

The Brier-Patch in the Kailyard

Realism versus Sentimentality in Late-Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth-Century Irish, Scottish, and American Fiction

TOM HUBBARD

DOI: 10.53720/TNXW8501

Abstract: At the turn of the nineteenth century, conservatively sentimental fictions, often religious and/or provincial in context, were answered by other works based on a realist and/or modernist aesthetic. In two novels by Canon Patrick Sheehan, Geoffrey Austin, Student (1895) and its sequel, The Triumph of Failure (1899), the central character moves from religious scepticism through secular philosophies to a rediscovery of faith. Whatever the failings of its human adherents, religious faith—and its institutions—are seen as benign. Novels which challenge this include Gerard O'Donovan's Father Ralph (1913), the autobiographical work of a former priest who exposes what he considers the conformist mediocrity of actually-existing Catholicism, and Brinsley MacNamara's The Valley of the Squinting Windows (1918), a controversial study of small-town narrow-mindedness and religiosity. Such works are comparable to the better-known critiques of James Joyce and George Moore.

Sheehan's "A Spoiled Priest" (1905) finds a Scottish Presbyterian counterpart in S. R. Crockett's "The Stickit Minister" (1893). In both these short stories, the aspiring clergyman's failure is a personal one, and the respective religious cultures remain unquestioned. Crockett and Ian Maclaren, the author of the short-story collection, Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush (1894), belong to the so-called "Kailyard" (cabbage-patch) school of Scottish writers who presented an idealised picture of small-town life. An unrelentingly dark riposte to the Kailyard, however, is supplied by George Douglas Brown's The House with the Green Shutters (1901); this novel is a Scottish equivalent of The Valley of the Squinting Windows.

In the US, certain Southern white writers maintained that the wrong side won the Civil War, and that slavery was not inhumane. Such attempts to legitimise racism were exposed by African-American writers, notably Charles Chesnutt in works such as “The Goophered Grapevine” (1887). However, the stories of Joel Chandler Harris—a white Southerner—are not as cosy as they might at first appear: in his Uncle Remus books (1880, 1883), Brer Rabbit can be seen as the black trickster who can outwit his oppressor, Brer Fox (= the slave-owner / overseer), as in the tale of Brer Rabbit, the Tar-Baby and the Brier-patch. As we would expect, there are vast differences in the historical and ideological contexts of these Irish, Scottish, and American works, but the patterns of force and counterforce are remarkably similar.

“There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all” (vi). That is one of Ireland’s best-known writers, Oscar Wilde, in his typically provocative preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* of 1891. The writers to be considered in this paper play a large part in the debate which Wilde outlines so starkly if simplistically. Simplistically—for I want to demonstrate just how complex and nuanced that debate can be when you get behind the snappy Wildean aphorisms. Moreover, while my main emphasis is necessarily upon Irish writers, I find structural similarities in the forces and counterforces evident in Scottish and American fiction of the period, a period running roughly from 1880 up to the years of the First World War and its immediate aftermath.

On the one hand, we have a number of writers in these three countries—Ireland, Scotland, and the United States—who have agendas extraneous to artistic criteria and whose fictions grow from these agendas, which are characterised by provincialism, conservatism, and are usually underpinned by religious beliefs (or if not religious beliefs as such, then social conventions and conformities which seek legitimacy in religious institutions). The three countries are all of course English-speaking, and may be said to form a large part of the Anglo-Saxon world—despite Ireland’s Celtic connections—whose dominant collective culture has tended to advance the moralistic over the aesthetic. French culture, by contrast, has tended to highlight the aesthetic over the moral—though, again, we must be on our guard against oversimplifications.

So, to recap, on the one hand, we have a group of conventionally moralistic writers. On the other hand, we have writers in these three countries who challenge the moralistic agendas, and who are concerned, variously, to expose the contradictions, often sinister contradictions, in their societies, or to prefer aesthetic considerations in their writing to anything overtly moralistic. Note these words “variously”

THE BRIER-PATCH IN THE KAILYARD

and “or”: this challenging group is not a cohesive one, and I am not sure that we should really call it a group, as if it were a monolith. Let us think rather of two sub-groups. The first of these is composed of writers who take a critical look at society, and could be broadly identified with realism—and we could well argue that this sub-group’s mission is as moralistic in its way as the kind of writing which it challenges. How different these “realists” are from their fellow-rebels who constitute our second sub-group, and who at the turn of the nineteenth century could be described as belonging to Symbolism and even modernism—modernism having at least part of its origins in the Symbolist movement—and here, the demands of art are uppermost. Here, there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book, though there might be a mischievous frisson to be had from deliberately setting out to be *immoral*, to *épater le bourgeois*, to mock the hypocrisies of a complacent dominant social class.

