

# Alternative Ascendancies: Anglo-Irish Identities in the Nineteenth Century

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**Abstract:** The common perception of the Anglo-Irish, or the Protestant Ascendancy – the Anglophone, predominantly Church-of-Ireland, and essentially Britocentric aristocracy, gentry, and professional class, which played a dominant role in the social, economic, political, and cultural life of Ireland from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century – is of a community which, despite its privileged position in Irish society, was nonetheless, in consequence of its colonial roots and its isolation from and distrust of the country's Catholic majority, paradoxically always a community in decline, passively clinging to the memories of the past and unable to play a constructive role in the formation of the cultural identity of a modern, independent Ireland. The paper takes an issue with this interpretation of the contribution of the Ascendancy to Irish culture, particularly in the nineteenth century; taking the examples of three Romantic and Victorian Ascendancy writers, Lady Morgan, Sir Samuel Ferguson, and George Moore, it argues that their vision of Ireland was much more open-minded, inclusive, and progressive than the popular myths of the Ascendancy, such as in particular the tradition of Big House fiction, would lead most readers to believe.

**Key words:** Anglo-Irish identity, Ireland, 19<sup>th</sup> century, Protestant Ascendancy

Speaking on 11 June 1925 in the Senate of the Irish Free State as it debated the proposal to effectively outlaw divorce in Ireland, William Butler Yeats said:

I think it is tragic that within three years of this country gaining its independence we should be discussing a measure which a minority of this nation considers to be grossly oppressive. I am proud to consider myself a typical man of that minority.

Jan Jędrzejewski "Alternative Ascendancies: Anglo-Irish Identities in the Nineteenth Century", *Polish Journal of English Studies* 3.1(2017): 55–77.

We against whom you have done this thing are no petty people. We are one of the great stocks of Europe. We are the people of Burke; we are the people of Grattan; we are the people of Swift, the people of Emmet, the people of Parnell. We have created the most of the modern literature of this country. We have created the best of its political intelligence. Yet I do not altogether regret what has happened. I shall be able to find out, if not I, my children will be able to find out whether we have lost our stamina or not. You have defined our position and given us a popular following. If we have not lost our stamina then your victory will be brief, and your defeat final, and when it comes this nation may be transformed (Pearce 1961, 99).

Yeats's passionate defence of the right of Irish Protestants not to be subjected to the imposition of legislation based on the teachings of the Catholic Church in the area of family life constituted one of the most powerful expressions of what was perhaps the most significant social dilemma facing post-independence Ireland: the definition of the role, in the public life of the country and in its social and cultural make-up, of its minority Protestant community, and in particular of its most influential section – the predominantly Anglican aristocracy, gentry, and upper-middle-class business and professional circles, descended, for the most part, from Anglo-Norman and/or English settlers and maintaining a distinctive (if hybrid) Anglo-Irish identity, based on a combination of a broad immersion in and commitment to British culture and values on the one hand and a strong sense of rootedness in the specific regional context of Ireland on the other. This section of Irish society, known from the late 18th century as the Protestant Ascendancy, had from the seventeenth century dominated the social, economic, political, and cultural life of Ireland, even if from the beginning of the nineteenth century its near-total grip on power began to loosen as a result of the gradual emancipation of the country's Catholic majority. As Ireland moved towards independence, the tension between its two cultural traditions and mentalities became more and more pronounced: the Protestant Ascendancy's dual sense of British as well as Irish identity, and the multidimensional British and Irish culture they espoused, stood in direct opposition to the concept of Irishness which underpinned the thinking of the more radical supporters of the pro-independence movement, and which would eventually find its expression

in the Constitution of Ireland, adopted in 1937 under the influence of arguably the most powerful ideologue and politician of early and mid-twentieth-century Ireland, Éamon de Valera. The world of the Ascendancy – aristocratic, Anglophone, Anglican, relatively liberal and outward-looking in social terms, and concentrated around the ‘Big Houses’ on their country estates on the one hand, and around Dublin’s Trinity College and the opulent Georgian mansions in Merrion Square and other fashionable areas in the southern part of the city on the other – could not have been more different from an ideal of Ireland which lay at the heart of the ideology which was to shape the newly-formed Irish state in the early years of its existence – an Ireland that was essentially rustic, plebeian, inward-looking, socially conservative, monolithically Catholic, deeply rooted in its Gaelic heritage, and defining itself primarily through its fierce, not to say obsessive, opposition to, and rejection of, all things British. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the emergence of a new Ireland in the 1920s dramatically accelerated the ongoing process of the erosion of the social, economic, and cultural position of the Ascendancy; within a few years, a significant proportion of Anglo-Irish families left the country, while those who remained found themselves, as a community, for the most part marginalised in the new political reality of the Irish Free State. The demise of the Ascendancy as a social class found its symbolic expression in the disappearance from the Irish landscape of the Big Houses, a process which was initiated by the methodical burning, by the Irish Republican Army, of nearly 300 Ascendancy properties during the British-Irish War (1919–1921) and the subsequent Irish Civil War (1922–1923), and which continued as a number of estates which escaped destruction during that period gradually fell into neglect and disrepair and were eventually demolished, often despite their historical and cultural associations and significance – as was the case, for example, with the Gregory family home in Coole Park, Co. Galway, the iconic symbol of the Irish Literary Revival immortalised by Yeats in poems such as ‘The Wild Swans at Coole’, ‘Coole Park, 1929’, and ‘Coole and Ballylee, 1931’.

