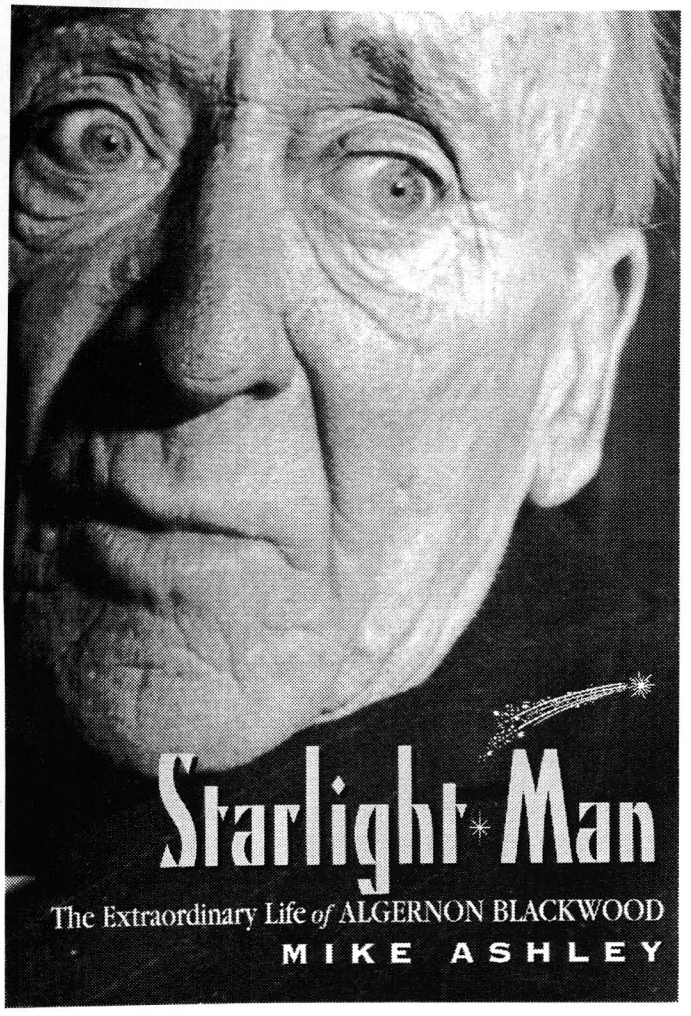
British Association for Irish Studies Newsletter

ISSUE No 30 APRIL 2002



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EDITORIAL

My heartfelt thanks to the following contributors: **Mike Ashley** for agreeing to take part in a Focus Interview after his fascinating talk about Algernon Blackwood's Irish Connections given to the Irish Literary Society's November meeting at the Irish Club, Eaton Square; **Bob Bell** for that vigorous rejoinder to the Battle in the Books about the Irish Border – exactly the kind of response which the Battle in the Books series was first created to provoke; **Ultan Cowley** for another Battle in the Books in connection with his research into the activities of Irish workers in Britain. Among the important notices in Noticeboard, I would draw your special attention to the announcement of the Moving Here Project (MHP) by **Aidan Lawes** from the Public Record Office Kew.

I informed the BAIS National Council at our last meeting that another hand needs to be found, in the very near future, for the tiller of the BAIS Newsletter which, of course, I have enormously enjoyed tilting and guiding throughout some 20 issues over the last 5 years.

Copy and/or discs (Word 97) with articles, reports, notices, letters etc. to be included in No. 31 should be sent to Jerry Nolan, 8 Antrobus Road, Chiswick, London W4 5HY by 5 July 2002 at the very latest.
Email: Jcmnolan@aol.com

FOCUS INTERVIEW 20: MIKE ASHLEY ON ALGERNON BLACKWOOD'S IRISH CONNECTIONS

Mike Ashley first became interested in the life and work of **Algernon Blackwood** when he was compiling *Who's Who in Horror and Fantasy Fiction* in 1976, and soon afterwards he decided to write Blackwood's biography. Some twenty-five years later, *Starlight Man: The Extraordinary Life of Algernon Blackwood* has at last appeared (Constable, 2001). Blackwood was once extremely popular as a writer of supernatural fiction that often dealt with mystical, psychic and occult experiences. What has not been so well known has been Blackwood's Ulster family connections and his theosophical interest when that movement was a source of inspiration in the Irish Literary Revival. Mike very generously agreed to be interviewed about Blackwood's Irish connections which, he is the first to admit, remain an area of Blackwood's life and work still in much need of scholarly research.

JN: How would you describe briefly Blackwood's Ulster family background?

MA: Blackwood had Ulster descent from both his parents. On his father's side he's descended from John Blackwood of Scotland who settled in Bangor in the early seventeenth century. From him are descended the Lords of Dufferin and Ava and the baronetcy of Blackwood which was bestowed upon Vice-Admiral Sir Henry Blackwood, who was a close friend of Nelson and was responsible for bringing Nelson's body home from Trafalgar. On his mother's side Blackwood is descended from the Dobbs of Castle Dobbs in County Antrim. John Dobbs, the grandson of a Lord Mayor of London settled in Carrickfergus, again in the early seventeenth century and his descendents include several High Sheriffs of County Antrim and a Colonial Governor of North Carolina. Blackwood himself, though, was born in England, as were his father and grandfather. He grew up in what then was still a rural part of Kent, at Woolwich and later Crayford, but which is now swallowed up in Greater London.

JN: How did the much-travelled Blackwood react to his Irish family background?

MA: Blackwood seems to have acquired an affinity with Celtic feyness from his childhood. He was a dreamy child, more interested in the world of Nature than he was in studying and learning a profession. His father kept in touch with his Irish cousins and Blackwood had early memories of visiting the Dufferins at their ancestral home in Clandeboye. Lord Dufferin had held official appointments in many parts of the world, including Governor-General of Canada and Viceroy of India, and the home was full of memorabilia from his travels and all this fascinated Blackwood. Blackwood was not especially interested in these aristocratic connections, though. I should add that his mother had previously been married to the Duke of Manchester and had two children by that marriage. Her eldest daughter,

Blackwood's half-sister, Sydney, married the Earl of Kintore, so Blackwood had plenty of connections with the peerage. Blackwood's parents were devout Christians. His father had converted during the Crimean War and become an ardent evangelist and his wife supported him. They held regular meetings at their home and other prominent evangelists stayed including the Americans Moody and Sankey. They rather overwhelmed the young Blackwood with their demands of whether he had saved his soul for Jesus, and Blackwood grew up in fear of hellfire and damnation.

