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The National Tale, 1800-1830.

Claire Connolly.

This chapter tracks the material history of Irish prose fiction in the period between 1800 and 1830, as the Irish novel emerged as a recognizable commodity on the literary market. Central to these developments is the genre of the national tale: novels that took Ireland as their topic and setting, which often imagined its history via marriage plots that addressed wider issues of dispossession and inheritance, and whose narratives incorporated footnotes and extra-fictional material as spaces of cultural mediation. Early publications by two Irish women writers inaugurated the genre: Maria Edgeworth pioneered narratives of national difference in *Castle Rackrent* (1800), *Ennui* (1809) and *The Absentee* (1812); while Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl: A National Tale* (1806) was the first recorded usage of this influential subtitle.

The years between 1808 and 1814 were a highpoint in the production of national tales.[1] Shaped by a desire to explain Ireland, the national tale joins with antiquarian and polemical

[1] Peter Garside, 'The English Novel in the Romantic Era', in Peter Garside and Rainer Schöwerling (eds), *The English Novel 1770-1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles, Vol II: 1800-1829* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 61.

histories, travel books, parliamentary speeches and reports, and studies of folklore in their efforts to make sense of the matter of Ireland. The field of fiction can be characterized in terms of a number of rival trends and patterns, that can be discussed under the categories of books, authors, readers. These key categories encompass and depend upon others to which it has not been possible to devote similar space: the role of periodicals, reviewers, booksellers all reward further research, while research into translations into European languages and later nineteenth-century American reprints of Irish novels would further enrich our understanding of the national tale and its transnational afterlife.

From the late 1790s to the early 1830s, 'the understanding of what constitutes a novel tightened, production and marketing became increasingly professional, output of fiction almost certainly overtook that of poetry, and the genre eventually gained new respectability'.[2] Despite a loss of reputation in the post-revolutionary years (the likely result of the genre's association with radical politics in the 1790s), and a dip in production in the 1810s, the novel saw an overall if uneven growth in numbers and prestige across these three decades. From the 1820s, the rise became steady and patterns in production stabilized: 'the three-volume form developed into the norm (though in turn encouraging fresh variants), more

[2] Garside, 'The English Novel', 15.

prestigious octavos challenged the smaller duodecimo format, and famously a guinea-and-a-half (31s.6d.) became the optimum price for a three-volume novel'.[3]

The books themselves were the products of a relatively specialized and intensive process: until the late 1820s at least, compositors in most cases set moveable type on presses operated by hand. Publishing his first set of Irish tales in 1825, comprising *Crohoore of the Billhook, The Fetches* and *John Doe*, John Banim complained of 'hideous' difficulties with the printers of *Crohoore*: 'almost every sheet of him came back to me three or four times. It is tremendous work to compel English types to shape themselves into Irish words'.[4] Yet numbers of novels actually published in Ireland were tiny, certainly until the 1820s, while Irish authors publishing in London and Edinburgh represent a diffuse phenomenon that can be tracked via individual biographies but is difficult to analyse at a more detailed level. Of 2,256 novels published between 1800 and 1829, over a hundred were Irish in theme or authorship. One recent checklist gives 114 'Ireland-related' titles appearing between 1800 and 1829. While serving to highlight 'the variety of ways in which Ireland appeared in fiction

[3] Garside, 'The English Novel', 15.

[4] Patrick Joseph Murray, *The Life of John Banim, the Irish Novelist* (London: W. Lay, 1857), 152-3.

of this time', it actually excludes works by Edgeworth, Owenson, and Maturin that are not set in Ireland.[5]

There are a number of related difficulties in an attempt to disaggregate an Irish aspect to the overall picture of the novel in the wider British context in this period, deriving from increasingly close political and cultural connections between Britain and Ireland in the aftermath of the Act of Union. The extension of the Copyright Act of 1709 to Ireland in 1801 all but killed off an Irish publishing industry that was reliant on markets for cheap reprints in Ireland, Britain, the American colonies and the West Indies. The anonymous *False Appearances*, Sydney Owenson's *St Clair: Or, the Heiress of Desmond* and Sarah Isdell's *The Vale of Louisiana: An American Tale* represent rare examples of Dublin-published novels in the immediate post-Union period, all dating from 1803. John Connor of Cork, who had commercial connections with the Minerva Press in London, published local author Anna