Of these two sub-groups challenging the status quo, the realists invoke French novelists such as Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola. The symbolists and modernists also invoke the French, but their heroes are rather the poets Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarmé, and those assorted writers associated with decadence and *fin-de-siècle* sensibility, as well as the novelist, Edouard Dujardin, pioneer of stream-of-consciousness in fiction. In Ireland, the novelist George Moore identified with the first sub-group, the realists, then became increasingly drawn to the second, the Symbolists/modernists, as in his novel, *The Lake* of 1905, which depicts a troubled priest’s questioning of his earlier dogmatism.

By way of bringing all this into sharper focus, let me back-track a little by taking a brief look at one of the most notoriously moralistic writers of the nineteenth century, the great art critic, John Ruskin. He grew up in a strict Protestant, evangelical family, and his prose style owes an enormous debt to the cadences of the King James version of the Bible. Ruskin was disturbed by the growing aestheticism of the latter part of his century, because he was an advocate (like Schiller and the early Karl Marx) of the Romantic idea of “the whole man”—man who fused the moral, religious, economic, political, and aesthetic dimensions of his being, not allowing one to dominate to the exclusion of the others. But for that very reason he grew also to question whatever was overtly moralistic and religious (or conventionally religious) to the exclusion of the other dimensions.

Accordingly, Ruskin, a writer from an intensely Protestant culture, attacked what he felt was a narrow-minded Protestant attitude to art. He had heard, in Alpine Europe, a preacher of the Waldensian sect, and was not impressed. That Sunday

morning, he writes in 1858, he had been listening to this preacher “expounding Nothing with a twang” (Ruskin xli, vol. 7). Was this man, Ruskin asks, really a servant of God? Surely, God had made the human body beautiful, had made all things beautiful, not in order to lead people away from Him. Ruskin continues: surely, a great artist like Paolo Veronese, in the “magnificent Animality” of his art, was not a servant of the devil? Ruskin had come to feel that his own Protestant upbringing had not prepared him for art.

Indeed, Ruskin could go as far as to claim that intensely religious people were ill-equipped to appreciate great art. If they were affected by any kind of artistic production, Ruskin suggested in 1853 that “very often it is by a theatrical commonplace, more frequently still by false sentiment.” (125, vol. 10). In other words, according to Ruskin, religious folk preferred kitsch. We could argue that this tendency exists among Catholics as much as among Protestants: in Catholic Ireland you can encounter innumerable examples of statues of Our Lady in the worst possible taste. Contrast this with the notion, towards the end of the century, that Catholicism could be a close relative of aestheticism. Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*, connoisseur-like, is attracted to Catholic ritual, albeit he soon proceeds to a very different dalliance with Darwinism. Wilde himself, Protestant-born, made a deathbed conversion to Catholicism, that last-chance saloon for many an 1890s decadent. James Joyce, bred a Catholic, rejected the faith even as he retained a preoccupation with its doctrines and culture. In *Stephen Hero* (composed 1904–1907, first published 1944), his Stephen Dedalus considers the proposition that “[t]he Puritan, the Calvinist, the Lutheran were inimical to art and to exuberant beauty: the Catholic was the friend of him who professed to interpret or divulge the beautiful” (183). A few pages later, however, Stephen invokes his concept of epiphany, “a sudden spiritual manifestation” (188), as pertaining not to religion but to art, despite its origins in religious discourse, specifically that of Aquinas.

To return to Ruskin: he never abandoned his Bible-based Christianity, and always insisted on a moral dimension in art. In no other art critic is that insistence so strong. But he does not demand that the artist have an overt, simplistic moral intention in his art. Here is how he suggests a great painter should go about his work: “Does a man die at your feet—your business is not to help him, but to note the colour of his lips; does a woman embrace her destruction before you, your business is not to save her, but to watch how she bends her arms. Not a specially religious or spiritual business this, it might appear” (388–389, vol. 4).

THE BRIER-PATCH IN THE KAILYARD

That demand—not to help the dying man, but to note the colour of his lips, not to save the woman but to note how she bends her arms—would, in effect, be endorsed by the realist writer in his quest for objectivity without any subjective moralising; it would also be endorsed by the Symbolist/modernist writer concerned with aesthetic rather than moralistic criteria. How odd it seems that Ruskin, otherwise well-known for his passionate denunciation of social and economic injustice, has in that last passage so much in common with his leading adversary in the aesthetic movement, the painter James Whistler, who disdained social comment and professed interest only in the composition of colours and shapes.

I would suggest, however, that the real polarity is not really that of art versus religion/morality. Ruskin had invoked Veronese as a great artist, and Veronese like so many of the Renaissance painters took his subject matter from the Bible and from Christianity. Ruskin also praised Michelangelo and Rubens, whose works are located in ecclesiastical buildings. Surely, there is much great art which has grown out of religious faith. Take music—the chorales and oratorios of Bach, the masses of Bruckner. (Though one might add that some of the finest church music has been composed by non-believers, for example, Berlioz, Tchaikovsky, Vaughan Williams.)

