

The Dilemma of William Carleton, Regional Writer and Subject of Empire

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ABSTRACT: William Carleton's *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* has long been recognised as one of the key nineteenth-century Irish literary texts and the masterpiece of a figure whose influence has extended to modern Irish writers such as John Montague and Seamus Heaney. *Traits and Stories* has been valued both for its vitality, humour and tragi-comedy and also as a unique record of the changing lives of the rural Catholic population in Ulster in the early years of the century. The circumstances of Carleton's own life also changed profoundly after he left Co Tyrone and sought to make his way as a writer among the Protestant literary class in Dublin. The implications of his decision to leave the Catholic church in favour of the established Protestant Church of Ireland have been of particular interest to critics who are divided in their views of the importance of this on his representations of Irish peasant life. This article focuses especially on the two longest commentaries Carleton wrote on his own work - the Preface to the first series of *Traits and Stories* published in 1830 at the beginning of his career, and the much more extensive Introduction to the definitive 'new edition' of the collected *Traits and Stories* of 1844, when he was an established literary figure. Using these texts, and making references to some of the stories, the article examines how they reveal the tensions between Carleton's sense of himself as an Irishman with a strong regional identity rooted in the north of country, and also as a colonial citizen of the British empire. It considers the importance of this dual awareness in his conception of his own position as a writer and on the way in which he presents his work with an eye not only to Irish readers, but to an English audience.

KEYWORDS: peasantry, region, Ulster, colonialism, religion, history.



WHEN THOMAS DAVIS declared in 1845 that 'No other peasantry have had their tale so well told as the Irish by this Ulsterman', William Carleton, and that 'No man, who does not know the things he tells, knows Ireland', he unwittingly laid down claims that have

essentially been endorsed in numerous subsequent judgements of the writer's work.¹ John Wilson Foster, for example, has called Carleton the 'first and foremost novelist of the Irish peasantry' whose writing 'can be said to have fathered Ulster fiction in the process of fathering important strains in Irish fiction generally'. For Terry Eagleton, *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* is the 'premier work of the century's literature' in Ireland.² For some, including Thomas Flanagan, Carleton's significance is less as a writer of fiction than as a social historian, a view which perhaps finds its most extreme formulation in Margaret Chesnutt's assertions that he 'must be read primarily as an exponent of a vanished culture and way of life', and that 'questions of literary or artistic quality are largely irrelevant.'³ In contrast to this dismissive judgement, Eagleton has explored how features of Carleton's writing often regarded as problematic or unsatisfactory – for example, the multiplicity of narrative styles, the enjambement of different rhetorics, or the seemingly far-fetched and clumsy plots – are better understood as symptoms of the historical and political context in which he was working and the lack of available models of Irish fiction.⁴ David Krause has also examined Carleton's narrative practices, rebutting the claim that however great the power of particular episodes in his books, he is unsuccessful as a novelist. For Krause, there has been a repeated critical failure to recognise how Carleton's 'comic vision with tragic implications' is grounded in his innovative freedom from conventional narrative structures which, he claims, anticipates Bakhtin's 'carnivalistic view of fiction'.⁵

¹ Thomas Davis, 'Carleton' in *Thomas Davis: Memoir, Essays and Poems* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1945), pp. 111-112.

² John Wilson Foster, *Forces and Themes in Ulster Fiction* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1974), p. 1 and Foreword, n.p.; Terry Eagleton, 'Form and Ideology in the Anglo-Irish Novel' in *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 207.

³ Thomas Flanagan, *The Irish Novelists 1800-1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957); Margaret Chesnutt, *Studies in the Short Stories of William Carleton* (Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1976), p. 140.

⁴ Eagleton, 'Form and Ideology in the Anglo-Irish Novel', passim pp. 145-225. See also, for example, Marjorie Howes, 'Literary Religion: William Carleton' in *Colonial Crossings* (Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2006), pp. 24-35.

⁵ David Krause, *William Carleton the Novelist* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2000), pp. 5-6. It should be noted that John Wilson Foster gestured towards the perspective Krause adopts in an important footnote in *Forces and Themes in Ulster Fiction*. He wrote: 'I would suggest that [Carleton] ought to be studied first and foremost as a comic writer; the crowded canvas, static characters, the curve

However, while critics have acknowledged the significance for Carleton's work of his regional background, and his position as both an Irishman and a subject of the British Empire, less has been made of the interplay between these two formative influences. The following discussion, which relates particularly to *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* and to the Preface and Introduction Carleton wrote for the 1830 and 1844 editions respectively, focuses on the importance of that interplay for his work and in shaping his conception of his own role as an artist.