JN: When and why did the young Blackwood first become interested in Theosophy?

MA: That really follows on from his increasing fear of his parents' evangelical zeal. Blackwood thought there had to be more to life (or to the after-life) than either a heavenly hope or eternal damnation. He could not understand why an individual should live in constant fear of divine punishment. Then, in his late teens, he discovered a pamphlet that had been left behind by one of his father's friends. This was Patanjali's *Yoga Aphorisms* on which this friend was going to write a sermon condemning it. Blackwood didn't profess to understand it but he liked what he read. Here was something that gave him hope and opened his eyes to another form of wisdom. When he attended Edinburgh University in 1889 he met others who encouraged this interest. By 1890 he was already calling himself a Buddhist and his study of theosophy soon followed. Exactly when he discovered it, I don't know, but there was a strong theosophical group in the city of Edinburgh. There were at least three lecturers at the University, J.W. Brodie-Innes, Robert Felkin and Andrew Aitken who were theosophists and who gave lectures on subjects that interested Blackwood, so his enquiring mind would almost certainly have sought them out, or other like-minded people.

JN: Why did Blackwood's stories about the supernatural become so popular during the first half of the 20th century?

MA: Firstly we have to consider why supernatural fiction as a genre became popular and then consider Blackwood's place in that. We know that the ghost story became an especially popular medium during the Victorian period, so much so that by the end of the nineteenth century authors like Jerome K. Jerome were lampooning it. For that matter Charles Dickens had ridiculed it at the start of *A Christmas Carol* fifty years before. During the 1890s there was a rapid change in the traditional ghost story and by the early 1900s it had ceased to be spectral figures and hooting spooks but had a stronger psychological and spiritual element. Henry James's 'The Turn of the Screw', which first appeared in 1898 and which was amongst Blackwood's favourite stories, still remains the best example of the psychological ghost story. There had also been a scientific approach to the study of ghosts through the Society for Psychical Research – indeed, Blackwood undertook some investigations for them. So by the 1890s ghost stories were made to feel even more real by applying the rigours of scientific analysis to them and still having something which defied description – actually a more frightening prospect. Blackwood did not start writing in earnest until around 1900, and although some of his early stories are in the traditional mode he rapidly worked through this. Because he had conducted investigations for the SPR he could inject this realism into his stories. One of his earliest, 'The Empty House' is based on one such investigation. In this we never see the ghost, though we hear things, but Blackwood's descriptions of the effects of fear on the woman who accompanied him – in the story it's his aunt but in real life it was a lady friend – are actually more frightening than any description of a ghost. Blackwood was also able to bring to his fiction his fascination for Nature. It was his empathy for Nature that had made him so interested in Buddhism and Theosophy and increasingly Blackwood's stories moved away from standard ghosts all together and explored the power of Nature. To us, what may seem supernatural was to Blackwood entirely natural. He believed that under the right conditions and with the right stimulation you could become aware of the true spirit of Nature, what we may think of as the Call of the Wild or Mother Earth. His later stories used this as their theme. So in one of his best stories, 'The Willows', we see two men, travelling by canoe down the Danube and camping on an isolated island. Unbeknown to them this island is on the frontier between mankind and one of these 'portals' to a world beyond where the power of Nature operates. Nature rises up against these two trespassers. The force of raw, spiritual Nature is far more terrifying than any sheeted spook.It was this that captured the imagination of readers at the start of the 20th century. People were becoming worried by increased industrialisation and the spoiling of the Earth. Blackwood showed that the Earth could bite back. It's a concept which has probably even more meaning and power today than it did then.

JN: Why did Blackwood's stories become so neglected as to fall out of print during the second half of the 20th century? Which titles should be reprinted?

MA: The decline of interest in Blackwood was gradual. Blackwood died in 1951 but most of his short stories remained in print until well into the 1970s, particularly two omnibus volumes. Also in the early sixties several stories were adapted for a popular TV series called *Tales of Mystery*, which was hosted by John Laurie actually playing the character of Blackwood. However, as with all things, as new generations come along the previous generations become all too easily forgotten unless someone emerges to champion them. Blackwood had no children of his own – he never married – and he had only the one nephew, who died in 1976. Books fell out of print and no one was there to push them. Nevertheless he has remained well known amongst the coterie of fans of supernatural fiction and is still regarded as one of the Big Three writers of the start of the 20th century, along with M.R. James and Arthur Machen. His best book is *The Centaur* and it was his own favourite. It provides a unique perspective on the idea of a sentient Mother Earth. His story collections *Pan's Garden* , currently in print in a limited edition, and *Incredible Adventures* provide multi-dimensional mystical views of Blackwood's concept of nature. Then there is his autobiography first published in 1923 as *Episodes Before Thirty*, which gives a very clear view on what shaped his life and how he became such a prolific writer. However tantalisingly the autobiography ends in 1899 and excludes any reference to mystical, psychic and occult experiences. There are current plans to reprint many of his books which involve those crucial experiences..

JN: Given all that essential Blackwood background, let's now move onto Irish literary matters.What have you discovered about the relationship between Blackwood and W.B. Yeats from your research into the personalities involved in the formation of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn?