No—surely, the problem is not religion/morality as such; the problem is rather *piety*. Piety stems from a vulgarisation of religious faith or moral commitment; piety is characterised by a dangerous sense of certainty, admitting no doubt, no struggle, a one-dimensionality that can lead to self-righteousness and intolerance of anyone who deviates even slightly from one's own sense of absolute correctness. Piety is a feature not only of religious behaviour, but also of secular belief-systems. Most European countries knew only too well how secular faiths manifested themselves during the twentieth century, as witness Nazi-promoted art, and the so-called “socialist realism” of the Soviet bloc, which proved to be later examples of the pious kitsch which Ruskin noted as being favoured by the narrowly religious.

The intellectual basis of piety is certainty; the emotional basis of piety is sentimentality. The pious sentimentalist confuses the world as he thinks it should be with the world as it actually is. That is a recipe for no end of disasters—including bad art.

So let us apply this to Ireland. Patrick Sheehan, who lived from 1852 to 1913, was both a Roman Catholic priest and a novelist, a Canon of the church, educated at the seminary of Maynooth. In his clerical role, he is best-known as the long-serving parish priest of Doneraile in Co. Cork. In an essay, Benedict Kiely describes him as a “reluctant novelist” (Kiely, *passim*). Indeed, there is a character in one

of Sheehan's novels who grumpily complains that too many novels focus on human misery—is not there enough misery in real life? Mainstream Irish Catholic nationalist culture was hostile to influences from outside Ireland—Rome, of course, excepted. English culture was the culture of the oppressor, and France was a seething pit of immorality, a country which produced all these dirty books by the likes of Emile Zola and Guy de Maupassant. As any student of Irish fiction knows well, French and other continental cultures were to writers like James Joyce and George Moore enormously liberating.

Canon Sheehan wrote novels that were extremely popular in Ireland and also within the Irish diaspora in America and Britain. He gave pleasure to a lot of people. (I would not be surprised if my own ancestors, Catholics from the south of Ireland, had read and enjoyed his work.) “Reluctant” novelist? Well, he found that the literary form called the novel, often reckoned to be dubious, could actually be used as a vehicle for propaganda. Sheehan was a man with a mission, and his mission was to defend traditional Irish Catholic values against the materialism of the outside world. But it is not just the outside world that is corrupt: Dublin has become a centre for sinful conduct that you would not get away with in a small provincial town or village (as witness George Moore's rebellious Julia Cahill in one of his short stories [*The Untilled Field* 203]). An elderly priest in Sheehan's novel, *Geoffrey Austin, Student* (1895) denounces what he calls “the contamination of city life” (5). Such proud provincialism would feed into Eamon De Valera's vision of an Ireland loyal to the old values, agrarian, anti-industrial, a country where, in the seriously travestied version of his famous radio address of 1943, “comely maidens” would be “dancing at the crossroads.” (He actually said “happy maidens” and there is no mention of the open-air performance!)(92–95).

In today's Ireland, De Valera's misquoted speech attracts cheap laughs. A possible defence, however, of Sheehan's novels would be that they posit kindness and compassion, especially towards the poor and rejected, against the cold ambition of the late nineteenth-century commercial and industrial world. A counter to that could be that Christian charity is all very well, but social and economic structures need to change. For Sheehan, though, socialism (seen as godless) is not the answer, and the threat comes from any brand of materialism, be that capitalistic or socialistic. There had, after all, been a recent Papal encyclical outlining Catholic social teaching as a means of averting a challenge from socialism.

THE BRIER-PATCH IN THE KAILYARD

So, from Sheehan's point of view, there are threats to traditional Irish Catholicism that are both metropolitan and cosmopolitan. James Joyce and George Moore, who were raised as Catholics, take an opposing view. To them, Ireland is priest-ridden: the clerics are petty tyrants who prevent their flock—especially in the rural areas—from enjoying dancing and sex, and from reading books which might excite their loins but which might instead expand their minds. Moore leaves Ireland to live in London; Joyce finds his way to wicked Paris where he secures the publication of *Ulysses*. Far, far from Canon Sheehan's parochial concerns down there in County Cork, Joyce establishes himself as a supreme novelist of the city on a par with the great realist novelists, though Joyce's bearings are modernist rather than realist, more akin to Proust than to Zola.

That said, Canon Sheehan's fiction does not avoid city life, and of course, he would have his reasons for representing Dublin as a heartless, alienating place—ironically comparable to the dingy paralysis that pervades the stories in Joyce's *Dubliners*. Let me focus on two novels by Sheehan, *Geoffrey Austin*, *Student* of 1895 and its sequel, *The Triumph of Failure* of 1899. These two books together form a kind of Bildungsroman, where we follow the chequered career of Geoffrey Austin, a somewhat severe young man who discovers the delights of intellectual pursuits at his school but fails an exam to enter the Civil Service and goes on to lead a rather desultory, shabby-genteel existence in Dublin, where, however, he falls in with congenial company, above all when he comes under the spell of a friend who is a charismatic Catholic evangelist and social worker among the lower classes. Geoffrey renounces the worldliness of human intellect, renounces corrupt secular values as he sees them, and becomes a monk.

