

REVISIONISMS AND THE STORY OF IRELAND: FROM SEAN O'FAOLAIN TO ROY FOSTER

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Abstract: The telling of the story of Ireland, the received nationalist tale replete with heroes, villains and a host of stock elements, has a long history and has exercised a particularly important influence on the development of Irish identity. Yet, when the revisionist historian Roy Foster claimed in the late nineteen eighties that the telling of this traditional tale had come to an end it did seem as if, finally, Irish people were beginning to see themselves through different more complex narratives. Recent evidence, nonetheless, suggests Foster was precipitate in his claims and issues of the competing merits of history and myth remain to the fore.

In 1994 Foster delivered a lecture to the University of Oxford entitled "The Story of Ireland" in which he looked in depth at the history of the traditional narrative through books of the same title. Of these he only briefly mentioned a particularly interesting example of the genre, *The Story of Ireland*, written by Sean O'Faolain, for many Ireland's first revisionist. In this paper I consider the importance of this omission and through a look at both texts, as well as at other influential contributions to the revisionist debate, I suggest that O'Faolain and Foster practice fundamentally different revisionisms.

Key words: revisionism; history; historiography; identity; Ireland; Sean O'Faolain; Roy Foster.

Towards the end of the eighties, Linda Hutcheon, in her seminal study exploring the interface of fiction and history, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, stated "history is now, once again, an issue" (1988: 87). She was, of course referring to the real world not to Ireland. History has always been the issue in Ireland and so it remains. Historical "facts" and their ontological and epistemological status have always either been taken with a healthy dose of scepticism or slavishly brandished whenever the occasion demanded. Perhaps unsurprising this cavalier attitude: in the wake of historians such as Froude¹ and the scientific race theories of Victorian Britain,² history and scientific truth are often seen to have had an uneven track record in Ireland. In 1988, when *A Poetics of*

Postmodernism appeared and issues of historiography and narrative were to the fore internationally, Roy Foster published his exceptionally successful and influential *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972* and "History and the Irish Question", so bringing to a heady blaze the controversy sparked off in Irish historical circles by Stephen Ellis's (1986-7) broadside at the nationalist tradition in Irish history writing and Ronan Fanning's (1988) presidential address to the Irish Historical Society insisting on the continued importance of the scientific scholarship tradition of the society's founders, T. W. Moody and R. D. Edwards and their heir F. S. L. Lyons. For all of these the imperative was the necessity of tackling the myth-making weakness at the heart of so much of Irish history writing. These are known as our "revisionists".

In the opening to Fanning's address he suggests that the "writings of three of the most eminent representatives of three successive generations of modern Irish historians, testify to a striking characteristic of modern Irish historiography: a continuous compulsion to confront myth and mythology" (146). The three chosen baton carriers are Moody, Lyons and Foster. They comprise a tradition, a canon of "real" historians who cut through the difficult thicket of myth to deliver a putative historical truth. It is surprising, nonetheless, to find in one breath such a championing of the most notable debunkers of the succession of heroes in the mythical, teleological tale of nationalist liberation, the "story of Ireland", as well as a seemingly unproblematic willingness to posit another alternative canon, a tradition of heroes fighting for a very different "cause".³

Ciaran Brady, in his introduction to the collection of key essays in the revisionist controversy, considers the genesis of the revisionist turn as coming out of a post-independence cultural shrinkage where censorship was increasingly the norm and public debate in retreat:

In the resistance against this drift toward the suppression of cultural diversity, it was, as is well known, the decades' writers and critics rather than the historians who took the lead. Most notably it was Sean O'Faolain who in a series of literary endeavours culminating in the founding of *The Bell* in 1940 forthrightly made the case that the encouragement of cultural heterodoxy was itself a nationalist issue—a necessary precondition of the gradual realization of a truly independent Ireland which was still in the process of becoming. (Brady 1994)⁴

Brady further points out that O'Faolain, the writer, turns particularly to history in his brave crusade against the Free State's cultural orthodoxy. In effect, as fiction writer-cum-historian, he problematizes that frontier between what is "real" history and what is fiction. In bringing the frontier of history and fiction into play he seems to anticipate the international debate on history and narrative in the later decades of the twentieth century, appearing to have more in common with the approach of Hayden White, Paul Ricoeur, Mikhail Bakhtin and Linda Hutcheon than with the often narrow, even insular, terms on which the Irish revisionist debate was conducted. As a result it is apposite that we avoid the

temptation to aggregate and simplify when dealing with the phenomenon of "revisionism". In this paper I will look at how there exists a fundamental difference between some characteristics of the tradition lauded by Fanning and the revisionism of O'Faolain. The work of the latter is marked by an unflinching contestation of the fixity of the boundaries of narrative, history, cultures and traditions coupled with the encouragement of heterodoxy and crucially a healthy disrespect for the excessively partisan. I will here examine some aspects and key protagonists of revisionism and later focus on how, in recounting the story of Ireland, O'Faolain and Foster tell somewhat different tales.