Although the island of Ireland has often been taken as a region within the British Isles as a whole, the province of Ulster has likewise been regarded as a distinct region within Ireland on a number of counts. One geographer describes Ulster as 'a natural region' centred on 'the four river basins of the Foyle, Bann, Erne and Lagan together with the Tirconnail country in Donegal'.⁶ But Ulster is also individuated by the historical, cultural and religious consequences of the confiscation of land originally held by the native Catholic population to reward Scottish Protestant supporters of the Williamite campaigns in the late seventeenth century and to subdue further Catholic insurgency. This 'plantation' created the largest concentration of Protestants in Ireland, most of whom were further distinguished from their co-religionists elsewhere in the country by their adherence to Calvinistic Presbyterianism. The sectarian divisions that have bedevilled community relationships ever since, and which are embedded in the landscape, language, literature and culture of Ulster, are a legacy of that strategy. So, too, is the statelet of Northern Ireland artificially created by the Government of Ireland Act (1920) out of six of the nine counties in the province to appease the Protestant Unionist population when British rule ended in the rest of the country.

Yet while it may be relatively easy to suggest the rationale for seeing Ulster as a region within Ireland, the larger question of what characterises regional writing has proved more challenging for scholars. K.D.M. Snell helpfully proposes that it is 'fiction

of the protagonists' careers from low to high, the just distribution of deserts in the *dénouements*: all these suggest the genre of comedy. Furthermore, all those prefaces, affidavits, footnotes, supporting evidence, didactic interruptions of the narrative belong to a fiction in which the distinction between fact and fiction is blurred. ... The intrigues and conspiracies of his plots are the machinery of comedy but also the desperate struggle of a hungry and oppressed people.' (p. 17)

⁶ T.W. Freeman, *Ireland: A General and Regional Geography* (London: Methuen, 1972) cited in John Wilson Foster, 'Radical Regionalism' in *Colonial Consequences: Essays in Irish Literature and Culture* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1991), p. 279.

set in a recognisable region, and which describes features distinguishing the life, social relations, customs, language, dialect, or other aspects of the culture of that area and its people'.⁷ As will be shown, William Carleton's stories incorporate all of these features. Furthermore, his work is imbued with 'a strong sense of local geography, topography or landscape', which is also mentioned by Snell as typical of regional writing.⁸ In her descriptive survey of Carleton's work, Eileen A. Sullivan locates him as 'a remarkable regional writer' whose 'literary kingdom [was] in Ulster and Meath', while more recently Thomas B. O'Grady has noted how the opening paragraphs of the first of the *Traits and Stories*, 'Ned M'Keown', 'act as a doorway into the world – a world both literal and literary – that Carleton has inscribed indelibly in the twenty fictional narratives that constitute his major opus.'⁹

Specific, identifiable circumstantial details are not the only hallmarks of regional writing, however, as Ian Duncan reminds us: 'from the beginning this kind of [regional] space is framed in an elegiac relation between imaginative or sympathetic belonging and historic exile', he writes.¹⁰ In Carleton's case, while his early life was spent in his native place, once he had departed from it he became no more than an occasional visitor, and yet the vibrant content and energy of his stories, and many of their most potent thematic concerns, were generated by memories rooted in his formative years. The power and process of such associative memory are vividly evoked in a passage from 'The Party Fight and the Funeral' where the narrator, returning to his home place on foot and by moonlight after a long absence, reflects on how:

... there is a mystery yet undiscovered in our being, for no man can know the full extent of his feelings or his capacities. Many a slumbering thought, and sentiment, and association reposes within him, of which he is utterly ignorant, and which, except he

⁷ K.D.M. Snell (ed.), *The Regional Novel in Britain and Ireland 1800-1990* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), Introduction, p. 1.

⁸ Snell, Introduction, p. 1

⁹ Eileen A. Sullivan, *William Carleton* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), p. 31 and p. 66; Thomas B. O'Grady, 'Reading the Lay of the Landscape in William Carleton's "Ned M'Keown"', *New Hibernia Review*, vol. 14. No. 2, Samradh/Summer 2010 (pp. 133-144), p. 133. It is worth noting that the most recent list of townlands in the barony of Clogher still contains many of the names found in Carleton's stories – see <<https://www.townlands.ie/tyrone/clogher2>> [Accessed 13/3/2019] Likewise, place names and topographical features mentioned by Carleton are often readily identifiable.