[5] Jacqueline Belanger, 'Some Preliminary Remarks on the Production and Reception of Fiction Relating to Ireland, 1800-1829', *Cardiff Corvey: Reading the Romantic Text* 4 (May 2000). http://www.cf.ac.uk/encap/corvey/articles/cc04_n02.html (accessed 3 April 2010); see Rolf Loeber and Magda Loeber with Ann Mullin Burneham, *A Guide to Irish Fiction, 1650-1900* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006). These authors adopt a broader definition of 'Irish fiction', where 'Irish' refers to books that are produced in Ireland, written by Irish authors, or take Ireland as their setting; and 'fiction' includes tales, chapbooks, tracts, and novelettes..

Milliken's *Plantagenet* (1802) and *The Rival Chiefs* (1804).[6] Patterns in the production of Irish fiction mirror the overall British picture: an upward surge from the 1790s, with a 'slight dip' between 1800 and 1802; a falling off of production of new novels in the 1810s; and a renewed rise in the 1820s, interrupted by the publishing crash of 1825-6.[7]

The publishing history of the earliest national tales tie them quite closely to radical trends in 1790s fiction, particularly to the London-based Jacobin publishers Joseph Johnson and Richard Phillips. Phillips, who published Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), was imprisoned in 1793 for selling Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* in Leicester; in London he chiefly published popular works of instruction, aimed at the lower classes, as well as fictions by William Godwin and John Thelwall. Phillips advertised *The Wild Irish Girl* almost as a travel book, 'in which are delineated the State of Society, the Domestic and Moral Habits, the Manners, Amusements, and Grievances of the PEASANTRY and YEOMANRY of

[6] Rolf Loeber and Magda Stouthamer-Loeber, 'The Publication of Irish Novels And Novelettes, 1750–1829': A Footnote on Irish Gothic Fiction', *Cardiff Corvey: Reading the Romantic Text* 10 (June 2003), http://www.cf.ac.uk/encap/corvey/articles/ cc10_n02.html (accessed 3 April 2010).

[7] Belanger, 'Some Preliminary Remarks'.

IRELAND';[8] the novel's publication was announced alongside John Carr's *Stranger in Ireland*.[9] *The Wild Irish Girl* cost 13s and must have sold well, as Phillips shortly afterwards reissued Owenson's *The Novice of Saint Dominick* at 20s.

Johnson, a radical Unitarian, published William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine, Henry Fuseli, and Priestley. Maria Edgeworth's relationship with Joseph Johnson was established via her father Richard Lovell Edgworth and his Lunar Society contacts; when Johnson died in 1809, the publisher's nephews Rowland Hunter and John Miles took over Edgeworth's business. In the period between 1809 and 1815 (her most successful years), Richard Lovell Edgeworth dealt with Miles on his daughter's behalf. Hunter, who took over the business, was thought to have overreached himself with the £2,100 he offered for *Patronage* and was later to complain that he only lost money by publishing Edgeworth's books. On his deathbed, Richard Lovell Edgeworth advised taking his *Memoirs,* on which he collaborated with his daughter, to John Murray, but Edgeworth remained with Hunter until

[8] Peter Garside, Jacqueline Belanger, and Sharon Ragaz, *British Fiction, 1800–1829: A Database of Production, Circulation & Reception*, http://www.british-fiction.cf.ac.uk (accessed 3 April 2010]): DBF Record No. 1806A053.

[9] *Dublin Evening Post*, 10 June 1806.

relations finally broke down in 1827. Richard Bentley published *Helen* in 1833, for which Walter Scott's son-in-law J.G. Lockhart helped her secure the very good price of £1,100.[10]

Our understanding of the generic instability of *Castle Rackrent,* so often noted in critical discussions of the text, might be amplified by further consideration of its material history. Johnson's pricing of *Castle Rackrent* at 4s aligns Edgeworth's first novel with cheap and sensational publications of the early nineteenth century, lacking in prestige even compared to the Minerva press's Irish novels of the following year: Mrs Colpoys's *The Irish Excursion: Or, I Fear to Tell You* and Charles Lucas's *The Infernal Quixote: A Tale of the Day,* both published in four volumes, duodecimo format, and costing 18s. *The Irish Excursion* was further 'Ornamented with an emblematical Print of the Union – The Rose, the Thistle, and the Shamrock intertwined, Quis Separabit?'[11]

Edgeworth's wish not 'to acknowledge a Novel' when she published *Belinda* in 1801 may reflect on 'the battering which the novel had received at the hands of the reactionary anti-

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[10] See Marilyn Butler, 'Appendix B: Maria Edgeworth and her Publishers', *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1972), 490-493.

