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## ‘Old Ireland and Himself’: William Orpen and the Conflicts of Irish Identity

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**Abstract:** The Irish painter William Orpen (1878-1931), defined here as Ireland’s most ‘Spanish’ painter, was out of fashion for fifty years after his death; but he has recently been dramatically revalued, with his works fetching huge prices in salerooms and an unprecedentedly large exhibition of his work being mounted in London and subsequently Dublin. Best known for his Edwardian portraits and his devastating paintings of the First World War, he also produced a series of allegorical paintings of his native Ireland. These are discussed in this article, and linked to his admiration for J.M.Synge, his dislike of clericalism and repression in Irish life, and his celebration of sensuality. The same themes lie behind ‘Homage to Manet’, a celebrated group portrait which includes the Irish novelist George Moore and the art collector Hugh Lane —a close friend of Orpen’s. Orpen knew other figures of the cultural Revival, and his relation to them is discussed; as is the conflict of identity he experienced (like other middle-class Irish Protestants) when the radicalisation of Irish politics and the outbreak of the First World War put a new strain on the allegiances of people who had previously thought of themselves as both ‘British’ and ‘Irish’. After the trauma of the War, and Irish separation, Orpen opted for Britain; but, it is argued, he was closer to elements of the Irish cultural revival, and more involved with Irish politics and Irish history, than is usually accepted.

**Key Words:** William Orpen, *Stories of Old Ireland and Myself*, Irish Protestant, cultural Revival, Irish identity.

The painter William Orpen seems an apposite subject for the first issue of a new Spanish journal of Irish studies. He has recently been re-valued as not only a great Edwardian portrait painter but also the creator of an astonishing series of haunting and apocalyptic scenes of war, which dominated the large exhibition shown at the Imperial War Museum and later the National Gallery of Ireland in the spring and summer of 2005; he has, as will be seen, been claimed by both Britain and Ireland. But he also painted in a distinctly European tradition, and was above all influenced by Velasquez and Goya. Many of his portraits and genre paintings contain references to the former (a portrait of the artist William Nicolson’s family is a direct homage to ‘Las Meninas’ —a painting that exerted on

Orpen a mesmeric influence, as it also did upon Picasso); and his brother-in-law William Rothenstein wrote one of the first influential critical studies of Goya in English (1900), which Orpen read closely.<sup>1</sup> A turning point in his own artistic odyssey came when he visited Madrid with the Irish art dealer, collector and connoisseur Hugh Lane; the Prado collection introduced him to the dark side of Goya, and the influence comes strongly through his paintings of wartime devastation a decade later. [See Plate n° 1, ‘The Madwoman of Douai’] The influence of Ribera and the Seville school is also marked in Orpen’s early work. His later oeuvre, in its starkness, its blackness, its angry interrogations of religiosity, marks him as the most Spanish of Irish painters.

His Irishness became something of an issue

when the catalogue for the 2005 exhibition first appeared; on the cover Orpen was described as ‘one of the great British artists’ of the early twentieth century, which ruffled some feathers at the National Gallery of Ireland. Orpen, it appears, is once again Irish. For many years after his death in 1931 he was out of fashion: seen as an over-privileged *wunderkind*, who inherited Sargent’s mantle as a painter of ‘swagger portraits’ for London’s elite, made a fortune, lived immorally (some of his greatest portraits were of his mistresses), declined into vulgarity with his savage war paintings of 1917-19, and drank himself to death aged only fifty-two. Now that rich Irish collectors are prepared to pay well over a million euros for an Orpen painting, his stock is high once more and he is once again claimed for Ireland. However, for Orpen’s life and times, there is an argument that ‘British’ could include and encompass a certain kind of Irishness. ‘Englishness’ is of course different. When Bruce Arnold was researching his Orpen book in the 1970s he received much help from Orpen’s daughter Kit Casey, and in January 1978 she sent him a very firm rebuttal of a comment by her father’s pupil, the painter Sean Keating, that Orpen represented a colonialist strain in Irish history. She emphasised how Irish the family was, how much they loved Ireland, how they all expected to end up living there permanently; though her father ‘admired and loved’ England, he was completely Irish.<sup>2</sup>

That letter echoes the tone of many Irish Protestants from the 19<sup>th</sup> century on: affection, displacement, a slight bewilderment. At the time of Orpen’s birth in 1878, the Orpen family traditions were certainly Protestant, haut-bourgeois, ‘establishment’; the distant ancestors were 17<sup>th</sup>-c ‘planters’ (though from a Royalist tradition), and his mother’s family were the aristocratic Charlemont connection; but by the 19<sup>th</sup> century long-established Protestants like them felt completely Irish, while adhering to the Union with Britain. It is an attitude reflected in many Irish memoirs and other writings, notably from Somerville and Ross. But these records, like Kit Casey’s much later letter, are written in an era when the ‘old Ireland’ that accommodated the easy sense of belonging in both countries (and sustaining a privileged position in both), which Orpen grew up with, was long gone. It went, of course, in the decade of Irish revolution from 1912 to

1922: an era when Orpen was very much alive, and painting dynamically. But that is also the era of the First World War, which was closely connected with the progress and direction of the Irish revolution; and which changed Orpen’s life too. Orpen’s short and dazzling career, and the artistic inheritance he bequeathed, are closely related to ‘Old Ireland’ —as he called it in his random book, *Stories of Old Ireland and Myself*— but his life spanned the transformation to ‘new Ireland’, and his paintings may be read against these upheavals too —as, perhaps, may his ultimate disillusionment and decline.