The central significance of the image of the Big House as a symbol of the Protestant Ascendancy lies, indeed, at the very heart of the distinctive literary and cultural heritage of the Anglo-Irish – a tradition which played a dominant role in the literature of Ireland in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Drawing a parallel between the literature of Ascendancy Ireland and the writing of nineteenth-century Russia on the one hand,

and the literature of the post-Civil-War American South on the other, Julian Moynahan writes:

A paradox of this literature (...) is that it flowers just when the social formation producing it enters a phase of contraction and decline. As Anglo-Irish literature 'arises', the Anglo-Irish begin to go down in the world. (...) It appears that the relation between accomplishment in literary pursuits and in the world is often inverse. The literary muse, at least in certain periods, dearly loves a loser (Moynahan 1995, 9-10).

A result of that paradox is that works constituting the literature of Ascendancy Ireland in general, and the tradition of Big House fiction in particular, tend to be melancholy and elegiac rather than upbeat and celebratory, focusing on the isolation of the Big Houses and the alienation of their privileged, affluent, Anglophone, Anglican, and broadly pro-British inhabitants in an environment physically if not economically dominated by poor Catholic tenant farmers, increasingly self-aware of their disadvantaged socio-economic position and gradually more and more vocal in their opposition to the existing social and political order.

This is precisely what characterises the vision of provincial Ireland in the novel generally recognised as the founding text of the Anglo-Irish tradition, Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800), a semi-satirical, semi-sentimental story of the fall of an Ascendancy family of the Rackrents, whose combination of selfishness, improvidence, and naivety eventually results in the loss of their eponymous estate to Jason Quirk, a ruthless and manipulative lawyer son of the family's old retainer, representative of the new, up-and-coming Catholic middle class which was, at the turn of the nineteenth century, beginning to undermine the Ascendancy establishment. In her later, more complex works, such as *The Absentee* (1812) and *Ormond* (1817), Edgeworth on the one hand maintains her criticism of such common aspects of the socio-economic model prevalent across Ascendancy Ireland as absentee landlordism and unfair treatment of tenants, while on the other hand proposing alternative solutions aimed at safeguarding the future of the Ascendancy through a rationalisation and modernisation of the operation of their estates; her vision is, however, quite conservative in its unquestioning acceptance of the underlying principles of the existing social and economic

order, and in its promotion of eighteenth-century-style enlightened aristocratic paternalism, personified by Edgeworth's idealised landlord, *Ormond's* Sir Herbert Annaly.

In the Victorian and Edwardian era, the Big Houses remained, on the surface of things, the key symbols of the continued power and influence of the Ascendancy, and of the apparent stability of the existing social order. At the same time, the more incisive studies of the Anglo-Irish society of the period reflected the increasing vulnerability of the Ascendancy world, both in terms of the economic impact of land agitation and reforms which removed many of the privileges previously enjoyed by the landed aristocracy and gentry, and as regards the more subtle processes of the undermining of traditional Ascendancy values by the often ruthless intruders from outside of their own community. This is what happens in the best works of Somerville and Ross – two Irish women novelists, Edith Somerville and Violet Martin (who wrote under the name of Martin Ross), who jointly published a range of works of fiction depicting the life of the Ascendancy class at the turn of the century. Their short stories *Some Experiences of an Irish RM* (1899), *Further Experiences of an Irish RM* (1908), and *In Mr Knox's Country* (1915) may be humorous accounts of the social life of Irish country gentry, focusing around various comic incidents of daily life, parties, hunting expeditions, and other rural pursuits; however, their best novel, *The Real Charlotte* (1894), a rich panorama of a rural Irish community the focal point of which is Bruff, the home of the local Anglo-Irish family of the Dysarts, offers a much more pessimistic vision of the Ascendancy world: the Dysarts are the dominant presence in the community in name only, with Sir Benjamin Dysart suffering from physical paralysis, and his children, Christopher and Pamela, being unable to act assertively and decisively, whether in the social sphere or in their personal lives – while real power in the community is exercised by the ruthless middle-class social climbers, the land agent Roddy Lambert and the ambitious and manipulative Charlotte Mullen.

The dramatic social changes of the 1920s and the physical destruction of many of the ancestral homes of the Ascendancy added a new dimension to post-independence Big House fiction – an elegiac tone of nostalgic sentiment for a tradition which may well have outlived its time, and which may well have been doomed to be consigned to the past, but whose demise had been cruelly – and ultimately undeservedly – accelerated by the circumstances of history. Perhaps the best example of that kind of response to the collapse

of the world of the Anglo-Irish is Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* (1929) – a subtle, delicate, and yet entirely un sentimental study of an Anglo-Irish family circle during the British-Irish War. In its vision of the spiritual and emotional sterility of the Naylor family and their friends, Bowen's novel resembles *The Real Charlotte*: both works diagnose the Ascendancy as a social class which is defined by its past, and which may be tentatively clinging on to its present, but which appears to have no vision of the future, and is therefore living on borrowed time, doomed to lose its privileged position and to dissolve in the new social reality of a new post-Ascendancy Ireland. Bowen's novel goes, however, one step further than *The Real Charlotte*: the poignant closing paragraphs of *The Last September*, describing the burning of the Naylor's house at Danielstown, not only mark the symbolic end of the world of the Protestant Ascendancy, but also, at the same time, give birth to a new national myth:

