the popular authority needed to sanction the status quo, and was itself often seen as an intruder by the Catholic majority who lived under the Ascendancy.⁹ As such, for the majority of the tenant classes the primacy of the Ascendancy was not considered self-evident in the way that by and large that of the upper echelons of society in England was. As the Anglo-Irish upper-class author Mildred Darby writes in the introduction to *The Green Country* (1902), which is an effort to 'naturalize' the Irish landlord class, 'nearly all speakers and writers on political and social Irish subjects seem to regard the upper classes in the Land of Saints as alien and useless cumberers of the ground, whose final exit will inaugurate the millennium'.¹⁰ In Darby's not particularly mainstream view, the declining landlord class is crucial to the Irish body politic, and its disappearance would only exacerbate the crisis in Ireland, as the current members of the upper classes 'have in them more of the elements of true nationality than those who will take their places'.¹¹

As Seamus Deane argues, because of Ireland's fraught history with regard to class and land tenure, '[t]he related questions of territory, property, land, and soil constituted an inescapably contested series of definitions and vocabularies'.¹² The representation and symbolization of land and landlordism, in particularly during the turbulent nineteenth century, are always politicized:

⁹ For instance, in the years leading up to the 1869 Irish Church Act, which disestablished the Church of Ireland, many commentators discussed this view. An interesting example is an 1865 letter by former Young Irelander John Blake Dillon which was published in a number of Dublin newspapers, as Dillon's views were quoted by clergy of the Established Church in several works written to support the position of the Church. Writers such as Bishop James Thomas O'Brien took issue with Dillon's assertion that '[b]y a series of of invasions, conquests, and massacres, the English Government succeeded, a couple of centuries ago, in planting upon the necks of the Irish people an alien proprietary and an alien Church.' See O'Brien's *The Case of the Established Church in Ireland*, 3rd edn (London: Rivingtons / Dublin: George Herbert, 1868), 39. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰ Andrew Merry [Mildred Darby], *The Green Country* (London: Grant Richards, 1902), 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2. Another notable example of an author who rejected the consensus view about Irish landlords is the landlord and Conservative politician Windham Wyndham-Quin, fourth Earl of Dunraven and Mount-Earl, who in 1911 stated that '[n]ever has a class been so cruelly libelled' as Irish landlords in discussions of the Famine. *The Legacy of Past Years: A Study of Irish History* (London: John Murray, 1911), 218.

¹² Seamus Deane, 'The Production of Cultural Space in Irish Writing', *boundary 2* 21(3) (1994), 119.

The physical landscape of Ireland is regularly redefined throughout the nineteenth century – administratively, cartographically, politically, culturally, economically, constitutionally – by competing groups, all of which seek to make it conform to a paradigm in terms of which it can successfully be represented as a specific place, indeed, but also as a *locus* for various forms of ideological investment.¹³

As Deane points out, part of this discourse and one of the foremost causes of its transformations was the changing role of the landlord class, an observation which is borne out by the inflections in the ways landlords are represented in Famine fiction published in the three decades before Independence.

Although representations of the Famine often focus on conflicts between landlords and tenants, the texts I discuss here, and indeed many others as well, take a different approach to outlining the differential positions of the classes. Particularly, several novels try to legitimize the landlord system by juxtaposing obviously bad landlords, who are objects of strict censure, with benevolent and often nationalistically inclined landlords or, more often, the children of landlords. In so doing, they attempt to qualify categorical critiques of landlordism and deemphasize the binary reading of the system central to much nationalist commentary on the Famine. Instead of dismissing the system wholesale, they promote alternatives which are sanitized versions of the ‘old way’, problematizing the allegations of bad faith and hostile otherness that cling to landlords as a class – though in effect, they advance visions of Irish society which perpetuate the system with minor alterations.