¹⁰ Ian Duncan, 'The Provincial or Regional Novel' in Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing (eds), *A Companion to the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) (pp. 318-335), p. 322.

come in contact with those objects whose influence over his mind can alone call them into being, may never be awakened, or give him one moment of either pleasure or pain. ... The force of association ... was powerful; for as I advanced nearer home, the names of the hills, and lakes, and mountains, that I had utterly forgotten, as I thought, were distinctly revived in my memory; and a crowd of youthful thoughts and feelings, that I imagined my intercourse with the world and the finger of time had blotted out of my being, began to crowd afresh upon my fancy. The name of a townland would instantly return with its appearance; and I could now remember the history of families and individuals that had long been effaced from my recollection.¹¹

This testifies to the speaker's discovery of the unforeseen capacity of a once familiar but long abandoned landscape to reanimate knowledge and emotions previously assumed to be lost forever, but which he suddenly realises are still embedded in his memory. Although much may have changed both for the returning native himself and within the community he starts to recollect, this remembrance of the place as he once knew it affirms how life elsewhere has not erased the regional history that underpins his identity and, at least by implication, highlights the losses incurred by his migration. From this perspective, it becomes clearer why, as we will see, in many of the footnotes to his stories, Carleton names the original people who lie behind particular characters and insists on the veracity and accuracy of details of rural Ulster life as he had known it in his youth.

Cairns Craig offers another angle on this dynamic between landscape and memory which he, too, sees as fundamental to regionalism. 'It is on the basis of [the] fusion of a particular environment with the particularity of the mind "possessed" by it that regionalism came to be founded', he observes: 'the territory of a particular region is a blank until infused by a memory which brings it to life by being stimulated to the recollection of its past.'¹² The opening of another of Carleton's stories, 'The Poor Scholar', is both illustrative of this process of 'infusing' a landscape with particularity through the act of recapitulating its past in comparison with its present, and also brings us directly into the world of the author's boyhood:

One day about the middle of November, in the year 18---, Dominick M'Evoy and his son Jemmy were digging potatoes on the side of a hard, barren hill, called Esker Dhu. The

¹¹ William Carleton, *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (Dublin: W. Curry, 2 vols, 1844; facsimile reprint, Gerards Cross: Colin Smythe, with a preface by Barbara Hayley, 1990), vol. 1, p. 186.

¹² Cairns Craig, 'Scotland and the Regional Novel' in Snell (ed.), *The Regional Novel* (pp. 221-256), p. 243.

day was bitter and wintry, the men were thinly clad, and as the keen blast spread across the hill with considerable violence, the sleet-like rain which it bore along, pelted into their garments with pitiless severity. The father had advanced into more than middle age; having held, at a rack-rent, the miserable waste of farm which he occupied, he was compelled to exert himself in its cultivation, despite either obduracy of soil, inclemency of weather. The day, however, was so unusually severe, that the old man began to feel incapable of continuing his toil. ... The father paused to take breath, and supported by his spade, looked down upon the sheltered inland which, inhabited chiefly by Protestants and Presbyterians, rich and warm-looking under him.

'Why thin,' he exclaimed to the son – a lad about fifteen, - 'sure I know well I oughtn't to curse yez, anyway, you black set! an' yit, the Lord forgive me my sins, I'm almost timplted to give yez a volley, an' that from my heart out! Look at thim, Jimmy agra – only look at the black thieves! how warm an' wealthy they sit there in our own ould possessions, an' here we must toil till our fingers are worn to the stumps, upon this thievin' bent.'¹³

The plight of the M'Evoy's, condemned to eke out a living on poor mountain soil with a view of the prosperous fields in the valley far below, confronts them with both a visual and an experiential reminder of the history of the expropriation of Catholic land and of the displacement of the native population in this region. Their story, at once individual and typical, is inseparable from the landscape in which it is located where the legacy of the forceful imposition of colonial power in the past has been reflected in the lives of subsequent generations down to Dominick and Jemmy M'Evoy themselves. The scene also endorses the idea that 'the particular geography of a place can operate as a determining force in the lives of its inhabitants', affecting not only the material condition of their lives, but their attitudes and relationships.¹⁴

How, then, do these factors have particular significance for William Carleton and his fiction? Born in the townland of Prillisk, near the small town of Clogher in Co. Tyrone, probably in 1794, Carleton was the fourteenth and youngest child not of a peasant, as he asserted on occasion, but of a smallholder. Thus, although the family may not have had much social standing, nor were they among the poorest members of their community. The Clogher valley itself was relatively prosperous, and Carleton's life there prior to his departure for Dublin around 1817 coincided with 'a period of rapidly growing

¹³ Carleton, *Traits and Stories*, vol. 2, pp. 257-258.