For in February, before those leaves had visibly budded, the death – execution, rather – of the three houses, Danielstown, Castle Trent, Mount Isabel, occurred in the same night. A fearful scarlet ate up the hard spring darkness; indeed, it seemed that an extra day, unreckoned, had come to an abortive birth that these things might happen. It seemed, looking from east to west at the sky tall with scarlet, that the country itself was burning; while to the north the neck of mountains before Mount Isabel was frightfully outlined. The roads in unnatural dusk ran dark with movement, secretive or terrified; not a tree, brushed pale by wind from the flames, not a cabin pressed in despair to the bosom of night, not a gate too starkly visible but had its place in the design of order and panic. At Danielstown, half-way up the avenue under the beeches, the thin iron gate twanged (missed its latch, remained swinging aghast) as the last unlit car slid out with the executioners bland from accomplished duty. The sound of the last car widened, gave itself to the open and empty country and was demolished. Then the first wave of a silence that was to be ultimate flowed back, confident, to the steps. Above the steps, the door stood open hospitably upon a furnace.

Sir Richard and Lady Naylor, not saying anything, did not look at each other, for in the light from the sky they saw too distinctly (Bowen [1929] 1998, 206).

The heritage of the Ascendancy, embodied in the tradition of the Big House novel, continues to provide an important source of inspiration to Irish writers to the present day – examples of twentieth and indeed twenty-first-century practitioners of this sub-genre of fiction include authors such as Molly Keane, William Trevor, and Jennifer Johnston. However varied their responses to that tradition are, they all ultimately take as their starting point the conventional image of the world of the Ascendancy shaped and preserved in the Irish national consciousness through the power of narratives which between them constitute one of the key components of the modern Irish national mythology. The communal identity of the Anglo-Irish that lies at the heart of the myth of the Ascendancy is therefore something of a mixture of the traits of the Rackrents, the Annalys, the Dysarts, the Naylor, and other families from the fictional Big Houses – unquestioningly supportive of the existing social order, broadly Britocentric in terms of their cultural attitudes, loyal to the Church of Ireland if not necessarily very devout, respectable if occasionally eccentric, reasonably well-educated but not particularly imaginative – but, most importantly, essentially passive, unable or unwilling to move with the times, to recognise the inevitability of the impending end of their world, or indeed to put up any form of effective resistance.

And yet, paradoxically, well-established in the cultural imagination of the Irish people and in the popular perception of Irish history and culture as this vision of the Ascendancy is, the literature of nineteenth-century Ireland reveals, on closer inspection, a much more varied picture – one which demonstrates that it is misleading to talk about Ascendancy culture and about its literary imagination as if it was a homogeneous entity. The literary heritage of the Anglo-Irish class turns out, on closer scrutiny, to be indeed a much richer and much more dynamic body of work than the popular perception of their place and role in Irish history might suggest, reflecting a level of diversity, complexity and indeed paradoxicality of cultural identities that could be found among the nineteenth-century Ascendancy establishment that goes far beyond the conventional perception of that class both within and outside of Ireland. Nineteenth-century Irish literature thus simultaneously both constructs and undermines its own vision of the world, offering its readers a multiplicity

of stories, ideas, and images which between them call into question many of the received perceptions of, and assumptions about, the past and the present of Ireland and its people.

One early example of that kind of diversity within the Ascendancy world is provided by the life and career of Sydney, Lady Morgan (1778?-1859). The elder of the two daughters of an Irish actor and theatre manager of Catholic descent, Robert Owenson, and his English Methodist wife Jane Hill, Sydney Owenson had none of the privileged upbringing of her contemporary Maria Edgeworth: Robert Owenson's changing fortunes in the volatile world of the theatre meant that periods of the family's relative prosperity were interspersed with times of significantly reduced financial circumstances, which forced Sydney to seek employment as a governess or a lady companion with Ascendancy families. By a stroke of good fortune, all of Sydney Owenson's employers recognised her intelligence and her creative potential, and encouraged her in her intellectual and artistic pursuits; she soon began to publish poetry and fiction, and in 1806 produced a novel which turned out not only to play a defining role in her own future life and literary career, but also to have brought a new dimension into the history of Irish literature – *The Wild Irish Girl*, a key text in the development of Irish Romantic Nationalism.

Published in London and designed essentially as a fictional introduction to Ireland for relatively uninformed English readers, *The Wild Irish Girl* is constructed as a conventional travel narrative: the main section of the novel consists of an epistolary account, written by a young English aristocrat Horatio M\_\_\_, of his experiences as he travels across Ireland while on a visit to his father's estates on the country's Atlantic coast. Horatio's initially reluctant and prejudiced approach to Ireland – he is effectively banished there by his father as a punishment for his assorted financial as well as romantic misdemeanours – is gradually replaced by a sense of curiosity and indeed awe as he embarks on what is effectively an extended course of practical study of Irish history and culture. In a manner typical of the period, reminiscent of Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* and foreshadowing the approach Sir Walter Scott would take, in relation to Scotland, in his Waverley novels, Owenson supplements Horatio's first-person record of his time in Ireland by extensive annotations, some of them scholarly and antiquarian and some anecdotal in character, on a range of matters relating to the country's ancient language, history, and traditions. This is, however, where the parallels with *Castle Rackrent* end: while Edgeworth, a quintessentially Ascendancy writer, tends



to think about the Gaelic heritage of Ireland and its traditional ways of living in terms of mere anthropological curiosities, Owenson, by bringing her narrator right into the middle of what is still left of ancient Ireland, embraces and celebrates the country's Gaelic past. Following an accident sustained while climbing the crumbling walls of the half-ruined Castle of Inismore, Horatio becomes a guest of its owner, the Prince of Inismore, one of the last surviving members of old Gaelic aristocracy, and the symbol of the fast-fading glory of old, pre-Ascendancy Ireland:

What a contrast to this saintly being [Father John, the Inismore chaplain] now struck my view; a form almost gigantic in stature, yet gently thrown forward by evident infirmity; limbs of Herculean mould, and a countenance rather furrowed by the inroads of vehement passions, than the deep trace of years. Eyes still emanating the ferocity of an unsubdued spirit, yet tempered by a strong trait of benevolence; which, like a glory, irradiated a broad expansive brow, a mouth on which even yet the spirit of convivial enjoyment seemed to hover, though shaded by two large whiskers on the upper lip, which still preserved their ebon hue; while time or grief had bleached the scattered hairs, which hung their snows upon the manly temple. The drapery which covered this striking figure was singularly appropriate, and, as I have since been told, strictly conformable to the ancient costume of the Irish nobles (Owenson 1806, 1:143-145).

Horatio soon falls in love with the Prince of Inismore's daughter, Lady Glorvina - a harp-playing, erudite, passionately patriotic young woman who introduces him to the traditional culture of her nation. Their eventual marriage becomes a symbol of Owenson's vision for the future of Ireland - one that is, in its recognition of the diversity of the country's heritages, and in its plea for their peaceful co-existence, strikingly modern, particularly when compared to the conservative views of her contemporaries such as Maria Edgeworth:

In this the dearest, most sacred, and most lasting of all human ties, let the names of Inismore and M\_\_\_ be inseparably blended, and the distinctions of English and Irish, of protestant

and catholic, for ever buried. And, while you look forward with hope to this family alliance being prophetically typical of a national unity of interests and affections between those who may be factiously severed, but who are naturally allied, lend your own individual efforts towards the consummation of an event so devoutly to be wished by every liberal mind, by every benevolent heart (Owenson 1806, 3:258–259).

The popular success of *The Wild Irish Girl* made Sydney Owenson's name, on the Dublin literary stage as well as in London, though her unorthodox views caused a considerable amount of controversy and disquiet among the Ascendancy establishment. This, however, did not deter Owenson from pursuing her liberal agenda, both as a writer and through the influence she began to exert as an increasingly significant figure on the broader Irish cultural and social scene: known now as Lady Morgan (she married, in 1812, a Dublin doctor Sir Charles Morgan), she created, in her house in the fashionable Kildare Street, a prominent literary *salon*. Her interests were manifold: she supported the cause of the educational and social emancipation of women (it is worth noting that in 1837, she was to become the first woman writer to be awarded an annual civil-list pension), and she was highly critical of the conservative regimes which, following the Treaty of Vienna, resumed control over France and the Italian states – her memoirs of travel to those countries, appreciated by radicals such as Byron, got her into trouble with both conservative critics in Britain and the authorities across a number of countries in Europe, from which both her books and she herself were at various points banned. It was, however, in the context of Ireland that Lady Morgan made political points that were the most controversial from the point of view of her own Ascendancy class – her novel *O'Donnel* (1814) gave an early and strong expression of support to what would, some ten years later, become the key issue in Irish politics – the question of the political emancipation of Roman Catholics.

The basic framework of *O'Donnel* is, in some respects, similar to that of *The Wild Irish Girl* and numerous other Ascendancy novels of the period: it offers a picture of Ireland – in this case, particularly of the province of Ulster, which young Sydney Owenson got to know when her father briefly managed a travelling theatrical company there, and subsequently when she joined the household of the Duke and Duchess of Abercorn at Baron's Court,

Co. Tyrone – perceived largely from the perspective of English visitors; the focus of the story, at least in its opening sections, is on a party of English aristocrats and their associates as they travel along the north coast of Ireland en route to pay a visit to an acquaintance of theirs, a local Church of Ireland bishop. The narrative offers standard descriptions of the country and its people, as well as conventional, and often comic, anecdotes about eccentric rural inn-keepers and overturned carriages; however, as the story unfolds, the novel's plot takes an unexpected turn: the English visitors encounter a mysterious stranger, who eventually turns out to be a descendant of the noble family of the O'Donnells, the ancient kings of Donegal. As a Roman Catholic, and thus a victim of the anti-Catholic Penal Laws, Colonel O'Donnel, despite his aristocratic birth and gentleman's education, has been reduced to having to earn his living serving in foreign armies; he may be every inch a gentleman, loyal to the British crown and, despite his poverty, perfectly at home among British nobility, but his religion prevents him from taking a place he deserves in the Irish – and indeed British – society of his day. It is in that context that, in his early conversation with O'Donnel, the thoughtful Englishman Mr Glentworth, who, despite being an absentee landlord, does nonetheless display an excellent understanding of the condition of Ireland, conveys the novel's central political message:

'It is indeed,' said the stranger, 'an odd paradox, a most irrational expectation, that a participation in the blessings of good government, and a share in the conduct of the state, should dispose any set of men the more readily to conspiracy and rebellion. If these afford objects of apprehension and anxiety, what should not be feared from the jealousy of the excluded, and the despair of the disqualified.'

