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Exploring Cultural History

Essays in Honour of Peter Burke

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Chapter 16

Harping on the Past:

Translating Antiquarian Learning into Popular Culture in Early Nineteenth-Century Ireland

Clare O'Halloran

In his classic short study *The Renaissance Sense of the Past* (1969), Peter Burke outlined the new historical thinking that the rediscovery of the culture and writings of classical Greece and Rome had indirectly occasioned. A sense of historical change and a more critical approach to sources and to myths, when allied to a new recognition that 'all sorts of things – buildings, clothes, words, laws' had a history, gave rise to antiquarian scholarship.¹ For a time, the antiquary was a highly respected member of the republic of letters, as demonstrated in Peter Miller's skilful examination of the milieu and reputation of Nicolas de Peiresc (1580–1637), the Provençal scholar and *parlementaire*, 'one of Europe's most famous men', who was at the centre of a network of European antiquarian and scientific writers and researchers in the early seventeenth century. On his death, a memorial meeting in Rome was attended by ten cardinals and dozens of antiquaries and philologists, a volume of elegiac poetry in 40 languages was published and he was the subject of 'the most important biography of a scholar in the seventeenth century'.² Yet it was at precisely this time that the image of the antiquary also came under satirical attack. In Shackerley Marmion's play *The Antiquary* (1641), for example, he was mocked as a 'credulous collector of absurd bogus antiquities', his erudition derided as unworldly and incompatible with the mores of a civilized gentleman.³ In the following century it was the French *encyclopédists* who, as Arnaldo Momigliano put it, 'declared war upon erudition', and rejected that kind of detailed scholarship as a prerequisite for cultural authority.⁴ The new 'philosophical' history of the

¹ Peter Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past* (London, 1969), pp. 39, 50–76.

² Peter N. Miller, *Peiresc's Europe: Learning and Virtue in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven and London, 2000), pp. 1–2.

³ Stuart Piggott, *Ancient Britons and the Antiquarian Imagination* (London, 1989), pp. 15–17; Joseph M. Levine, *Dr Woodward's Shield: History, Science, and Satire in Augustan England* (Ithaca and London, 1991), pp. 117–18.

⁴ Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford, 1990), pp. 74–5; Miller, *Peiresc's Europe*, pp. 151–2.

Enlightenment usually declared its contempt for antiquarian scholarship, although there were some notable exceptions, such as Edward Gibbon.⁵

The stock character of the antiquary as buffoon was revamped by Walter Scott in *The Antiquary* (1816), the third of his Waverley novels. Jonathan Oldbuck (whom Scott modelled partly on himself) is a crusty bachelor, whose heated but ineffectual disputes with his neighbour, Sir Arthur Wardour, over the vexed issue of the ethnic origins of the Scots, mask a kindliness and sympathy at odds with his public persona. Scott's description of Oldbuck's study as 'a *mare magnum* of miscellaneous trumpery' makes clear that the only dangers he faces are of being swamped by his antiquarian enthusiasm for collectible objects, or of being imposed upon by unscrupulous fraudsters (as his friend Sir Arthur is).⁶ Oldbuck's interest in the minutiae of the Picts and legendary Caledonians, like his quarrels with Sir Arthur, are symptomatic of a kind of antiquarian scholarship that jumbled together the important and the ephemeral without discernment. Scott's antiquary lives at one remove from society, and also from history; a mere bystander in the novel, who watches the action unfold without making any telling intervention. However, while Scott satirized what was seen as the arid scholarship of the antiquary in this work, he nevertheless made the antiquarian past central to the type of cultural reconciliation between Scotland and England that he put forward in novels such as *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818).

Scott's *The Antiquary* was an early starting point in my first investigations into Irish antiquaries and their writings in the second half of the eighteenth century. The novel provided confirmation that it was not only in Ireland that criticism of antiquarian scholarship as eccentric, fanciful or credulous was still in common currency at the end of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth. It also suggested Scottish antiquarianism as an interesting comparison, given the shared Gaelic culture of Ireland and Scotland and their rather different relationships with the dominant power, England. Indeed, most of the issues that Jonathan Oldbuck and Sir Arthur Wardour quarrelled over had their Irish counterparts. Thus, for example, in place of the Picts, Caledonians and Celts, Irish antiquaries had their contests over the medieval Irish origin legend, which held that the island was peopled in ancient times by the Milesians from the southern Mediterranean region, seen as the cradle of European civilization.⁷ This was contentious because it provided support for a golden age myth of a learned, orderly and civilized polity in Ireland, in pagan as well as Christian times, which was only destroyed by English colonists in the late twelfth century.

The legacies of that and the subsequent colonizations from England (and Scotland) in the late sixteenth to mid-seventeenth centuries provided the framework

⁵ J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion* (4 vols, Cambridge, 1999–), vol. 1, pp. 137–51.

⁶ Walter Scott, *The Antiquary* [1816] (London, n.d.), p. 18 (Chapter 3).

⁷ Clare O'Halloran, 'Ownership of the Past: Antiquarian Debate and Ethnic Identity in Scotland and Ireland', in S.J. Connolly, R.A. Houston and R.J. Morris (eds), *Conflict, Identity and Economic Development, 1660–1839* (Preston, 1995), pp. 135–47.

for all subsequent Irish historical scholarship and debate. The core issue was the nature of Irish society as the first English colonists had found it. Twelfth-century writers, such as Gerald of Wales, had stressed its barbarism, thus representing the newcomers as the harbingers of civilization.⁸ Later colonists (like Edmund Spenser at the end of the sixteenth century) argued that this civilizing project had been left unfinished, and painted a lurid picture of contemporary native Irish backwardness and lawlessness, in support of a harsh policy of military domination and the wholesale destruction of Gaelic culture and its replacement by English mores, language and the Reformed religion.⁹

Thus, a by-product of colonization was the provision of a dark counter-narrative to that of the golden age, which caused, in turn, a reactive burnishing of the latter. Antiquaries from the early seventeenth century operated between these interpretative twin poles, their positions determined largely, but not wholly, by their religion. Those of colonist stock and adherents of the Anglican state Church (who held exclusive political power) were more likely to support the counter-narrative of colonization as a civilizing mission; and Catholic antiquaries to a man (there were no women, alas) embraced with fervour the historicity of the pre-twelfth-century golden age. However, in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, a number of Protestant scholars began to interest themselves in Gaelic culture (although they could neither read nor speak Irish), and to extol its virtues as a repository of history as well as of sublime music and poetry. They argued that harsh English policies had perverted the initial civilizing impulse of colonization, resulting in the gradual degradation of Gaelic popular culture of their own time. Their enthusiasm was for the aristocratic bardic literary tradition as revealed in medieval manuscripts and in its last remnants from the early eighteenth century.¹⁰ In their claims to understand and to comment authoritatively on native Irish history and literature, these liberal Protestant antiquaries echoed many of the concerns of Creole scholars in South America, whose writings have recently been highlighted by Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra. He focuses on the role of Creole Spanish American antiquaries of the eighteenth century, who wrote patriotic histories to endow Creole colonial societies with a glorious past and to refute the views of sceptical northern European authors about the incivility of the Spanish American colonies.¹¹ Issues preoccupying Creole scholars – for example, the reliability of

⁸ Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, trans. John J. O'Meara (Harmondsworth, 1982).

⁹ Edmund Spenser, *A View of the State of Ireland: from the First Printed Edition (1663)*, ed. Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley (Oxford, 1997); see Joep Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael* (Cork, 1996), pp. 38–61.

¹⁰ See, for example, Joseph Cooper Walker, *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards* (Dublin, 1786); Cooper Walker, *An Historical Essay on the Dress of the Ancient and Modern Irish* (Dublin, 1788).

¹¹ Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *How to Write the History of the New World: Histories, Epistemologies, and Identities in the 18th c. Atlantic World* (Stanford, 2001), pp. 2–4, 8–9,

Native Indian records for the pre-colonial and early colonial periods, and the status of Amerindian forms of writing – had their Irish equivalents, thus suggesting the continuing colonial dimension in cultural debate, as in politics, in eighteenth-century Ireland.

As part of this new enthusiasm for the Gaelic world from the 1770s, a number of attempts were made by Protestant antiquarian learned societies to collect Gaelic manuscript remains and publish them in English translation.¹² These were now seen as the key to understanding the Irish pre-colonial past, which Protestant patriot antiquaries were harnessing to form new legitimating historical narratives that tended to be critical of English policy in Ireland, past and present. However, this impulse was not universal and there were Protestant sceptics who rejected these patriot narratives and held to the older colonial tradition of Irish barbarism. They dismissed the Gaelic manuscript materials as the work of the late Middle Ages, 'a period ... of rebellion and domestic confusion', and the 'fabulous tales' therein as unworthy of scholarly attention.¹³ Thus, the disputed nature and value of the medieval manuscript materials as historical sources for the pre-colonial period was a corollary of the civility versus barbarism debate, with those who regarded colonization as progress being unwilling to allow the possibility of a valuable Gaelic tradition of scholarship. Positions taken on these questions were also linked directly to one of the major contemporary political issues of the second half of the eighteenth century – namely what to do about the panoply of discriminatory laws against Catholics, which had been put in place in the 1690s and early 1700s, in response to Irish Catholic support for the Stuarts, and which excluded them from all political power and preferment, and severely curtailed their inheritance rights. Advocates of a pre-colonial golden age generally supported the relaxation of these laws (views on how far that relaxation should go varied), while those who felt the laws were justified by the ever-present Catholic threat of rebellion tended to the opposite perspective of a barbarous early Ireland.

Hence, in Ireland, the antiquary was not the quaint and marginal figure suggested by Scott's novel, but rather a highly politicized writer, edgily aware of the contemporary resonances of his pronouncements on the early Irish past. This awareness was further reinforced by the bloody rebellion of 1798, in which 30,000 people are estimated to have died. It was a shocking blow to the confidence of the Anglican ruling elite and was seen by them as a reprise of the massacre of Protestants by Catholics in 1641, a traumatic event that had remained strong in their historical

60–63, 111–29, 204–65.

¹² Clare O'Halloran, *Golden Ages and Barbarous Nations: Antiquarian Debate and Cultural Politics in Ireland, c.1750–1800* (Cork, 2004), pp. 36–8, 172–5.

¹³ See, for example, Edward Ledwich, *Antiquities of Ireland* (Dublin, 1790), pp. 81–2; Thomas Campbell, *Strictures on the Ecclesiastical and Literary History of Ireland* (Dublin, 1789), pp. 35–9.

memory.¹⁴ That the vast majority of the rebels were Catholic, and many Gaelic speaking, caused, among other things, a discrediting of that antiquarian interest in, and extolling of, the Gaelic past and culture, now confirmed as inextricably bound up with sedition. The immediate effect was a significant decrease in antiquarian activity and writing, particularly among Protestant antiquaries who were Gaelic enthusiasts, and who were seen to have been particularly compromised by the rebellion. The antiquities section of the Royal Irish Academy, which had hitherto sponsored an ambitious programme of collecting and translating Gaelic manuscripts, abandoned that project and became moribund for most of the next 20 years, only resuming its meetings in the late 1820s.¹⁵