"Historiography and fiction are seen as sharing the same act of refiguration, of reshaping of our experience of time through plot configurations; they are complementary activities" (100) writes Hutcheon in 1988, the same year as Foster begins his *Modern Ireland* claiming "the tradition of writing the 'story of Ireland' as a morality tale, invented around the seventeenth century and retained (with the roles of hero and villain often reversed) until the twentieth, has been abandoned over the last generation" (ix). Yet, nearly 17 years later the received version of Irish history has no more disappeared than when Foster made his claim. A cursory look at today's newspapers demonstrates that the debate on history and myth remains very much in the public domain. Witness, for example, a recent edition of *The Irish Times* containing no less than six letters dealing with issues of Irish history and its protagonists with much emphasis on lineage, tradition and the preservation of the memory of either the old heroes or some new alternatives.⁵ History is the stuff of everyday debate.

This meeting of past with present always has portents for the future in Ireland. It has generally been accepted that the *rapprochement* achieved between contending parties in the Northern Irish conflict has, to a degree, been due to a willingness to focus on common ground between the traditions or cultures, a cautious attempt to cross the borders that locked identity into narratives of exclusivity peopled with heroes and villains either orange or green. When today traditions are reaffirmed or questioned it is done very much in the knowledge that expression of a tribal nature is not very far from violence of a tribal nature. In fact the revisionist

controversy, before reaching a high point with the publication of Foster's *Modern Ireland*, had built up steam over the interpretation of the 1916 rising on its 50th anniversary and had been carried out against the backdrop of tragically dramatic violence in Northern Ireland since the late 70s.

Much controversy has been caused in recent times by the attempt by *Sinn Féin* to represent the "Republican" protagonists of the past thirty years as the direct inheritors of the tradition of the men of 1916. This is done, of course, at the same time as the movement is unequivocally being identified as the source of numerous punishment shootings and organised crime all against the backdrop of a faltering Peace Process and the shadow of a possible return to violence.⁶ Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh points out that Ronan Fanning, himself a key "revisionist", has no difficulty in citing Bernard Lewis as follows to explain what motivated the Irish Establishment to adopt a "revisionist" version of Irish history once violence had broken out in Northern Ireland: "those who are in power control to a very large extent the presentation of the past and seek to make sure that it is presented in such a way as to buttress and legitimize their own authority, and to affirm the rights and merits of the group which they lead" (1994: 313). So whether coming from contemporary *Sinn Féin*, non-radical nationalists or the revisionists, history writing is clearly a field of dispute where different traditions vie for prominence and the past is used to emphasise permanence, to afford a pedigree and authority, particularly with an eye on the present and future. As Hayden White has stated "a specifically *historical* inquiry is born less of the necessity to establish *that* certain events occurred than of the desire to determine what certain events might *mean* for a given group, society, or culture's conception of its present tasks and future prospects" (1986: 487). This is surely the case, too, for all the stakeholders in Irish history.

Returning to contemporary debate on aspects of history so vehemently expounded in the press we find, in a dispute on the history of the Gore-Booth family of Lissadell, Sligo, clear evidence that the death notice served on the received notion of Irish history, the "story of Ireland," was premature. In an exchange of opinion on the fate of tenants on the estate of Sir Robert Gore-Booth in the years before the

famine the disputants engage with each other in emotive terms with History here much removed from the realm of transparent value-free science: "Legend or History" is the heading of one letter by Sligo local historian, Joe McGrath (2005), that claimed to verify that Gore-Booth had evicted, "shovelled out," tenants on his estate before they were lost on the "coffin ship" on which he dispatched them to Canada. The piece was a riposte to an article by the often shockingly provocative polemicist and self-styled revisionist Kevin Myers (2004) claiming the ship had not gone down, had sailed the seas for years afterwards and that in fact Gore-Booth had compensated the tenants for the eviction as well as generously hiring the ship to take them to Canada. For Myers other historians claiming the contrary are labelled as silly or "equally silly".