'Undoubtedly,' said Mr Glentworth. 'And this very *ascendancy* is not more an evidence of such apprehension, than it is the cause of their propriety. Ascendancy is a relative term; it is an assumption on one part of the population, at the immediate expense of the interests, happiness, and undisputed rights of the rest: not a superabundance of power and authority *added to the one scale*, but a portion of protection and security *taken from the other*. Where ascendancy is claimed by one tribe or case, over others, subsisting under the same government, there is little chance

of internal union, or of safety for either party. For duties and rights are inseparable, and the voluntary dereliction of the first necessarily implies an abandonment of the second. The surest pledge, therefore, which can be given of the loyalty of the excluded, is their constant and unremitting efforts to be admitted to the rights and privileges of the government under which they live' (Owenson 1814, 1:211–212).

Lady Morgan's support for Catholic Emancipation finds its expression in the structure of the novel as well – as the story progresses, its focus shifts to the story of O'Donnel, and his faithful foster-brother and servant Patrick McRory, and to O'Donnel's eventual marriage to the former governess of Mr Glentworth's stepdaughters, who, by a number of twists of the novel's highly convoluted plot, inherits the familial estates of the O'Donnells, which she can then, through her marriage, return into her husband's rightful hands. In this way, the novel not only inverts the gender pattern of *The Wild Irish Girl*, but in doing so also undermines the underlying principle of Ascendancy authority: rather than, as was the case in the earlier novel, proposing a peaceful merger of the two traditions of Ireland under the (male) authority of the Protestant M\_\_\_ family, *O'Donnel* recognises and supports the right of the displaced and underprivileged Old Irish/Catholic community to play its part in the life of modern Ireland. This is, of course, not to suggest that Lady Morgan advocates some form of Irish independence – her assumption throughout is that Catholic Emancipation should happen within the broad context of the British state – but her unequivocal support for the Catholic cause, symbolised by the choice of Colonel O'Donnel as the idealised eponymous hero of the novel, marks her off as one of the most outspokenly liberal, progressive voices in early nineteenth-century Ascendancy culture.

If Lady Morgan challenged mainstream Ascendancy opinion essentially through the expression of her liberal political opinions, the significance of the work of Sir Samuel Ferguson (1810–1886), a poet, translator, and literary critic, lies primarily in the way in which he transformed the public perception of the nature of Irish culture by promoting an inclusive, heterogeneous vision of Ireland's heritage, accommodating its Gaelic as well as Anglo-Saxon strands, and bringing it into the mainstream of Victorian Irish culture. Born, in Belfast, into an impoverished gentry family of Ulster Presbyterian stock, Ferguson trained as a lawyer and built up a career as a barrister, though his real interest

lay in literary and historical antiquarianism, which he pursued first as a personal interest, and subsequently as Deputy Keeper of the Public Records of Ireland, a prestigious civil service post to which he was appointed in 1867. His position as a prominent member of the Dublin Unionist establishment was consolidated when, in recognition of his archival work as well as his contribution to literature he was knighted in 1878, and elected President of the Royal Irish Academy in 1881.

Sir Samuel Ferguson was, of course, by no means the first collector and translator of Irish-language poetry: Charlotte Brooke published her *Reliques of Irish Poetry* in 1789, and James Hardiman's two-volume *Irish Minstrelsy, or Bardic Remains of Ireland*, a bilingual, extensively annotated collection of Irish poems from the Early Middle Ages to the modern period, with poetic translations by contemporaneous Irish poets such as Thomas Furlong, William Drummond, and John D'Alton, came out in 1831. It was in his extensive critique of Hardiman's work, published in 1834 in the newly-established *Dublin University Magazine*, which was to become Victorian Ireland's leading literary review, that Samuel Ferguson first formulated the key principles which were to determine the focus of his approach to the Irish literary heritage throughout his career:

Let it first be our task to make the people of Ireland better acquainted with one another. We address in these pages the Protestant wealth and intelligence of the country, an interest acknowledged on all hands to be the depository of Ireland's fate for good or evil. The Protestants of Ireland are wealthy and intelligent beyond most classes, of their numbers, in the world: but their wealth has hitherto been insecure, because their intelligence has not embraced a thorough knowledge of the genius and disposition of their Catholic fellow-citizens. The genius of a people at large is not to be learned by the notes of Sunday tourists. The history of centuries must be gathered, published, studied and digested, before the Irish people can be known to the world, and to each other, as they ought to be. We hail, with daily-increasing pleasure, the spirit of research and liberality which is manifesting itself in all the branches of our national literature, but chiefly in our earlier history and antiquities – subjects of paramount importance to every people who respect,

or even desire to respect themselves. Let us contribute our aid to the auspicious undertaking, and introduce the Saxon and the Scottish Protestant to an acquaintance with the poetic genius of a people hitherto unknown to them, as being known only in a character incompatible with sincerity or plain dealing (Ferguson 1834a, 457).

Ferguson's analysis of *Irish Minstrelsy*, while acknowledging its range and significance, takes issue with its central political message: he criticises what he perceives as Hardiman's anti-English prejudice, as well as his appropriation of the Gaelic heritage not only as an exclusive property of Ireland's Catholics, but also as an expression of the Jacobite – and thus anti-British – political sentiment:

That the spirit of petty anti-Anglicism, sought to be imparted by Mr Hardiman throughout these annotations, is highly prejudicial to the best interests of the country, we should think will not be disputed by even the most enthusiastic advocates of Irish independence. A fretful, querulous, undignified malice, however provoked, can never be countenanced by the supporters of a manly opposition. Such rancorous and puerile malignity injures the party it would support, by justifying our want of confidence in their most generous protestations (Ferguson 1834b: 515).