[11] Garside, Belanger, and Ragaz, *British Fiction* (accessed3 April 2010]: DBF Record No. 1801A019.

Jacobin movement in the late 1790s'.[12] By the 1810s, Walter Scott's *Waverley* and Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815) (both priced at a guinea) would announce a difference between 'superior' and more popular or ephemeral kinds of fiction.[13] Edgeworth and Owenson had already benefited from the new trend towards 'the upmarket best-selling novel': the first and second series of Edgeworth's *Tales of Fashionable Life* (1809, 1812) cost 21s and Owenson's *The Missionary* a guinea.

The 1820s is the decade in which 'an Irish *line* of fiction begins to be defined' in the British reviews.[14] The '*line'* was defined in negative as well as positive terms, and often associated with an excess of political commitment or an unpleasant obtrusion of reality into fiction. The shift from the earlier more positive climate did not however stem the production of Irish titles. The 1820s and 1830s also saw the growth of an indigenous Irish publishing industry. Some types of fiction (chiefly chapbooks and novelettes, often sensational or Gothic in nature) were published in Dublin from the 1810s forwards. John Cumming (1811 onward) published *Tales for Cottagers* (1814), written by the Quaker diarist Mary Leadbeater and her niece Elizabeth Shackleton. *Nice Distinctions*, a novel by Miss Driscoll, *Eccentricity*, a novel

[12] Garside, 'The English Novel', 40.

[13] Garside, 'The English Novel', 44.

[14] Ina Ferris, *The Romantic National Tale and the Question of Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 130-1.

in three volumes by Mrs MacNally, and the anonymous *The West-Indian: Or, The Brothers* followed in 1820; the two later titles are the first Dublin-produced triple-decker novels. All three had London co-publishers: Longmans in the case of *Nice Distinctions* and *Eccentricity* and A. K. Newman and Co. for *The West-Indian*.

The booksellers crash of 1825-6, instigated by the failure of the London associates of the Scottish publisher Archibald Constable, Hurst Robinson and Co. (who had published Charles Robert Maturin's *The Albigenses* in 1824), along with political ferment surrounding Catholic Emancipation, are usually blamed for a weakening of the fiction market at the end of the 1820s. Henry Colburn published Lady Morgan's *The O'Brien's and the O'Flahertys* in 1827 (announced alongside her *The Book of the Boudoir*, the Banims' *The Croppy: A Tale of 1798*, M.G.T. Crumpe's *Geraldine of Desmond* and the anonymous Irish silver-fork novel *The Davenels*) as part of a much wider effort to dominate a weak market. While others went under, Colburn was 'actually quadrupling his output of novels, and marketing them with an efficiency which brought cries of protest from potential rivals'.[15]

Morgan's relations with all of her publishers were difficult, however. Colburn had also published her travel book, *France*, in 1817. Instead of going directly to Henry Colburn with her updated *France in 1829-30*, however, Morgan entered into negotiations with Saunders

[15] Garside, 'The English Novel', p. 47.

and Otley, from whom she received a better price. Colburn exacted his revenge, putting a publisher's ruse known as 'the opposing system' into practice: 'LADY MORGAN AT HALF PRICE', declared Colburn's notices, claiming 'that in consequence of the great losses which he had sustained by Lady Morgan's former works, Mr. Colburn had *declined* this present book on France, and that all copies of her books might be had at half price'. Saunders and Otley entered into legal proceedings against Colburn; the latter finally made financial reparation to the former and Morgan published her next book, *Dramatic Scenes of Real Life* (1833), with Saunders and Otley.[16]

Books were still more borrowed than read during the early decades of the nineteenth century, which meant that publishers paid well for copyright but fostered 'a cult of exclusivity'.[17] Changes in technology (the steam-driven rotary press, the development of stereotype plates and mechanized paper production) finally began to effect a change and contributed to the willingness of publishers in the 1830s to produce collected and serial editions of fiction.[18]

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[16] William Hepworth Dixon (ed.), *Lady Morgan's Memoirs: Autobiographies, Diaries, and Correspondence*, 2 vols (1862; London: W.H. Allen, 1863), vol 2, 308.