Of course the most famous of the Gore-Booth family is Constance Markievicz. Yet, while Myers is more than disposed to defend the Anglo-Irish landowning Gore-Booths in the figure of Sir Robert, he is less patient when it comes to Markievicz, the member of the family who took to the nationalist tradition and participated in the 1916 rising. He does in fact mercilessly attack her and "her own account of her plucky conduct on being sentenced to death in 1916 [which] has entered Irish nationalist mythology". When being tried for her part in the rising [she] is described as "crawling", "crumpled up", "crying". "She revolts me" concludes Myers before going on to denounce her "triumphalist murderousness" ("I shot him, I shot him", she gleefully screamed beside Lahiff's body)" and her "insufferable vanity". Lahiff is the policeman Myers alleges she shot in St. Stephen's Green during the rising. The veracity of this claim — just like that of the coffin ship — is a very contentious issue. Nonetheless, Myers has no difficulty in presenting both as incontestable truth and wildly dismissing other historians, all couched in a pugnacious, provocative style.

Turning back to the academic debate on revisionism we find Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh's contribution to the debate emphasising the importance of Hayden White's insights into historiography in order to temper the worst excesses of the disputants:

historians gain part of their explanatory effect by their success in making stories out of mere chronicles; and stories in turn are made out of chronicles by an operation . . .

called . . . “emplotment”. . . . No given set of casually recorded historical events in themselves constitute a story; the most that they offer to the historian are story elements. The events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific representation, variation of tone and point of view. . . . (Ó Tuathaigh 1994: 325)

So then, even while internationally the narrative condition of history writing is taken as evident, Irish revisionists insist storytelling has been a vice particularly prevalent in Irish nationalist history. Yet our most contemporary and most popular revisionist, Myers, seems to reproduce many of these “ills” while unhesitatingly presenting his version of history as fact. Interestingly, a Markievicz biographer Anne Haverty very much doubts the veracity of the Stephen’s Green killing and much less the gleeful cries so authoritatively reported by Myers. In fact she offers clear evidence of the Countess having in fact intervened to save the life of a British soldier who had mistakenly entered the College of Surgeons thinking it had already surrendered (Maye 2002).⁷ Clearly, then, Myers engages in a very overt suppression of some “events” while highlighting others. Subsequently, when dealing with the “coffin ship” Gore-Booth hero/villain controversy between McGrath and Myers, the author of a recently published book on the family, Dermot James (2005), clarified in *The Irish Times* that neither McGrath nor Myers could claim veracity for either version as long as we remain without records of the period. He then goes on to cite Sean O’Faolain on the worth of seeing history from different perspectives. In the foreword to the 1967 edition of *Constance Markievicz*, O’Faolain welcomed another recently published biography by stating “two points of view are better than one” (10).

Certainly interesting that the most recent revisionist controversy should find a sort of closure by returning to the key protagonists of its beginning, Markievicz and O’Faolain.⁸ But more than anything perhaps the citing of O’Faolain brings us back to the core spirit of what is positive about the phenomenon of revisionism. The abovementioned foreword voices an exemplary even-handedness when positing the search for “fairness” as the key challenge facing the biographer or historian

when coming to his or her subject. O’Faolain asks if it is fair to compare her “love for all mankind in general (except, alas, the English), and her love for the Irish people in particular, with her ruinous personal relations with her own family, her husband and her only child, whom she virtually abandoned as a baby?” (7) Yes, he concludes, because it gives us the broad picture on her character. We do not, then, find a bio-pic that air-brushes out the unpalatable aspects of the life of a nationalist heroine, but have instead a balanced “fair” portrait that voices the views both of the Anglo-Irish Unionist community from which she became largely estranged and those of the nationalist tradition.

Similarly, when dealing with the “coffin ship” controversy of Sir Robert, O’Faolain is studiously fair, avoiding rash conclusions and emotive language while basing his findings on the available evidence. Sir Robert was “known to some as a fair landlord” but will be remembered for clearing out the tenantry from his estate. “The clearance ended, if the local folk-memory is to be believed—and the folk-memory usually is—in tragedy. The shipload of evicted tenants sank, a few miles out from Sligo, in Donegal Bay”. Later, however, in the famine, “he was so generous to the poor in the day of their suffering that he received an address from the parish-priest of Drumcliff thanking him for his kindness” (21-22). No mention of “coffin ships,” no blame directly attributed with the available evidence presented neither as “myth” nor historical fact but for what it is—folk-memory.

Unlike Myers or the purveyors of the received nationalist narrative, there is no conscious highlighting of convenient elements and suppression of others, no facile colour through provocative language. Unquestionably, the rough broadsword of Kevin Myers is far removed from the studied scholarship and elegant prose of academic revisionists like Lyons and Foster, yet, disturbingly, readings of the latter reveal some common traits.