Significant as Ferguson's critique of Hardiman's collection is as an expression of his position on matters of Irish cultural politics, it is, however, the role that it played in the development of Ferguson's own creative practice as a poet that is central to a full appreciation of his contribution to nineteenth-century Irish writing. At the end of the final instalment of his essay on Hardiman, Ferguson published an appendix which is, in effect, a mini-anthology of his own versions of a selection of poems included in *Irish Minstrelsy*. The nineteen poems, diverse in their historical origin and thematic range, constitute, in effect, Ferguson's first attempt to provide his own response to the Gaelic tradition of Ireland: though the majority of the poems are love songs, and the collection includes also celebrations of ancient Irish bards, of the beauty of the country's landscape, and of its tradition of generous hospitality, Ferguson does not, in line with his belief in representativeness

and inclusiveness, shy away from including a number of elegiac poems mourning the defeat of the old Gaelic order at the hands of the English. He is also concerned about the preservation, in his translations, of the aesthetic qualities of the Irish originals: he attempts to imitate their rhythm and compressed stylistic energy, which in his view can be lost in the more verbose style of Hardiman's translators, who aimed at closer textual paraphrase rather than attempting to render the spirit of the original texts. A good example of Ferguson's tone and style is offered by the opening of a rarely reprinted poem 'Agnew's Lamentation':

My heart is in woe,  
And my soul is in trouble,  
For the mighty are low  
And abased are the noble:

The sons of the Gael  
Are in exile and mourning;  
Worn, weary, and pale,  
As spent pilgrims returning;

Or men who in flight  
From the field of disaster  
Beseech the black night  
On their flight to fall faster;

Or seamen aghast,  
When their planks gape in sunder,  
And the waves, fierce and fast,  
Tumble through in hoarse thunder;

Or men whom we see  
That have got their death omen:  
Such wretches are we  
In the chains of our foemen! (Ferguson 1834b, 532)<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The corresponding section of the translation included in Hardiman's book, by Henry Grattan Curran, reads:

The same spirit of cultural sensitivity, openness, and inclusiveness that characterised Ferguson's early translations from the Irish can be discerned in his most important single literary work – the epic poem *Congal* (1872), a modern retelling of an ancient Ulster tale based around the life of a seventh-century king of the mediaeval kingdom of Ulaid (in the present-day counties of Antrim and Down). In his version of the tale, Ferguson offers a vision of a semi-legendary, semi-historical Ireland which is still in the process of defining its identity between traditional Celtic beliefs and Christianity, between the social model based on the dominant role of semi-independent clans and the evolving structures of feudal authority, and between a narrow local and regional perspective and an awareness of and involvement in the broader geographical, cultural, and political context, not just of the whole of Ireland, but also of other parts of the British Isles as well as Continental Europe: in the course of trying to build a coalition against

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'On the Downfall of the Gael'

Weep! weep! for agony and shame  
 With deepening gloom the Gael invest;  
 Fall'n is each proud and patriot name,  
 On which a nation's hope might rest.

What are they now? – a remnant spared,  
 Writing from desolation's tread -  
 Pale pilgrims, who the deep have dared,  
 And traced the sterile waste outspread

A shattered bark's disheartened crew  
 O'er-gazing from the crowded deck;  
 The sheeted wave that flashes through,  
 Or bursts above the labouring wreck.

Victims of every changing fate,  
 These shadows of the Gael of yore,  
 Whose bonds with worse corrosion eat,  
 Through breasts that panted free before (Hardiman 1831, 2:103-105).



his overlord and rival King Domnal, Congal travels not only to Scotland and Wales, but also to the lands of the Franks and the Saxons. The epic tone of the narrative is sustained throughout; the consistent, dignified rhythm of the poem's iambic heptameter underlines the heroic dimension of the story of Congal and his followers in a manner fully reminiscent of classical epic poetry:

Of all the field Halt Kellach on his chair alone sat still,  
Where placed to view the battle on the airy, green-sloped hill:  
And, like a sea-rock that alone of all around stands fast,  
Mid scudding clouds, and hurrying waves, and hoarse tides  
racing past,  
So sat he rooted mid the rout; so, past his brazen chair  
Was poured the heavy-rolling tide of ruin and despair:  
And oft he cried to those who fled, with shrill, disdainful call,  
'Stand fast: fear nothing: turn like men!' but none gave heed at all;  
Till, Druid Drostan hurrying by, like maniac horror-driven,  
He hailed him mid the long-hair'd rout, 'Bald-head, how fare my  
Seven?'  
'Slain all,' was all the sage replied, as labouring on he went:  
Then Kellach leaned upon his couch, and said, 'I am content.'  
Nor spoke he more till Elar Derg cried, 'Old man of the chair,  
Courage: young Brasil still survives, and seeks thee everywhere,'  
And Brasil's self, emerging from the flying throng, appeared,  
Bloody and faint, but calling out incessant as he neared,  
'Ho, father, I am with thee. Courage, father; I am here:  
Up; mount upon my shoulder: I have strength to bear thee clear.'  
And ran and knelt beside the chair, to heave him on his back;  
But as he stooped, even through the curls that clustered on his  
neck,  
An arrow smote him. Kellach said, 'Best so. I thank thee, God,  
That by no son of mine the path of shame will now be trod.'  
And leaned again upon his couch; and set his hoary head  
Awaiting death, with face as fixed as if already dead (Ferguson,  
*Congal*, 5:329-352).