To the extent that these novels by Sheehan inhabit the genre of Bildungsroman, they have much merit. Comparison and contrast with Joyce's *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* and its earlier draft, *Stephen Hero*, would—I believe—yield much, but that would amount to a whole paper in itself. Anyway, if you place Sheehan beside his diametrical opposite, Joyce, ironies abound: in Sheehan, you have Geoffrey Austin, the religious prig, and in Joyce you have Stephen Dedalus, the artist/intellectual prig, and you might be forgiven for thinking that there is not much to choose between them.

No-one could accuse Canon Sheehan—a man of considerable political courage—of offering up pretty-pretty rural idylls. He was not the kind of writer to evade at least some of the sordid realities of urban life in favour of a never-never land where priest and people got on harmoniously in a small parish—though no doubt, as priest

at Doneraile, he would aspire to just that. If, through his character of Geoffrey Austin, he was to denounce the inadequacy (as he saw it) of worldly learning, Sheehan was no provincial ignoramus: he was extremely well-read in German literature and philosophy (Hennig 352ff.), even if he viewed German culture as a corrective to French *fin-de-siècle* decadence. (In Sheehan's fiction, unsurprisingly, the phrase, "*fin-de-siècle*," is used to describe attitudes of which he and his pious characters disapprove.)

Where it all goes wrong, artistically, is at the points where Sheehan gets carried away by his own propaganda, or rather by the unquestioning piety which propels that propaganda. He can write with narrative verve—one can, therefore, understand his popularity—then, alas, you get pages and pages of breathless rhetoric. He is in the pulpit, banging away, and we readers can feel patronised, irritated if not downright bored. Geoffrey witnesses the untimely death of his hero, the charismatic Catholic preacher Charles Travers, and as Travers has had so many admirers among both Dublin's uptight bourgeoisie and its grateful proletariat, there are enough tears shed to flood the river Liffey. The lachrymosity of this chapter of *The Triumph of Failure* shows Sheehan at his worst—in a book where often we have read him at his best. Piety produces bad art. A comparable case is that of another late-Victorian writer-cleric, Lewis Carroll (a Protestant this time), who ruined his *Sylvie and Bruno* books of 1889 and 1893, allowing po-faced sermons to get in the way of the zany hilarity of the more imaginative chapters.

One of Sheehan's best short stories is the title story of his 1905 collection *A Spoiled Priest*. Kevin O'Donnell is a bright young student at Maynooth, but is rejected for the priesthood. It is a devastating blow to him and to those close to him (not least his mother) but, his bitterness overcome and having become a successful medical doctor abroad, he returns to Ireland and (albeit later in the day) is ordained a priest after all. Now, Sheehan never regarded Maynooth as a place of total cosiness between spirited young fellas and the grave clerical professors, but this writer does not seriously question the position of the Church and its institutions in Ireland: far from it. To that extent he could be regarded as seriously evasive—especially (and perhaps unfairly) in the light of hindsight and the manifold sexual abuse scandals that have battered the Church's authority in our own time.

There is something poignant in the fact that it was in the year of Sheehan's death, 1913, that there appeared a novel which unflinchingly dealt with the hypocrisy and corruption of actually-existing Catholicism in Ireland. Moreover, this was a novel by a priest—or more to the point, a *former* priest who had gone on to marry and

THE BRIER-PATCH IN THE KAILYARD

father children. Gerald O'Donovan, who lived from 1871 to 1942, published in 1913 the semi-autobiographical novel, *Father Ralph*. Young Ralph O'Brien is pushed by a domineering mother into the priesthood but when he is appointed to a parish, he finds that his independence of mind is up against a powerful alliance of the local gombeen men—small-town exploitative businessmen—and the Church authorities. Ralph wants to involve himself in the co-operative movement and to assist working-class people in improving their lives. This attempt to practise Christian compassion is of course branded as dangerously socialistic by his clerical and lay enemies, and he finds a particularly nasty adversary in his immediate boss, the vulgar, boorish Father Molloy. Ralph is summoned before his bishop (as was O'Donovan in real life), and is instructed to cease his activities. He refuses, and leaves the priesthood.

The first chapter of *Father Ralph* presents us with the innocent scene of its protagonist, as a baby, being wheeled in his pram through St Stephen's Green in Dublin. Interestingly, in a novel published the previous year (1912), *The Charwoman's Daughter* by James Stephens, there is also an early chapter depicting a quiet scene in St. Stephen's Green. It is as if the Green is a place of serene beauty for the young and the innocent before the uglier sides of Irish life take over. To the north you have Protestant Trinity College, to the south you have Catholic University College. In between, St. Stephen's Green feels like a neutral space.