¹⁴ O'Grady, 'Reading the Lay of the Landscape', p. 134.

population, of prolonged corn boom, of a vibrant flax industry and of developments in communication'.¹⁵ It was a society in which old traditions, customs and superstitions were commonplace, and where Irish was still widely spoken, although it was already under pressure that would become irresistible with the advent of the National Schools where instruction was all through English.¹⁶ The area was frequently the scene of violent sectarian incidents perpetrated by both the newly formed Protestant Orange Order, which was militantly anti-Catholic, and Catholic Ribbonmen who carried out acts of agrarian terrorism against Protestant farmers. One of Carleton's earliest memories recounted in his unfinished and posthumously published *Autobiography* (1896), and given fictional form in his novel, *Valentine M'Clutchy* (1845), was of a night-time raid on the family home by Orangemen allegedly searching for hidden weapons during which one of his sisters was physically assaulted. In addition, Carleton's boyhood coincided with heightened tensions in the country during and after the unsuccessful rising of the United Irishmen in 1798 against British rule in Ireland. The origins of the author's own rejection of violence and revolutionary politics may partly lie in his memories of these experiences.

In short, Carleton's youth was passed in a community which retained strong links to the past and was periodically disrupted by longstanding internal tensions rooted in its history, but which was also starting to change, and would be altered further by major events that affected the country as a whole over the course of his lifetime. These include the dissolution of the Irish Parliament in 1800, Catholic emancipation (1829), the spread of formal education and decline of the hedge schools, the impact of famine and emigration, the influence of the nationalist Young Ireland movement in the 1840s, the growth of more authoritarian Catholicism from the middle of the century, and the increasing erosion of the Irish language and native Irish culture. Even by the time he turned to fiction in the late 1820s, Carleton knew that the kind of people and lives he was representing in his stories were already passing into history, and this fact is fundamental to any consideration of him as a writer with a strong regional identity.

Moreover, just as that world was in transition, so Carleton's own life is marked by a series of profound and unsettling transitions: he was the country boy with a local

¹⁵ Jack Johnston, 'Carleton's Clogher' in Gordon Brand (ed.), *William Carleton: The Authentic Voice* (Gerards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2006) (pp. 108-124), p. 108.

¹⁶ This issue is central to Brian Friel's play, *Translations* (1990) which is set in a hedge school in the 1830s.

reputation for feats of physical prowess who made his home in the city and aspired to be a literary man; he swapped the north for the south and abandoned the Catholicism of his family for the Protestantism of the established Church of Ireland.¹⁷ Educated in the hedge schools of Tyrone, and at one time intended for the priesthood, he eventually wrote novels with introductory appeals to leading English politicians to address Ireland's problems, and he became the recipient of a belated literary pension towards the end of his life. As Foster has remarked: 'Carleton has paid the critical price in Ireland for straddling more often than any other writer the deep divisions that lie like geological faults across the Irish, and particularly the Ulster, psychic landscape.'¹⁸ The impact and cost of those 'deep divisions' are nowhere more apparent than in the introductory pages he wrote to *Traits and Stories* which reveal his tricky negotiations with his region, his country and his own position as a subject of empire.

Carleton's emergence as a writer resulted from his friendship with Rev. Caesar Otway, whom he met in Dublin. An evangelical Church of Ireland clergyman and the founder of two publications, the *Christian Examiner* (1826) and the *Dublin Penny Journal* (1832), Otway was an influence in Carleton's conversion to Protestantism, and published his first story, 'A Pilgrimage to Patrick's Purgatory' in the *Christian Examiner* and *Church of Ireland Gazette* in April 1828. Based on the author's youthful experience of a pilgrimage to Station Island in Lough Derg, it is marked by the beliefs of his mentor and was moulded to serve the purposes of Protestant evangelicalism by mocking the superstitions of Catholics and the alleged unscrupulousness of their priests. According to Otway himself, 'its success was decisive and instantaneous; it was rapidly followed by the story of "Father Butler", which appeared in the same periodical under the same signature of Wilton. From that hour the biography of Mr Carleton is in the annals of our

¹⁷ Carleton's change of church has attracted much attention, with critics divided in their views on whether this was a matter of conviction or an opportunistic move on the part of a man seeking to establish himself in Dublin (Protestant) literary society, but who remained a Catholic at heart. Marjorie Howes suggests that the question has been so prominent because Carleton's status as an ethnographer is at stake: 'If scholars conclude that Carleton is in some fundamental way an anti-Catholic writer, then his portraits of the Catholic country people begin to look increasingly like condescending stereotypes. If, on the other hand, scholars argue that he remained loyal to Catholicism on the sentimental level, a level usually characterized as emotional, unconscious, or paradoxical, it becomes possible to recuperate a kind of anthropological accuracy in his works.' ('Literary Religion: William Carleton', p. 27.)