MA: This is one of the areas where I'd like to know so much more. Blackwood left very few papers behind. He seldom kept any, for a start, and those he did keep were destroyed when his nephew's house, where he was staying, was bombed during the Blitz in 1940. Thus I have had to rely on what few papers survived elsewhere such as letters and his radio talks in the 1940s. He mentions Yeats on several occasions, but he does not say how they met. Blackwood was out of the country throughout the 1890s. He went to Canada with the idea of farming in 1890, but went from failure to failure and ended up a down-and-out in New York until he became a Private Secretary to the millionaire banker James Speyer and his fortunes returned. Blackwood returned to England in 1899 and quickly joined the London branch of the Theosophical Society. Although by then Yeats had quit the Theosophical Society in favour of the Golden Dawn, Blackwood would no doubt have known of Yeats's interests and he certainly loved Yeats's poetry – he quotes some of it in one of his radio talks. Somehow he got to meet Yeats during this first year back in England because it was Yeats who introduced Blackwood to the Golden Dawn, and he was initiated in October 1900. Blackwood stayed in the Golden Dawn for a couple of years, rising through the lower grades but choosing not to become an adept. By about 1904 his interest had waned and he returned to his love of Nature and exploring it his own way by travelling to the wild parts of the world. Amongst his few comments on the Golden Dawn are that he met several interesting people and he names in particular Yeats, Maud Gonne, Florence Farr and Arthur Machen. Unfortunately so far as I have been able to ascertain, there is no mention of Blackwood amongst Yeats's own papers, which is surprising. Admittedly Blackwood was an unknown in 1900 but he was very well known a decade later when he came to know James Stephens and George Russell, and it is strange that Yeats made no reference to Blackwood anywhere. I should love if some scholars of the Celtic Revival Movement would delve more deeply into the whole question of Blackwood as a person who began by being influenced, and then went on to influence major writers in that revival.

JN: You say in your book that Blackwood became very excited by the work of George Russell (AE) – how do explain this excitement?

MA: I think Russell and Blackwood shared exactly the same vision of the universe. Russell was a more complete theosophist than Yeats and, like Blackwood, he was a Nature Mystic. The more I read of Russell's poems and essays, the more I gain the same feeling as when I read Blackwood's work. Russell became especially interested in Blackwood's 1912 novel, *The Centaur*, and it seems to me that they were on common ground here, in the remembrance of centaurs that were spiritual manifestations of the power of Mother Earth. There are close connections between an essay like 'Power' in Russell's *The Candle of Vision* and Blackwood's poems in *The Earth Breath*. Indeed many of the essays in *The Candle of Vision* celebrate a mystical interpretation of the power of nature and must have been pure

ambrosia to Blackwood when he discovered them. However I must admit that I have yet to find specific references to Blackwood in the voluminous and scattered writings of George Russell. Perhaps some letters may still be found somewhere.

JN: What is your explanation for James Stephens's great enthusiasm for Blackwood's *The Centaur*?

MA: Stephens was attracted to *The Centaur* because he felt inspired by Blackwood's novel. When he actually wrote to Blackwood, he commented that Blackwood was writing from 'the whole being', not just the head or the heart. It was Blackwood's study of theosophy which led him to an understanding of the beliefs and legends of the ancestors which had enabled them to perceive Earth's spiritual manifestations as gods or deities of some form. For Blackwood and Stephens, the god Pan became a metaphor of the Earth's power. In many ways, I expect Blackwood and Stephens were very different personalities. For instance, Blackwood bared his soul more obviously in his fiction than Stephens ever wanted to – Blackwood's stories were ways of expressing all his fears about what was happening to the world. When he was producing his best writing, before the First World War, he was still optimistic about how mankind might yet return to Nature, but the War put an end to that vision. After the War Blackwood sank into a deep melancholy for months, horrified at what humanity was capable of doing. He never really recovered the spirit which had so inspired Stephens to write *The Crock of Gold.*

JN: How close or far removed then are Blackwood's supernatural stories from the novels of James Stephens such as *The Crock of Gold* and *The Demi-Gods*?

MA: Superficially they are very different. In fact I had read Stephens's *The Crock of Gold* before I began to read much Blackwood and when I later became steeped in Blackwood, at first I didn't make any connection whatsoever. It was not until I discovered the exchange of letters between them that I realized that Stephens may well have been influenced by Blackwood's *Centaur* in the writing of *Crock of Gold.* It caused me to revisit that book and then to read *The Demi-Gods.* Only then did I realise that once you scrape away the surface of Stephens's stories, his world view begins to emerge. There is quite a strong connection between Blackwood's view of the Diva, the kind of all-powerful Nature Spirit that controls the laws of Nature, and Stephens's views of angels and the faery-folk. The two writers are poles apart in their literary styles, but I'm becoming more and more convinced that it is important to recover an understanding of the common spirit that drove the forces of creativity in each writer.

JN: Why have your investigations into Blackwood over the years turned into this crusade for a much neglected writer?

MA:Sometimes it feels like a crusade but when I've occasionally turned round, I've found very few people behind me! Blackwood was not just a writer of fiction. He was himself a crusader. He used to say that he had set himself certain ambitions in life – 'torches' he called them, guiding lights on the way. One of these, and the one that stayed with him throughout his life, was to be a 'holy man'. This was not a clerical view of priesthood, but more of an oriental view of somebody spreading good messages to people in the hope that they would realise the vast possibilities of human consciousness and achievement. That prophetic note permeates *The Centaur.* Both Russell and Stephens responded to that prophetic note. The debt that Blackwood owed to the Celtic Revival and the debt that the Celtic Revival owed to Blackwood needs to be documented by the scholars in the field.

JN: How do you react to the current critical opinion that Blackwood, rather like the Theosophical legacy of the Irish Literary Revival, has become pretty irrelevant in our brave, new 21st century?

MA: Well, it's like so many things, each generation focuses what it thinks it has discovered and created, and forgets the debt to the past. The process happens much more quickly these days. We tend to forget our debts very quickly. I am forever frustrated when TV or newspapers list the public's 100-best books or songs of the 20th century, and most of them only came from the 1990s or 1980s. We are hooked on the short-term memory pop culture. Fortunately there are still those about who do recognise that things we think we've discovered as new, have all been discovered before. What goes around, inevitably comes back. The so-called New Age movement of the 1980s and 90s had been around for at least 80 years by then – the original Age of Aquarius – and Blackwood was heavily into that. Several of his books, especially *The Centaur*, *The Promise of Air* and *The Bright Messenger*, were New Age

books of his generation and would be recognized as such by today's generation, if only there was sufficient promotion and recognition. I feel that it's important not to pigeonhole Blackwood as simply a writer of supernatural stories. Think of him as a religious writer, and his religion was being a friend and worshipper of nature. Think of him as a world writer, and his view was a holistic view of the continuity of nature and humanity. Think of him as a humanist writer in his strivings to imagine answers to the world's instinctive need for social harmony. Think of all these things and you'll find that there is much contemporary relevance in Blackword's work. Perhaps a similar approach might help to focus the contemporary importance of the Celtic Revival's mystical works? I like to think I've made a first step in rediscovering Blackwood with the biography. The book certainly has attracted a lot of reviews, and that has to be a step in the right direction in awareness-raising. Yes, I'm feeling optimistic!