Canon Sheehan was bold in his advocacy of political overtures to Ireland's Protestants, north and south, in the face of sectarian intransigence from his own side. And he recorded his admiration for the work of many non-Catholic writers. But it is O'Donovan in *Father Ralph* who puts his finger on the cultural intolerance of mainstream Catholic Ireland, its savage embrace of philistine mediocrity. Let me quote another point early in the book, where Ralph naïvely wonders why Protestants are regarded as all bad, but Catholics are all good:

Ralph thought it was a pity that many of the writers of books that he liked were Protestants. He prayed often that they might become Catholics or that Catholics might write books like *Treasure Island*, and *Quentin Durward*, and *David Copperfield*. He asked Ann [a woman who looks after him] why there were no Catholic books so good as these. She was horrified. "Why, they're nothing but a pack of lies. None of them things ever happened," she said. "Catholics write true stories about

Lourdes and St. Aloysius and the like. I misdoubt me but a lot of them Protestant stories were invented by the devil.” (O’Donovan 27–28)

Canon Sheehan and his more intellectual characters can only too often trash their hard-won knowledge in order to adopt an ingratiatingly anti-intellectual stance: this may help them accommodate to their less-educated parishioners and to Church orthodoxy, but it can also seem like a betrayal of the Enlightenment cultures from which they have personally benefited. It comes across as a *trahison des clercs*—“clercs” that is, the old French term which refers now more to scholars than to clerics—a sell-out of intellectual culture by intellectuals anxious to pander to the philistines. O’Donovan’s Ralph, newly arrived at Maynooth, finds that the College’s resources are ill-equipped to nurture in its young men a love of “the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake” (to use a famous phrase of Cardinal Newman): “During the few free days before the arrival of the general body of students Ralph ... explored the College: the poky, ill-supplied divisional libraries, without catalogue, order or classification, or any book that one wanted to read; the rather fine College library ... but still pitifully unrepresentative of any general culture” (O’Donovan 160). Happily, I can tell you that having worked in Maynooth as a researcher, I could not recognise such inadequacies in the excellent John Paul II Library of today, a library which is well-stocked across the disciplines, and catalogued to modern international standards.

Our second novelist for what I would describe as the “realist” response to Catholic pious sentimentality is Brinsley MacNamara, whose dates are 1890 to 1963. That is a pseudonym: his real name was John Weldon. His best-known—indeed his most notorious novel—is *The Valley of the Squinting Windows*, published in 1918. It caused a furore. In MacNamara’s home village, Delvin in County Westmeath, the book was publicly burnt as it was felt that the fictional town of Garradrimna was based on Delvin.

Again, we have a young man whose mother—feeling intense guilt at her sinful sexual past—pressurises him to become a priest. Unfortunately, young John’s half-brother, Ulick, exerts a less than holy influence, steering him into the pubs and generally taking advantage of the naïve John’s impressionability. A new school-teacher, Rebecca Kerr, arrives in town. As she’s bright and pretty, the wagging tongues of the village indulge in crescendos of malevolence: why, she must be a slut, unfit to teach the children of the parish. Squinting windows in the title? This refers to the local gossips, the petty bigots of whom Ireland is full and who can be even

THE BRIER-PATCH IN THE KAILYARD

more censorious than the priests, to those people who are always standing at their windows, ready to squint out at any behaviour which seems to diverge from the norm. Well, Rebecca has an affair with Ulick, and is, of course, driven out of the village. John, the young would-be priest, is in love with Rebecca, and crazed by jealousy and revenge, he attacks and kills Ulick.

As in *Father Ralph*, there is an older priest, Father O’Keeffe, well-established in the village, who is in cahoots with gombeenism—indeed, he is both priest and gombeen man in himself. There is no hope for spiritual guidance from that quarter—it is all a long way from Sheehan’s saintly Charles Travers. Moreover, the woman who runs the village post office has no qualms about steaming open letters—especially love-letters, which will not reach their destination—and she thereby frustrates natural human desire even as she nourishes the self-righteous tittle-tattle of the village.

Unlike George Moore, whose own exposés of Irish degradation were influenced by the fiction of Zola and Turgenev (the latter in the case of the stories in his collection, *The Untilled Field*), neither Gerald O’Donovan or Brinsley MacNamara paraded any lessons learned from French and continental models. It would appear that their brands of realism were of a native Irish origin, and provoked by conspiracies of silence concerning the unpleasant realities of Irish life. They broke that silence.

It should come as no surprise, by the way, that George Moore was an ardent admirer of Gerald O’Donovan’s work.

And now, what of those strange expressions in my title—the *brier patch*; the *kailyard*?