¹⁸ Foster, *Forces and Themes in Ulster Fiction*, p. 17.

literature.¹⁹ A revised version of the first story, retitled 'The Lough Derg Pilgrim' and with the more lurid anti-Catholic elements toned down, later appeared in *Traits and Stories*. It is unclear whether the changes reflect a moderation of Carleton's own views or a determination to take control of his story, but the salient point is that it indicates how from the outset he was at the centre of pressures to make his fiction serve particular vested interests. He published a number of other pieces in periodicals over the next two years, but the first series of *Traits and Stories* appeared anonymously in 1830 and was well received. This was Carleton's real break-through publication, and he consolidated his achievement with a second series three years later, subsequently noting that 'not only were his volumes stamped with an immediate popularity at home, where they could be best appreciated, but [they were] awarded a very gratifying position in the literature of the day by the unanimous and not less generous verdict of the English and Scottish critics.'²⁰

In his preface to the 1830 volume, Carleton is at pains to establish a number of points which display an ambiguous combination of self-confidence and self-doubt, and perhaps a need to justify himself and his work to prospective readers: it as if he anticipates that his audience will find his stories alien and implausible. To this end he immediately begins with a defiant pre-emptory strike against any challenge to the veracity of the subject-matter, announcing that his material is authentically Irish – 'drawn by one born amidst the scenes he describes – reared as one of the people whose characters and situations he sketches' – and also original, especially in its regional specificity. 'The Author assumes', he declares:

'that in the ground he has taken, he stands in a great measure without a competitor; particularly as to certain sketches, peculiar, in the habits and manners delineated in them, to the Northern Irish. These last ... are characteristically distinct from the Southern or Western Milesians, as the people of Yorkshire are from the natives of Somerset; yet they are still as Irish, and as strongly imbued with the character of their country.'²¹

Carleton then positions himself as the interpreter of Irish history and regional community relations for the benefit of potential readers who 'perhaps may be sceptical

¹⁹ 'Caesar Otway on William Carleton' in Brand (ed.), *William Carleton The Authentic Voice* (pp. 17-28), p. 21.

²⁰ Carleton, 'Introduction' to *Traits and Stories* (1844), vol. 1, p. vi.

²¹ William Carleton, 'Preface' to the First Edition of *Traits and Stories* (1830), reprinted in Brand (ed.), *William Carleton The Authentic Voice* (pp. 9-11), p. 9.

as to the deep hatred which prevails among Roman Catholics in the north of Ireland, against those who differ from them in party and religious principles'.²² He reminds them of the consequences of the Ulster plantation for the indigenous population whom he describes as 'this race, surrounded by Scotch and English settlers', hiding 'amongst the mists of their highland retreats', amongst whom 'education, until recently, had made little progress; superstition and prejudice, and ancient animosity, held their strongest sway, and the Priests, the poor pastors of a poorer people, were devoid of the wealth, the self-respect, and the learning, which prevailed among their better endowed brethren of the South.'²³

From here Carleton moves to explain his cultural and moral aims. After first denying, in his phrase, 'subserviency to any political purpose whatever', he insists that his characters are represented with integrity and without any desire either to demonise or to idealise them, claiming that he has 'exhibit[ed] them as they really are', showing their vices, errors and superstitions, but also their candour, affection and faithfulness.²⁴ Then, in an overt display of flattery to the British establishment, he expresses the pious hope that:

'his own dear, native mountain people may, through the influence of education, by the leadings of purer knowledge, and by the fosterings of a paternal government, become the pride, the strength, and support of the British empire, instead of, as now, forming its weakness and reproach'.²⁵

The apparent volte face here highlights the dilemma of a writer who is aware of himself both as the native of a region and as a colonial subject, and also of the tension between these two positions. This arises through the ironic and paradoxical implication that it will be through casting off many of the very characteristics which distinguish the Irishness of the subjects of his stories – and which may make them interesting to readers – and by developing lives more congruent with approved imperial standards and aspirations, that northern Irish Catholics will acquire status and win respect among the English.

²² Carleton, 'Preface', p. 9.

²³ Carleton, 'Preface', p. 9. One might note in passing that there is no evidence of hostility towards the Catholic priesthood here. Indeed, the northern priests appear to be doubly oppressed – first, by anti-Catholicism and secondly by their relatively disadvantaged status compared with other Irish priests.

²⁴ Carleton, 'Preface', p. 10.

²⁵ Carleton, 'Preface', p. 10.