[17] Garside, 'The English Novel', 39.

[18] Garside, 'The English Novel', 39. See also William R. McKelvy, '"This Enormous Contagion of Paper and Print": Making Literary History in the Age of Steam', in Ina Ferris and Paul Keen (eds.), *Bookish Histories* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), 61-84.

Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801) and *The Modern Griselda* (1805) had already been republished as part of Anna Letitia Barbauld's fifty-volume series of *British Novelists* (1810),[19] while her best-known Irish novels appeared originally in series form, as part of her *Tales of Fashionable Life*. Henry Colburn (from 1829 in partnership with Richard Bentley) followed his monthly *Modern Novelists* series with a nineteen-volume set of *Irish National Tales*, priced at 4s per volume and in octavo format and announced alongside a new twenty volume set entitled *The Naval and Military Library*. Contemporary advertisements describe the *Irish National Tales* volumes as eclipsing even 'the cheapness of the Waverly Novels' (at 5s), and as 'of a handsome size, good paper and print, and neatly lettered in green and gold'.[20] The series, also advertised as the 'Library of Irish Romance',[21] is described as seeking 'to accomplish, as far as possible, for Irish Story, what Sir Walter Scott has done for Scottish national history, by collecting together all the modern celebrated works illustrative of the manners and peculiarities of the Sister Kingdom'.[22] Essentially, however, this was not a full

[19] On textual changes to *Belinda*, see 'Textual Variants', in Siobhán Kilfeather (ed.), *Belinda* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003), 405-406.

[20] *Morning Chronicle*, 4 April 1834. See also *John Bull*, 30 December 1833, 410.

[21] *Morning Chronicle*, 4 January 4 1834.

[22] *Morning Chronicle*, 27 December 1833.

reprint on the model of Bentley's *Standard Novelists* but rather a cheaply produced series made up of old sheets of multi-volume novels already published by Colburn.[23]

Authors of Irish national tales were largely Irish, whether by birth or residence. Their professional status as writers takes a variety of different shapes in this period, from the gentry professionalism of Edgeworth (who believed 'the London booksellers' to be 'the best patrons'), to the unambiguous need of Gerald Griffin and John Banim to make their living by writing. Owenson was taken up by the Whig grandees Lord and Lady Abercorn following the success of *The Wild Irish Girl*; her dependence on their patronage does not diminish her later reputation as a canny operator in the London publishing scene. The reliance of Griffin and the Banims, as well as Lady Morgan in her later years, on journalism is also worth noting, as are the shared dramatic ambitions of Maturin, John Banim, and Griffin. The relation of all of these authors to their publishers and patrons had material effects on their fictions, the nature of which we have only begun to examine and understand.

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[23] Michael Sadleir, *XIXth Century Fiction: A Bibliographical Record*, 2 vols (London: Constable, 1951), vol 2, 116. For claims as to the importance of the series in forming the canon of Irish fiction, see Loeber and Loeber, 'General Introduction', *Guide to Irish Fiction*, xlix-cv: lxii, and Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: the Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 324n.

Although there is little evidence of the cavils of later generations concerning the cultural privileges assumed by those who chose to represent Ireland in print, Irish novelists and their critics did conduct a lively internal debate concerning issues of authorial rights and reputation. The narrator of 'The Half-Sir', one of Gerald Griffin's *Tales of the Munster Festivals* (1827) offers a rather backhanded justification for the very appearance of such a tale in the fertile field of Irish fiction. 'What Irish fashionable life was' just after the union, he writes, 'is no longer a question to be solved by the Irish novelist':

> Few persons, we apprehend, will open these volumes who have not already been made aware of all its varieties, by a writer who was the first to put the sickle into the burthened field of Irish manners; in whose footsteps we follow, like Chaucer's gleaner, at a long interval, with fearful and hesitating pace, casting our eyes around to gather in the scattered ears which remain after the richness of her harvest; and who, if her opportunities of observation had been as extensive as her capabilities of performance, would have left all the conditions of Irish life as little better than a stubble-field to her successors.[24]

[24] Gerald Griffin, 'The Half-Sir', *Tales of the Munster Festivals*, 3 vols (1827; New York: Garland, 1979), 268-9.