A REJOINDER TO BATTLE IN THE BOOKS 9: THE IRISH BORDER: *IRELAND UNBROKEN BY THE BORDER*

In the last issue of the Newsletter Tim Forest made a conscientious attempt to answer the question: What is 'the Irish Border'? By that he meant not so much the physical boundary as something that exists in 'the mind of the Irish' and he attempted to explore the differences between what he called 'the battling schools' by dividing them into three categories: Nationalists, Unionists and Revisionists. However as he ploughed his way through the statements of many leading figures, some of them insightful observations, some of them mere rhetorical assertions, none of his three categories proved to be as homogeneous or as discrete as he had hoped. In seeking to get what he called 'a grasp on what is going on' he found that the answer to his original question became more and more complex and his pessimistic conclusion was that what he calls the Battle of the Border would continue to pose 'mental and imaginative challenges to the future generations of the Irishry on either side of it' – to which one can already hear the stalwart Unionists of North Down retort that they were never part of 'the Irishry' and what appears to be an innocuous concluding observation is shot down in flames.

Shortly after reading the article I listened to a distinguished young English clinician carrying out the public examination of a Finnish Ph.D candidate who had produced a thesis on Alzheimer's disease. He thought very well of the work and particularly praised the author for showing a distaste for what he called 'boxes' She had, he felt, avoided the all too common academic tendency to make glib categorisations and he warmed to a medical study that for once had avoided over rigid classifications and regarded each patient as a human being with a unique collection of characteristics and experiences. To do otherwise was for him bad science.

In Northern Ireland, however, there has always been an overwhelming, almost unthinking tendency to place people in 'boxes' and to assume that people's loyalties are totally predictable. The two deadly equations, Catholic = Nationalist, Protestant = Unionist, have continued to dominate political thinking and social analysis and this facile linking of sect and political allegiance has regularly played into the hands of demagogues ready to brand as a traitor anyone who refuses to stay in his box. It's no accident that Ian Paisley has always seen the Ecumenical movement with its destruction of neat categories and its blurring of divisions as an even greater enemy than Catholicism. For him anything that reduces confrontation threatens Northern Ireland and he has received great assistance from those in Nationalist circles who insist that only Catholics can be real Irishmen, forgetting the fact that so many distinguished Nationalist leaders from Tone to Parnell were Protestants.

The sad thing is that these crude sectarian stereotypes are no longer just part of the rough and tumble of politics but are actually playing a key role in the framing of government policy and the construction of Northern Ireland's new constitution The undoubted enmity that now exists between large numbers of Protestants and large numbers of Catholic has, for example, led ministers to accept too readily the claim that not only are there two warring communities in Northern Ireland but that at the heart of their dispute lie two discrete traditions or, as the official statements put it, 'two cultures'. The acceptance of this notion all too often involves also the acceptance of the sectarian equations and a real denial that Protestants and Catholics have had or are ever likely to have any shared culture. It thus ignores whole areas of common ground where reconciliation could be nurtured. The Irish language, for example, now appears to be

officially allocated to a purely Catholic/Nationalist culture; yet the revival of the language in the nineteenth century involved many Protestants and although in the twentieth century it certainly did become a Nationalist symbol some people still see it as a potential bridge between the two communities. It has already made its cautious way on to the curriculum of some Protestant schools, it has aroused the enthusiasm of elements in the highly influential women's movement and, one gathers, it has even been nurtured by one Orange lodge which believes that the native language should not be left entirely in papist hands. To label it Catholic and Nationalist is to help no one.

The Good Friday agreement also has, for understandable political reasons, had to accept and institutionalise the divisions produced by the sectarian equations which for the moment really seem to embody the reality of Northern Ireland. Even so those divisions in their present form will almost certainly prove transitory given the rapid changes in society being produced by immigration, by the accelerating internationalisation of culture, by the development of the European Union and by the current upheavals in the Irish Catholic church to name but a few of the influences that are likely to play a strong part in the realignment of the province's politics. What is missing also from the agreement is any real acknowledgement of regional differences in Northern Ireland, of the very different and ever changing cultural nature of each of the six counties and their place in the framework of Ireland as a whole.

In recent years Irish economists and geographers have begun to suggest that the really significant socio-economic division in Ireland is not between North and South but between East and West, that urban Dublin has more characteristics in common with urban Belfast than either of them has with rural Leitrim or Tyrone. It would be reasonable to expect therefore that the attitudes and opinions of a western county such as Fermanagh would over the years have varied considerably from those in Antrim and Down and looking back at the county as it was when I lived there in the 1950s and 60s I recall a place that was not only very different from the Northern Ireland of today but one which also gives some hope for a future which, as Forest says, can never have its problems 'resolved in the corridors of Stormont'.

The Fermanagh of that time was, of course, not devoid of sectarian bigotry . Orange flags flew over the Protestant churches throughout July and in 1964 Evelyn Waugh's son-in-law, fighting the Westminster election for the Liberals, was astonished by the public outcry when a British officer, a Catholic aristocrat friend, marched his platoon to mass, in full uniform, through the main streets of Enniskillen. But, unlike in Belfast, St. Patrick's Day was also celebrated in those same flagged churches and on less fraught occasions than July 12th. Attitudes to the Border itself undoubtedly differed considerably from those of North Armagh or South Antrim. A visit to the Republic, far from being rare, was for most people a common, perhaps even a daily occurrence. Indeed the streets of Pettigoe were shared between the two states. Most middle-class families had a cottage in the Free State as it was still commonly called and many of them had known Donegal and Cavan intimately since childhood. Dublin was almost as near as Belfast with the long straight roads across Meath making a shopping trip or an evening at the theatre a feasible and enjoyable outing. Everyone over fifty could remember clearly the days before Partition. Many of the older professional men and landowners were still members of Dublin clubs and the *Irish Times* was still the paper most commonly read by the Protestant middle-class. The latter voted Unionist, of course; even if they were not staunchly Orange. Many of them still resented Irish neutrality during the war, most of them had learned to mistrust the Catholic Church's role in the framing of social policy and few people, even among Catholics, felt their financial welfare would be safeguarded in what was understandably still seen as the less prosperous state. Even so, it's doubtful whether many in Fermanagh thought of the Republic as a 'foreign' land. To them Sligo and Bundoran were just as much a familiar part of their locality as Dungannon and Omagh and they were quite happy to spend most of their summer weekends there.