The dilemma is even more pronounced in the much longer introduction to the 'New Edition' of *Traits and Stories* published in 23 parts between 1842 and 1844, and then in two volumes in 1844. Here Carleton presented the definitive version of what he now somewhat disingenuously called 'the two unpretending volumes by a peasant's son' which had made him a leading Irish writer and had already appeared in a number of reprints and editions in the 1830s.²⁶ The status of the 'New Edition', which went through eleven impressions until 1870, is suggested by several important features. Apart from making revisions and adding the introduction which is his most extensive commentary on his own work, Carleton included numerous notes on Irish life, customs, beliefs, superstitions, religious practices and idioms: for instance, he glosses terms such as '*doodeen*' ('a short pipe'), '*yellow-legs*' ('a kind of potato') and '*gosther*' ('idle talk – gossip'), and provides English equivalents for Irish phrases which proliferate in his characters' speech.²⁷ Examples of these include: "*acushla agus asthore machree*" ('The very pulse and delight of my heart'), "*Manima Yea agus a wurrah*" ('My soul to God and the Virgin'), and "*Shudorth, a rogarah*" ('This to you, you rogue').²⁸ Other annotations are more personal: Shane Martin and Jemmy Tague, two of the party gathered in Ned M'Keown's house were, respectively, 'a rollicking, fighting, drinking butcher' and 'a good-humoured fellow, well-liked, and nobody's enemy but his own. Shane was called Kittogue Shane from being left-handed'; and Paddy Mellon, a very minor figure in 'The Battle of the Factions' was apparently 'the most famous shoemaker in the parish', although, Carleton adds, 'I am bound in common justice and honesty to say that so big a liar never put an awl into leather'.²⁹ Many of these notes have, as it were, a narrative life of their own, as do the extensive descriptions of landscapes and of cottage interiors within the stories, and they bear out Eagleton's perception that 'the populist authenticity, and the rhetorical play for the British reader' in *Traits and Stories* 'are not as antithetical as they may seem: simply to describe Irish popular life is to cater

²⁶ William Carleton, 'Introduction' to *Traits and Stories* (1844), vol. 1, p. vi.

²⁷ The first two words come from 'Ned M'Keown', and the third from 'Larry M'Farland's Wake', *Traits and Stories*, vol. 1, p. 7 and p. 10 respectively.

²⁸ The first phrase comes from 'Shane Fadh's Wedding', the second from 'The Party Fight and the Funeral' and the third from 'Phelim O'Toole's Courtship' in *Traits and Stories*, vol. 1, p. 79 and p. 190, and vol. 2, p. 227 respectively.

²⁹ See 'Ned M'Keown' and 'The Battle of the Factions' in *Traits and Stories*, vol. 1, p. 6 and p. 123 respectively.

to the anthropological curiosity of the outsider, which is why Carleton can relaxedly allow himself long passages of naturalistic observation which do little to promote the plot'.³⁰ The volumes were enhanced by etchings and woodcuts by eighteen well-known contemporary artists, including Phiz, Sibson, Macmanus, Wrightson and Lee, and they were published not only in Dublin by William Curry, but in London by William S. Orr.

Carleton's tone throughout the introduction shows how his confidence had grown since the first publication of his work. He is less defensive against potential criticism and now proudly projects the Irish peasantry as colonial citizens – 'an important and interesting part of the empire' – which contrasts with his earlier, more tentative view of their standing.³¹ He also declares that his first purpose is 'to prepare the minds of his readers especially those of the English and Scotch' – for the stories that follow, and this restated ambition to reach a wider audience on the British mainland is now linked to other aspirations.³² In particular, Carleton wants to contest stereotypical notions of the Irish as ridiculous both in character and language and he goes to some length to defend them against charges of stupidity, arguing that: 'The language of our people has been for centuries, and is up to the present day, in a transition state. The English tongue is gradually superseding the Irish ... This fact, then, will easily account for the ridicule which is, and I fear ever will be, heaped upon those who are found to use a language which they do not properly understand.'³³ The hybrid language spoken by many of Carleton's Clogher valley neighbours, and in other parts of Ireland, and which runs through much of the dialogue in his stories, is therefore not to be conflated with stupidity or foolishness, but understood as a consequence of colonial history. As might be expected in this pitch for a more sympathetic reception in England, Carleton takes an upbeat view of the ongoing development of Anglo-Irish relations in an age of scientific and industrial progress which has promoted better communications: 'Thus has mutual respect arisen from mutual intercourse, and those who hitherto approached each other with distrust, are beginning to perceive, that in spite of political or religious prejudices ... the truthful experience of life will in the event create nothing but good-

³⁰ Eagleton, 'Form and Ideology in the Anglo-Irish Novel', p. 207.

³¹ Carleton, 'Introduction' to *Traits and Stories*, vol. 1, p. i.

³² Carleton, 'Introduction', p. i.

³³ Carleton, 'Introduction', p. ii.

will and confidence between the countries.³⁴ These words highlight the conservatism of Carleton's politics and his determination to present himself as an exemplary subject of the empire, but the unintended irony of their publication on the eve of the great Irish famine of the 1840s is also undeniable.