The unnamed writer here is undoubtedly Maria Edgeworth, an unlikely bearer of agricultural implements perhaps, but, until the advent of *Waverley* in 1814, the 'most celebrated and successful' of living British and Irish novelists.[25] Her loss of reputation is in part due to a 'male invasion of mainstream fiction' taking place in the early years of the nineteenth century, with 'female dominance' in the 1810s reversed by the 1820s, both in Britain and in Ireland.[26]

Griffin's comments amplify our understanding of this 'masculine capturing' of the novel in its Irish dimension. The admiring reference to Edgeworth actually serves to legitimate Griffin's own efforts: lacking 'opportunities of observation', her novels leave aspects of Irish life to be harvested by more able spectators. Where others might see a 'stubble-field', Griffin sees ground made fertile by Edgeworth's lack of 'opportunities'. Her difficulties might be presumed to be a product of her landowning status (as a later generation of nationalist critics would suggest), but in context seem more likely to refer to her gender and relative exclusion from the professional worlds of commerce, law, and education. Griffin's imputation of a lack of professional experience to Edgeworth resonates with contemporary criticism of her fiction, in particular her novel *Patronage*. The publication of *Patronage* in 1814 was central to Edgeworth's decline in reputation, with the reviews of that novel erecting hitherto invisible

[25] Butler, *Maria Edgeworth*, 6.

[26] Garside, 'The English Novel', 63, 75.

'gender boundaries' around the fiction.[27] Gender relations helped to underpin and secure a further and related shift in generic hierarchy: as women writers faded from prominence and men came to dominate the field, the novel itself moved into the cultural mainstream.[28]

Griffin had left his native Limerick for London in 1823, where, dejected at the rejection of his tragedy, *Aguire*, and his failure to make his way in the theatre, he turned to journalism. He wrote prose and poetical pieces for the London papers (under 'five hundred different signatures', as he puts it),[29] and wrote and published his first tales before returning to Ireland at the end of 1827. In London, Griffin benefited from the help and patronage of John Banim ('What would I have done if I had not met Banim?', wrote Griffin to his brother),[30] who offered him a kind of apprentice role in his own fictional labours. Banim's offer, to pay Griffin to contribute tales to the collections published by his brother Michael and himself as *Tales of the O'Hara Family*, was made only months before the appearance of Griffin's first collection, *Holland-Tide* (1827), and Griffin's rejection of the offer seems likely to have been

[27] Ina Ferris, *The Achievement of Literary Authority: Gender, History and the Waverley Novels* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 67-8.

[28] Ferris, *Literary Authority*, 1.

[29] Quoted in John Cronin, *Gerald Griffin: A Critical Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 21.

[30] Murray, *Life of John Banim*, 121.

motivated by a desire to achieve financial and professional success as an author in his own right. Griffin's earliest biographer attributes 'a morbid horror of patronage' to the Limerick novelist, sharpened by his disgust at the kind of professional networking which seems to have come rather more easily to Banim.[31]

Banim himself had moved to London in the hope of a successful career as a writer of legitimate tragedies. His early stage success with *Damon and Pythias* (1821) proved difficult to replicate, and he too turned to periodical journalism, writing art and theatre criticism for *The Literary Register* for a salary £102 per annum, paid weekly.[32] In his *Revelations of the Dead-Alive* (1824), a linked series of miscellaneous essays on the fads and fashions of literary London, Banim has his 'Mr. Drudge' complain that periodicals foster 'a dangerous jumble of tastes' that furthermore prejudice 'the public mind' against authors and dissuade them from buying new books: '"The periodical press!", I exclaimed, "truly, sir, it was a species of steam-loom, or thrashing or winnowing machine, that with its short methods and unnatural despatch, threw thousands of honest people out of bread"'.[33]

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[31] Murray, *Life of John Banim*, 173-4.