As Aleida Assmann and Linda Shortt have argued with regard to the ways societies attempt to lay to rest recent ‘totalitarian and violent pasts’,¹⁴ (cultural) memory is an important instrument for the construction of new, generative versions of the past which pursue reconciliation without disavowing or forgetting the atrocities of that past:

Memory has become a central issue in our discussions about transition, as this truth is directly related to the memory of the victims, and it is the medium of a new shared narrative of the past that integrates formerly divided perspectives.¹⁵

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Aleida Assmann and Linda Shortt, ‘Memory and Political Change: Introduction’, in Aleida Assmann and Linda Shortt, eds, *Memory and Political Change* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1.

¹⁵ Ibid., 1.

Because of its transformative nature, memory can function as ‘a powerful agent of change’ and can create ‘new frames of action’.¹⁶ As such, ‘[b]y working through past hatreds and resentments, memory can contribute towards reconciliation and new forms of co-existence, opening up the possibility of a common future’.¹⁷

As they see it, literature, and in particular fiction, can play a central role in such processes. Indeed, although Assmann and Shortt emphasize that what they refer to is ‘the role of memory in temporally limited periods of transition, in which a government and a society undergo a constitutional change within a special legal framework’,¹⁸ such as post-Apartheid South Africa and Rwanda after the 1994 genocide, these observations also apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the way many writers of Famine fiction draw upon the cultural memory of the Famine to reimagine the landlord system and interrogate received notions about responsibility and victimhood. Decolonization and the move towards a post-colonial society were gradual processes, but the political and social changes – both attempted and realized – which signpost the progress to independent nationhood constitute in themselves a prefiguration of institutional transition during the post-Independence period. The fact that the novels here discussed were written during a period of great change in Ireland, politically, socially, and culturally, and focus on improving the dynamic between classes and factions during this era of transition suggests that it could be productive to consider these texts in this light.

Louise Field, *Denis* (1896)

In the brief prefatory note to her novel *Denis: A Study in Black and White* (1896), Louise Field (1856-1940) states that she aims to present a balanced picture of Irish class relations during the Famine (which seems to belie the subtitle of her novel). She emphasizes that her novel ‘advances no theory, it upholds no political doctrine, nor does it seek to espouse the cause of peasant against proprietor, or of proprietor against peasant’.¹⁹ This disclaimer is important: Field was herself not a member of the classes most severely struck by the Famine, but was rather an upper-class landlord’s daughter, and as such a member of the class that many nationalists considered implicated in the tragedy, even though the family was Catholic rather than Protestant. Like so many other writers of Famine fiction, Field claims that her story is based on authentic material, and emphasizes that her story also aims to influence current

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁹ Louise Field, *Denis: A Study in Black and White* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1896), [v].

debates about Ireland. According to the preface it represents ‘actual incidents, to throw some light on circumstances and characteristics too often unknown and ignored, which yet are vital factors in that vast and ever-recurring problem, the Irish Question’.²⁰ Land tenure and the role of landlords in particular was an important political issue during the period the novel was written, and as such it is not surprising that Field intended her examination of class relations to have contemporary resonance.

In *Denis*, she explores different class permutations in the fictional community of Castlemoyne, aiming to script the upper classes into the story of the Famine, and more specifically making some of its members part of the nationalist continuum that ranges from the United Irishmen to late nineteenth-century radicalism. Like many other writers of Famine fiction, she presents her argument not merely through plot or character development, but employs particular characters and situations to provide contextual information and a range of perspectives in a condensed way. Different characters represent different opinions about Irish issues, and exchange their views in discussions which allow the reader to become familiar with various viewpoints which held sway during the 1840s.

Several of these discussions are set in the drawing rooms of the Big Houses, and focus on Darcy O’Hara, the fiercely nationalist son of Major O’Hara, a local landlord, and his attempts to convince the other members of his class that Ireland is in dire need of reform along the lines proposed by Daniel O’Connell, leader of the Repeal Association. By training her focus on the private sphere of the Big House drawing room and depicting this space as the setting where developments in the public sphere can be initiated, Field implicitly criticizes the upper (middle) classes for their passivity, both with regard to the suffering in Ireland and in terms of politics. Stuck in the mindset typical of their class and loath to imperil their comfort, they not only adhere to their pernicious opinions, but also expend all their energy in talk. Though also wont to sermonize, Darcy O’Hara is very much the exception to this rule.