In passages like this, Ferguson manages not only to manifest his fascination with Ireland's ancient Gaelic past, but also to elevate it to a level of imaginative intensity broadly comparable with some of the best work of his contemporaries: in consequence, in the history of Irish literature, *Congal* enjoys a place similar to that occupied, in the English literary tradition, by Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. In one of the many paradoxes of Irish cultural history, it is thus owing to the work of Ferguson, a pillar of Dublin's Anglo-Irish establishment, that the ancient mythology, history, and traditions of Gaelic Ireland became recognised, in the mid-Victorian era, as an integral component of the country's shared cultural heritage.

The powerful influence of Sir Samuel Ferguson was, as acknowledged by W. B. Yeats in his poem 'To Ireland in the Coming Times', central to the development of the Irish Literary Revival – a movement dominated, as mentioned above, by Ascendancy figures such as Yeats himself, Lady Gregory, and John Millington Synge. However, the Revival's focus on Irish, and primarily Gaelic, history, tradition, and folklore mitigated against an interest in the culture of the Anglo-Irish – so it is hardly surprising that the most probing study of the Ascendancy world to have been produced by an author directly associated with the Revival should have come from a writer whose contribution to Irish literature has been not only overshadowed by the work of his contemporaries, but, it is tempting to think, almost actively neglected. George Moore (1852-1933) tends to be remembered in the context of his contribution to the mainstream English literary tradition: *A Mummer's Wife* (1885), one of the first naturalistic novels in English, is a disturbing study of alcoholism, while *Esther Waters* (1894) is in many ways a response to Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in its unapologetically sympathetic study of a 'fallen woman' who manages to achieve a level of success in her valiant struggle to overcome the obstacles life continues to throw in her way. Among his Ireland-focused works, however, it is *A Drama in Muslin* (1886) that constitutes Moore's most significant artistic achievement; a Big House novel with a difference, it offers a challenging and controversial analysis of Ascendancy identity in the late nineteenth century.

The story of *A Drama in Muslin* is set among the aristocracy and gentry of Co. Galway during the early 1880s – a period of rural unrest following the founding, in 1879, of the Irish National Land League, an organisation aimed at supporting Irish tenant farmers against the landlords. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the Protestant Ascendancy is no longer

the socially homogeneous class that it used to be earlier in the century: the families of Galway landowners are a mixture of Protestants and Catholics, of old aristocrats and vulgar *nouveaux-riches*, of narrow-minded puritanical spinsters and unfulfilled wannabe artists. Representative of the social destabilisation of the Ascendancy class are the family of the Goulds:

The Goulds were of an excellent county family. They had for certainly three generations lived in comfortable idleness, watching from their big square houses the different collections of hamlets toiling and moiling, and paying their rents every gale day. It was said that some ancestor, whose portrait still existed, had gone to India and come back with the money that had purchased the greater part of the property. But, be this as it may, in Galway three generations of landlordism are considered sufficient repentance for shopkeeping in Gort, not to speak of Calcutta. Since then the family history had been stainless. Father and son had in turn put their horses out to grass in April, had begun to train them again in August, had boasted at the Dublin horse-show of having been out cub-hunting, had ridden and drunk hard from the age of twenty to seventy. But, by dying at fifty-five, the late squire had deviated slightly from the regular line, and the son and heir being only twelve, a pause had come in the hereditary life of the Goulds. In the interim, however, May had apparently resolved to keep up the traditions so far as her sex was supposed to allow her (Moore 1886, 74).

The fact that the passage ends up zooming in on May Gould is not accidental: the novel as a whole looks at the Ascendancy of the 1880s from the perspective of the young women of that class – boarding-school educated, reasonably well-off, but ultimately seen, by their families, as little more than new offerings on the Dublin marriage market, making, under the watchful eyes of their mothers, their annual pilgrimage to the capital to stay in the fashionable Shelbourne Hotel and attend all the events of the social season in the hope of attracting the attention of eligible bachelors. The vision of Dublin Moore presents is devastating in its analysis of the city's – and by extension, the country's – spiritual and moral emptiness:

The weary, the woebegone, the threadbare streets – yes, threadbare conveys the moral idea of Dublin in 1882. Stephen's Green, recently embellished by a wealthy nobleman with gravel walks, mounds and ponds, looked like a school-treat set out for the entertainment of charity children. And melancholy Merrion Square! broken pavements, unpainted hall-doors, rusty area railings, meagre outside curs hidden almost out of sight in the deep gutters – how infinitely pitiful!

The Dublin streets stare the vacant and helpless stare of a beggar selling matches on a doorstep, and the feeble cries for amusement are like those of the child beneath the ragged shawl for the red gleam of a passing soldier's coat. On either side of you, there is the bawling ignorance or plaintive decay. Look at the houses! Like crones in borrowed bonnets some are fashionable with flowers in the rotting window frames – others languish in silly cheerfulness like women living on the proceeds of the pawnshop; others – those with brass-plates on the doors – are evil-smelling as the prescriptions of the threadbare doctor, bald as the bill of costs of the servile attorney. And the souls of the Dubliners blend and harmonise with their connatural surroundings.