Ironically, this relaxed attitude towards the South was partly the result of Fermanagh's religious allegiance for unlike in Belfast almost all the Protestants were members of the Church of Ireland whose administrative headquarters, clergy training centre and national Cathedral were, and still are, all in Dublin. Four of its dioceses still straddle the Border and in such circumstances it was difficult for people to think of their nationality as being any different from that of their co-

religionists in Limerick or Cork or indeed to think of even their fellow Anglicans in Lurgan and Portadown as being anything other than Irish. No doubt most Fermanagh Protestants believed that they were British as well as Irish but that was simply to follow the pattern of pre-partition Ireland and indeed of the rest of the United Kingdom where such feelings of dual nationality, Scots and British, English and British, Welsh and British, were taken for granted. Some would call themselves Ulstermen rather than Irish but the later claim, made mainly by members of the Democratic Unionist Party, that the people of Northern Ireland are entirely British and in no way Irish would certainly have seemed very odd to most people in 1960s Enniskillen.

This was the period of the O'Neill/Lemass talks and the irony was not lost on local wags that the Protestant state was being represented by a man with an Irish Catholic name and the Catholic state by someone with a Huguenot Protestant one. But the general search for a relaxing of the barriers erected over forty years was almost certainly gaining ground in the county. Probably the most significant sign of a thaw was the founding of a Fermanagh Literary and Debating Society. This might seem a trivial, parochial event but in Northern Ireland terms this was no ordinary society. It had as its president Lady Brookeborough, the wife of a Stormont prime minister notorious for expressing anti-Catholic sentiments and, as its vice-president, Cahir Healy, the veteran abstentionist MP. Despite their deep political differences both of them were willing to speak in debates and to engage socially with people who twenty years earlier and indeed twenty years later would have been as remote from their circle as Colonel Gaddafi. To its literary meetings it invited figures as diverse as Sam Thompson from Belfast, author of the politically controversial play *Over the Bridge* and, from Dublin, the poet Pearse Hutchinson. Its membership included not only leading Unionists and Nationalists but some people from Border areas who would later be identified with Sinn Fein.

At the centre of these Enniskillen developments was Portora Royal School. Presided over by the Fermanagh Protestant Board of Education it managed to combine the role of an English-style Public School dating back to Plantation times with that of the county's sole grammar school for Protestant boys. Many of the boarders came from the Republic, the children of a Southern generation of Protestants that had finally shed its grandparents' unionism and on the whole rejoiced in its Irish nationality. Tradition rather Unionism drew them to Portora The Irish language was available as part of the curriculum, taught by an Anglican chaplain, fresh from a Belfast curacy, who would eventually become Archbishop of Dublin. Nor did these southern connections seem in any way to antagonise Portora's Fermanagh day-boys. Some of them, like many of the boarders from Belfast and the eastern counties, eventually opted to study at Trinity rather than Queen's at a time when TCD, also now generally confident in its Irish nationality, still reserved a large number of places for candidates from Northern Ireland. Moreover many of the dayboys showed far more interest in Irish history and literature than was then common in other Northern Protestant schools, no doubt encouraged to do so by a head of English and a head of History who were both TCD graduates from the Republic.

The school's cultural loyalty to Dublin was not entirely surprising. Even in the nineteenth century many leading families in the capital had sent their children there. Portora was the school of Oscar Wilde and the boys took pleasure in telling visitors the almost certainly apocryphal story that his name had at one time been removed from the Honours Board not because of his imprisonment but because he had become a Catholic on his death bed. Even so, the name had for long been restored and staff and senior pupils regularly made the gesture of staying at the Hotel d'Alsace in Paris where he had died. Samuel Beckett was also an alumnus and the school staged a production of *Waiting for Godot* in his honour at the Dublin Theatre Festival. Later Portora would jointly establish with Clongowes Wood a Beckett/Joyce literary prize which is still competed for by the pupils of both establishments. Rowing took crews to Henley but also to Irish regattas in places such as Blessington, Athlone and Athlunkard, trips which helped to cement relations not just with Belfast schools such as Methodist College but also with St Ignatius College in Galway. In Enniskillen itself Portora set about nurturing an ever closer relationship with St. Michael's, the county's Catholic boys' grammar school, sharing with them the teaching even of such potentially ideologically loaded subjects as history and human biology. These links were to remain close even after the beginning of the troubles, so close indeed that on the day after the Armistice Day bombing, Portora's head-boy made it clear on television that his first instinct on hearing the news had been to

discuss the situation with the head-boy of St, Michael's.

Things were, of course, to change in many ways. The physical dangers of the 1970s and 80s made parents in the Republic far less keen to send their children to Enniskillen. The flow of boys to Trinity also dried up and the increasing political polarization of Northern Ireland soon began to take its toll on Fermanagh's mood of reconciliation . Even so the county was one of the pioneers in the establishment of a non-sectarian schooling and Portora never irrevocably severed its links with the South, thus demonstrating yet again that the cultural divisions of Ireland had never been rigidly fixed for ever by the Plantation, by the Reformation, by the Boyne, by Partition or by the violence of the 60s and 70s and that in Northern Ireland there was, and still is, a far more complex array of cultures than a simple 'two'.

The fact that the Good Friday agreement was possible, that there exist such organisations as the Corrymeela Community and that so many churches, academic bodies and sporting organisations have remained happy all through the troubles to organise themselves on an all-Ireland basis reminds us that human beings in Northern Ireland have never felt obliged to stay in their box and such things keep alive the hope that the increasingly tolerant Fermanagh of forty years ago is not a lost world.