## I

That book, ‘*Stories*’, is a curious ramble, but there may be more art in it too than is first thought. Writing in 1924, just after the end of the Civil War in Ireland and the birth of the new independent Irish Free State after years of guerrilla war and military repression, Orpen was trying to conjure up the *douceur de vivre* of a world long gone, and a world which he had painted and sketched with such brilliance: the leisured life of the Irish upper middle classes in the Edwardian era. [See Plate n° 2, ‘A Breezy Day, Howth’] In *Stories*, Orpen rhapsodizes about Ireland as a lost world, a vanished playground:

I remember when I came to live in London, at the age of seventeen, the first Sunday I spent there a fellow student asked me to go out for the day with him. I called at his place in the early morning. Said he. ‘What shall we do?’ ‘Let’s go to the sea or up the mountains’, said I at once. And he ‘laffed and laffed’. But he did not understand that I had always lived in Dublin, and expected the sea and the mountains to be close by For Dublin as a city has wonderful points about its position. How pleasant it was of a summer morning, ‘when we were free!’ and ‘all was hospitality’, to drive out in the doctor’s big car [Oliver Gogarty’s Rolls Royce] to ‘Lamb Doyle’s’, that wonderful inn on the Hill of Step-a-Side which lies near the base of the Three Rock Mountain, so named from the three enormous rocks on its summit, which one can see clearly from Howth twelve miles away! The view from ‘Lamb Doyle’s’ pub on a summer morning, as you sit in the shade on a bench outside the house and look back over the bay, with Dublin on the left, and Howth, with Ireland’s Eye, and Lambay behind! On the

right Kingstown, Dalkey and Bray Head, all of them in the blaze of the midday sun! This view, with the sweet fresh smell of the country in your nostrils, a cigarette in your mouth, and your glass beside you, truly you could feel life in all its glory, yourself having only left the crowded, hot city some twenty minutes before; in fact, you could leave Dublin at noon and get all this joy, and be back in the city, have lunch, and be ready for work at two o'clock. (Orpen 1924: 43-4)

The closing reference to 'work' is characteristic, but for Orpen and his friends, Edwardian Dublin was their playground. This meant the Fitzwilliam Lawn Tennis Club, pubs like the Brazen Head and Davy Byrne's, Jammet's restaurant rather than the Abbey Theatre, the focus for his near-contemporaries Yeats and Synge, much less the seedy inner suburbs of the North side immortalized by Joyce in *Dubliners*. It is generally thought that Orpen lived his Dublin life oblivious of these other worlds, and indeed, he was from early on dividing his life between his duties at the Metropolitan School of Art and his soaring career as a portrait painter in London. But there were other realities too. This was Dublin governed from Dublin Castle, by a Viceroy and Chief Secretary appointed by a British Government. Ireland was, of course, represented at Westminster, by a large Home Rule party, led at this time by John Redmond; and many middle-class Irish people, Catholic and Protestant, found prosperous and even influential careers in imperial service, while many Irishmen joined the British army (and the Irish police forces). But there was another tradition too. How conscious of it was Orpen? When his attitude to Irish politics is considered, authorities usually quote a statement from his book *Stories*, where he says that he was never sure what 'the Irish Question' was —suggesting a deliberate artistic naiveté. But it is worth reading the passage in which this remark is embedded, because it gives a different impression.

I can remember things happening in Ireland ever since I was a very young child. I remember the Phoenix Park murders and the terror they brought to me. [1882] I had not realised what murder and sudden death meant before.

The murderers, Brady, 'Skin the Goat', and 'Time Kelly the Youth'.

'For in his bloom

He met his doom-

Tim Kelly's early grave.'

And how they drove away on the outside car, after the murders, through the Castleknock Gate.

And 'Buckshot' Forster.

'Parnell for ever O.

Buckshot the beggar O.

Take him to the slaughter yard

And hang him up for leather O.'

And the arrest of Parnell from brave Morrison's Hotel when he tried to escape by the yard. And the Parnell Commission. And Richard Pigott, who used to swim in Kingstown harbour every morning, a nice, quiet, kind old gentleman with a white beard. He who did the forgeries and, as far as I remember, ran away and shot himself somewhere across the sea—in Spain, I think.