[32] Michael Banim, 'Introduction to *The Fetches*', *Peter of the Castle and The Fetches. By the O'Hara Family: A New Edition with Introduction and Notes* (New York: D and J Sadlier, 1869), 11.

[33] John Banim, *Revelations of the Dead Alive* (London, 1824), 113, 115.

Banim's own reliance on drudge work reminds us of the realities that lie below the much cited rise of the Irish novel in the 1820s; the novels that made their way into print tell only one part of a complex story comprising ambition, emigration, hard graft and painful failures. Charles Robert Maturin's 'fraught, drawn-out and multiply tangled' relations with his publisher Archibald Constable represent a well-documented instance of difficult author-publisher-patron relations in the period, especially as they concern Maturin's best known novel, *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820).[34] Maturin had begun a correspondence with Walter Scott in 1812 and as a result Scott's support secured a contract with Constable for *Women: Or, Pour et Contre* (1818). Maturin also wrote for the *Quarterly,* while his tragedy *Bertram* was sponsored by Walter Scott and taken up by a Lord Byron-led Drury Lane committee. The publication of *Melmoth the Wanderer* in three volumes in November 1820 followed two years of delays and diversionary tactics on the one side and anger and mounting impatience on the other.

The women writers who came after Edgeworth and Owenson did not always thrive in a literary field structured along masculinist lines. Nonetheless, issues of professional advancement and networks preoccupy women writers too, even when they did not leave

[34] Sharon Ragaz, 'Maturin, Archibald Constable, and the publication of *Melmoth the Wanderer*', *The Review of English Studies*, 57.230 (2006), 359-73: 360.

Ireland in search of a career.[35] The correspondence of M.G.T. Crumpe provides evidence of a hard-working woman writer who, only leaving her home in Limerick for short visits to London, was patronized by Thomas Moore, Thomas Campbell, and Edgeworth herself. Campbell tried to interest the critic Francis Jeffrey on her behalf, maintaining that he would be 'as convinced' of her 'talents' 'if she were the ugliest Woman in England'.[36] Constable published her novel, *Geraldine of Desmond*, dedicated to Moore, in 1829, a year that marked a highpoint in the production of Irish titles.

Even as cultural understandings of the novel as a genre narrowed and such specialist phenomena as Irish or Scottish titles flourished, the overall audience for fiction increased. British readers outnumbered and outspent Irish ones in this period, despite the rapid growth of population in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Ireland. Correlations between demographic and literary histories suggest themselves: the period between the late 1780s and the early 1840s saw not only the growth and development of new forms of fiction, preoccupied with the matter of Ireland but also a period of remarkable population expansion

[35] See Rolf Loeber and Magda Stouthamer-Loeber, 'Literary Absentees: Irish Woman Authors in Nineteenth-Century England', in Jacqueline Belanger (ed.), *The Irish Novel in the Nineteenth Century: Facts and Fictions* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), 167-186.

[36] Garside, Belanger, and Ragaz, *British Fiction* (accessed 3 April 2010): DBF Record No. 1829A033.

within Ireland itself. Yet the question as to whether we can 'begin to model the links between texts, books, reading, changing mentalities, and wider historical effects' remains frustratingly difficult to answer for Ireland. [37]

The mixed British and Irish readership for Irish national tales belongs to a period itself characterized by not only by closer political union but by improved infrastructural links between the islands and a high degree of mobility for groups including migrant laborers, the military, members of the legal and medical professions, and authors themselves. It remains difficult to produce a distinct understanding of the readership of English language prose in early nineteenth-century Ireland. We cannot confidently claim of early nineteenth-century Ireland, as has been claimed of Britain, that 'virtually everyone read books, magazines, and newspapers on a regular basis'.[38] The period of the rise of the national tale coincided with a major shift away from the Irish language in the population at large and towards the more complex bilingual world of nineteenth-century Ireland. The suggestion that fictions such as

[37] William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1.