The best playwrights and novelists have always realised that dealing in stereotypes is the surest way to introduce unreality into a play or novel. The corollary of this is that people should never be expected to conform to stereotypes in real life... I once knew a Belfast Presbyterian Unionist couple whose chief passion was collecting Irish harps... One well-known Enniskillen Methodist , the father of a victim of the Armistice Day bombing and a life-long Unionist, accepted membership of the Dublin Seanad in what he thought were the interests of peace. The Catholic nationalist politician Gerry Fitt accepted a British peerage for the same reason. A hundred years ago the Ulster Unionist party and the *Belfast Newsletter,* at a time when Home Rule was still a live political issue, opposed the conversion of Queen's College, Belfast into an independent Queen's University on the grounds that to destroy its connections with Dublin would be to make it hopelessly provincial and to damage its academic reputation.

The truth is that people are only easily put into boxes once they are dead. So long as they are living no categorisation or dichotomising will lead us to the full truth about them or their society whatever the party spin doctors say. The use of strict categorisation is, to use Forest's word, extremely 'problematic'. In obituaries the most significant figures in society are routinely described as 'exceptional' and exempt from classification but in another sense every person in Ireland is exceptional, not just a Catholic or a Protestant, a Unionist or a Nationalist, a westerner or an easterner but a quite distinct personality with his or her own set of opinions and interests. Each person in fact inhabits not one of two cultures but many cultures – that of their neighbourhood, that of their family, that of their sport, that of their favourite television channel etc. etc. and the combination and interaction of all these cultures produces people who need not be categorised for the convenience of academics and are each quite unique – just like Alzheimer patients, in fact.

Forest quotes Rosemary Harris who claims that in her (disguided) Border town of Ballybeg 'in almost every situation, from schools to sport to shopping, a person's religious background seemed to dictate his or her behaviour' and, of course, it's true that the institutional framework established in nineteenth century Ireland reinforced sectarian divisions over the whole island. In 1960s Enniskillen also children attended denominational schools and did have to choose between Gaelic and Rugby football. People also tended to patronise the shops of the people they met at church, although not exclusively so. They certainly did mix at the golf club and in the bars of both the Protestant and Catholic hotels. Moreover, the technical school and the adult education classes were used by everybody. The possible lines of communication were therefore never totally broken by any Border and one suspects that all over Northern Ireland those lines of communication are still there to be used for all kinds of conciliatory activity – unless the doctrine of the two cultures gets in the way.

Dr. Bob Bell
London

BATTLE IN THE BOOKS 10: WHAT ABOUT THE IRISH NAVVIES IN BRITAIN?

If D. H. Akenson was correct in remarking that Great Britain, as the second most important reception area for Irish migrants, '...is the place for which (scholars) have the least and lowest quantity of information on the migrants, particularly systematic data' (Akenson, D H, *The Irish Diaspora: A Primer,* 1995, p.190), then the Irish in British construction, traditionally the largest single employment source for Irish male emigrants, must hold the record for being too often absent from academic surveys.

Academics are not really to blame: firstly, few sources are available which assess and quantify the Irish elements within the British construction industry, and even these are not entirely reliable. Secondly, the few available autobiographical accounts by Irish navvies themselves demonstrate little understanding of the socio-economic contexts within which their authors operated. Thirdly, it is a gritty subject which might seem singularly uncongenial to many historians. However I believed this situation was regrettable and with some audacity set out to rectify it. Before attempting to write a book about the Irish navvy in Britain, I felt I needed to gain an understanding of three interlocking elements: the context for Irish labour migration; the nature of the navvy experience; and the significance of the Irish in British construction

Achieving this understanding meant accessing the available printed sources but also, controversially perhaps, combining a close reading of existing autobiographical material with a programme of interviews with those closest to the subject: labourers, sub-contractors, main (British) contractors, and the families of the Irishmen concerned. This oral history aspect of the story has assumed an importance in my book which may seem excessive to some.

The first element is well documented and called for little more than a close reading of published material, most of it the fruit of high calibre research, such as the writings of Cormac O'Grada, Gearoid O'Tuathaigh, David Fitzpatrick, Enda Delaney and others. It only remained for me to clarify the linkage between harvesters and navvies. The second was more problematic; there are few first-hand accounts and each of these presents its own difficulties. The best known are the autobiographical novels of the Donegal-born navvy poet, Patrick MacGill, and the memoirs of Donal MacAuligh. The fifty-year interval between these two writers' accounts however produced major shifts in the role and importance of the Irish navvy and in the socio-economic context for his activities. The third necessitated familiarisation with the history of British civil engineering and extensive interviews with British construction company management. This for me was largely alien and uncharted territory but in the end proved most rewarding. I considered that all three elements, in varying degree, could best be served by acquiring and collating anecdotal material which would enhance the documented data. This, I hoped, would have the added virtue of making the results more immediate and accessible to the non-academic reader and particularly to those most closely connected with the experience itself for whom, primarily, this book was written.

Two major findings revealed by my preliminary researches encouraged this approach. The first was the shocking discovery that, contrary to popular opinion, railway building in 19th century Britain was dominated, not by the Irish (as in the US), but by the English. This startling fact emerges from David Brooke's *tour de force, The Railway Navvy: 'That Despicable Race of Men',* (1984). Unlike Coleman's earlier more populist account of the building of Britain's 19th century railway network, *The Railway Navvies* (1964), Brooke's work is a systematic study of the geographical origins of Britain's navvies derived principally from enumerator's books, compiled from the decennial censuses of Great Britain, as they reflected the employment patterns prevailing during the building of various lines overlapping a census. A summary of the results appears in Chapters 1-3 and the Appendix of *The Railway Navvy.* While conceding that '...only the ubiquitous Irish can be described as a truly international force in railway construction', on the basis of his findings Brooke maintains that '...their contribution to the English network was a good deal less vital than has sometimes been supposed', with their presence in Wales being confined mainly to the industrial South. He does however acknowledge their supremacy in the East and West Lowlands of Scotland. Route miles in Scotland would nevertheless be far fewer than in England. So much then for '*Paddy on the Railway*'! Detailed findings are contained in Dr. Brooke's reports to the SSRC

entitled 'Railway Construction Labour in England in the Returns for the Censuses of 1841-71' (HR3417) and 'Railway Construction Labour in the Returns for the Censuses of Scotland, 1841-91, and Wales, 1841-71' (HR5585).