The treatment of Parnell at this time, and later, is surely a thing of which England and Ireland each ought to be ashamed. Even some of the men he made turned against him in his dark days.

I was brought up on 'The Irish Question'; but what the Irish Question was I have no idea. (I wonder if anyone has!) From my memory of those times I should think there must have been thousands and thousands of 'Irish Questions'.

Even as I write strange words come back to me. I don't know what half of them mean—I most likely never did—but I must have heard them so often, long, long ago, that they are firmly planted in my brain. I imagine this planting must have taken place mostly as I sat watching my father and brothers eating their dinner and listening to their talk. Such words as 'The Home Rule Bill', 'The Kilmainham Treaty', 'Moonlighters', 'The Agrarian Crimes', 'Boycott', 'No Rent Movement', 'Land Purchase Bill', 'Congested Districts Board', 'the United Irish League', 'The Town Tenants Act', 'Evicted Tenants Act', 'Irish reform association', 'The Irish Church Act', 'The Fixity of Tenure', 'The Dunraven Treaty', 'The Land Commission', 'cattle driving', 'Urban' and 'Rural District Councils'.

It seems to me wonderful how all these things were run. Leagues, Associations, Boards, Acts, Bills, treaties, departments, Commissions, Organisations, societies and Councils, they must have been most expensive things! They must have cost the people a terrible amount of money to keep

them all going, considering the thousands and tens of thousands of officials they meant. But that was the method at that time for relieving distress in that most distressful of countries. Nor were all the officials of the Green Island. No, sir, not by a long chalk. (Orpen 1924: 6-8)

We should not be misled by the chatty tone, the *faux-naïveté*, the snatches of song: this is actually a very comprehensive list of the political issues of Orpen's youth, and an incisive portrait of late-Victorian Irish administration, recalled forty years later. Nor was he entirely politically apathetic, even at the time of his Edwardian heyday; he produced, for private consumption, political cartoons, featuring Castle officials like Sir Antony MacDonnell and politicians such as William O'Brien, satirizing their attempts to solve the questions of land and home rule 'by conference'. Orpen was closer to Irish history than we may think.

## II

And, of course, he was a Dublin 'figure' at one of the most exciting eras of modern Irish history: the opening years of the twentieth century when, as George Moore put it, the sceptre of intelligence was handed back from London to Dublin, and the cultural revival pioneered by people like W.B. Yeats gathered pace. Yeats, like Orpen, actually lived between London and Dublin at this era, but was much in Dublin because of the Abbey theatre, which he founded with his friend Augusta Gregory. Orpen went to the Abbey, though not as often as his brother Richard; he knew Gregory and seems to have liked her, though he politely refused her invitation to come to Coole and paint the inmates of the local workhouse.<sup>3</sup> But he found Yeats unbearably pretentious. The last passage of *Stories* is a vituperative attack on the poet for criticising the performance of Anna Pavlova on her last Dublin appearance; and when Orpen does recall those years of cultural ferment and experiment, he deliberately leaves Yeats —of all people! — out of the roll-call.

Dublin had a great period for some years before the war. Wonderful things happened. George Moore came and lived there, entertained, wrote his books, picked people's brains, laughed at his friends, and cursed dogs. After all, he only came to

Ireland for 'copy', not for love and he got what he wanted. *The Lake* was a fine book, and *The Untilled Field* had some good stories, which were really something like life in Ireland. Then the Abbey Theatre started, and John Synge wrote wonderful plays and books. He knew Ireland, the humour, the sadness of it all, better than anyone ever did. And he expressed his knowledge in his works in words that burn deep into the heart of all who know and love the country. What a master he was, this calm, modest, shy great man! Alas! He is dead, and there is no-one who can fill his place.

Then there was James Stephens, who wrote most charming verse. And are not his two books, *The Crock of Gold* and *Demi-Gods*, known and admired all the wide world over? Do you remember the chapter in *Demi-Gods* about the thoughts of the ass as he stood in the rain? That was great stuff!

And we had Starkey, better known to lovers of poetry as Shamus O'Sullivan, and Oliver Gogarty, that king of wits, and Padraic Colum, and James Joyce, who wrote the *Dubliners*.

Rich in talent we were; none can gainsay that. (Orpen 1924: 48-9)

This view of the Irish Literary revival is very clearly Hamlet without the Prince. It might be noted too that Orpen was a reader, for all his mockery of high literary culture, and a writer (the National Gallery of Ireland archives contain poems and prose meditations): and Synge clearly spoke to him on many levels, notably in his attack on Irish pieties about idealised rural life and undue clerical influence. It is striking that the Moore novel he mentions is *The Lake*: it deals with a rural Irish priest (mischievously named Father Oliver Gogarty) who falls in love with a beautiful woman and opts for sensual life rather than clerical celibacy. There are many assonances here with Orpen's allegorical paintings about the new Ireland in 1913-15. (There is also a strange Synge connection in later life: during his wartime life in France, Orpen became close to the hard-living Press officer, George Mair, who has in fact been briefly married to Synge's great love, Molly Allgood, who had created the part of Pegeen Mike in the *Playboy*.)