However, what looks like a long caesura in Protestant elite antiquarianism is to some extent misleading. Rather, it was displaced into at least one other literary genre: in this case, the Irish novel of the early nineteenth century, which was a significant influence on Walter Scott. There has been considerable work done on Irish fiction of this period, with a particular focus on its political contexts.¹⁶ The novel is seen as having been transformed by the Act of Union of 1801 (a government response to the 1798 rebellion), which incorporated Ireland fully into the British state as a means of ensuring its security. The shifting of the centre of power from Dublin (where the by now abolished Irish parliament had sat every winter) to London had huge political, but also social, cultural and economic repercussions, for the Irish elite and for Irish writers. The Irish question (in other words, how to ensure good government and stability in this impoverished and intractable part of the British state) was now to be decided at Westminster. That same eastward focusing of attention can be seen also in the Irish novel, invariably published in London, with writers addressing themselves particularly to an English audience in an effort to explain this neighbouring, yet exotic and sometimes alien island. The result of this greater understanding, it was hoped, would be policies that would prevent further traumatic rebellion and lead to harmonious relations between the two islands. Even when set resolutely in the present, the post-Union novel centred on the past and its legacies, which were seen as critical to questions of allegiance and identity.

¹⁴ Jacqueline Hill, '1641 and the Quest for Catholic Emancipation in Ireland, 1691–1829', in Brian Mac Cuarta (ed.), *Ulster 1641: Aspects of the Rising* (Belfast, 1993), pp. 159–72; James Kelly, '"We Were All to Have Been Massacred": Irish Protestants and the Experience of Rebellion', in Thomas Bartlett et al. (eds), *1798: A Bicentenary Perspective* (Dublin, 2003), pp. 312–30.

¹⁵ O'Halloran, *Golden Ages*, pp. 172–5, 181.

¹⁶ See, for example, Joep Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination: Patterns in the Historical and Literary Representation of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Cork, 1996); Ina Ferris, *The Romantic National Tale and the Question of Ireland* (Cambridge, 2002); Miranda Burgess, 'The National Tale and Allied Genres, 1770s–1840s', in John Wilson Foster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 39–59.

This can be seen in the treatment of antiquarian themes in three Irish novels of the early nineteenth century by Irish Protestant writers: Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan)'s *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), Maria Edgeworth's *The Absentee* (1812) and Charles Robert Maturin's *The Milesian Chief* (also 1812). This analysis forms part of a wider project of tracking the percolation of late eighteenth-century antiquarianism into the popular print culture of the first half of the nineteenth century; 'popular' here including the growing middle classes, who were the main readers of the new fiction. In particular, I want to look ultimately at the process by which antiquarianism was harnessed by Catholics as a way of mobilizing mass support for their political agenda of, firstly, Catholic Emancipation, and then repeal of the Act of Union, under the charismatic leadership of Daniel O'Connell. These novels are important not just as an early phase of this transmission process, but also because they show different responses by Protestant writers to Irish antiquarianism and its discrediting in the immediate aftermath of, not just the 1798 rebellion, but also the doomed uprising of Robert Emmet in 1803. All of them acknowledge, if not always directly, the challenges and indeed dangers posed by antiquarian knowledge and discourse to the Union settlement.

On the most basic level, antiquarian learning was harnessed by these novelists to provide romantic and exotic colour. Their plots often unfolded against a backdrop of ruined castles and abbeys in sublime mountainous scenery, and it was largely via the novel that a popular association began to be formed between the Irish past and ruins, such as monastic round towers, wolfhounds and especially the harp. The harp was an interestingly contested symbol.¹⁷ Initially used to represent Ireland in the coinage of successive English monarchs, starting with Henry VIII, and in the royal standard from the time of James II, it became a symbol of Catholic rebellion in 1641 (a reflection of the royalism of the rebels perhaps), and of Jacobitism in the 1690s. During the eighteenth century the harp was prominent in the insignia of both 'patriot' organizations like the Volunteers of the late 1770s and 1780s and of 'loyalist' groups like the Yeomanry of the 1790s. It was given renewed official prominence in the insignia of the Order of the Illustrious Knights of St Patrick in the 1780s. (This Irish equivalent of the Order of the Garter attempted to attach 'patriot' sentiment to the state.)¹⁸ However, it again became a prominent symbol of rebellion when taken up in the 1790s by the radical society of United Irishmen, whose original reformist aims (influenced by the first, moderate phase of the French Revolution) were transformed, largely by government oppression, into the goal of separation from Britain via armed revolt in 1798.¹⁹

¹⁷ G.A. Hayes-McCoy, *A History of Irish Flags from Earliest Times* (Dublin, 1979), pp. 22–3, 48–64, 89–108, 111–21.

¹⁸ Peter Galloway, *The Most Illustrious Order: The Order of St Patrick and its Knights* (London, 1999).

¹⁹ Mary Helen Thuente, *The Harp Re-strung: The United Irishmen and the Rise of Literary Nationalism* (Syracuse, 1994).

Antiquarian interest in the harp and in Irish music had been fostered in the late 1780s by Joseph Cooper Walker's *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards* (1786), which was part of an Ossian-inspired vogue for such music that can be seen also in Wales, England and Scotland at around this time. As Katie Trumpener has shown, the figure of the ancient bard was widely adopted in the so-called Celtic fringe to symbolize cultural defiance against an anglicizing hegemony.²⁰ Works such as Walker's, and Charlotte Brooke's *Reliques of Irish Poetry* (1789) – the first substantial published collection of Gaelic poetry and song translated into English – argued for a national literary tradition that was not just equal to that of England but superior to it because rooted in an ancient language and golden age civilization. In July 1792 a group with close ties to the United Irishmen organized a harp festival in Belfast that was timed to coincide with Bastille Day celebrations, and with a large United Irish convention, thus underlining the connection of the harp with radical politics. One of the United Irish newspapers was called *The Harp of Erin*, and used the United Irish slogan on its masthead: 'It is newly strung and will be heard.' In addition, the image of the harp was frequently employed in the popular verse included in all United Irish publications.²¹

The traditional airs played at the Belfast Festival by an elderly and impoverished group of about a dozen harpists were transcribed by a copyist, Edward Bunting, in a conscious act of retrieval of a dying popular musical culture, which can be paralleled among all European elites in this period, as Peter Burke has shown.²² The transcriptions, heavily reworked and adapted for the piano, provided the accompaniment for the *Irish Melodies* of the Catholic poet and political satirist Thomas Moore, which were published in serial form to widespread acclaim in Britain as well as Ireland, from 1808 to 1834. Moore's verse was imbued with a romantic nostalgia for a lost golden age, encapsulated in the title of one of the most famous melodies, 'Let Erin remember the Days of Old'; and it often celebrated Irish martial heritage, though always safely in the distant past.²³ However, the ubiquity in his verse of the figure of the bard, playing a lament on his harp, enabled a more political reading, silently invoking the recent rebellions of 1798 and 1803:

But alas for his country! – her pride is gone by,
And that spirit is broken, which never would bend;
O'er the ruin her children in secret must sigh,
For 'tis treason to love her, and death to defend.²⁴

²⁰ Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton, 1997), p. 4.

²¹ Thuente, *The Harp Re-strung*, pp. 120–21.

²² Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1978), pp. 3–22.

²³ Thomas Moore, 'Let Erin remember the Days of Old', *The Poetical Works of Thomas Moore, collected by himself* (10 vols, London, 1853), vol. 3, pp. 252–3.

²⁴ Thomas Moore, 'Oh! Blame not the Bard', *ibid.*, pp. 264–5.

The heroines of all three of the novels under consideration here are closely associated with the harp. Glorvina, in Sidney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl*, is an accomplished harpist and singer of Gaelic songs; Grace Nugent of Edgeworth's *The Absentee* is named after a well-known composition of the famous harpist and composer of the early eighteenth century, Turlough O Carolan; while in Maturin's *The Milesian Chief*, Armida plays on a continental harp, in keeping with her Anglo-Italian parentage; but she too can sing Irish airs. Alone of the three novelists, however, Maturin makes explicit the connection between the harp and sedition.

Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* was the first of these novels to be published, and its subtitle, 'a National Tale', is now used to identify this distinctively Irish Romantic genre, which is recognized as a significant influence on Scott's early Waverley novels.²⁵ *The Wild Irish Girl* also most obviously bears the imprint of antiquarian scholarship, not just in the text but in lengthy didactic footnotes that advertise the weighty research undertaken by the author and educate her English readership about Irish history.²⁶ She also includes efficient summaries of some of the major antiquarian debates, such as over the authenticity of Macpherson's Ossian poems and the status of the Gaelic manuscript tradition as a source for early Irish history, using these in her plot as a kind of symbolic enactment of Anglo-Irish conflict in which the English Mortimer is made to bow to superior Irish disputation and scholarship.²⁷ But *The Wild Irish Girl* also created a popular vogue, in Ireland at least, for 'antique' jewellery, hairstyles and dresses in the Glorvina style, which Owenson had described in detail, drawing on the 1788 *Historical Essay on the Dress of the Ancient and Modern Irish*, by Joseph Cooper Walker, author of *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards*.²⁸

Walker offered Owenson every encouragement, recommending that she also incorporate local story-telling and oral legend in her novel.²⁹ However, in the same year that *The Wild Irish Girl* was published, 1806, he himself all but repudiated his earlier antiquarian works that she had drawn on, calling them 'my crude productions on the subjects of the history and antiquities of Ireland' and ascribing their faults to 'youthful enthusiasm'.³⁰ He had, in fact, been engaged in a process of distancing

²⁵ Burgess, 'The National Tale', p. 39; Ina Ferris, *The Achievement of Literary Authority: Gender, History, and the Waverley Novels* (Ithaca and London, 1991), pp. 105–33.

²⁶ Scott later added extensive footnotes to the Magnum Opus edition of the complete Waverley novels, which began appearing in 1829, in order to root his story 'more explicitly in actuality' (Ann Rigney, *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism* (Ithaca and London, 2001), pp. 42–5.)

²⁷ Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism*, p. 131.

²⁸ Claire Connolly, 'Note on the Text' in Sydney Owenson, *The Wild Irish Girl: A National Tale* [1806], ed. Claire Connolly (London, 2000), p. lxvi.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. lx–lxi.

³⁰ Joseph Cooper Walker, 'On the Origin of Romantic Fabling in Ireland', *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy*, 10 (1806), antiquities section, pp. 3–5, 21; O'Halloran, *Golden Ages*, pp. 179–80.

himself from these since the early 1790s, when the United Irishmen had adopted the harp and the bard as emblems of the radical cause, just as in the same decade he repudiated his youthful support for the Whig politics of the 'patriot' party in the Irish parliament. Owenson adopted Walker's descriptions of bards, of music and of Irish dress with exuberance, and without any of his concerns about the political resonances of such material in the wake of 1798. Her lack of inhibition may partly be explained by the fictional genre that she had adopted. Walker, for example, could not have foretold that the pike that he had featured as part of the battledress of the early Irish warrior hero in his 1788 *Historical Essay* on Irish dress would be the main weapon used by the rebels in 1798.³¹ But Owenson could still clothe her characters in versions of the garb depicted in Walker's *Historical Essay*, because she had full control of her narrative and could choose an ending that avoided echoes of recent wars or rebellions.

The plot involves a young man, Horatio Mortimer, journeying for the first time to Ireland, where his family own land that was won by their Cromwellian soldier-ancestor during the wars of the mid-seventeenth century. Ignorant of Irish history, he quickly realizes, once he arrives, that the land had been confiscated from the ancestors of the Prince of Inismore, who now lives nearby in a ruined castle with his daughter, Glorvina, and chaplain, but who remains highly aggrieved at his family's dispossession. That Owenson can make the prince explicitly stand for the dispossessed Gaelic aristocracy is a measure of the freedom she experienced in tackling politically fraught topics such as this, and it may have something to do with her unusually mixed Gaelic Catholic and Protestant gentry family background.³² By contrast, the eighteenth-century antiquaries, whose works she had consulted and borrowed from, could only allude indirectly to the seventeenth-century land confiscations, and the consequent destruction of the Gaelic elite, lest they were perceived to be advocating revolution.³³ Owenson, however, ends the novel by signalling the marriage of Glorvina and Mortimer, thus uniting the colonizer with the colonized and thereby holding out the prospect of a palliative for the major trauma of Irish history.

On the way to this resolution, Mortimer is given a series of lessons on Irish history and Gaelic culture, which show him that the view he had held of Ireland as 'semi-barbarous [and] without those ... graces which distinguish polished society' was erroneous; in response he embarks on a study of Irish history and the Gaelic language under the tutelage of Glorvina.³⁴ However, Mortimer's change of mind is achieved only partly through the study of history books and grammars, and far more through what he calls 'the corroboration of living testimony', namely the Prince of Inismore and his daughter, who literally embody the golden age

³¹ O'Halloran, *Golden Ages*, p. 124.

³² Tom Dunne, 'Fiction as "the Best History of Nations": Lady Morgan's Irish Novels', in Tom Dunne (ed.), *The Writer as Witness* (Cork, 1987), pp. 139–40.

³³ See O'Halloran, *Golden Ages*, p. 164.

³⁴ Owenson, *The Wild Irish Girl*, pp. 10, 45–6.

antiquarian lore to which Owenson constantly appeals in her lengthy footnotes. Thus, the prince's 'ancient costume of the Irish nobles' is described in great detail and accords with Walker's prescriptions in his 1788 essay on the subject.³⁵ His memory is said to be 'rich in oral tradition', and he declaims in Ossianic style about the decay of past greatness.³⁶ Furthermore, the great hall of his ruined castle now serves 'as an armory, a museum, a cabinet of national antiquities, and national curiosities', but this is not the miscellaneous collection of Walter Scott's Oldbuck, but rather 'the receptacle of all those precious relics, which [he] has been able to rescue from the wreck of his family splendour'.³⁷ As he sits in his 'immense arm-chair', with his 'ancient bard' playing the harp,

his gratified eye wandering over the scattered insignia of the former prowess of his family ... he forgets the derangement of his circumstances – he forgets that he is the ruined possessor of a visionary title; he feels only that he is a man – and an Irishman!³⁸

Thus, in *The Wild Irish Girl*, antiquarian lore is made part of the process of fostering harmony among Ireland's divided population – the old man can forget his loss in the comfort of the harp music, and his estates will be made good by the union of his harp-playing daughter with the by now almost Hibernicized Englishman.

We shall see how in Maturin's *The Milesian Chief*, antiquarianism (symbolized particularly by the harper) was vested with an explicitly sinister intent. Inhabiting a space in between these views, however, is Maria Edgeworth's *The Absentee*, which follows Owenson's plot in broad outline: a young man, Lord Colambre, whose family is Irish but whose home is in England, comes to Ireland to visit his estate. Imbued with roughly the same prejudices about Ireland as Owenson's hero, he too finds the reality very different, though a contrast to Morgan's version – 'a spirit of improvement, a desire for knowledge, and a taste for science and literature [was evident] in most companies' – and he resolves by the end to live on his Irish estate, and to reject the shallow life of an absentee landlord in London. As the quotation makes clear, this is not a straightforwardly romantic novel, although it employs some of the devices of that genre. Edgeworth's moral purpose was grounded in the Enlightenment ideal of education and improvement, and her novel advocates a reform of the land system in Ireland by means of a resident landlord class who would manage their estates wisely and thus ensure a contented and law-abiding peasantry.³⁹

Edgeworth shows none of Owenson's exuberant interest in antiquarianism, and significantly her hero, Colambre, does not read Joseph Cooper Walker, or any of the late eighteenth-century antiquaries. (Indeed, on arrival in Dublin, he is advised to read Spenser and other colonist writers.)⁴⁰ However, Edgeworth does make an antiquary central to the story, and she gives him the name O'Halloran, thereby recalling Sylvester O'Halloran, the Catholic antiquary whose works were important to Owenson. Count O'Halloran (the title coming from his service in the Austrian army) is described as 'a fine old military-looking gentleman' and 'a man of uncommon knowledge, merit, and politeness'.⁴¹ He welcomes Colambre to Halloran castle, 'a fine old building, part of it in ruins, and part repaired with great judgment and taste'.⁴² Unlike the Prince of Inismore, therefore, he believes in and practises renovation and improvement, rather than wallowing in a nostalgic stasis. Colambre is in love with his cousin Grace Nugent, but has been told that she is illegitimate by the scheming English Lady Dashfort, who plans to marry him off to her own daughter. Colambre is distraught at the news, but while in the count's study sees a book on the genealogy of the Nugent family. The count's interest in genealogy is in line with the more commercial aspects of the business of a number of well-known Irish antiquaries of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There was a ready market for family genealogies among the many Catholic Irish soldiers who enlisted in continental armies (Catholics being excluded from the British army by the penal laws) and who needed to prove a degree of noble birth in order to be eligible for promotion.⁴³

It is O'Halloran's genealogical knowledge of the true nature of Grace's parentage that allows Colambre to wed his cousin and return to his Irish estates. On the other hand, the antiquities that the count has found on his estate and displayed in the great hall of his castle, 'golden ornaments, and brass-headed spears, and jointed horns of curious workmanship', are used by the evil Lady Dashfort to prevent a conversation between Colambre and the count that might reveal her lie about Grace's illegitimate birth. Dashfort rushes Colambre off to look at the count's collection, thus steering the conversation onto 'round towers, to various architectural antiquities, and the real and fabulous history of Ireland, on all which the count spoke with learning and enthusiasm'.⁴⁴ Here, Irish antiquities serve as a distraction from the truth, a barrier to the national reconciliation that will be achieved if Colambre the Protestant landowner marries his Irish cousin and lives on his estate as an improving landlord. Yet in making the count the instrument of that reconciliation, Edgeworth seems to suggest that it is not antiquarianism

³⁵ Ibid., p. 46.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 60–61.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 99.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Tom Dunne, '"A Gentleman's Estate Should Be a Moral School": Edgeworthstown in Fact and Fiction, 1760–1840', in Raymond Gillespie and Gerard Moran (eds), *Longford: Essays in County History* (Dublin, 1991), pp. 109–16.

⁴⁰ Maria Edgeworth, *The Absentee*, eds W.J. McCormack and Kim Walker (Oxford, 1988), p. 81.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 115, 113.

⁴² Ibid., p. 113.

⁴³ On the genealogical activities of one Irish antiquary, see Richard Hayes, 'A Forgotten Irish Antiquary: Chevalier Thomas O'Gorman, 1732–1809', *Studies*, 30 (1941): 587–96.

⁴⁴ Edgeworth, *The Absentee*, pp. 120–21.

itself that is dangerous, but rather the uses to which it may be put. That the count is no threat is underlined by his service in the army of Austria, now a firm ally of Britain in the Napoleonic Wars, and he travels to London to help 'a relation' in the ministry with the planning of a British military expedition, using maps and charts brought with him from Ireland.⁴⁵ He is also made the mouthpiece of Edgeworth's own pragmatic support for the Act of Union, in his welcoming of the news that a number of English militia regiments have landed in Ireland:

The two countries have the same interests; and, from the inhabitants discovering more of each other's good qualities, and interchanging little good offices in common life, their esteem and affection for each other would increase, and rest upon the firm basis of mutual utility.⁴⁶

Thus, in Edgeworth's ideal Ireland, antiquarianism is to be compatible with fealty to the Union settlement.

This is in direct contrast to Maturin's *The Milesian Chief*, published in the same year as *The Absentee*, 1812. Maturin, an impecunious Church of Ireland clergyman, took note of the commercial success of Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* and, presumably with an eye to sales, entitled his first novel *The Wild Irish Boy* (1808), even though its only real similarity to the former is its reliance on the epistolary form. In fact, it is his next novel, *The Milesian Chief*, which borrows most obviously from Owenson's plot, but then only to subvert it and to cast doubt on its liberal Whig politics. Maturin was assisted early on by Walter Scott, who saw in the young Irish Tory writer a counter-balance to the Whig dominance of the Irish question.⁴⁷ Trumpener argues that Maturin was a considerable influence on Scott in turn, and that *The Milesian Chief*, which appeared just two years before *Waverley*, was an important marker in the transition from the Irish national tale of Morgan and Edgeworth to the historical novel of Scott.⁴⁸ The Anglo-Italian heroine, Armida (whose name evokes the heroine of Tasso's late sixteenth-century epic poem *Jerusalem Delivered*), moves to the west of Ireland with her English father to take possession of an estate that he has bought from a 'ruined Milesian family'.⁴⁹ The patriarch of that family has refused to accept the loss of his patrimony and shuts himself away in a tower on the border of his former estate with his grandson and his ancient, blind harper. It is this grandson who is the Milesian chief, Connal O'Morven, and who falls in love with Armida, in spite of being wracked, as he

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 219–20.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 116–17.

⁴⁷ Claire Connolly, 'Irish Romanticism, 1800–30', *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature* (2 vols, Cambridge, 2006), vol. 1, p. 418.

⁴⁸ Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism*, pp. 147–8. On the influence of Morgan and Edgeworth on Scott, see *ibid.*, pp. 323–4.

⁴⁹ Charles Robert Maturin, *The Milesian Chief* (4 vols, New York, 1979), vol. 1, p. 48.

says himself, by the 'bitter thought' of his 'alienated home and rights'.⁵⁰ Connal, like the Prince of Inismore, wears 'the ancient Irish dress', and is described by Armida as resembling 'the bust of a classic hero' but with a 'wild and romantic sublimity of expression'. Unlike Owenson's prince, however, Connal is given a heavy fringe of hair, which immediately calls to mind Spenser's condemnation of the 'glibb' or long fringe worn by Irish rebels in the sixteenth century, which was used to disguise their features.⁵¹ This immediately puts a different and far less sympathetic cast on Maturin's version of a Gaelic chieftain, which can be also seen in the circumstances of the O'Morvens' dispossession. Whereas in Owenson's novel, the ancestors of the Prince of Inismore had been deprived of lands through Cromwellian military conquest, the O'Morvens had sold their estate only 30 years previously. The cry that goes up among the O'Morvens and their followers when Armida and her family first enter the castle was 'a sound that expressed all the wild feelings of a savage people, mixed with grief, despair, and agonized attachment'.⁵² The still primitive nature of the Gaelic O'Morvens means that they cannot let go of the past, and therefore cannot survive in the modern commercial world represented by Armida's English father.

However, if Maturin's conservative political message about the perils of Gaelic culture is emphatic on one level, it is nevertheless rendered less clear-cut by his ambivalence towards cosmopolitanism as represented by Armida's family background and her attachment to the classical culture of Greece and Rome.⁵³ When she quotes the first lines of Volney's influential *The Ruins; or, a Survey of the Revolutions of Empire* (1791), on first sight of an ancient ruined abbey, burial ground of the O'Morvens, Connal cuts across her and dismisses any parallel between the graveyard of his ancestors and the 'nameless ruins' of Volney's essay, 'which are supposed to commemorate greatness now unknown, and virtues that have no other memorial'. These latter, he claims, can inspire only 'an abstract and indefinite melancholy', whereas 'here is a local genius', specific to generations of his family: 'I feel who lies below: every step I take awakes the memory of him on whose tomb I tread, and every hour seems weary till I lie down with them, and are [*sic*] forgotten'.⁵⁴ Furthermore, when her louche, cynical and ultimately depraved English fiancé, Wandesford, contrasts the 'rude relics' of the abbey with 'the splendid monuments of Grecian art at a still earlier period', Connal retorts that '[t]he greatest works of antiquity were the productions of despotism or of superstition'. Epitomizing the 'noble savage' (with all the contradictory attributes associated with that concept), Connal makes plain his rejection of the corruptions of modern society: 'I had rather be seated in the halls of my fathers, open perhaps

⁵⁰ Maturin, *The Milesian Chief*, vol. 1, p. 189.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 128–9.

⁵² Ibid., p. 57.

⁵³ This paragraph owes much to the ideas of Ina Ferris in her *The Romantic National Tale and the Question of Ireland* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 112–17.

⁵⁴ Maturin, *The Milesian Chief*, vol. 1, pp. 186–7.

to every wind of heaven, with my bards and my warriors around me, than be the supple, silk-clad pensioner of an English minister.⁵⁵

Maturin's Rousseau-like critique of the inauthenticity of metropolitan society and culture, while a staple of the romantic genre, coexists uneasily with the determinedly negative portrait of its supposed opposite, traditional Gaelic society. It is one reason why, in *The Milesian Chief*, Maturin crafted a novel that was more gothic than romantic, allowing him to blend a romantic sensibility with a dark view of the Gaelic world and Gaelic culture.⁵⁶ Unsurprisingly, the only antiquary whose work he cites in the novel is the conservative Protestant scholar Edward Ledwich, whose *Antiquities of Ireland* (1790) provided the main challenge to the liberal, romantic antiquaries like O'Halloran and Walker (Owenson's authorities), and poured scorn on their golden age versions of the early Irish past.⁵⁷ Like Ledwich, Maturin deliberately put himself in the colonist tradition of Spenser. He had previously signalled this in his 1808 novel *The Wild Irish Boy*, by quoting on the title page from Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1598). In *The Milesian Chief*, antiquarian enthusiasm for the Gaelic world transmutes into revolutionary separatism. Inevitably, Connal leads an insurgency, which echoes elements of both the 1798 and 1803 rebellions, the latter of course also associated with another romantic but doomed leader, Robert Emmet. In contrast to Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl*, where brief references to the recent rebellions are corralled safely into the extensive footnotes, Maturin makes explicit the contemporary context of his plot by having Connal apply military tactics learned from a battle fought in 1798.⁵⁸

Connal realizes, too late, the folly of this renewed insurgency, and that it is 'impossible for Ireland ... to exist without dependence on the continental powers, or a connexion with England', but although he wants to give up the enterprise, he feels an honourable commitment to 'the brave men who had embraced it'.⁵⁹ Knowledge having replaced 'illusion', Connal can see how he has been seduced into rebellion by his mad grandfather, who 'shut himself up in the old tower on his ancient demesne ... listened to the tales of his bards and the songs of his harpers ... brooded over his pride and his misfortunes till madness began to ferment in his mind; and he conceived the frantic idea of wresting Ireland from the English hand'.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 190–91.

⁵⁶ For Ina Ferris, this novel is the first of the distinctive sub-genre, the Irish Gothic (Ferris, *The Romantic National Tale*, p. 175 n.)

⁵⁷ Maturin included just three endnotes, all referring to volume 1, and did nothing like the systematic research of Owenson (the notes can be found in vol. 4, p. 204). On Ledwich, see O'Halloran, *Golden Ages*, pp. 60–62, 66–9, 135–40, 157, 172.

⁵⁸ Maturin, *The Milesian Chief*, vol. 3, pp. 108–9.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 52.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 49.

While the Irish harp and its music in Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* symbolized civility as well as romantic feeling, which are also alluded to in the harp-associated name given to the sensitive heroine of Edgeworth's *The Absentee*, Maturin differentiates sharply between the impact of Armida's performance on the harp and that of the grandfather's blind harper. Armida's playing of an 'old Irish melody' causes Connal to leave his sorrows behind: 'and I feel that I could sit thus, on this rock, for ever forgetting our fallen house, forgetting the cold world, myself, everything but you'.⁶¹ But the old harper is an ever-present symbol of the family's 'ruined fortunes', who 'touches his harp in empty halls, and wastes on the ear of age sounds that might have roused heroes to battle'. In old age he has forgotten all the love songs that he knew and can only sing of 'woe or death'. It was the 'martial airs' played on the harp that led Connal to become a rebel:

At night, seated in the hall at my grandfather's feet; I listened to the harp and the legend till I believed them true as inspiration, and my heart burned and beat for the time 'ere the emerald gem of the western world was set in the crown of a stranger'.⁶²

Here, Maturin has the rebel chief quote a line from the first verse of one of Thomas Moore's most popular melodies:

Let Erin remember the days of old,
Ere her faithless sons betray'd her.
When Malachi wore the collar of gold,
Which he won from her proud invader,
When her kings, with standard of green unfurl'd,
Led the Red-Branch Knights to danger; –
Ere the emerald gem of the western world
Was set in the crown of a stranger.⁶³

Moore is celebrating Irish martial prowess in the wars against the Vikings, but in such a way that those glory days of resistance to the foreign invader are confined safely to history. In putting Moore's words into the mouth of Connal, who has already embarked on a rebellion set in the present, Maturin connects the antiquarianism of his own day, not with the romantic aim of recovering and celebrating a dying literary culture, but rather with a still potent sedition. He also works to strip away the golden-age sheen from the martial tradition, as celebrated by Moore in his *Melodies*, by depicting the rebel actions as savage and undisciplined. Thus, he undercuts the romantic and 'regal' figure of Connal, his harper by his side striking 'a martial chord on his harp', with descriptions of the 'barbarity' of

⁶¹ Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 155–6.

⁶² Ibid., vol. 3, p. 50.

⁶³ Moore, 'Let Erin remember the Days of Old', *Poetical Works*, vol. 3, pp. 252–3.

his peasant army as they pursued a young British officer 'like wolves after their prey'.⁶⁴ Just as the Gaelic O'Morvens are unable to adapt to modern commercial values, so the rebels cannot fight according to the ways of modern warfare, and 'it seemed like the contest of two savage nations in their deserts: there was no array, no regularity, no conducted charge, no disciplined retreat'.⁶⁵ Thus, the discipline and professionalism of the government's own forces will be at risk of barbarous contamination if another rebellion is allowed to take place in Ireland.

In 'The Origins of the Harp', another of Moore's *Melodies*, the harp is said to have first been 'a Siren of old, who sung under the sea'.⁶⁶ Although Moore's siren sang of love, Maturin's connection of the harp to sedition is closer to the original story of the sea nymph who lured sailors to destruction on the rocks. Maturin's gothic version of modern Ireland is made plain in the denouement of the novel. Connal is executed by firing squad, while Armida takes poison and throws herself on his corpse to be united with him in death. Thus, Maturin casts doubt on the sunny optimism of Owenson's conclusion by subverting the marriage plot of Glorvina and Mortimer. There can be no safe blending of the Gaelic and the modern world through a marriage of the Milesian chief and his Anglo-Italian love, because Gaelic culture is not amenable to the harsh modern realities of the Union settlement. Equally, the impossibility, for Maturin, of an accommodation of the two cultures is signalled by a reversal of the gender terms of Owenson's original formulation.⁶⁷ The dispossessed culture in *The Milesian Chief* is embodied in an exclusively masculine form and remains threatening, whereas in *The Wild Irish Girl* it has been largely feminized in the person of Glorvina and thus rendered compliant and passive.

With hindsight we can see that Maturin's diagnosis of the dangers of antiquarianism was correct, since it was to play a central role in the development of the nineteenth-century Irish nationalism that led to the dismantling of the Union in 1921. The new cultural identity that emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century was based in part on the late eighteenth-century antiquaries' idealization of the Gaelic past, but it was also eventually given an exclusively Catholic cast. The irony here, of course, is that Maturin, like the other two Protestant novelists, contributed to the promotion of that new, ultimately exclusivist identity through his exploitation of the antiquarian vogue, even though, like them, his intention was anything but nationalist. In the transmission of antiquarianism from elite scholarship to popular cultural nationalism, the Irish novel of the early nineteenth century forms an important early phase.

⁶⁴ Maturin, *The Milesian Chief*, vol. 3, pp. 88–9; vol. 4, p. 51.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁶⁶ Moore, 'The Origins of the Harp', *Poetical Works*, vol. 3, pp. 281–2.

⁶⁷ Fiona Robertson, *Legitimate Histories: Scott, Gothic and the Authorities of Fiction* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 218–19. Robertson notes the extent to which Scott (in *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819)) also borrowed and adapted the plot of Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl*.

If we move forward 30 years, then we can see one result of that process in the symbolism employed at a mass gathering of the nationalist Repeal Association. This organization was set up in 1840 to campaign for the repeal of the Act of Union, and it harnessed all the popular icons derived from the antiquarianism of the previous century, but giving the harp particular prominence. Its founder, the great liberal parliamentarian Daniel O'Connell, was an admirer of the novels of Owenson and of the poetry of Moore, although they were suspicious of his methods and jealous of his success.⁶⁸ Using tactics of mass agitation that he had previously employed in the successful campaign for Catholic Emancipation, O'Connell devised a series of 'monster meetings' around the country in support of repeal of the Union; where possible these were held in places that had a historic resonance for the public, to stress the possibility of the return of the golden age if repeal were granted. In August 1843 a meeting of an estimated half a million people was held at the Hill of Tara, legendary seat of the high kings of Ireland in early Christian times. Such meetings had to be carefully choreographed (and stewarded) to present a demonstration of potent symbolism and rhetoric while ensuring the maintenance of order among the vast audience. At Tara, O'Connell's open carriage (which took two hours to make the final stages of his journey through the crowds) was preceded by a car on which a harper sat enthroned playing Thomas Moore's 'The Harp that once through Tara's Halls'.⁶⁹ Thus, enthusiasm for the harp – initially promoted by antiquaries like Walker, and adapted, as we have seen, to a range of political and cultural perspectives in the post-Union novel – had, by the 1840s, resulted in its transformation into a vibrant nationalist symbol that resonated with a mass audience.

⁶⁸ Connolly, 'Irish Romanticism', pp. 442–3.

⁶⁹ Oliver MacDonagh, *The Emancipist: Daniel O'Connell, 1830–47* (London, 1989), pp. 229–30.