Carleton does not regard the transitional state of language as the only source of English prejudice towards the Irish. 'For nearly a century we were completely at the mercy of our British neighbours,' he writes, 'who probably amused themselves at our expense with the greater licence, and a more assured sense of impunity, inasmuch as they knew we were utterly destitute of a national literature.'³⁵ Furthermore, he maintains that the former lack of publishing opportunities in Ireland led the most gifted writers to become 'absentees' in London where they were assimilated into the English literary tradition. Carleton's choice of the word 'absentees' is notable in this context, being the term commonly used for Irish landowners living extravagantly in English society funded by the expropriation of their tenants at home. Again, however, he takes an optimistic view of recent developments, highlighting especially the importance of the *Dublin University Magazine* founded by the lawyer and politician, Isaac Butt, in 1832.³⁶ In his opinion, this periodical had assisted in the birth of 'a national spirit that rose above the narrow distinctions of creed and party', creating a 'neutral spot' where 'the Roman Catholic Priest and the Protestant parson, the Whig, the Tory and the Radical, divested of their respective prejudices, can meet in an amicable spirit.'³⁷ The liberating potential of such a collaborative forum should not be underestimated, because it cut across the political and religious differences that so often polarised Irish society and inhibited Irish cultural coherence in the face of colonial influences. It is therefore unsurprising that Carleton predicts that the *Dublin University Magazine's* influence will advance the spread and appeal of literature, and, through its 'spirit of candour and generosity ... produce a most salutary effect among the educated classes of all parties, and consequently among those whom they influence'.³⁸ The importance

³⁴ Carleton, 'Introduction', p. iv.

³⁵ Carleton, 'Introduction', p. v.

³⁶ The *Dublin University Magazine* had regularly published Carleton's work, and his new edition of *Traits and Stories* was dedicated to Isaac Butt.

³⁷ Carleton, 'Introduction', p. vii.

³⁸ Carleton, 'Introduction', p. vii.

he attaches to redressing the lack of a national literature is in tune with the ideal of change through cultural nationalism promoted by Thomas Davis, editor of the Young Ireland movement's paper, the *Nation*, in this period. Crucially, Carleton accepts his own role and responsibility as a writer to contribute to this initiative, and the connection that emerges here between regional representation in his stories and the attempt to establish a national literature is particularly notable.

In a similar vein later in the century, W.B. Yeats chose to introduce a selection of *Stories of Carleton* (1889) as part of his own project of cultural nationalism, loftily declaring that 'The history of a nation is not in parliaments and battle-fields, but in what the people say to each other on fair-days and high days, and in how they farm, and quarrel, and go on pilgrimage. These things has Carleton recorded.'³⁹

By presenting Carleton as a custodian of the nation's past as well as a writer of fiction, Yeats not only reiterated the view of Thomas Davis, but that of the author in his own commentary: almost half of the 24 page introduction to *Traits and Stories* is devoted to an autobiographical account of his family background, upbringing and early experiences with the explicit intention of establishing his credentials as the recorder and interpreter of Irish character and rural life. In particular, he writes of his parents, each of whom, in Marjorie Howes' words, 'embodies a different conception of the peasantry and Irish folklore'.⁴⁰ His mother's reputation as a singer in Irish and as a renowned exponent of traditional keening for the dead links her to a receding culture, while his father's fluency in Irish and English, his prodigious memory, and his capacity as a seanachie or story-teller preserve the past and enable him to pass on the intimate regional history that so richly furnished his imagination. Recalling the rich variety of residual Irish stories and traditions in his home area, Carleton wrote that:

'even in my early youth, even beyond the walls of my own humble roof, they met me in every direction. It was at home, however, and from my father's lips in particular, that they were perpetually sounding in my ears. ... As a teller of old tales, legends and historical anecdotes he was unrivalled, and his stock of them was inexhaustible'.⁴¹

³⁹ W.B. Yeats, 'William Carleton', reprinted in W.B. Yeats, *Representative Irish Tales* (1891; Gerards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1979), with a Foreword by Mary Helen Thuente, p. 363.

⁴⁰ Howes, 'Literary Religion: William Carleton', p. 25.

⁴¹ Carleton, 'Introduction', p. ix.