Orpen also reserved a particularly malevolent attack in *Stories* for poor George Russell, or AE, one of the key figures of the 'Celtic Twilight' school. But there is a point here about the purposes of art in Ireland. Orpen saw

AE as a bad Sunday painter, churning out first, fairy fantasies, and then, bad imitations of Millet, for an undiscerning Dublin audience, who should have been buying the pictures of Orpen's own protégés at the Metropolitan school, like Keating and Frank Tuohy. And one thing Orpen felt strongly about was the need to bring new art to Dublin, which is why his relationship with Hugh Lane is so central.

Lane, a nephew of Lady Gregory's, was a brilliant art dealer and self-taught connoisseur—briefly trained at Colnaghis Gallery, he was ploughing his own very successful furrow in London by the early 1900s. Drawn by his aunt into Irish cultural revivalist circles, he wanted to found a gallery of modern art in Dublin, though his own expertise up to this had chiefly been in discovering previously unattributed Old Masters. He was, however, very interested in French painting, and got into trouble about a Corot which he showed in a Dublin exhibition, and which was accused of actually being a study by the Hungarian artist Mezoly; Orpen warmly defended Lane in *Stories*, but a letter in the National Gallery of Ireland shows that he knew it was not genuine.<sup>4</sup> It was the sort of incident which mobilized the worst side of Dublin philistinism, as was also true of Lane's plans for a great gallery, to be located in a bridge-building thrown across the Liffey, designed by Lutyens.

This epic struggle convulsed Dublin's artistic and literary circles before the First World War; it began with Lane's attempt to raise a public subscription to buy the Staats-Forbes collection of French paintings as the foundation of an Irish gallery of modern art in 1904.<sup>5</sup> Orpen was anxious to throw support behind Lane's efforts, and he also was, as early as 1902, anxious to mount a show of his own work in Dublin, and approached Lane as the obvious person to arrange it. Lane was also instrumental in Orpen's taking over from John Butler Yeats a series of commissioned portraits of eminent Irish people for the National Gallery of Ireland. Lane made sure that Orpen was well represented in the landmark exhibition of Irish painters which he organised at the Guildhall in London in 1904. Thus far, we see Orpen tentatively identified with the Irish cultural renaissance. And when Orpen and Lane travelled to France and Spain together later that year, it was immensely influential for them both. As has already been pointed out, in Madrid, Orpen's huge

admiration for Velasquez, already clear in his work, was confirmed; but he also discovered the range and power of Goya's work, which would emerge not only in his portraits but in his later war work. And in Paris, rooting around at the dealer Durand-Ruel, Orpen effectively introduced Lane to Manet's painting. Starting Lane's pursuit of modern French painters, whom he began buying obsessively, and who would form the basis of the great collection of paintings which was to be disputed between the National Galleries of Dublin and London for decades after his premature death.<sup>6</sup>

### III

Manet is the central figure here, and this brings us back to Orpen's friend George Moore, Irish novelist, connoisseur, mischief-maker and unreliable memoirist. Though Moore was ambivalent about Lane, he believed passionately in the new French painting, and when living in Paris had attached himself to Degas, Monet and above all Manet. Lane enlisted Moore as one of the people who would persuade the Dublin public that they needed a new gallery, and that it should contain pictures like the Staats-Forbes Collection of modern French artists, many of whose works looked controversial, to say the least. Moore agreed to help (and even patched up his current quarrel with Yeats in order to appear on the same platform). The lecture Moore gave in Dublin on 8 December 1904 in support of the cause was not entirely helpful: it has been described as Moore's Epistle to the Philistines. Among other things he ridiculed the 'dull and commonplace' National Gallery of Ireland, whose Director was sitting in the audience, and whom Moore jeered at for turning down a Manet when he could have bought one for £10 instead of a thousand. (Frazier 2000: 338 ff.) Above all he spoke of the need for artistic shamelessness, the breaking of codes, and the salutary power of shock. Modern art, particularly the art of Manet, could bring a gospel of liberation. Moore liked his own lecture so much that he published it separately as *Reminiscences of the Impressionist Painters* (1906) and also worked it into a later volume of memoirs. He also read it to a private audience at Steer's studio in Chelsea in May 1906.