Nine years after the publication of the 1967 edition of *Constance Markievicz* the *Irish University Review* published a volume of essays to celebrate Sean O’Faolain. One of the essays dealt with O’Faolain as biographer and was penned by F. S. L. Lyons. Unsurprisingly, given the context, Lyons is fulsome in his praise of his subject but especially so with

regards to his role as debunker of Irish nationalism, while at the same time gently pointing out that O'Faolain was really an amateur historian. But more disturbing is how Lyons tiptoes over much of the work, conveniently highlighting some elements and suppressing others. Most praise is reserved for *Newman's Way*, without doubt the least political of the biographies and the most removed from the thorny issues of Irish identity. And of the others the analysis of *The Great O'Neill* is the most revealing. Lyons seems at his happiest when in the first sizeable quotation of the essay he lauds O'Faolain for his "real insight" in comparing the Irish to "some modern Emir who will end a meal with hands greasy to the wrist, rise openly from the group to go to his wife, love best his sharpest rather than his richest daggers, take the fleas as part of the luxuriance of nature, speak with the freedom of the libidinous desert, seem to the foreigner a savage" (1976: 99). If elsewhere Lyons censures his subject for literary self-indulgence he does not do so here. When taken with the broad picture, as O'Faolain put it about Markievicz, this quotation fits into the nuanced study of a complex world, with Hugh O'Neill as a Renaissance man involved in a conflict not local or national but European. Lyons stresses O'Neill was as much a part of English as of Irish history and approvingly quotes the biographer where he criticizes the tendency of the Irish to "see everything as part of the patriot myth—with each new Hero rising against the ancient Tyrant" and muses over the extent to which his rebellion could be seen as that of the local knight rebelling against his monarch (1976:100). However, the reflection doesn't stop there; O'Faolain again and again lamenting "the old, frightful, futile slaughter that follows on all colonization" (1997: 58), the "horror", the "holocaust" (1997:78). To challenge the worst excesses of the patriot myth does not involve writing out the reality of colonial conquest. The constant grappling for balance or "fairness" is clearly illustrated when he imagines the young O'Neill leaving behind the elegance of an England in touch with Europe to return to Ireland

where he was never to know that Learning and the Arts were bursting behind him into the greatest flowering they were to know in England, and that Humanism was reaching there its peak of grace and enlightenment; since, alas, for it seems that such things must

always have their sinister corollary, he was to experience only the savage reverse of the medal, and forget whatever he had seen of England's humanistic grace and kindness in her imperial brutality and greed. (42-43)

This latter aspect does not seem to have greatly interested Lyons.

Of course Lyons was writing when any complacency about history writing in Ireland had been violently shattered by the outbreak of hostilities in the north. He appears to have been very shaken by the troubles and in a later lecture delivered in Belfast in 1978 wondered, remembering Yeats, whether historians "helped to shape modern attitudes and do they therefore incur a responsibility ... for the present condition of Ireland" (88). In this lecture, "The Burden of Our History" — considered a key text in the revisionist controversy— Lyons was remembering Brian Rankin, someone who had made great efforts to "cross the barriers imaginatively between one community and another" and clearly the model of Rankin is something Lyons aspired to. Yet, while one cannot question the broadly honourable intentions of Lyons, his lecture seems to bear out Hayden White when he states: "what the historian brings to his consideration of the historical record is a notion of the types of configuration of events that can be recognized as stories by the audience for which he is writing" (Ó Tuathaigh 1994: 325). Surely an Ulster-born Protestant educated at Trinity College Dublin, lecturing in Unionist Belfast, will be careful not to offend the sensibilities of either community and especially not those of the community to which he most ostensibly doesn't belong? If, like with O'Faolain, a spirit of "fairness" is to prevail, is it not imperative that the audience be not emboldened in a partisan sense of identity by the reiteration of stories they recognize as their own, of narratives that reinforce their sense of identity in opposition to the other side, the other community with its alternative legends?

Lyons wisely avoids a simplistic binary division of native and colonist and goes on to depict the various hues of Irishness. This is not, however, unproblematic. Consider his portrayal of northern Presbyterians:

Whether on the land, or in the market-town, or in the Lagan valley, it was they who set their formidable stamp upon the quality of life. They combined for much of their

history a notable liberalism in public life with a strict severity of private discipline. They were a serious people, caring for education, intent upon self-improvement and material progress, yet deeply marked by their religion. They were kindly, humorous and at the same time austere. (Lyons 1978: 97-98)

The contrast with the description of the northern nationalist community couldn't be greater. Note the quasi-anthropological tone reminiscent of nineteenth century race theorists as he refers to "the native culture":

We notice here as elsewhere the familiar marks of identification —the prominence of the church in education and in other aspects of social life, the emphasis upon the Irish language and upon Irish history and literature, the deep attachment to Irish games, all given the intensity that comes from the consciousness of existing under the shadow of what has generally been felt as a hostile or suspicious majority. (Lyons 1978: 101)

Far from permitting cross-cultural dialogue this discourse —like the selective quotation from *The Great O'Neill*— serves only to reinforce negative stereotypes about the supposedly unrelentingly atavistic nationalist community. Whether or not this cementing of received notions of tribal identity is intentional the contrast between "intent upon self-improvement and material progress" and "deep attachment to Irish games" sends a clear message to the audience and hardly facilitates the imagining of any alternative notions of community not sectarian in nature. Again this account of the story of the different Irelands evidences a repression and highlighting of certain elements. Again we find there is a patent deficit of what O'Faolain called "fairness".