This, he claims, was of 'peculiar advantage to me in after life, as a literary man' because it:

'enabled me in my writings to transfer the genius, the idiomatic peculiarity and the conversational spirit of the one language into the other, precisely as the people themselves do in their dialogue, whenever the heart or imagination happens to be moved by the darker or better passions.'⁴²

Joep Leerssen has also noted how Carleton used the account of his family to 'hallmark the value and authenticity of his tales', adding that in 'set[ting] up his parents as the very prototypes of ideal folklore subjects', he contributes to the process whereby the Irish peasantry began to be perceived not as the 'pauperized, brutish and sullen dregs of a dead old culture, full of disaffection and hatred for their new rulers', but as subjects of 'cultural interest'.⁴³ In Leerssen's words: 'They come to be seen, in Romantic, Grimm-like fashion, as the repository of quaint superstition and primordial folk and fairy tales.'⁴⁴ This is helpful in defining Carleton's own interstitial position between his remembered close world of his rural youth and the metropolitan, literary, Protestant world with its wider horizons and reach into urban and English markets where he lived his adult life without ever being fully assimilated into it. As the 'historian' of his people and a contributor to the making of a 'national literature', he is also quite consciously constructing that history and literature in a way that seeks to invoke authentic regional knowledge, experience and memories, and at the same time involves a canniness about what he needs to do to achieve literary and commercial success on a larger stage and with a wider and non-domestic audience.

Carleton has been an exemplary figure for more recent Irish writers, too. He was an important influence on the fiction of Benedict Kiely, whose *Poor Scholar* (1947) remains the definitive biography of the writer, while for the poet, John Montague, Carleton and his characters were almost touchable presences in his own boyhood in the 1930s. 'For a youngster growing up on the edge of the Clogher Valley the stories of William Carleton were not fiction, but fact', he wrote;

⁴² Carleton, 'Introduction', p. ix.

⁴³ Joep Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), p. 163; p. 162.

⁴⁴ Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination*, p. 162. Leerssen takes this point further, seeing Carleton as a forerunner of numerous other nineteenth-century Irish writers who published collections of legends, stories and tales (e.g. Samuel Lover, Anna-Maria Hall, Speranza Wilde) and of folklorists such as Crofton Croker, Jeremiah Curtin, William Larminie and Douglas Hyde – see pp. 162-164.

'gradually one learnt the genealogy of the various houses, gathered a hint of the intricate law-cases and local feuds, saw Orange drummers practising before a tin-roofed lodge. There were people still alive who could remember Anne Duffy, the original of all his gentle heroines, the blind fiddler Micky MacRory, and in a famous fight at (sic) barn-dance only thirty years before two whole townlands had battered away until dawn was breaking, and there were no more untouched skulls.'⁴⁵

Although Montague's poetry embraced universal themes and drew upon his extensive experience of living in the United States and France, as well as his belief in the internationalism of literature, it also remained deeply embedded in the very landscape and regional history that had previously invigorated Carleton's imagination.⁴⁶

The inspirational influence of Carleton also extended to the most famous Irish writer of recent times, Seamus Heaney, who imagined his fellow Ulsterman and literary forebear as one of the ghosts he encounters on the road to Lough Derg in his long poem, 'Station Island'. In this seminal work, Heaney explores his passage from his own strongly regional origins in Co. Derry with which he never lost touch, and from religious, political and cultural pressures and expectations that his predecessor would have recognised and understood, to muster the courage required of a writer with aspirations to universality. The ghost is 'an aggravated man' – impatient and confrontational, suspicious of 'something ... defensive' in the poet's smile, but his parting advice simultaneously reflects Heaney's estimate of Carleton and the lesson that he takes from his example:

'... you have to try to make sense of what comes.
Remember everything and keep your head.

...

We are all earthworms of the earth, and all that
has gone through us will be our trace.'⁴⁷

In a variety of ways, therefore, the case of William Carleton is persuasively illustrative of, first, the enduring power and stimulus a particular region may give the creative

⁴⁵ John Montague, 'Tribute to William Carleton', *The Bell*, vol. xvii, no. 1, April 1952; reprinted in Brand (ed.), *William Carleton The Authentic Voice* (pp. 87-93), pp. 91-92. 'The Party Fight and the Funeral' in *Traits and Stories* vol. 1 recounts the kind of fight described by Montague.

⁴⁶ This is perhaps particularly true of Montague's major volume, *The Rough Field* (1972), a sequence of poems which offers an historical meditation on Ulster.

⁴⁷ Seamus Heaney, 'Station Island' in *New Selected Poems 1966-1987* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 166; p. 167; p. 168.

imagination. Second, his work shows that a regional writer may also be a national writer, and that regionalism is not of necessity 'a shrinking from the world' but may be 'a starting-point from which to reach out to wider horizons' – a perception which is reflected in the work of other Irish writers whose own development was touched by Carleton's example.⁴⁸ And finally, we see in the writer's introductory reflections the anxieties and tensions generated not only by the transitions that shaped his own life, but by the obligation he felt to explain and justify Irish character in the face of his country's colonial history and in the hope of replacing English ignorance and contempt towards the natives of its oldest colony with more compassionate understanding and a will to address their grievances.



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⁴⁸ Robin Marsh, 'Carleton, John Hewitt and Regionalism' in Brand (ed.), *William Carleton The Authentic Voice* (pp. 393-410), p. 396.