This is the background to Orpen's contribution to the campaign, for that is one way of looking at his great conversation-piece, 'Homage to Manet', painted in 1907-8. On one level, it is what it says, a homage to a painter central to Orpen's imagination. Manet's portrait of the artist Eva Gonzales, finally bought by Lane in 1906, hangs behind George Moore as he reads from his 'Impressions of French painters' to an audience of painters (Tonks, Steer, Sickert), the critic McColl, and the connoisseur Hugh Lane. It is also one of Orpen's supreme examples of mirror-effect, a painting of someone reading about paintings to a group of painters in front of a painting of a painter who is painting a painting. But there is more to it than that. Moore, in his text, argues (not very helpfully, as far as Lane was concerned), that what Dublin really needs is not a gallery but cafes, like the Nouvelle Athenes in Paris where he had met Manet and others. A culture of artistic appreciation is not necessarily created by rich people giving subscriptions to buy paintings for the public; what is needed is the kind of apprehension of reality and sensuality in which Manet excels. In fact, he argues, the reason why the 'Eva Gonzalez' portrait (the cornerstone of Lane's French collection) is an 'article of faith' lies in these very qualities; Dublin should look at the magnificent bare arm, raised in the act of painting, instead of upon 'the meagre thighs of dying saints'.

Life is a rose that withers in the iron fist of dogma, and it was France that forced open the deadly fingers of the ecclesiastic and allowed the rose to bloom again. And France is in the world's van today in her repudiation of the deadly doctrine that some Bedouin tribes invented in the desert long ago, that life is a mean and contemptible thing, and that renunciation of life is the greatest virtue... The beautiful limbs of the lover and the athlete were forbidden to the sculptor, and the meagre thighs of dying saints were offered to him instead. (Moore 1906: 47-8)

As the puritanical Dublin diarist Joseph Holloway put it, after the original lecture, "Moore almost raved over the unshaded arm of a lady in one of Manet's exhibits [...] and propounded many strange things such as 'artists should be almost unaware of any moral codes to succeed'" (Frazier 2000: 339). Moore's equally pious friend Edward Martyn told him that the anti-Catholicism of the

lecture "hurt me as much as if someone had shoved a pin in the very quickest part of my flesh." (Frazier 2000: 344) Moore's message was that past conventions and respectable beliefs had to be abandoned. "Art is a personal re-thinking of life from end to end." Manet, Moore thought, had the necessary confidence, partly because he carried "the birthmark of easy circumstances and the culture thereof" (unlike Renoir, whose art was tainted by 'inherited vulgarity'). Thus he scorned pretentiousness and adopted Bohemianism. His art must be the example which would teach the Irish to appreciate the new painting which, established in a gallery, would substitute 'the praise of life' for the limitations of dogmatic Catholicism. Thus the essential message was that of Manet's 'Eva Gonzales', which Moore saw as Manet at his most 'Spanish'. Moore would later present himself, in his immortal autobiography *Hail and Farewell*, as returning to Ireland on a mission to save the country from Christianity (by which he meant Catholicism), reversing the mission of St Patrick. If you look at Orpen's picture and realise that this is the message being preached at the altar of Manet, the painting takes on a distinctly subversive edge.

Kenneth McConkey has argued convincingly that the painting reflects the current debate about modern art. (McConkey 2003: 208-9) This is true but I would also argue that it is also about sex and secularism: the revolution which Moore is preaching is not political, but sexual liberation. Orpen did not agree with Moore in everything (who did?), but on some things they were at one, and Orpen would have warmly agreed with Moore's injunction to 'be not ashamed of anything but to be ashamed'

#### IV

If 'Homage to Manet' has a particular Irish subtext, is this true of much else of Orpen's work before the War? It is an Irish-revolutionary aspect to —for instance— 'The Rebel' of 1902.<sup>7</sup> But in the series of portraits of Irish public figures which he took over from JBY, his portrait of the Irish socialist, ex-Fenian and land reformer Michael Davitt stands out, as does the warmth with which Orpen writes of him in his recollections. [See **Plate n° 3**, 'Michael Davitt'] It is striking that it should be Davitt who captures his affection, rather than a more establishment figure like

John Redmond, who had just reunited the Irish parliamentary party, and was a follower of Parnell, whom Orpen admired. It is even more striking to note his warm admiration of the communist labour leader Jim Larkin, whom, alas, he never painted in oils, though he sketched him in the Trade Union headquarters Liberty Hall, during the great Dublin lock-out of 1913, when Orpen spent much time with him. He admired Larkin intensely and wrote about him vividly and movingly in *Stories* (82 ff) —another interesting hero-figure. His daughter Kit's recollections are, again, significant. "He never became in any way a political creature even in later life", she recalled. "But he always had an instinctive sympathy with the underdog & a passionate aversion the unfair treatment of the catholic majority in Ireland; hence his admiration for Davitt, Countess Markiewicz etc. (I had to collect for the latter in the streets of Dublin in 1914)"<sup>8</sup> Marckiewicz was a revolutionary nationalist as well as a socialist; Kit's activities would not have been approved of her grandparents out in 'Oriol', the comfortable Orpen house in invincibly bourgeois Blackrock. But one of the aspects of Larkin's activity which Orpen felt most strongly about, was his treatment by the Catholic Church, which he writes about vehemently in *Stories*: and it is significant that his own support of the Lock-out, which was opposed by the Church as well as Dublin's capitalists, comes just at the time when he embarked upon his trilogy of allegorical paintings about Ireland —'Sowing New Seed', 'The Western Wedding', and 'The Holy Well'.