We are in a land of echoes and shadows. Lying, mincing, grimacing – careless of all but the pleasures of scandal and marriage, trailing their ignorance, arrogantly the poor shades go by. Gossip and waltz tunes are all that they know. (...) Catholic in name, they curse the Pope for not helping them in their affliction; moralists by tradition, they accept at their parties women who parade their lovers to the town from the top of a tramcar. In Dublin there is baptism in tea and communion in a cutlet (Moore 1886, 158–159).

Moore's criticism of the emptiness of Ireland's supposed attachment to traditional moral and religious values is indeed exemplified throughout the novel – despite the semblance of propriety and careful observance of the Victorian standards of respectability, the reality of the world of the Bartons, the Goulds, the Scullys, the Cullens, and their neighbours and associates

is that people have affairs, unmarried women go into hiding to give birth to secret illegitimate children, and eligible young men find women of their own social class much more sexually available than anyone in their social circle would have been prepared to admit. Religion, too, whether Protestant or Catholic, seems to be, in the lives of Moore's Ascendancy families, of very limited significance: seen by most people as either an irrelevance, or a mere routine of everyday life, or at most a mechanism of maintaining a level of social cohesion (as Mrs Barton says, 'religion is all that is respectable, 'tis you, 'tis me, it is the future of our children. Society could not hold together a moment without religion' (Moore 1886, 24)), it tends to attract few people other than socially and/or sexually unfulfilled women, who use it as a way of channelling their unspent energies and frustrated passions.

Moore's vision in *A Drama in Muslin* is not, however, altogether bleak: the novel's central character, the intelligent, thoughtful, resourceful, and empathetic Alice Barton manages to emerge from the problematic world of her social class, her family, and her religion not only personally unscathed, but indeed able to make positive choices in her own life as well as to offer support to others when circumstances require it. Despite her Catholic upbringing and the expectations of her family, Alice soon finds herself unable to accept the Christian worldview on the one hand, and the limitations imposed on her by her gender and social position on the other; she adopts a broadly secular moral vision, governed by a rational approach to life and a strong sense of compassion and empathy, and she asserts her personal and intellectual independence as she attempts to develop a career as an aspiring writer. In line with her ideals, Alice supports her friend May Gould, morally as well as financially, through the time of May's pregnancy and childbirth, and she remains loyal to her despite May's continued rejection, later on in her life, of the conventional restrictions of Victorian sexual morality. Even more significantly, Alice acts with tact, understanding, and generosity as she declines the lesbian advances of another of her friends, Lady Cecilia Cullen. As the novel draws to its close, Alice's final decision to defy the wishes of her family and the expectations of her social class and to marry, for love, a young doctor, a self-made man fully conscious of his lower-class background and deeply committed to the cause of social responsibility that he sees as integral element of his professional calling, offers a level of hope that is rare in Ascendancy fiction. Alice Barton and Edward Reed personify a more positive, progressive, optimistic future, suggesting that despite the problematic

nature of much of traditional Anglo-Irish life and values, there is nonetheless a potential among the Ascendancy, and among the new liberal Irish middle-class into which some sections of it are beginning to be transformed, to respond, and to lead a national response, to the moral and social challenges of the modern world. On their departure from the Bartons' estate of Brookfield, on the day of their wedding, the Reeds pay off the debt of a tenant family who are on the point of being evicted from their farm – a single gesture, maybe, but symbolic of a shift in thinking that is needed if the social tensions undermining the very existence of the Ascendancy class can begin to be addressed and rectified.

The overall picture that emerges from the study of the works of Lady Morgan, Sir Samuel Ferguson, and George Moore is therefore indicative of a level of diversity in the collective identity of the Ascendancy class that goes far beyond the common perception of that particular stratum of nineteenth-century Irish society as a community that is too set in its ways, too passive, too self-contained, too focused on the memories of its long-gone past to be able to find an effective voice and to play a meaningful role in the life of modern Ireland. It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse the reasons for the demise of the Ascendancy in the Irish Free State after 1922, and indeed for the perpetration, in the public perception of the Anglo-Irish heritage, of the melancholy, decadent vision of their decline and fall symbolised by the burning of the Big Houses – but it is tempting to think that that oversimplified interpretation of the contribution of the Ascendancy to Ireland's social history aligned rather well with the broader atmosphere of the parochialism and stagnation that prevailed in the social and cultural life of Ireland for much of the twentieth century. However, while in contemporary Ireland heirs to the Ascendancy tradition might not be seen as much more than 'a picturesque survival' (Bence-Jones 1987, 299), and while such social influence as they might still enjoy does not extend far beyond a small number of the more upmarket areas of central and southern Dublin, it is difficult to resist an impression that the dramatic social and cultural changes which have, over the last thirty years, transformed the Republic of Ireland into one of the most dynamic and advanced countries of Europe, are, in a metaphorical sense at least, a fulfilment of W.B. Yeats's dream of the final defeat of the forces of petty intolerance and narrow-mindedness against which he protested in his Senate speech. If that is indeed the case, then the modern, liberal, inclusive, open-minded, tolerant Ireland that has emerged since

the early 1990s may well owe a debt of gratitude to some of the half-forgotten writers and thinkers of its often neglected and underappreciated Ascendancy past.

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