The other primary source of information on the railway navvies is local newspapers but, as Brooke and Treble have pointed out, these tend to single out the Irish only where the latter have been in trouble with the law and are not therefore reliable indicators of Irish representation on navvying projects overall. At the end of his researches Dr. Brooke was still forced to the conclusion that the navvy remains '...an obscure and elusive figure', echoing canal historian Anthony Burton's earlier conclusion that, 'Of all the men concerned in canal building, the workmen retain the greatest degree of anonymity'. How much more elusive then, in times when construction companies kept scant records of labourers' names and addresses, much less birthplaces, are the Irish in these nomadic occupations.

Furthermore many navvies courted anonymity by assuming false identities to escape either their past or the tax man. This was characteristic also of many Irish construction workers, until relatively recent times, with the added complication that the Irish-descent have been an ever-increasing part of the Irish workforce in British construction since the late 19th century but are not officially classified as such. Nor are Irish-sounding names a reliable indicator. For example, the author of another history of the navvies is Dick Sullivan, whose father was a navvy, and whose mother was born on site to navvy parents. Despite his surname's Irish derivation, far from identifying with the Irish, he in fact delights in quoting his father's many put-downs of the Irish and echoes these with his own (Sullivan, D., *Navvyman,* 1983, pp. 3-22).

My second sobering discovery was that, in the context of 20th century British construction, the percentage of Irish employed remained small relative to the British themselves. In 1951, for example, of the 1,079,429 returned by the census as 'workers in building & contracting', those from the Irish Republic amounted to 37,263, with a further 6,242 from N. Ireland and 2,793 classified as 'PNS' (part not stated). In 1961, following the re-classification of Occupational Orders which saw the term 'navvy' finally dropped from use, figures for the relevant occupational groups were 810,400 & 63,050 respectively. In 1971 the figures were: British national total – 1,051,172; Irish – 70,790. I no longer have the 1981 figures to hand but the industry was booming. The Irish figure for 1991, however (with the industry then in recession), was 79,190.

These two facts effectively debunked the myth that the Irish, without qualification, 'built Britain'. How then was the popular consensus (in both Britain and Ireland) concerning Irish dominance within the industry to be accounted for? No one seemed to have asked this question previously. Clearly qualitative, rather than quantitative, definitions were urgently required. For this one has to look to the individuals involved. Bernard Canavan has rightly observed that '...individual experience is everywhere contradicted by the expert and rendered insignificant by the infinite quantity of our knowledge of human life...and the individual's experience is correspondingly devalued in the process' ('Story-tellers and writers: Irish identity in emigrant labourers' autobiographies, 1870-1970, in *The Irish World Wide: History, Heritage, Identity,* Vol. Three, 1997, pp. 154-55, Ed. Patrick O'Sullivan). In relation to the railway navvies the problem was not the context – the history of the railways and, indeed, of the golden age of British civil engineering in general, is very well documented. The history of 19th century Irish emigration to Britain also is increasingly well known. As far as detailed knowledge of navvies in general, and of Irish navvies in particular, is concerned however we have little but individual experience to guide us.

For this reason the novels of Patrick MacGill, particularly *Children of the Dead End* (1914), *The Rat Pit* (1915) and *Moleskin Joe* (1919) are widely cited as the best first-hand chronicles of the life of the Irish *Tattie Hoker, Spailpin,* and navvy at the close of the 19th century. There is an accompanying tendency, bred of modern assumptions about Irishmen and construction workers being synonymous, to assume that the navvy workmates of *Dermod Flynn,* MacGill's *alter ego* in *Children of the Dead End,* particularly his mentor, *Moleskin Joe,* are also Irish.

In fact MacGill doesn't indentify any character in the novel other than *Flynn* by race. If anything, the passage in *Children of the Dead End* where *Flynn, Moleskin,* and another navvy are fighting in a bunk over the one blanket, and *Moleskin* accuses his bed-mate of being a 'hell-forsaken Irish blanket-grabber', suggests that *Moleskin* was definitely not Irish. Given the well-documented antipathy between the

Scots and Irish navvies of the period he was probably English. This was at a time when the numbers of both harvesters and navvies were declining overall (Moran, 1982 & Brooke, 1984) and even the Irish, the most youthful of the navvying races in late 19th century Britain, were less inclined to choose this isolating and onerous manual occupation in a more mechanised age. Indeed, MacGill's own time as a navvy was ironically brief. He was only 22 when he left for London, to become a journalist, having navvied for perhaps two to three years at most.

None of the aforementioned British writers attempts seriously to distinguish the Irish from other navvying races of the British Isles and, furthermore, they confine themselves to the navvy as a builder of railways. David Brooke however cites James Handley's *The Navvy in Scotland* (1970), along with Coleman's work, as his inspirations, but unlike Brooke, Handley usefully broadened his definition of navvying to include all forms of labouring in construction, not just railway building. Handley, on the other hand, relies heavily on contemporary Scottish newspapers for his information and appears to interpret 'navvy' as meaning Irish navvy, consequently perhaps crediting the Irish with a disproportionate degree of representation on 19th century Scottish civil engineering works.

Nevertheless there is a wealth of contemporary testimony to the perceived indispensability of Irish labour to Scottish 19th century industry and public works, as well as to British agriculture, and the long-established migration of seasonal harvesters (pre-dating the Great Famine by at least a century and extending into the 1970s from parts of Donegal and Mayo) is undoubtedly the genesis of the Irish connection with British construction, initially in the form of labouring on 'Public Works' (a pre-World War Two official term for state-sponsored civil engineering projects).