All are flawed paintings, but full of political significance. 'Sowing New Seed', for instance, places the spirit of modernity and liberation, in the guise of an artist's model in a kimono, against a figure representing The Board of Agriculture and Technical Instruction, in the black suit, who I suspect to be a portrait of the red-bearded AE. The Board actually did represent experimental forms of agricultural co-operation pioneered by Horace Plunkett, AE and others; but what Orpen objected to was their control of art teaching in Ireland. There had been a parliamentary Committee of Inquiry set up in 1905 to investigate this, before which Yeats and Moore gave evidence; it gave Moore the opportunity to suddenly turn round and attack Lane's ideas about a gallery, and produce a celebrated onslaught on the

National Gallery of Ireland.<sup>9</sup> In Orpen's explanation provided for a mystified Australian public, he points out that the landscape is exactly that which he described later so rhapsodically in *Stories*: Dublin Bay, Howth, the Sugar Loaf mountain; there is a sense of pagan, pre-lapsarian landscape, notably in the mysterious well in the ground, where the water mischievously reflects the genitalia of the naked children, the coming generation. But the painting is also a salvo in his campaign for an art celebrating sensuality, and his dislike of pious and sterile authority, represented by fenced-off ruins and broken trees. The second painting in the trilogy was called 'The Western Wedding'; it was painted in 1914, and probably destroyed in Japan during the war. Yet again it is an interrogation of puritanism and penitence, but far more directly taking on religious imagery: a man and women riding on a donkey, a huge crucifix placed off-centre, a jumble of discordant images in a landscape of rocks that suggests Judea as well as Connemara: elemental, earthy, Synge-like qualities are represented by Sean Keating, lounging in the foreground like the Playboy of the Western World. 'Western' dress was a sort of camp fashion for Orpen; he painted himself in native knitwear and hat; but his self-portrait as a race-course *habitué* in 'Leading the Life in the West' is another oblique comment on his own kind of west-of-Ireland experience. Galway races meant more to him than rather than an embarkation for the isle of Aran. Certainly, in 'The Western Wedding', it seems unlikely that the Rolls-Royce parked behind the crucifix is going to waft the depressed looking bride and groom off to any kind of sensual Nirvana.

These allegorical paintings are, I think, interesting for what Orpen is trying to say about Ireland rather than for intrinsic artistic quality; there is a kind of jarring facetiousness about the concepts behind them, which marries oddly with the flat, hard colours of the marble medium he was using, and the strange Byzantine perspective. But these elements have their own significance, because 'The Western Wedding' and the final painting, 'The Holy Well' are also, I would suggest, parodies of the 'Holy Pictures' widely circulated in Ireland: devotional images of saints and their lives, often in simple colours and primitive style. [See Plate n° 4, 'The Holy Well'] In 'The Holy Well' a couple of sinners seek

absolution from the clerical guardian of a well, while Sean Keating, again, in Western dress, looks scornfully on. Again, the references suggest Synge, who had written a play called ‘The Well of the Saints’; again, the background of religious imagery is oppressive and distinctly Irish (the beehive huts represent the lives of early Christian Anchorites who have renounced the world, and the clothes of the penitents are red petticoats, ‘crois’ belts, bainin flannel); again, human sexuality is put in contradistinction of sterile religiosity. We are back with George Moore’s injunction to the Irish to shift their gaze from ‘the meagre thighs of dying saints’ and his belief that the new painting would teach people to ‘praise life’ and escape from dogmatic religion. But I think there is an even more specific derivation from Moore than this. During his days in Dublin before the war, Moore used to hold forth in Jammet’s restaurant to a circle of friends who included Orpen. One of his current obsessions was the sexual temptations suffered by monks and nuns in Ireland during the early Christian era, which he had recently learned about from the scholar Kuno Meyer. (Later he would put these into *A Story-teller’s Holiday* in 1918.) His table-talk in Jammet’s revolved around ‘nuns virtuously tempting monks with “the temptation of the thighs” and “the temptation of the breasts”, with trials of naked leapfrog or naked dancing to hornpipes, and of monks undergoing with shepherd daughters the terrors of *virgo subintroducta*, until it would become necessary to plunge themselves into the cold cistern before returning to the ordeal’. (Frazier 2000: 355) That ‘cold cistern’, I suggest, is what Orpen is painting in ‘The Holy Well’.