Let us now turn to the contemporary period and back to that third revisionist Ronan Fanning identified as the key inheritor of the tradition of Moody and Lyons: Roy Foster. In 1994 Foster inaugurated the Carroll Chair of Irish History at Oxford University with a brilliant lecture on the history of the national narrative titled "The Story of Ireland".⁹ Interestingly, Foster's lecture "The Story of Ireland" and the series of essays in which it is collected, *The Irish Story* (2001), give us the opportunity to bridge the gap back to O'Faolain, himself the author of a book

entitled *The Story of Ireland* (1943). Yet the earlier writer hardly gets a mention in Foster's admittedly brief run through previous incarnations of *The Story of Ireland*. Perhaps ultimately this absence tells us a story in itself, perhaps they are far from comprising the same tradition. Are we dealing with revisionisms rather than revisionism?

Towards the end of the later published version of his Oxford lecture Foster states that "political events at the close of the last millennium have shown that Irish people can reinterpret their experience away from supposedly preordained patterns and endings; and subversive history-writing has played its part in this." He refers here, of course, to the "Peace Process". Lest we be in the dark as to who these subversives are, the essay on F. S. L. Lyons informs us that "the limitations of the old manifest-destiny notion of Irish nationalism have been exposed ... mercilessly. Here the revisionist historians have played their part" (53). Presumably he means Moody, Lyons and Foster. What does this reinterpretation involve? Well, getting away from preordained patterns and endings. If we look to another of the figures lauded by Foster, Hubert Butler we get an idea. In Edna Longley's words Butler was "a kind of multiculturalist martyr" (2001: 2), and his "sin was that he violated that taboo which says — though now less confidently— that Irish Catholics and Protestants should keep to their own boxes, they should not meddle in one another's religious or political business" (2). Butler sought to engage with these divisions, to challenge the borders which allowed these would-be communities perpetuate themselves on self-validating narratives of exclusion. In his own words "borders do not keep out vulgarity and stupidity" (Foster 2001: 208), rather they bring "an almost unbelievable spiritual stagnation" and particularly so because "too many people would sooner be silent or untruthful than disloyal to their side". Not here the building of partisan traditions, stories, canons. Butler's antidote was "the art of free controversy", "an intelligent and vigorous public opinion" (208-9).

This was also of course the impetus behind the work of O'Faolain, no more graphically illustrated than in his providing a public tribune, *The Bell*, for the likes of Butler and Elizabeth Bowen and many others from the "other side". As Butler put it "we remnants of

the Anglo-Irish “intelligentsia” would have been nobody’s children, had *The Bell* not taken us under its wing” (1976:67).

And they did all tell their side of the story. In the opening number Bowen penned the wonderfully beguiling “The Big House”, where with admirable sensitivity, she notes how “After an era of greed, roughness and panic, after an era of camping in charred or desolate ruins (as my Cromwellian ancestors did certainly) these new settlers who had been imposed on Ireland began to wish to add something to life”. (Bowen 1997: 27) The case for what was added is firmly, convincingly and respectfully put while acknowledging the current need to break out of the pre-ordained mould: “Can we not’ [...] ‘be, as never before, sociable? Cannot we scrap the past, with its bitternesses and barriers, and all meet, throwing in what we have?’ (29) She contests the notion of her own Bowen Court being isolated and invites her neighbours in with a marked spirit of politeness. A politeness that accepts the Big House has both much to learn and much to give. Indeed she concludes “From inside many big houses ... barriers are being impatiently attacked. But it must be seen that a barrier has two sides.” (30) Maybe, as Butler adventures not too many neighbours did in fact make their way to the house but at any rate *The Bell* itself proved a space where she met Catholic Nationalist Ireland. Similarly, the barrier with Ulster was challenged. Many took part in the “dialogue” as Butler terms it: the Dean of Belfast defended the Ulster Protestant with “firmness and courtesy” so too the clergyman Frederick Leahy and the poet Thomas Carnduff. (1976: 67)

As Ciaran Brady writes, O’Faolain sought “expressions of cultural diversity and dissent” (1994: 21). Witness, for example, *The Story of Ireland*. Published in 1943, its green cover adorned with a harp opens to reveal the first words denoting the framing series on the title page: “Britain in Pictures: The British People in Pictures”. From the beginning the author upsets our purely national frame of reference. He appears to vacillate from pole to pole, dissenting against “pre-ordained patterns” and, as we will see, endings. Take the brief historical chronology that prefaces the main text: there is no mention of 1798, no mention of the Battle of the Boyne and between the founding of the Land League and the Free

State the only note is “1906 Arthur Griffith founds his paper *Sinn Fein*” (6).