The main obstacle Darcy O’Hara encounters in his efforts to influence the fellow members of his class is not so much that they actively resist his political activism. Rather, his progress is marred by the condescension and self-righteousness of his father and his peers, ‘well-satisfied *pères de famille*’.²¹ They do not deign ‘to take him seriously’,²² as ‘[t]he clear rays of common sense would dispel them [his ideas] by and bye, and he would make his way

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 266.

²² Ibid., 267.

in his profession—he was a clever fellow enough—and marry and settle down’.²³ While the Famine rages outside and Darcy is fully aware that change is required to prevent further damage, the people who have the position and the power to make the difference – at least locally – dismiss his activism as youthful folly, a romantic phase he will soon enough pass through and to which they need therefore pay no attention.

One debate between Darcy and other members of the gentry focuses not only O’Connell’s Repeal movement, but also on the Young Ireland movement and their main organ, the *Nation*. At the meeting, O’Hara presents, once again, the case for reform in Ireland, echoing nationalist axioms such as the argument, advocated by Daniel O’Connell and others, that repeal of the Union would be the best way to battle famine and prevent it from recurring, and that a good starting point for a more effective relief policy would be to levy ‘a tax upon absentees’ to generate income and force landlords to take care of their estates.²⁴ (Indeed, the prominent Young Irelander and Member of Parliament William Smith O’Brien introduced a bill to this effect in the House of Commons in March 1847, but it was defeated resoundingly.²⁵) Field uses the discussion not only to present information but also to pass judgement on her characters, for instance underscoring the pigheadedness of the landlords by stating that ‘they honestly admired’ O’Hara’s speech as ‘a good piece of eloquence wasted on a bad cause’.²⁶

As his efforts to effect change by mobilising the upper classes and achieve his nationalist goals by constitutional means fail, Darcy turns increasingly radical, becoming an important leader of the local secret society. He is eventually involved in the abortive 1848 rebellion, despite realizing it is ‘hopeless’²⁷ – a clear messianic gesture on behalf of the suffering peasantry. Following the failure of the insurrection, he becomes ‘a hunted fugitive’²⁸ and is forced to flee. On his way to the harbour where he will embark for Australia, Darcy travels from cabin to cabin and is sheltered by the poor, thus managing to evade the law. The fact that he is protected by the poor despite the price on his head demonstrates that his nationalist efforts have elided the cultural differences between him and the local poor, though the fact that he is still considered a natural leader of the movement reinforces social stratification even as Darcy is ostensibly seeking to reconfigure class hierarchies. However, despite suggesting that the scions of landlord families too can become genuine nationalist

²³ Ibid., 266.

²⁴ Ibid., 272.

²⁵ See Kinealy, *Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland*, 51-2.

²⁶ Field, *Denis*, 271.

²⁷ Ibid., 411.

²⁸ Ibid.

Irishmen, the novel ends on a wistful note, lamenting the cultural and social effects of the Famine.²⁹ The memory of the event lingers in Castlemoyne, but while the novel's main antagonist, the ostensibly honourable but ultimately reprehensible landlord Captain Mervyn, is 'remembered [...] with execration'³⁰ for raping local girl Mary Cassidy, who subsequently flees in shame and dies in childbirth,³¹ Darcy has become a folk hero and is 'remembered and his return longed for with passionate adoration'.³²