That which sentimentalists see as consolation, realists see as illusion. In the course of a conversation, Flaubert said that most writers of his time wanted to make their readers feel good, feel optimistic—they wanted to do this, he said, making a gesture of raising his hands, the fingers together and pointing upwards. What I want to do, he said, is this—and he lowered his hands, parting the fingers, as if to dump all illusions in the garbage (Deffoux and Zavie 125). Another Frenchman—and we recall that Canon Sheehan did not care much for the French—was the realist painter, Courbet, who when asked by a priest to paint angels in his church, challenged the priest, saying, “[s]how me an angel, and I’ll paint one” (qtd. in Lewis and Lewis 34).

While we must remember Balzac’s Catholicism and Dostoevsky’s Orthodox faith, we can say that, generally, realism in the arts has tended towards the sceptical and the secular. Likewise, modernism, which is predicated on uncertainty, may well exclude firm religious faith: Nietzsche had proclaimed that God was dead. The big

exception to this is Kierkegaard, whose Christian existentialism is based on uncertainty, doubt, struggle, and who would find more of a following in the twentieth century than in his own early nineteenth century.

In Scotland, at the end of the nineteenth century, there emerged a popular group of writers who specialised in stories of small-town life—rural idylls in which everyone was nice to everyone else, the local church minister and schoolteacher were highly respected as leaders of the community, a bright young lad from the village went to university, where he won prizes and everyone in his home town was proud of him, not only his parents. The landowner in the big house was paternalistic, moderately benevolent: everyone knew his or her place. There was no doubt, no contradiction, no struggle (though there were significant exceptions to this, to which I will come). Collectively this group was known as the “Kailyard” school of writers—“kailyard” being a Scots word meaning “cabbage-patch.”

A Presbyterian minister, the Rev. John Watson, wrote under the name of Ian Maclaren, and one of his short story collections is called *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush* (1894). It takes its title from a sentimental Scots song—“There grows a bonnie brier bush in our kailyard / And white are the blossoms on’t in our kailyard.” Brier-bush: briars are sharp, they can scratch you, make you bleed—but that is not emphasised: we are to accept only that the brier-bush is bonnie—beautiful—as are its white blossoms. Maclaren was an ultra-sentimentalist and deplored realism: “There are such things as drains, and sometimes they may have to be opened, but one would not for choice have one opened in his library” (Maclaren, “Ugliness in Fiction” 80–81).

Another “kailyard” writer was S. R. Crockett, who wrote a story called “The Stickit Minister” (1893)—“stickit” means “failed”: a young man has had the ambition to be ordained as a Presbyterian (Protestant) minister, and has not made it. So, there *is* a sense of struggle here—to continue the brier-bush metaphor, a man can get seriously scratched. But Crockett goes out of his way to extract floods of tears from his readers: the “stickit” minister is suffering from a fatal illness. It is curious that “stickit minister” is close to “spoiled priest”—the title of Canon Sheehan’s best-known story. A stickit minister is the Protestant equivalent of a spoiled priest. Conversely, we could argue that Canon Sheehan was writing an Irish Catholic equivalent of kailyard fiction—though it should be clear by now that there was a great deal more to him than that, and I have been at pains to emphasise the strengths as well as the weaknesses of Sheehan’s fiction.

THE BRIER-PATCH IN THE KAILYARD

A third kailyard writer is J. M. Barrie, best-known for *Peter Pan*. He is the best of the three kailyarders and, indeed, he would depart from a kailyard phase and go on to produce work of far better quality. Barrie's sentimentality, while still pervasive during his kailyard period, is offset by his portrayal of petty but bitter rivalries between small towns in Scotland, narrow-minded sectarianism in religion, the limited intellectual and cultural horizons of the people in these small towns, but there is no critical focus on why that should be so—it is simply accepted and served up to a mass readership, in Britain and America, which liked to see Scots folk portrayed as cute and eccentric. Realism aimed to be both objective and critical—and you could say there is a contradiction in trying to be both objective and critical. Be that as it may, other Scottish writers came along who challenged the kailyarders, and who looked to European novelists for alternative models.

George Douglas Brown was a young Scottish writer who looked to Balzac, and in his novel, *The House with the Green Shutters* (1901), he gave us a picture of a Scottish small town which was anything but cosy—there was ruthless business competition, extreme psychological and even extreme physical violence, the local church minister was a pompous idiot; sure, the bright boy went to university, even won a prize, but then he turned to drink, was expelled from university, and the townsfolk hugely enjoyed the Schadenfreude they felt at his downfall. There is a line in the novel—“A pretty hell-broth was brewing in the town” (Brown 104). Brown's novel is the Scottish equivalent of MacNamara's *Valley of the Squinting Windows*.