MacGill's writings are an invaluable source of information concerning the nature of this experience but, unsurprisingly, they tell us little about its context. MacGill and his companions saw themselves simply as an indistinguishable part of the great nomadic mass of labourers tramping the roads of Britain, prior to World War One, seeking employment in construction but indifferent to its purpose. As MacGill himself remarked, of his work on the Kinlochleven hydro scheme: *'We neither knew nor cared what for; we turned the Highlands into a cinder heap, and were no wiser at the end than at the beginning'*. It is the widespread acceptance of navvying in Britain being synonymous with Irishmen, on the one hand, and with railways, on the other, which has led to erroneous assumptions being made about the extent of Irish involvement in railway building in the 19th century. The longevity of that acceptance is perhaps a reflection on over-specialisation amongst historians. John O'Donoghue's account of navvying in England during and immediately after World War Two, *In a Strange Land* (1958), and especially *Dialann Deorai* (Diary of an Exile), by Donal MacAuligh, published in English under the title, *An Irish Navvy* (1964) are graphic first-hand accounts of the life of the Irish navvy in England in the second half of the 20th century. A lesser-known but no less valuable Irish account of navvying in Scotland is *Farewell to Mayo,* by Sean O'Ciarain (1991). These books, however, omit much which might inform us about the underside of emigration amongst Irish labourers. They tell us little, for example, about the financial expectations of their families at home (unlike MacGill, who complains often about being called on to provide for his siblings in Ireland) or their emotional relationships with Irish women ('two went to the altar, but only one got married'). Neither do we learn anything about the ambiguous place in rural Irish society of the Irish emigrant to Britain – seen sometimes as a failure for leaving, as a source of income but simultaneously as a social embarrassment, sometimes even as an unwelcome if successful returnee.

However the quality of life experienced by the Irish associated with construction in Britain is in fact closely related to such issues; often if men failed to consistently remit money home they lost face, saw little point in corresponding further, and eventually lost touch with their families and communities. Others who persisted in the macho and male-centred lifestyle of the industry overlong risked alienating wives and children and could, like many of the former, end up in hostels or bed-sits on their own in later life. Some who faithfully remitted money home, building up a holding, might yet find it willed to a younger sibling and get nothing or, returning prosperous, marry but be denied the 'fortune' which would normally have come with a wife in marriage (to a non-emigrant).

Again, as with MacGill, we learn little about the status of the Irish labourer in the British construction industry as a whole. The numbers

of Irish involved in British construction since World War Two, if dissipated throughout the industry, must leave us puzzled as how they acquired their dominant image. Seen however as a body, concentrated largely in the labour-intensive ground works sector, their impact becomes understandable given their time-honoured and universally accepted status as dogged, determined, and dependable operatives who would see a project through to completion whatever the circumstances. For that perspective, however, one must consult the management of major British construction companies, particularly those associated with firms which operated in the heyday of post-war Reconstruction.

My point therefore is that in this instance, as perhaps in others, a willingness to consult literary, autobiographical, and anecdotal sources proved most helpful and such an approach may, indeed, make the difference between a narrative, however, inadequate and incomplete, and an unhelpful silence, maintained for want of textbook conditions in which to commence the work. Such a silence, if allowed, could prove permanent. For example, I had the good fortune to begin my researches in time to consult with several Irishmen who represented the last living links with the values and lifestyle of the original railway navvies, the 'Ways of the Line', and of the harvesters, and their words informed my understanding to a degree not otherwise possible. Those men are now dead. No archive can ever fill that gap. I'm glad I spoke with them. I know others are too.

ULTAN COWLEY Author, *The Men Who built Britain: A History of the Irish Navvy* (Dublin, 2001) ultancowley@eircom.net

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THE MOVING HERE PROJECT (MHP)

Irish immigration/migration to England, c. 1800 – c. 2000.

The Public Record Office has become the lead organization in a project ('Moving Here') to make digital images, sound and film relating to immigration into the UK available over the web. The web-site address will be www.migration.org.uk. The project, funded by the New Opportunity Fund (NOF), is designed to identify and digitize sources relating to immigration from the Caribbean, South Asia, Ireland and Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe from the early 19th century to the late 20th . We will be working with records, museum objects, publications, sound recordings and film, creating a catalogue to the images and contextual information – educational material and descriptive stories.

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The MHP is not intended primarily for academic users but above all for ordinary citizens and 'life-long learners'. Because it aims to present a rounded picture that includes the lives of those who did not necessarily reach the attention of the authorities through the official sources that treated migrants as a problem or the 'snapshots' of the decennial census returns, personal accounts, letters and photographs are all urgently required for the full picture. **If you want further information and think you can contribute material to the MHP, please contact Aidan Lawes, Public Record Office, Ruskin Avenue, Kew, TW9 4DU Email: aidan.lawes@pro.gov.uk**

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Registration forms on the Society's website at www.qub.ac.uk/english/socs/ssnci.html
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Irish Seminar on the Sources of Radicalism Conference

Organised by the Centre for Labour Studies & North West Labour History Group in association with Red Pepper.

There will be a seminar on *Ireland and the Irish* as part of the Sources of Radicalism Conference in Manchester on Saturday 11 May 2002 which will focus on the history of popular protest and radical social, political and cultural movements.

The Speakers at the Irish Seminar will be Bernadette Hyland, Pat Reynolds and Lawrence McKeown.

Bernadette and Pat are national officers of the Irish in Britain Representation Group will reflect on the position of the Irish in British society, both past and present.
Lawrence , a Republican prisoner who took part in the 1981 hunger strike, recently published *Out of Time: Irish Republican Prisoners, Long Kesh: 1972-2000* (Beyond the Pale, 2001) based on his doctoral thesis. Previously he had co-edited *Nor Meekly Serve My Time: the H Block Struggle 1976-1981.*

The full programme of the Sources of Radicalism Conference which includes topics such as music, anti-fascism, trade unions, race, media, internationalism and the women's movement; and speakers such as: Sally Alexander, Richard Cross, Bob Dickinson, Dave Haslam, Alice Nutter, Sheila Rowbotham, Marika Sherwood and Linda Walker. Conference fee is £7/£3 and includes lunch. **For more details and booking form please contact Anne Morrow email: anne.morrow@man.ac.uk. The Conference website may be found at www.leftdirect.co.uk/sources.htm**

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