These paintings may represent a satirical critique of the ‘official’ Ireland that had hounded Jim Larkin, and disapproved of Manet’s paintings. By the time ‘the Holy Well’ was painted, in 1915, Orpen was living mostly in London; symbolically, preliminary sketches for ‘The Western Wedding’ and ‘The Holy Well’ survive on menu-cards and notepaper from the Berkeley Hotel.<sup>10</sup> It’s at this point too that opinions in Ireland were becoming polarised, with political crisis over Ulster’s opposition to the final passing of the Home Rule Bill, New radical Ireland was posited against mean-spirited West Briton and ‘West Briton’ was increasingly the epithet applied to Orpen and his kind. In 1914, when the

Nationalist volunteers imported arms to defend Home Rule, they clashed with soldiers in Dublin, and in the ensuing melee civilians were shot. Orpen happened to be in Howth when the guns were run in, and he was deeply shocked by subsequent events; he made a drawing in his sketchbook, which Robert Upstone has related to Goya’s May drawings, but it never was converted into a painting. (Upstone 2005: 18-9) Jack Yeats, of course, did make a famous painting ‘Bachelor’s Walk, In memory’, with a directly political image of martyred heroism and remembrance: the language of the future. When Orpen describes the incident in his memoirs ten years later, he does not mention the fatalities; but much had happened since then.

Controversy was also mounting over support in Ireland for the war that had broken out in 1914; many Irish had volunteered, Redmond had thrown the support of the constitutional nationalists behind the war effort, but this turned out to be a disastrous decision. As advanced nationalism gained round, the Fenian movement masterminded an unsuccessful but —as it turned out— inspirational Rising in 1916. This blew apart the Dublin Orpen had known, literally and figuratively. Some of those involved were well known to Orpen; some came from his kind of comfortable Protestant-bourgeois background, notably Grace Gifford, whom he had painted (rather ironically) as ‘Young Ireland’ some years before. But in 1916 she married the rebel Joseph Mary Plunkett in his condemned cell the night before his execution; already a sharp caricaturist for radical causes, she converted to Catholicism and was imprisoned for republican activities in 1922. Other figures Orpen had admired, like Countess Markiewicz, were involved, and imprisoned (and also converted to Catholicism. Friends and pupils of Orpen’s like Sean Keating became involved in the subsequent guerrilla movement, seeking through violence to achieve separation from Britain rather than Home Rule: Keating — whom Orpen painted as a quintessentially romantic ‘Man from the West— would paint some of the iconic images of the struggle. [See **plate n° 5**, The Man of the West’] The period just after the War saw the bitter Anglo-Irish War, the Treaty of 1921 seen as a half-measure by irreconcilable Republicans, and then the even more traumatic Civil War. But by then Orpen was long estranged from Ireland.

This was probably because of his involvement in, and commitment to, the War in Europe: which brought some of his greatest work. One of his greatest self-portraits, 'Ready to Start', shows him setting out, his face full of foreboding under his steel helmet [See plate n° 6] He painted the blasted landscape of Flanders and Picardy, in unreal, brilliant colours; he showed men wandering shell-shocked through ruined buildings; a stark study called 'Dead Germans in a Trench' depicts exactly that. Above all Orpen celebrated the heroism of ordinary soldiers, and despised the decisions of the civilian authorities who sent them to their doom; attitudes which pervaded his paintings of the Versailles Peace Conference, and his depictions of war memorials when the conflict was over. These paintings, liked by the public, were extremely controversial with the authorities who had commissioned them. Orpen's war paintings constitute an enormous subject, and cannot be dealt with here. But it must be remembered that in his commitment to the war effort, he was like many Irish Protestants of his time; and like them, he felt deeply divided when nationalist Ireland slowly but inexorably turned against the Allied cause. For someone of Orpen's background, affiliations, ideas, the Easter Rising would have been hard enough to stomach; but when allied to the fact that it was carried out with German aid, at a time when the war was going badly, it would have been impossible for him to support it. The odd thing is how little he commented on Irish affairs as they descended into a maelstrom of violence and bitterness. He was, of course, descending into his own maelstrom. Paradoxically, in the years just before Irish history went into fast-forward mode, he had painted ambitious allegorical canvases trying to express what he thought about it all: and then, nothing. The way other Irish artists responded to the revolution is an

under-studied subject; even Jack Yeats's paintings of this period are largely symbolic in their representations of a risen people. But in the early years of the new Free State, Keating, McGonigal, Tuohy and others would paint ideal types of Ireland, using many of the techniques they had learned from Orpen.<sup>11</sup>