A second *anti*-kailyard writer is John MacDougall Hay, who produced an even more powerful novel called *Gillespie*, named after its principal character, a totally unscrupulous small-town businessman, and appearing in 1914. Again, there is an atmosphere of unrelenting economic struggle, vicious gossip in the main street, extreme violence—there is an awful lot of blood in this book: if sentimentalists splash among tears, realists splash in blood. Hay was strongly influenced by Dostoevsky—but also by a native Calvinism and its theology of doom. Hay was actually a Protestant minister whose faith and art possess respective qualities of existentialism and expressionism; altogether, he presents a deeply thoughtful and imaginative contrast to his fellow-minister Ian Maclaren's comfortable evasiveness.

During our period, in the Southern states of the USA, writers represented in varying ways the phenomenon of slavery, its abolition following the Civil War, and the problems of black people adjusting to the far from absolute “freedom” of the years of Reconstruction. Thomas Nelson Page, according to our model,

would be the American equivalent of an extreme Kailyarder, writing stories of how happy the blacks were before the war, if they had a kind master and knew their place as members of the “inferior” race. This is a world of cute, loyal darkies, Southern belles and gallant Confederate officers—it would be the stuff of *Gone with the Wind*. Page was writing during the 1880s—but it was this decade that saw the emergence of another Southern white writer, Joel Chandler Harris, author of the Uncle Remus stories.

On the face of it, these tales seem to depart little from Thomas Nelson Page’s formula of the charming old black fellow who can spin a yarn—in this case telling animal fables to an audience of white kids. But beneath these stories of animal predators like Brer Fox and potential animal prey such as Brer Rabbit, there is a not very subtext of sadistic slave-owner/overseer threatening extreme violence to the slaves whom he controls. Brer Fox captures Brer Rabbit and wants to torture him before he kills him. Brer Rabbit says to Brer Fox—do anything you want to me, scratch out my eyeballs, tear out my ears by the roots, and cut off my legs, but please, Brer Fox, whatever you do, do not throw me into that brier-patch over there. Brer Fox thinks: the brier-patch is obviously the worst torture for Brer Rabbit, the briars will rip his flesh slowly and painfully (just like the slave-owner whipping a slave to death), so that is the torture Brer Fox will choose for his victim—and he throws the rabbit into the brier-patch. The rabbit starts laughing, and hops out free—he taunts the fox by telling him that the brier-patch did not hurt him at all, as he, Brer Rabbit, had been born and brought up in a brier-patch.

So—what we might think of being a cute tale told by a cute black guy about cute animals turns out to be a disturbing tale of the threat of extreme cruelty, though the rabbit turns out to be “cute” in a different sense of that word, i.e. smart rather than sentimentally pretty, the prey/slave tricking his predator/master, challenging a rigidly conservative hierarchy.

Also, during the 1880s there appeared our third writer of the American South—this time a black man, actually of mixed race, Charles Chesnutt, generally considered the first important African-American writer of fiction. His short story, “The Goophered Grapevine” (1887), follows the usual formula of old black man telling a story to a white audience, but as with the Uncle Remus tales, the apparent sentimentality is stealthily subverted. It is another “trickster” tale, the cunning blacks outmanoeuvring the oppressive whites, as Brer Rabbit tricked Brer Fox—only this time, the author is a black man writing from *within* African-American culture

THE BRIER-PATCH IN THE KAILYARD

as distinct from a sympathetic white man like Joel Chandler Harris adopting a culture which is not, after all, his own.

Could we call this anti-sentimental strain in Southern writing “realist”? Well, yes, to the extent that it grapples with the realities of race relations in the South, and challenges the myths and wishful thinking of the dominant race (and the whites were still dominant after the war). But unlike the Irish and Scottish writers, these Americans are not following European models—no Balzac or Flaubert or Zola here—and they are constructing their narratives instead on the basis of traditional African-American and even American Indian folklore, on fables and (in Chesnutt’s case) tales of magic and the supernatural.

Finally, in all three cases—Irish, Scottish, and American South—although the historical and ideological contexts of the respective fictions are widely different, there are structural similarities (as I proposed at the beginning) in the force and counterforce of sentimental myth and critical challenge, call that challenge realist, Symbolist/modernist, or folklore-based. We have works at the extremes of these polarities—the Scot Maclaren and the American Page as the extreme sentimentalists; O’Donovan, McNamara, George Douglas Brown, John MacDougall Hay, and Charles Chesnutt as the challengers on the other side. It is not always so polarised: there are, as it were, what I would call “intermediary” writers—the Scot Barrie shows the jagged briers in the kailyard, Harris in the Uncle Remus stories demonstrates that a white Southern writer can be critical of a racist society. In Ireland, Canon Sheehan can be said to be his own intermediary: he does not seriously question the values of the dominant Catholic culture, but at the same time he does not flinch from representing the far-from-cosy nature of Dublin city life—its poverty, its squalor. It is even possible to conclude that, for all his limitations and for all the very different representations of Ireland offered by Joyce and his fellow-transgressives, Canon Sheehan did succeed in steering fiction into what Joyce jestingly called “the Hibernian metropolis”—more generally, the urban spaces that were the loci of the nineteenth century realists and twentieth century modernists. It remains to add that, given that we have also been talking of small-town and rural life, twentieth-century Irish literature would also, in due course, get to grips with that as well as with the city. W. B. Yeats’s late-romantic illusions about rural Ireland would be answered in Patrick Kavanagh’s *The Great Hunger* and his address to the “stoney grey soil” (Kavanagh 73) of his native Monaghan.

TOM HUBBARD

WORKS CITED/CONSULTED

- Brown, George Douglas. *The House with the Green Shutters*. London: J. MacQueen, 1901.
- Cahalan, James M. *The Irish Novel: A Critical History*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988.
- Campbell, Ian (ed.). *Nineteenth-Century Scottish Fiction*. Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1979.
- Candy, Catherine. *Priestly Fictions*. Dublin: Wolfhound, 1995.
- Chesnutt, Charles W. *Collected Stories of Charles W. Chesnutt*. Ed. William L. Andrews. New York: Mentor, 1992.
- Clifford, Brendan. *Canon Sheehan: A Turbulent Priest*. 2nd ed. Millstreet, Co. Cork: Aubane Historical Society, 2008.
- Crockett, S. R. *The Stickit Minister*. London: T. F. Unwin, 1893.
- Deffoux, Léon, and Emile Zavier. *Le groupe de Médan*. Paris: Payot, 1920.
- De Valera, Eamon. "That Ireland Which We Dreamed of" [speech of 1943]. In *Great Irish Speeches*. Ed. Richard Aldous. London: Quercus, 2007.
- Drescher, Horst W., and Joachim Schwend (eds.). *Studies in Scottish Literature: Nineteenth Century*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1985.
- Garvin, Tom. "The Quiet Tragedy of Canon Sheehan." *Studies* 98 (2009): 159–168.
- Gifford, Douglas (ed.). *The History of Scottish Literature*. Vol. 3. *Nineteenth Century*. Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988.
- Harris, Joel Chandler. *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings*. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1881.
- Hay, J. MacDougall. *Gillespie*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 1979.
- Hennig, John. "A Note on Canon Sheehan's Interest in German Literature." *Modern Language Review* 49 (1954): 352–355. <<https://doi.org/10.2307/3718868>>
- Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. New York: Ben Heubsch, 1916.
- . *Stephen Hero*. London: Granada, 1977.
- Kavanagh, Patrick. *The Complete Poems*. Newbridge, Co. Kildare: The Goldsmith Press, 1984.
- Kiely, Benedict. "Canon Sheehan: The Reluctant Novelist." In *A Raid into Dark Corners and Other Essays*. By Benedict Kiely. Cork: Cork University Press, 1999. 181–191.
- Lewis, Richard, and Susan Lewis. *The Power of Art*. 2nd ed. Belmont, CA: Thomson Higher Education, 2009.
- Maclaren, Ian. *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1894.

THE BRIER-PATCH IN THE KAILYARD

- . “Ugliness in Fiction.” *Literature* 1 (1897): 80–81.
- MacNamara, Brinsley. *The Valley of the Squinting Windows*. Dublin: Anvil Books, 1964.
- Moore, George. *The Lake*. London: William Heinemann, 1905.
- . *The Untilled Field*. London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1903.
- Murphy, James M. *Catholic Fiction and Social Reality in Ireland 1873–1922*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1997.
- O’Donovan, Gerald. *Father Ralph*. Dingle, Co. Kerry: Brandon, 1993.
- Page, Thomas Nelson. *In Ole Virginia*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887.
- Ruskin, John. *The Works of John Ruskin*. 39 vols. Library Edition. Eds. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. London: George Allen, 1903–1912.
- Sheehan, P. A. *Geoffrey Austin, Student*. Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, n.d.
- . *A Spoiled Priest & Other Stories*. Dublin: Clonmore and Reynolds, 1954.
- . *The Triumph of Failure*. Dublin: Clonmore & Reynolds, 1956.
- Stephens, James. *The Charwoman’s Daughter*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1972.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. London: Ward Lock and Company, 1891.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Tom Hubbard, a semi-retired scholar, has based this article on a keynote lecture delivered at a “Representations of Ireland” conference at Károli Gáspár University, Budapest, in 2012. He is a Scot who has recently acquired Irish citizenship. From 2006 to 2010, he was a Research Fellow at the National University of Ireland Maynooth, and Editor of the online Bibliography of Irish Literary Criticism (BILC). He was Lynn Wood Neag Distinguished Professor of British Literature at the University of Connecticut in the spring semester of 2011, subsequently *Professeur invité* at the Stendhal University, Grenoble, and a Writer-in-Residence at the Château Lavigny (Ledig-Rowohl Foundation), Switzerland. He is the author of several collections of poetry, of two novels, and a book of short stories; on the academic side, he has published many works as author, editor, or co-editor, as well as articles in journals and co-authored books.