The Story itself starts with an emphasis not on the self-contained nation state but on its heterogeneity and the links with Britain and crucially, Europe:

[Ireland] is so close to the continent, and, one knows, so closely bound to the history of Britain, that one naturally takes it to be as much part of Europe as, say, at least Sardinia or Crete...The colour masses on the map which indicate a community of languages, religions, and political associations, emphasise this sense of Ireland’s central position and European connection. (O’Faolain 1943: 7)

Nevertheless, he goes on to tell us how Ireland’s remote position gives her a notable degree of detachment from the modern world. As he concludes, above all the story of Ireland is about ambiguity.

From this initial touchstone the story proceeds to present a rattle-bag of “things, memories and citizens” which offers plenty but privileges none: “James Joyce, Parnell, Swift, Guinness, the Rotunda Medical School, Jacob’s Biscuits, Oscar Wilde ... the Abbey Theatre, Yeats, Dublin University, Michael Collins, Boss Croker, Goldsmith, innumerable anonymous “characters”, many wits, and a few distinguished admirals and generals such as Wellington or the two Goughs” (9). With this he laments the abundance of beggars and the dearth of *chic* women. We find here no simple teleological tale of the liberation of a national community moving steadily up through history but a world that has as simultaneous Dublin and Belfast in 1943 and the jagged coast of Kerry where “it is the middle ages”, while towns like Lifford and Strabane articulate “Ireland’s unresolved variety”. O’Faolain doesn’t shirk the historical reality of colonial prosperity and native poverty while at the same time he also lauds the Irishmen of diverse traditions who have “built a great physical and spiritual traffic with the world”. We find enumerated an impressive list of individuals who in origin are either “colonist” or “native” and have “passed through this island on their journey to immortality and left their humane mark on it” and it is the blending of these strains that “brought about an interesting and vital mentality”.

The stall of who the Irish are, already set out, the story can be told. This is done in a manner scrupulously careful in its attempt not to aggregate or totalise, never seeking facile elisions, never betraying a partisan loyalty to his own community, always attempting a “fairness” in fitting with revisionism at its best; never settling old scores in spite of his own past as a defeated revolutionary. Here the author looks not back to emphasise one tradition over another but forward to what will be. To conclude he acknowledges Britain’s predisposition to friendly neighbourly relations, and lauds the growing assurance “that the Irish people are permanently free to create the life-modes that they consider most suited to their national genius” (48).

O’Faolain is clearly then a subversive in the mould praised by Foster, both by providing a platform for people of diverse traditions and by challenging the simple teleological narrative of Irish national liberation. And he does so, as Butler proposed, by unravelling old strands of affection and weaving them “tenderly into a new pattern”. This was the Ireland to come, where a new pattern was forged, and crucially a pattern that wasn’t just tolerant of ghettos and their differences but actively sought to impulse exchange, perhaps to be “intercultural” not just “multicultural”.¹⁰ The northern unionist clergyman’s voice was brought to bear on debate back in the small southern towns, he was invited in to help others break down the barriers that affirmed their own tradition in conflict with another, but from within. Like Elizabeth Bowen, O’Faolain knew the barriers were also erected from outside but their dismantling had to be begun from within. Here the tentative revisionist seed that perhaps has contributed to the current *rapprochement* we call the “Peace Process”.

Roy Foster’s “The Story of Ireland” and *The Irish Story* are, however, somewhat different. We have here a volume using as its touchstone the tradition of writing “The Story of Ireland”. The avowed aim is to try to “break up the seamless construction of narrative incident which was presented as the story of Ireland, and to analyse the moment, rather than simply follow the flow” (1995: 3). In the tradition of the professional historian revisionists this is achieved through a series of short sharp essays aimed to disconcert, and to be accessible to a wide public. But also it appears the author’s attempt to break up the

old narrative involves an unwillingness to abandon some of the genre’s key debilitating features.

From the beginning the author stresses how prevalent in the Irish case has been the elision of the personal and the national, how “history becomes a kind of scaled-up biography and biography a kind of microcosmic history” (xi). Like a personal or family story —such as that of the Gore-Booths— with its beginnings and endings and the requisite collection of heroes, villains, helpers guests and plots. While admitting the ingenuous charm of the genre he laments its lack of historical rigour, and particularly how its practitioners have been especially prone to a “mercilessly present-minded preoccupation”. “Home Rule three thousand years *avant la lettre*” (9).

But the good guys and the bad guys are here too. The Oxford lecture deals with the history of books with the title *The Story of Ireland* and focuses critically particularly on the example written by A. M. Sullivan in 1867 and subsequent variations of a similar hue. For Foster, Sullivan “helped create the popular Irish concept of nationalism (8-9) and constructed (often by careful exclusion) the accepted Irish national memory” (12). Much of this involved the privileging of certain events which could be “easily comprehended and remembered” with other incidents that “might confuse and bewilder” (9) being dropped. And all done to establish a clear nationally minded tradition. All looking to the end of national liberation.

Two other essays in *The Irish Story* deal with the manner in which history is currently packaged for mass consumption through theme-parks and commemorations perverting history to satisfy present needs. The author laments Ireland’s embracing of this current phenomenon: it moves “from archaism to postmodernism without really allowing the time to become modern” (24). Having deconstructed the opposite ends of this spectrum he then looks to what came in between. In effect he fills in the gap and after the manner of the popular writers so critically studied, the national memory is constructed, again by careful inclusion and exclusion.

Who occupies this period? W. B. Yeats, Elisabeth Bowen, Hubert Butler and F. S. L. Lyons: interesting, thought provoking bio-pics but perhaps benign to an extreme. It is as if this period of maturity seems to have been written

out by independent Ireland and the family saga needs to be retold with some unfairly neglected old relations reinstated. Particularly urgent this seems, too, in the light of the current predicament as illustrated by the choice of contemporary culture: the aforementioned theme-parks and commemorations alongside presumably representative contemporary cultural “giants” such as Alice Taylor, Gerry Adams, Frank McCourt and above all his brother Malachy —bad boys in anybody’s book. All rounded off with the false hero Carleton ultimately rejected by the mature Yeats and the ungrateful meddling Englishman Trollope.

Butler spoke of the Irish problem of people not being disloyal to their side, and Foster’s choice of heroes would seem to earn him a particularly partial set of stripes. In the essay on Lyons this historian is quoted as “hating the whole idea of pantheons quite frankly” (39) yet Foster seems to have no qualms of that nature when referring to those of his own historiographical tradition, to Moody and Lyons among others: “These were notable people” he states (41). Interestingly, when investigating the manner in which the apostolic teleological version of Irish history was challenged in the early decades of the Free State, two almost simultaneous journals are highlighted: *The Bell* and *Irish Historical Studies*. Yet after the cursory initial mention *The Bell* fades into the background and *Irish Historical Studies* is firmly forwarded and its role in honest historical scholarship is lauded. Similarly, *The Bell* sneaks into the piece on Elizabeth Bowen when reference is made to “The Big House”, described as “a key essay which helped launch that essential journal *The Bell*” (151). O’Faolain, in effect, is gently nudged aside and the role of Bowen is privileged. Hubert Butler’s debt to *The Bell* has already been dealt with, yet in Foster’s essay on Butler the reference to the journal is again brief. This may appear a trite observation, after all the essay is on Butler himself, however, as with the case of the piece on Bowen the author insists on the “Irishness” of both writers while emphasising their roles in opening Ireland up to the outside world. The implication is that they, above all, were seminal in bringing about change, in initiating the dismantling of the isolationist barriers erected in the early decades of the Free State. If we go back to Foster’s words on Sullivan’s history of Ireland we find

he is critical of how Sullivan “constructed (often by careful exclusion) the accepted Irish national memory”. Here the inclusions and exclusions appear of consequence. Not even with a book so appropriately titled as *The Story of Ireland* does O’Faolain get a look in. Is Foster in hindsight writing in one tradition over another?

This certainly appears so when dealing with the villains of the piece. If the heroes are all of Anglo-Irish Protestant origin and from that missing modern period, the real villains, Sullivan aside, seem to be contemporary voices from the other side of the tracks. We have the memoirs of Gerry Adams, Alice Taylor and the McCourt brothers ploughing indeed a very rough furrow. Yeats, Bowen, Butler and Lyons were, and are shown to have been, individuals of considerable subtlety and sensitivity. They are shown to have deftly negotiated their problematic position in post-independence Ireland usually in the face of incomprehension and even hostility. They are no doubt, in the main, admirable figures. But is it not somewhat disingenuous, is it not in boxing parlance —to echo Butler— something of a miss-match to talk of Bowen’s childhood recollections in the same breath as those of the rather less challenging stories of housewife Alice Taylor? Is there not here an evident deficit of what O’Faolain called “fairness?”

Foster may not directly compare one with another but the juxtaposition articulates its own story. Similarly, the problems of inclusion and exclusion are starkly clear when in the middle of the analysis of Taylor’s “prelapsarian” books we suddenly find ourselves dealing with “the pre-electric men”: those from Field Day! The text then continues “For Alice Taylor too, time is strangely undefined” (165). The “pre-electric men” obviously have a lot in common with Alice Taylor. They would appear to be bed-fellows of a sort, part of that tradition of atavism spelt out above by F. S. L. Lyons in which Taylor appears more worthy of extensive consideration than say Brian Friel, for example. Is there, to echo Foster’s own words, a “mercilessly present-minded preoccupation?”

Next stop the McCourts. “Without depth or nuance”, “flatulent” in the case of Malachy (171). Elsewhere Foster bemoans how language that should somehow be neutral is in fact “heavily loaded”, yet here we find reference to the better McCourt’s beady eye,

his monotonous language, his formulaic strap-lines and his penchant for talking of farts and bladders. “An embarrassment” Foster concludes before moving on to Hubert Butler and his “blend of tough realism and resilient idealism” (188), a man “ahead of his time” and to boot a man willing to cross “swords with clerics and fellow-Protestants all his life” (190).

Following the long tradition Foster has written an engaging and brilliant story full of colourful characters, both good and bad. But do we have a happy ending? Do we reach Propp’s function 31 when “The hero is married and ascends the throne?”¹¹ No, at the moment we have a tentative “Peace Process”, an increasingly precarious ceasefire and a

political impasse. Not much sign of love across the divide. Hardly the time to claim credit, however timidly, for the progress made or the time to engage in overt celebrations of a partisan nature. As Brian Friel’s Jimmy Jack in *Translations* puts it “the word *exogamien* means to marry outside the tribe. And you don’t cross those borders casually-both sides get very angry” (1981: 68). Maybe it’s time to again go back to the revisionist spirit of O’Faolain, Bowen and Butler and challenge the need for tribal loyalty, to tear down the barriers from within, to defuse the anger, to unravel the old strands of affection, and, in the words of Butler, weave them “tenderly into a new pattern”.

NOTES

1. James Anthony Froude (1818-94). Controversial historian. Foster, in *Paddy & Mr Punch* states Froude’s “study of *The English in Ireland* had maligned and belaboured the native Irish in a manner not to be seen again for a hundred years”. (1995: 9)
2. For a thorough account of this phenomenon see *Anglo Saxons and Celts* and *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature* by L. Perry Curtis Jr. Roy Foster offers a different perspective in “Paddy & Mr Punch”. (1995)
3. “The Cause” is a euphemism in the Irish “Republican” tradition for physical force nationalism.
4. Terence Brown gives the most authoritative account of the period from a socio-cultural perspective in *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-1985*. (1985)
5. On the 25th of January 2005 *The Irish Times* featured letters on the controversy over the history of the Gore-Booth family –dealt with below; on a dispute over the first family of the father of Patrick Pearse; on the remembrance of Irish First World War poet Francis Ledwidge and the other war dead; on the vandalized statue of I. R. A. veteran and Nazi collaborator, Sean Russell; on the preservation of the national film heritage and on the supposed ignorance of English politician Roy Hattersley on matters Irish.
6. The “Peace Process” has been especially compromised by the robbery of a very substantial sum of money from the Northern Bank and the shooting of a civilian, Robert McCartney. Both have been attributed to the “Republican” movement and followed closely on the latest breakdown in attempts to achieve a definitive disarmament in late 2004.
7. In “An Irishman’s Diary”, *The Irish Times*, 15th of July 2002, Brian Maye sketches a benign portrait of Markievicz on the 75th anniversary of her death. He quotes from Anne Haverty’s biography *Countess Markievicz: An Independent Life*. (1988)
8. O’Faolain’s first edition of *Constance Markievicz*, published in 1934 can be considered his first revisionist biography. *The Life Story of Eamon de Valera* from a year earlier is later described by O’Faolain himself as “shamelessly pro-Dev and pro-Irish propaganda at a time when all of us who had stuck by De Valera from 1916 onwards at last saw our hero coming into power and all our dreams and ideals —as we foolishly and trustingly hoped— about to be realized”. (quoted in Harmon 1984: 33)
9. In the original lecture, Foster begins by referring to how F. S. L. Lyons, on being invited to give the Ford Lectures in British History at Oxford, asked if they might be on Irish History instead. The authorities acceded, there being, in their view, no difference. This is deleted from the later version. (1995: 1)
10. This distinction is developed by Edna Longley in “Multi-culturalism and Northern Ireland”. (2001)
11. Foster adapts Propp’s functions to Irish history, particularly to the story of Hugh O’Neill. (2001: 5-6)

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