[38] St Clair, *The Reading Nation*, 10.

the Banims' *Tales* 'imagine the possibility of an Irish-speaking readership' is fascinating but as yet unsubstantiated.[39]

Functional literacy in English was 'permeating the modestly circumstanced in the towns' by the middle of the eighteenth century.[40] By 1820 Edgeworth could claim that 'The Edinburgh and Quarterly Review are now to be found in the houses of most of our principal farmers'.[41] Recent work on fiction written for and available to cottagers and their children helps to further nuance our understanding of the role of national fictions within the sharply stratified social worlds of early nineteenth-century Ireland.[42]

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[39] Siobhán Kilfeather, 'Ireland and Europe in 1825: Situating the Banims', in Colin Graham and Leon Litvack (eds.), *Ireland and Europe in the Nineteenth Century* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006), 29-50: 38.

[40] Toby Barnard, 'Reading in Eighteenth Century Ireland: Public and Private Pleasures', in Bernadette Cunningham and Máire Kennedy (eds.), *The Experience of Reading: Irish Historical Perspectives* (Dublin: Rare Books Group of the Library Association of Ireland and Economic and Social History Society of Ireland, 1999), 60-77: 61.

[41] Quoted in St. Clair, *The Reading Nation*, 573.

[42] Rolf Loeber and Magda Stouthamer-Loeber, 'Fiction Written for and Available to Cottagers and their Children', in Cunningham and Kennedy (eds), *The Experience of Reading*, 124-172.

The novelist and Wicklow M.P. William Parnell said of his *Maurice and Berghetta* (1819) that 'I did not write for English readers, but with the hope of forming a popular book that should interest the peasantry of Ireland'. In his *A Letter to the Editor of the Quarterly Review* (Dublin, 1820), in which he responds to John Wilson Croker's negative review of the novel, Parnell wonders whether he 'should have adapted one edition to England, another to Ireland'. A Dublin edition of 1820 makes good on this intention: the text published by Richard Coyne is adapted to meet the presumed needs of a popular Catholic audience. Changes include a smaller, cheaper format, as well as revisions to the plot.

Further questions here cluster around definitions of reading: the sense of it as 'a recorded engagement with a written or printed text — beyond the mere fact of possession' is the most difficult to recover, particularly as horizons of reading recede in time.[43] Fictionalized scenes of reading in the novels of the Banims and in nineteenth-century genre paintings suggest the possibility of tracing an Irish narrative of the transition from collective to individual forms of reading in this period. Yet recorded instances of solitary reading, 'the close, quasi-bodily

[43] *The Reading Experience Database, 1450-1945*, http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/experience.htm (accessed 3 April 2010).

pleasures of books', are scarce.[44] We know that John Ruskin dreamt 'of being at court of Louis XV, in consequence of reading "Ormond"' by Maria Edgeworth (as recorded in his diary for 30 August 1867),[45] but few such sources are available for those wishing to investigate the inner lives of Edgeworth's Irish contemporaries.

There is certainly evidence that Edgeworth's fiction was read aloud: by Thomas Moore to his wife, by William Cusack Smith to his family and by Daniel O'Connell to his children.[46] Daniel O'Connell is thought to have believed that the character of the upwardly mobile Black Connal in *Ormond* was based on himself, and that an incident in *Patronage* was based on one

[44] Ina Ferris, 'Book-Love and the Remaking of Literary Culture in the Romantic Periodical', in Ina Ferris and Paul Keen (eds.), *Bookish Histories* (Palgrave: Basingstoke, 2009), 111-125: 114.

[45] *The Reading Experience Database*, http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/recorddetails2.php?id=25971 (accessed 3 April 2010).

[46] Jacqueline Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation.* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), 172; *The Reading Experience Database*, http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/recorddetails2.php?id=138 (accessed 3 April 2010).

of his legal cases.[47] The O'Connell-Edgeworth nexus points up the importance of establishing patterns and connections along the lines of a shared reading culture rather than simply in terms of preconceived political tendencies. Rather than read Daniel O'Connell's leadership of the Catholic nation as 'a most improbable phenomenon in the Edgeworth scheme of things',[48] it seems more helpful to return to the books themselves, to their authors and first readers, and to what we know or can still discover of their material meanings in their own moment.

[47] William J. O'N. Daunt, *Personal Recollections of the late Daniel O'Connell, M.P.,* 2 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1848), vol. 1, 134; W. J. Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Correspondence of Daniel O'Connell, The Liberator. Edited with Notices of his Life and Times,* 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1888), vol. 2, 425-6.

[48] Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 36.