As the novel's preface underscores, Field's aim is not merely to relate the story of the Famine, but to offer it as an intervention in the then current debate about the Irish question and the role of the landlord in a rapidly changing Ireland. Mobilizing the memory of the crisis for current purposes, the novel uses the Famine, and Famine-era politics, to explore the notion that the upper classes too can contribute to the development of Irish society, despite the apparent obsolescence of landlordism. Still, the novel is ultimately a tragedy, resisting the type of *deus ex machina* denouement favoured by many writers of Famine fiction, such as L.T. Meade, who introduce improbable sudden plot developments to remedy or reverse the Famine crisis.³³ Field's novel instead concludes with a glum Old Testament quotation: '*We have been with child, we have been in pain, we have as it were brought forth wind, we have not wrought any deliverance in the earth.*'³⁴ Throughout the novel, Darcy O'Hara represents a particular type of nationalist politics, which is expressed not only through his actions but particularly in the discussions he has with other members of the class. While ultimately fruitless, Darcy O'Hara's nationalist evolution thus contributes to this integration of different views, as he is treated much more sympathetically by the narrator than other members of his class. As such, Field's novel proposes that cultural identity is not inherently rooted in social class and thus suggests that an uncritical dependence on essentialist iterations of Irishness is a counter-productive strategy for developing a viable road map for the Irish future.

²⁹ Ibid., 413.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 353-4.

³² Ibid., 414.

³³ Further examples of this narrative strategy are legion, particularly in Irish-American Famine fiction. In Mary Anne Sadlier's *Bessy Conway; Or, the Irish Girl in America* (New York: D. and J. Sadlier, 1861), for instance, the eponymous heroine returns to Ireland after a biblical seven years in the US just in time to prevent her family's eviction. With her savings, she pays their arrears and sets about organising a feast. After this plot twist, the Famine seemingly disappears from the narrative. And in John Brennan's *Erin Mor: The Story of Irish Republicanism* (San Francisco, CA: P.M. Diers, 1892), set in the US, the protagonist's garden dam breaks and the water washes away his potato patch, which in Ireland would be disastrous but in California exposes a large amount of gold.

³⁴ AV Isaiah 26:18, quoted in Field, *Denis*, 414. Italics in original.

L.T. Meade, *The Stormy Petrel* (1909)

With roughly three hundred books to her name, Elizabeth ('Lillie') Thomasina Meade was one of the most prolific Irish authors of her day, churning out novels at a fearful rate. While she is nowadays mostly known (if at all) for her girls' stories, she also wrote novels for adults in a variety of genres, including mystery and historical fiction.³⁵ During the 1880s and 90s, she had 'significant celebrity status' and her works were widely read.³⁶ In her writings, she regularly focused on important social issues, including urban poverty, capitalizing on hot-button topics to boost public interest in her works.³⁷ Meade was born just before the Famine in West Cork, one of the worst-stricken areas. However, Tina O'Toole's recent assertion that despite Meade's background, 'we find no traces of this [the Famine] in her later writing, which perhaps suggests an unwillingness to engage with the fractured history of her homeland' is not correct;³⁸ late in life she did in fact write an entire novel set during the Famine. Meade was a prolific and popular author, and it is significant that she, like other popular writers of the day, such as Jane Barlow, published a work of fiction about the Famine, as this suggests that this episode from Irish history was much more a mainstream interest than has hitherto been assumed, as I have argued elsewhere.³⁹ In her little-known Famine novel *The Stormy Petrel* (1909), philanthropy plays a central role. In many ways, *The Stormy Petrel* is a textbook Famine narrative, featuring all the familiar images, tropes, and characters and a *deus ex machina* ending which almost miraculously resolves the Famine in 'O'Grady's Country' and the Courtmacsheen estate, the fictional region in south-west Ireland where the novel is set.

Meade's novel provides an idealized representation of Irish society in the 1840s. It suggests that despite social differences, Ireland was in fact a much quieter place than at the time the novel was written, particularly with regard to religious strife. Thus, while Ireland 'was divided into [well-to-do] Protestants and [poor] Catholics',⁴⁰ '[t]here was no feud whatever between them'.⁴¹ Indeed, the narrator asserts, '[t]he Catholics, in those days, were far too poor not to accept what bounties they could obtain from their richer neighbours, and the Protestants

³⁵ Janis Dawson, "'Write a little bit every day": L.T. Meade, Self-Representation, and the Professional Woman Writer', *Victorian Review* 35(1) (2009), 132.

³⁶ Beth Rodgers, 'L.T. Meade, "The Queen of Girls'-Book Makers": The Rise and Fall of a Victorian Bestseller', *Women's Writing* (2016), 2. Online prepublication <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09699082.2015.1130991>> accessed 20 January 2017.

³⁷ Dawson, "'Write a little bit every day'", 133.

³⁸ Tina O'Toole, *The Irish New Woman* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 46.

³⁹ Christopher Cusack, 'Memory, History, and Identity in Irish and Irish-Diasporic Famine Fiction, 1892-1921', PhD thesis Radboud University, 2018.

⁴⁰ L.T. Meade, *The Stormy Petrel* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1909), 4. I would like to thank Nicholas M. Wolf and Ellis Garey at New York University for helping me obtain a scan of this novel.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

helped them, as a matter of course, never dreaming of allowing the religious question to interfere'.⁴² Such idealization sets the scene for a narrative in which several members of the upper classes have a paternalistic concern for their tenants. As the narrator states with regard to the O'Haras, the novel's central family and owners of the Courtmacsheen estate: 'There was perfect trust between the O'Haras and all their own tenants. They were, in short, like one great family, whose sorrows, necessities, and pangs of want were felt by [daughter] Kathleen just as though she were their head. Her father shared her feeling, and so did [her brother] Patrick'.⁴³

Like Field's *Denis*, *The Stormy Petrel* has different upper-class characters represent different contemporary opinions. The least sympathetic voice in the novel is that of Patrick and Kathleen's English aunt, Miss Johnson, who asseverates that 'this is a dispensation of Providence to put them [the Irish] on a fresh diet before they're quite knocked to pieces by the miserable, watery potato'.⁴⁴ Her views on the Famine echo those of commentators such as Charles Trevelyan, who saw the Famine as an opportunity to reform (or 'improve') the Irish, believing, in David Lloyd's words, 'that material conditions, social forms and moral character unfolded together'.⁴⁵ In Trevelyan's view, the Famine was 'a direct stroke of an all-wise and all-merciful Providence', which would cause 'morbid habits to give place to a more healthy action',⁴⁶ and he (infamously) concluded that 'on this, as on many other occasions, Supreme Wisdom has educed permanent good out of transient evil.'⁴⁷ Like Field, however, Meade juxtaposes these callous characters with various benevolent characters whose opinions are diametrically opposed to those of Miss Johnson and her ilk.

Miss Johnson's remarks mainly pertain to local relief efforts, but while the novel concentrates primarily on the charitable efforts of the gentry, the secondary focus of *The Stormy Petrel* is the development of nationalist sentiment during the Famine, which runs rife not just in the lower classes but also influences some members of the upper class. While the independent and strongminded Kathleen, whose independence and aversion to decorum elicit a lot of tut-tutting from the more conservative women in her father's circle, is described as an ardent nationalist and is by this token a favourite among the local peasantry,⁴⁸ an important

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 291.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 106.

⁴⁵ David Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity 1800-2000: The Transformation of Oral Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 22.

⁴⁶ Charles Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1848), 201.

⁴⁷ Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis*, 1.

⁴⁸ Kathleen is a vehicle for Meade's feminist views. The novel begins with a meditation on the role of women in 1840s Ireland, to show how Kathleen challenges the norm (without, however, fully subverting it). Rather than faulting her character for her unconventional behaviour, Meade mostly extols her independence. Unfortunately,

element of the novel's plot is the political radicalization of her brother Patrick, who becomes increasingly involved in nationalist agitation and, ultimately, agrarian violence, and is wrongfully accused of assassinating a heartless land agent. Though the novel provides no details, Patrick apparently dies 'a hero's death',⁴⁹ surrendering his life for the cause. As Kathleen's paramour says, 'there was something wild, something untamable' about Patrick, and 'he would [n]ever have settled down to the ordinary life of the country squire'.⁵⁰

However, despite the O'Haras' efforts the Famine cannot be held at bay, and having spent vast sums on relief, they are forced to retrench before a *deus ex machina* plot twist instantly resolves the crisis. Kathleen receives a letter from Cork informing her that 'a vessel of three thousand tons [...] laden with food of every sort' is waiting for her orders in Cork,⁵¹ a donation from the wealthy Irish-American Denis O'Flynn, who was helped by Squire O'Hara and his wife two decades earlier but never revealed his identity, instead going by the moniker 'Stormy Petrel', and whose son has been assisting the relief effort in Courtmacsheen.

While the novel thus seems to suggest that kindness will eventually repay itself, underlying the *deus ex machina* denouement appears to be a hint of a larger point about the viability of Irish society. This plot might be read as suggesting that the support of Irish Americans is required to reinvigorate Ireland – even if the Irish themselves sow the seeds for this particular dynamic, in the case of the O'Haras by aiding Denis O'Flynn. Return migration is thus pictured as beneficial for Ireland, as is more common in Famine novels, such as Mary Anne Sadlier's *Bessy Conway* (1861) and Patrick Sheehan's *Glenanaar* (1905).⁵² In *The Stormy Petrel*, this point is underscored by the death of Patrick, the scion of the O'Hara family. His radicalization and subsequent demise curtail the O'Hara lineage and indeed nearly kill his father, Squire O'Hara. It takes the assistance of the O'Flynn and Fergus's romantic involvement with Kathleen to salvage the O'Hara family and the Courtmacsheen community more generally. Even though Meade's novel is less propagandistic than the end of *Glenanaar*,

space does not permit me to further discuss this aspect of the novel, but for a recent analysis of Meade's Irish female characters, see Sandra McAvoy, 'The "Wild Irish Girl" in Selected Novels of L.T. Meade', in Catherine Cox and Susannah Riordan, eds, *Adolescence in Modern Irish History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 63-81.

⁴⁹ Meade, *The Stormy Petrel*, 390.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 386.

⁵² In *Bessy Conway*, the eponymous protagonist returns from Ireland just in time to prevent her parents' eviction. Sheehan ends his narrative with calls to Irish Americans to return to Ireland, lamenting that Ireland has lost its vitality due to emigration. *Glenanaar* concludes with a call to 'the exiled Gaels': 'Come back! Come back! Back to the land of your fathers! [...] The days are dark and short since ye went; there is no sunshine on Ireland, and the nights are long and dismal!' *Glenanaar: A Story of Irish Life* (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1905), 320.

which, as the excerpt quoted in footnote 52 demonstrates, emphatically functions as a vehicle for Sheehan's views on social change in Ireland, its message is similar: to regenerate Irish society following the devastation of the Famine and the social disruption it has caused, Ireland must look west, not east.

In *The Stormy Petrel*, the restoration of Ireland is set in motion by the nationalist radicalization of the upper classes, which thus move closer to their tenants, but the novel thereby also reaffirms class relations and the notion that the higher classes have a crucial role and natural position in Irish society. In so doing, however, it partly rewrites the well-established Irish genre of the romantic national tale. In such novels, the allegorical marriage of a perfect Irish upper-class maiden to an English heartthrob symbolizes the Union between England and Ireland, and such marriages suggest that Ireland's future depends on a harmonious relationship with England. *The Stormy Petrel* also introduces an outside character and suggests that the union between the female protagonist and the male stranger will inaugurate a more prosperous future for Ireland, but its allegorical ideology is different: in the case of Meade's novel, the outsider is not British but American, and the narrative thus eschews the focus on the Union of Great Britain and Ireland that characterizes romantic national tales such as Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806). Ironically, given the scale of the destruction, the Famine and the philanthropy it inspires thus trigger the renovation of the nation, if only by means of Irish-American assistance. Still, this dynamic is ultimately facilitated by the nationalism of the upper-class protagonists, which renders them authentically Irish and thus rhetorically validates this dependence on external assistance and the primacy of the upper class.

Conclusion

The role of landlords during the Famine and their responsibility for creating the conditions that enabled *P. infestans* to cause such devastation remains a contentious topic. During and after the Land War of 1879-82, when the Land League was agitating for fundamental changes in the Irish land system, public opposition to landlordism increased even further, and this development consolidated the influence of a particular brand of Irish nationalism which prefigured nationalist developments in the early twentieth century. As Roy Foster writes, the Land League 'reinforced the politicization of rural Catholic Ireland, partly by defining that identity against urbanization, landlordism, Englishness and – implicitly – Protestantism'.⁵³

⁵³ R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (London: Penguin, 1989), 405.

Indeed, nationalist commentators more generally strongly condemned the Irish system of landlordism and considered it one of the main causes of Irish destitution. The Ascendancy were often seen as usurpers who had wrongfully claimed Irish lands and had functioned as major instruments of British colonial oppression. Other commentators, however, were less negative about the Anglo-Irish upper classes and believed that their claim to power was legitimate. Still, all factions realized that the question of class, and more specifically the social function of the upper classes, was an important one in a society which was undergoing rapid change, principally to the detriment of the ruling order.

In many works of Famine fiction, the effort to assess the impact of the Famine on the class system, determine the position of the landlord in the Irish social and cultural landscape, and cultivate social stability results in a focus on community and interdependence between the classes. Cohesion and integration are preferred to the overthrow of the class system, and many Famine narratives reinvent landlordism in such a way that it becomes a heavily romanticized brand of feudalism. Such texts disregard the uneven power balance in nineteenth-century Ireland and instead suggest that class relations in Ireland were for the most part symbiotic and conformed to the medieval ideal of feudalism as a reciprocal dynamic rather than a strongly exploitative system.⁵⁴ The upper classes, though flawed, are presented as ultimately indispensable. They are part of a natural order, and while these texts do accept that the system was not unproblematic, its problems and excesses are considered remediable, particularly through the agency of upper-class characters who become Irish nationalists.

While Louise Field's *Denis* and L.T. Meade's *The Stormy Petrel* both use nationalism as a tactic to narrow the gap between landlords and their tenantry, it might seem problematic that in both novels the radicalized scions of the landed gentry disappear from their communities. While Meade's *The Stormy Petrel*, with its variation on the national tale, is more optimistic in its belief in the viability of the Irish class system, Field's novel *Denis* is much less sanguine. Nevertheless, the novel's objective is partly didactic, as it advocates that the future of Irish society should be rooted in conciliatory and integrationist approaches to the issue of class and not in intransigent partisanism.

Still, in these novels the recombination of common elements from cultural memories of the Great Famine clears a space for alternative renditions of the past and constructions of

⁵⁴ For a discussion of (neo-)feudalism in Famine fiction, see Marguérite Corporaal, Christopher Cusack, and Lindsay Janssen, 'Reimagining Rural Ireland: Famine, Migration and Feudalism in Irish and Irish North-American Fiction, 1860-1895', forthcoming in *Breac*, and chapter 4 of Christopher Cusack, 'Memory, History, and Identity in Irish and Irish-Diasporic Famine Fiction, 1892-1921'.

the future which culturally reconfigure an essentially political issue. Familiar elements from representations of landlord families are reconstituted in such ways that narratives move beyond the binaries of peasant and landlord, servant and master, victim and perpetrator. Field's and Meade's novels, like many of the other texts I analyse in my PhD thesis, do not present the landlord class as a whole as parasitical and alien, as nationalists such as Michael Davitt and James Connolly did, but attempt to humanize and hibernicize the class, by incorporating them into the narrative of Famine victimhood, emphasizing their self-sacrificing efforts on behalf of the poor, and scripting them into the nationalist story of (intermittently) emergent nationhood. In so doing, they use the Famine as a framework to address larger questions about class and the position of landlords in a rapidly changing Ireland. In this sense, and indeed in other ways, the memory of the Famine forms a complex web in which a myriad themes converge, and which is therefore an effective backdrop for the examination of important social and cultural issues, not least that of class.

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