Orpen was by then painting his last portraits, and occasional pieces like 'Man Against Beast', which is inseparable from his visions of horror during the war. He was not painting the new Ireland; though interestingly, Keating later turns to Orpen-like allegories in paintings like 'Night's Candles Are Burnt Out'. What Orpen himself thought of Ireland in his last years is unrecorded, but we should remember his daughter's insistence that he saw himself as 'fully Irish', and as Ireland as somewhere he could always go back to. That was, to 'Old Ireland'. The events of 1912-22 put an end to Old Ireland. Up to 1916 there is some indication that Orpen sustained a certain sympathy with the New Ireland that was apparently forming, through the actions of people like Larkin and Markiewicz, and the influence of radical critics of pietism, like Synge; but the revolution, coming in the way and at the time it did, closed off that route of sympathy, leaving him—and many Irish people of his class and tradition—with a sense of bereftness. Nor, as it turned out, did the new Ireland bring artistic, sexual or religious liberation, in fact, the opposite. There are, it is true, many reasons for the bleakness, sadness and decline of Orpen's personal life and inner vision in the post-war period; but I think the traumatic effect on him of contemporary Irish history played an important part. He is now recognised as a world-class painter, who from 1917 painted the tragedy of the modern world. But like other world artists of the era—Joyce, Yeats—he was wounded, in his own way, by Ireland.

## NOTES

1. Rothenstein visited Spain in 1894 and had been publishing on Goya since 1898. The 1890s was the decade when the Spanish master was first fully appreciated in Britain; the National Gallery bought their first three Goyas in 1896.
2. Kit Casey to Bruce Arnold, 3 Jan 1978, Orpen Archives, National Gallery of Ireland.
3. Orpen to Gregory, 19 July 1905, Berg Collection, New York Public Library.
4. Orpen to Lane, n.d. [1905], Orpen Archives, National Gallery of Ireland: he advised him, tongue-in-cheek, to stage a fire and burn it.

5. For an account, see my *W.B. Yeats, A Life, I* (1997: 326-8, 477-83).
6. For this journey, and Lane's previously sketchy knowledge of Impressionist painting, see O'Byrne (2000:10-33).
7. Cf Robert Upstone's discussion of it in Upstone et alia (2005: 19).
8. Kit Casey to Bruce Arnold, as above.
9. "Whatever education and culture there is in the country is leaving it; Ireland will soon be given up wholly to small farmers; out of these, no doubt, an aristocracy will emerge eventually- hundreds of years hence... The National Gallery is proof of the little interest Ireland takes in art. The National Gallery is the most perfect image of the Sahara that I know. Now and then one sees a person hurry by like a Bedouin on the horizon. True, that the pictures that are bought for the National Gallery are generally worthless. Sometimes the pictures are ridiculous forgeries... They are nearly always without artistic interest... How can I expect Sir Walter Armstrong to give much attention to his gallery? No one goes there, except when it rains. Ireland is given over to officials, graziers, and priests." See Frazier (2000: 350).
10. Orpen Archives, National Gallery of Ireland.
11. See Crookshank and the Knight of Glin (2002: ch. 17).

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### Plate n° 1

Sir William Orpen (1878-1931)  
 The Mad Woman of Douai, 1918  
 Oil on canvas. 762mm x 914mm  
 Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum

**Plate n° 2**



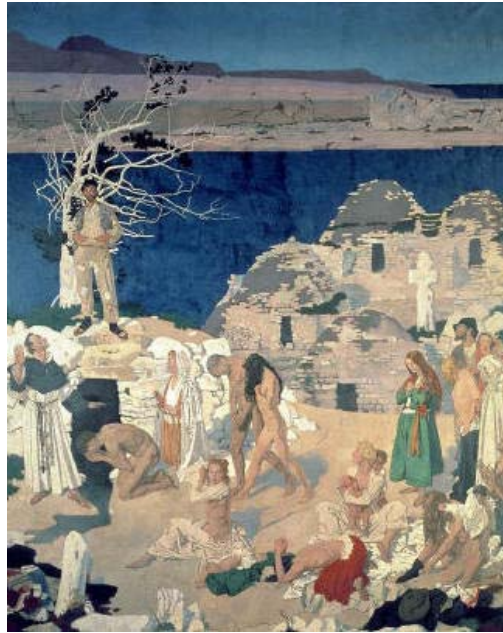
William Orpen (1878-1931)  
A Breezy Day, Howth  
Oil on panel (40 x 61 cm)  
Courtesy of Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane

**Plate n° 3**



William Orpen (1878-1931)  
Michael Davitt, M.P.  
Oil on canvas (74.9 x 62.2 cm)  
Courtesy of Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane

**Plate n° 4**



Sir William Orpen (1878-1931)  
The Holy Well, Tempera on canvas 234 x 186 cms  
Courtesy of The National Gallery of Ireland

**Plate n° 5**



Sir William Orpen (RA,RI,HRHA)  
Man of the West (Seán Keating),  
Oil on linen, 107 x 97 cm  
Courtesy of Limerick City Gallery of Art, Ireland

**Plate n° 6**



Sir William Orpen (1878-1931)  
Ready to Start. Self Portrait, 1917  
Oil on panel. 608mm x 494mm  
Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum