
Uchronian Scenarios in the Context of Irish Literature: the case of C. B. Gilford's *The Crooked Shamrock*¹

Juan F. Elices

Universidad de Alcalá, Spain

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Abstract. The outburst of the science fiction phenomenon, very much sustained on the notoriety and popular acclaim received by some television series and films, has made it very complex to withdraw the literary artefact proper from the influence exerted by these audio-visual productions. Even though the presence of the fantastic has been quite recurrent in the context of Irish literature, it would be difficult to argue that the tradition of science fiction and alternate history and writing, which builds up “what-if” speculations on the basis of what would have happened had certain historical episodes been different, has hardly constituted a significant trend, perhaps due to the prevalence of other more realistic genres and also due to the very limited critical and commercial impact these works have had. Among these works, C. B. Gilford's *The Crooked Shamrock* stands as a most suitable example of how accepted and unquestioned historical assumptions can be re-invented and re-inscribed within an alternate historical scenario in which the author very suggestively constructs a series of counterfactuals that challenge the foundations of the Anglo-Irish relations. Therefore, the purpose of this paper will revolve around the way Gilford manages to build up “what-if” speculations that basically purport to unveil and undermine some long unquestioned historical assumptions.

Key Words. Alternate history, counterfactuals, parody, monarchy, colonialism.

Resumen. La consolidación de la literatura de ciencia ficción, gracias también al reconocimiento comercial y crítico que han recibido algunas series de televisión y producciones cinematográficas, hace que resulte muy complejo separar el género literario de los productos más puramente audiovisuales. Aunque la presencia de lo fantástico ha sido bastante recurrente en el contexto de la literatura irlandesa, sería muy difícil afirmar que existe una tradición sólida de obras que se enmarcan dentro del ámbito de la ciencia ficción o la historia alternativa, quizá debido a la preeminencia de otros géneros de corte más realista y al escaso impacto crítico y comercial que este tipo de literatura ha tenido. Entre ellas, cabría destacar *The Crooked Shamrock*, escrita por C. B. Gilford y en la que el autor plantea un interesante debate acerca de cómo se pueden cuestionar determinadas asunciones históricas a través de la pregunta “¿Qué hubiera pasado si.....?” Por lo tanto, el propósito de este estudio es analizar de qué manera Gilford construye este mundo alternativo, cimentado en la idea de qué hubiera pasado en el curso de la historia de Irlanda si determinados episodios hubieran tenido una resolución diferente.

Palabras clave. Historia alternativa, especulaciones, parodia, monarquía, colonialismo.

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The significant and fruitful role history has played out in the literary domain is evident from the vast number of works that gravitate around specific historical events and the massive popularity of the “historical novel” genre. Bearing this in mind, it is no wonder that history has become a realm fiction writers have drawn on in order to comment, challenge, simply rewrite it or, as in the case of alternate history, reinvent it. Many historians have also narrativised or even fictionalised history, thus highlighting the fallacious objectivity of the discipline. Moreover, the epistemological changes brought about by postmodernism have also conditioned our own historical perceptions. Those preconceptions that were articulated around its linearity are losing ground in favour of a discourse that is now founded upon fragmentation and discontinuity and also upon a vision of the past that tends to be more defying and inquisitive.² The framework of “truthfulness” in which history has been positioned in the past is being repeatedly contested by philosophers, literary critics and even historians, who no longer rely on those unequivocal axioms that categorised it as a fixed succession of events. In this apparently conceptual quicksand, alternate history emerges as a forum that ponders over the very essence of this discipline and puts forward variables that have been overlooked or even neglected due to the impossibility of being “scientifically” validated according to more conventional paradigms. In a like vein, C. B. Gilford’s *The Crooked Shamrock* (1969) provides an example to illustrate how alternate history operates at a narrative level that speculates about how the course of history could have changed had several factors taken place instead of others. The contention of this study will be, therefore, to analyse Gilford’s novel in relation both to the theoretical premises of the alternate history genre and to the Irish background that informs the story. In this respect, it is important to note that Gilford’s

2. Gavriel Rosenfeld also revolves around this very idea when he states that: “The rise of postmodernism, with its blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction, its privileging of ‘other’ or alternate voices, and its playfully ironic reconfiguring of established historical verities, has encouraged the rise of alternate history” (2002: 92).

work is one of the very few examples of an allohistorical narrative that exclusively concentrates on Irish issues and that effectively suggests a series of counterfactuals that seek to undermine some long-standing and unquestioned historical assumptions.³

Due to the similarities between science fiction and alternate history, it is very habitual to find the latter absorbed by the former’s more universal standards. As an example, the inclusion of alternate history in the hugely influential *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1999) and *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (2003) proves that it has been usually acknowledged simply as a sub-genre. Other critics such as Karen Hellekson have argued that the main difference between them is that, while alternate history explores how certain alterations in the past might have driven the present into a drastically different course, science fiction is more substantially concerned with “a fictive future” (2000: 249). Obvious as this divergence may seem, there are many works that could be classified as alternate history that have fallen into the, let’s say, more canonical or academically valued science fiction label. Nonetheless, we could say that there are more points of departure between these two genres than simply their temporal or spatial (dis)locations. In general terms, alternate histories are sustained upon the “What if...?” or “What might have been if...?” formulae that seek to interrogate how our past is constructed and how history is not as solidly founded as could have been initially assumed. As a matter of fact, most of these narratives take decisive historical turning points to hypothesise about the way our world would have stood if, for instance, Hitler had won the Second World War and the Third Reich had become a global super-state, if the German and Japanese armies had conformed an Axis to subjugate the United States, or if the Confederate

3. C. B. Gilford emerges as a very marginal and rather unknown author whose literary oeuvre has passed unnoticed, even the novel that is the object of our analysis. He is categorised as a science fiction novelist and short story writer whose main works are *The Liquid Man* (1969) and some stories like “Terrified” (1958), “Devil in Ambush” (1963) or “The Already Dead” (1967), all published in various magazines and pulp collections.

Confederate South had prevailed in the American Civil War.

Though immersed in the arena of speculation, most authors and historians that have fantasised about these “roads not taken” base their analyses on more than plausible ideas and not only on mere guesswork. Nigel Fergusson, in his acclaimed *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*, points out that some historians have been rather suspicious and overtly reluctant to accept the historicity or factuality of alternate history,⁴ which they perceive as not being rigorous enough (2003: 5).⁵

Critics and detractors of this “alternative way” of dealing with history argue that its assertions are not legitimate in the sense that this genre is based on counterfactuals, that is, on suppositions that go beyond the boundaries of mainstream historical research. Schneider-Mayerson points out, however, that in the new theoretical scenario opened up by postmodern historiography “the alternate historian has the same claim to truth as the academic” (2009: 67). The evolution of this genre has been considerable and attained its heyday with the publication of Robert Harris’s best-selling *Fatherland* in 1992, which somehow helped to recuperate a number of narratives that had been so far overshadowed by more prominent or canonical science fiction works. In academic terms, alternate history has only recently achieved a certain critical attention, which has mainly sought to shed light upon the terminological complexities to define its main characteristics. Amy J. Ransom refers to several terms that have been applied to this kind of narratives, all of them suggesting the

4. He mentions three eminent historians such as E. P. Thompson, E. H. Carr and Michael Oakshott who suggest that history is only built upon what people did and not upon what people failed to do. In this sense, Fergusson refers to Oakshott when he argues that: “The distinction between essential and incidental events does not belong to historical thought at all; it is a monstrous incursion of science into the world of history.... The historian is never called upon to consider what might have happened had circumstances been different” (2003: 6).

5. To this Robert Cowley adds that: “One of the troubles with history as it is studied today is that people take it too seriously” (2001: xv)

idea that alternate history purports to reconstruct the past in order to explore the alterations it might have caused in the present (2003: 59). She mentions allohistories, counterfeit worlds, *uchronias* or alternative histories as different labels that point basically at the same notions that were discussed above. However, the concept that that was initially employed to designate these works was *uchronia*, which Julián Díez defines as a narration in which the course of historical events is altered, resulting in a reality that is totally different from our own. To this, Díez adds that *uchronias* must preserve a strict sense of plausibility so that the stories they present are verisimilar and not just bizarre accounts with no real support in history (2006: 7).⁶

In the context of Irish literature in which C. B. Gilford’s *The Crooked Shamrock* is inscribed, the presence of alternate histories or science fiction narratives has been rather scarce. It could be argued, even at the risk of being too generalising, that the Irish literary tradition has predominantly relied on the dictates of realism, even though the elements of fantasy and the gothic have been inextricably associated to some very significant Irish authors. It would be difficult to affirm that the tradition of science fiction and alternate history has constituted a major trend in the country’s literary history, although, if we dig into it, the number of works that might fall under this broad category would encompass an interesting bulk of novels and short stories that have not been sufficiently studied. From Belfast-born C. S. Lewis to novelists such as James White, Bob Shaw or the more contemporary Ian MacDonald, Peadar Ó Guilín or Gerald Whelan, science fiction and alternate history novels have begun to draw the attention of both the reading public and the critics, who are now beginning to recognise a genre that is also able to explore Irish issues from other perspectives. It is perhaps through the groundbreaking contribution of female writers such as Éilís Ní Dhuibhne with her dystopian revision of Irish history *The Bray House* (1992) or Catherine Brophy’s *Dark Paradise* (1992) that this genre has achieved a wider notoriety and a more

6. In fact, the most complete Internet resource on the subject is called *Uchronia: The Alternate History List* (<http://www.uchronia.net/>)

outstanding place in the academic panorama. The related bibliographical or electronic resources are, nonetheless, very limited and some works that might be classified as alternate fiction have, in most cases, passed unnoticed.⁷

It would also be necessary to ponder over other considerations to ascertain some of the reasons that might explain why alternate history has been rather marginal in Irish literature, in spite of recent and very much appreciated progress. Many scholars and academics who have delved into allohistorical literature have suggested that a great majority of the works that are produced are mostly circumscribed to the US context, which means that the most pervading topics are primarily US-oriented, namely the Civil War or the American Revolution. Besides, alternate history narratives borrow most of their themes and topics from global historical turning points, a fact that might somehow ostracise other very relevant though more local or insular events. Irish history, in this sense, excels in landmarks that could have triggered a considerable interest for alternate historians and writers, although it seems that only a few have managed to really capture the potential that this genre could have in Irish literature. However, despite this apparent shortage of titles, there are still some works that can surely be inscribed within this category and which present a vision of Irish history that seeks to question or alter some of the assumptions that have long been part of the country's own ethos.

Among these narratives, Gilford's *The Crooked Shamrock* stands as a most suitable example to illustrate how accepted and unquestioned truths can be re-invented and re-assessed in allohistorical terms. The novel's storyline centres upon a plan orchestrated by a group of Irish rogues to kidnap the Prince of Wales, heir to the throne of England, at a time that is never specified in the novel. This group, known as the Ballydoon Brigade, apparently a loose faction of the Irish Republican Army, is

shortly described as one of the last remnants of unreserved Irish patriotism. Its members –Matt O'Quinn, Dan Skiddy, Bart Kincaid and Phil Brady– are portrayed as archetypes that are still anchored to a past of Irish legendary heroes and mythological ordeals against the British occupation.⁸ It is precisely their anti-British stance that inspires them to plot this hazardous assault, which pursues both to stand up against the colonial subjugation of Ireland and to overthrow Britain's most beloved symbol: its monarchy.⁹ Gilford's characterisation of Matt O'Quinn, the main protagonist of the novel and leader of the Ballydoon Brigade, reveals the temporal and historical dislocation he suffers and points at some aspects that turn out to be essential to understand the real dimension of this group. Our first contact with a half-inebriated and delirious O'Quinn takes place in a Ballydoon pub, a melting pot of the most multifarious opinions and approaches towards both Ireland and England: "Matt O'Quinn, self- and oft-proclaimed patriot, has taken a drop or two in the hour he'd spent that evening at Boyle's bar, the hour at Flahive's, and the hour at Maloney's. In a state of near-inebriation the mind, freed of the confines of material universe, is receptive to miracles" (1969: 4).

As the narrator very suggestively points out, O'Quinn's mind is so uninhibited that he begins an incendiary declaration against the British that immediately leads him out of the pub due to obvious civil disorder. From a narrative point of view, the aimless wandering around Ballydoon he starts off changes his appreciation of the historical reality, especially when, all of a sudden, he comes up against the

7. The web page "Science Fiction and Fantasy Set in Ireland: A Checklist" (<http://www.nicholaswhyte.info/sf/irsf.htm>) is the only one that offers a comprehensive overview of science fiction and alternate history narratives whose action takes place totally or partially in Ireland.

8. It is important to note that this novel was published in 1969, a period of great upheavals and turmoil that is painfully marked by the riots that broke out in Derry and Belfast in August of that same year. Although this sectarian tension is not overtly reproduced in the novel, there are veiled allusions to particular paramilitary organisations that might be echoing both protestant and catholic factions.

9. In her book *Crown and Shamrock: Love and Hate between Ireland and the British Monarchy* (2010), Mary Kenny builds up a very interesting and mordant portrait of the turbulent relationship between Ireland and Britain on strictly royal grounds.

ghostly appearance of Red Hugh O'Donnell, the well-known sixteenth-century Irish hero who successfully led the resistance against the British in the so-called "Nine Years War."¹⁰ It is precisely O'Donnell, whom O'Quinn worships as a demi-god, who commands him to carry out "the only deed in the world that would raise up Ireland and bring the English down" (1969: 10). O'Quinn, who up to this point has just appeared as a compulsive drinker and good for nothing, is harangued by an spectre that probably thrives from his own intoxicated imagination "to take a name for a name", that is, to put an end to the most important British lineage by seizing the King's only son (1969: 11). This encounter turns out to be decisive as it enables Gilford to lay down the counterfactual bases that are going to be later on explored along the novel. Beyond the symbolical fact of outwitting the British, the hero is openly claiming to rewrite Irish history by giving voice to all those that were silenced in the past and whose presence can only be revisited or retraced through mechanisms such as alternate history.

The whole passage in which the Ballydoon Brigade gives shape to the quasi-suicidal mission of abducting the Prince of Wales is tinged with a hilariously mock-heroic tone, for the event that would change the course of history, as they pompously like to call it, is devised when they are conspicuously drunk. According to Matthew Pollard, the mode of the mock-heroic "is not simply parody, for parody concentrates on exaggerating the style of its model and thus satirizing the model itself. Mock-heroic uses its model to satirize something else by means of comparison, and it possesses considerable freedom in the closeness or otherwise of the comparison" (1970: 43). In this respect, the language O'Quinn draws on in his conversation with Red Hugh O'Donnell, which exalts values such as national pride and patriotic zeal, clashes with the type of characters Gilford actually constructs for his novel. This incongruity

10. Red Hugh O'Donnell was king of Tyrconnell and one of the most legendary heroes in Irish history. As well as the Prince of Wales in the novel, he was also kidnapped and imprisoned in Dublin Castle, from which he managed to escape together with Art and Henry O'Neill.

produces a prototypical burlesque situation that undermines the heroism that may underlie the Ballydoon Brigade's plan. It could be said, therefore, that, opting for this set of characters, Gilford's aim is not only to reverse history but also to demystify its participants.

From this moment onwards, the action of the novel moves on to London, where the Ballydoon Brigade arrives to accomplish its mission. This new setting enables Gilford to explore issues that point directly at all the differences that have historically underlain the Anglo-Irish relations and which he seeks to reassess from the vantage point of the various counterfactuals that are suggested in the novel. It seems that the author's decision to build up this alternate scenario does not only seek to hypothesise about history and what might have been but also to challenge stereotypes long associated to the Irish and to Ireland, that is, to bring to the fore those "what ifs" that have been repeatedly and, sometimes, purposefully discarded. In a like vein, Robert Cowley suggests that: "If nothing else, the diverging tracks in the undergrowth of history celebrate the infinity of human options. The roads not taken belong on the map" (1999: xii). *The Crooked Shamrock* gravitates around the idea of Ireland as a surreptitiously colonised island, which is accused of the kidnapping of the Prince of Wales even before evidence is collected to prove it. Inspector Willow, a senior detective of Scotland Yard appointed to look into the case, shows no doubts whatsoever that Irish villains must be behind this assault because it clearly reflects the country's inherent mischievousness. The following conversation between the English Foreign Secretary and Willow demonstrates that the Irish plot is the only line of investigation that is to be followed:

'Quite so, sir. Our crime then, I say, was an international endeavour. Now, the question I ask, sirs, is this. What country harbours resentment toward England?' 'Inspector,' the Foreign Secretary answered almost gently, 'the answer to that question might make a rather long list.' 'If you say so, sir'.... 'If you list these countries, however, sir, all the descriptions of the kidnapping gang seem to identify them as being of this nationality (*Irish*).'¹¹ (My emphasis 1969: 53)

This presumption postulated by Willow reveals the standoffish attitude of England

towards Ireland, which finds its origin in a purely colonialist discourse. *The Crooked Shamrock* is full of allusions to the racial differences existing between the two countries, the Irish genetic inclination towards violence and the simplicity and backwardness of its citizens¹¹ In a like vein, the debate upon the postcolonial status of Ireland is a long discussed and deeply controversial issue, although it has been generally demonstrated that the power relations between the two countries have been marked by a conspicuous inequality. In the alternative setting Gilford proposes, this situation points to a reality that is a shameful part of the country's history. In *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, Ania Loomba refers briefly to the Irish case in her exploration of the use of stereotypes in the construction of "otherness":

Despite the enormous differences between the colonial enterprises of various European nations, they seem to generate fairly similar stereotypes of 'outsiders' –both those outsiders who roamed far away on the edges of the world, and those who (like the Irish) lurked uncomfortably nearer home. Thus laziness, aggression, violence, greed, sexual promiscuity, bestiality, primitivism, innocence and irrationality are attributed (often contradictorily and inconsistently) by the English, French, Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese colonists to Turks, Africans, Native Americans, Jews, Indians, the Irish, and others. (1998: 107).¹²

The aggressively patronising tone shared by most English characters, which traces back to the heyday of England's colonial domination,

11. The construction of Ireland's identity according to its citizens' naturally-born tendency towards violence has been profusely analysed. Steven Garner's illuminating *Racism in the Irish Experience* revolves around this long unquestioned assumption arguing that: "In the logic of this view, their natural propensity for fighting, drinking and low morals, present to a certain extent among English Protestant workers, was exacerbated by their popish religion and inferior cultural background. They were seen as having brought the slum with them" (2004: 123).

12. In the novel, Ireland is repeatedly addressed as "that other island", as we can see in the following passage: "Unfortunately, however, the fog lasted long enough for even a rather slow boat to have made the passage across to that other island" (1969: 56).

emerges as an ironic counterpoint, considering the country's decline and loss of international influence depicted in the novel. However, most English politicians, military men and police officers in the novel still uphold the idea that Ireland should remain a subjugated state, as it is collected and legitimised in the historical annals: "I don't have a mind to have those Irish barbarians potshooting at me as I ride down a Dublin street. No half measures this time. My plan, Batty, is a quick and complete subjugation of the whole island. Make 'em recognise their proper masters again" (1969: 96). In addition to this last quotation, Inspector Willow stresses that the Irish and English belong to a different racial status and that he is proud to partake of the glorious past of Drake, Raleigh and Nelson, all of them embodiments of the most unmerciful colonial ruthlessness: "He didn't mind at all being recognized as an Englishman. Even while the rest of the world was laughing at him, he was proud to be of the same race as Drake and Raleigh and Horatio Nelson" (1969: 91).

It is precisely to challenge and deconstruct this "otherness" and, more importantly, to evince that the course of history could have been significantly altered that Matt O'Quinn and his Ballydoon Brigade get involved in the kidnapping of the Prince of Wales. The figure of the Prince proves to be central to understand how alternate history operates in the novel and how Gilford puts forward his counterfactuals and "what-ifs."

The evolution of the Prince and his growth from the infant he is when he is captured conditions the existence of all characters in the novel. Some of them initiate a desperate quest to find him out and to restore the line of succession to the English crown and others only aim at keeping him away from any English interference. When O'Quinn and his gang kidnap the three-year-old Prince and take him to Ireland, he incidentally begins a process of "Irishation" through which he ends up erasing his Englishness and, eventually, despising the monarchic institution. This transformation ironically commences when Richard, Prince of Wales, is baptised in a Catholic ceremony in Ballydoon, where he is given a new, Irish name –Kevin O'Quinn–, and a new faith: "I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,"

the canon's frail voice finished. *Too late!* The canon's palsied hand, pouring Irish water over the brow of England's little Richard, lost all control of itself and a deluge of the cold liquid poured down and drenched the small blond head" (1969: 129).

Richard's christening represents a turning point in the novel, as it marks the end of its first section. The next image we have of the Prince is that of a twenty-year-old Kevin O'Quinn, who has become a fully integrated individual who enjoys all the pleasures of his life in Ireland. This new stage in the evolution of this character enables Gilford to examine the role of monarchy in general and, specifically, of British monarchy as one of the country's most emblematic symbols. Kevin O'Quinn is the means through which Gilford dissects this institution from the dual perspective of the Irish and the English. In *The Crooked Shamrock*, monarchy seems to be always at the stake. In fact, very few characters –Inspector Willow among them– still believe in the beneficial status, prestige and national unity it confers to the country. As it was suggested above, Kevin O'Quinn is the figure that channels this thorough exploration into the intricacies that lie beneath a monarchic system and it is precisely O'Quinn the one that triggers one of the central issues Gilford examines in the novel. His traumatic discovery that he is the heir to the English throne and Matt's decision to return him to England, once King James's death is confirmed, takes Kevin again to the same place where his stepfather met Red Hugh O'Donnell. In what seems to be a dramatic turn of events, Kevin is faced with this spectre, who orders him to "conquer England" (1969: 143). This vision activates Kevin's still dormant Irishness and he immediately releases his most revolutionary spirit. In several action-packed chapters in which the Ballydoon Brigade is recognised in London and Kevin made hostage by Scotland Yard, members of Buckingham Palace identify him as Prince Richard, the one that should maintain a hereditary line that is now suspended after the king's death and with no known successor to take over the crown.

Nonetheless, when everything seems to adjust to the expected design, Gilford introduces several disquieting counterfactuals: What would happen if the Head of the British Crown were an Irish citizen? What if the

British Parliament would take advantage of the absence of a successor to get rid of the monarchic system? To the second question, it goes without saying that monarchy has been the object of an intense academic and popular debate and also of recurrent re-examinations in the realm of alternate history, especially in those countries with a long-standing monarchic tradition. For instance, in *Historia Virtual de España [A Virtual History of Spain]* (2004), several chapters are devoted to re-interpret the development of the Spanish society hadn't the republican government been deposed after Franco's military uprising.¹³ In *The Crooked Shamrock*, Gilford presents a scenario in which the British Prime Minister considers that the death of the King would necessarily pave the way to the impending dissolution of monarchy, which he considers a burden to the country's financial stability: "I know, gentlemen, that I only echo a thought that is in all your minds. We are confronted with an unprecedented opportunity ... to divest ourselves once and for all of the monarchy" (1969: 150).

The news that Prince Richard has been found and the possibility that he might accede to become the new king open a very interesting political dilemma in which the interests of the Prime Minister clash frontally with the indefatigable crusade to preserve the crown launched by Inspector Willow. Following the standard protocols of Scotland Yard, when Kevin O'Quinn is captured near Buckingham Palace, Willow decides to cross-examine him as he has been seen together with members of the Ballydoon Brigade. The reaction of the Prime Minister when he gets to know that Willow is about to interrogate the prisoner is outrageous, because he takes for granted that this conversation might frustrate his plans: "The Prime Minister was the first to speak. 'Inspector, take your prisoner to Scotland Yard and keep him in custody there until you hear from me personally. He's not to be questioned or anything of that sort. I'll hold you responsible'" (1969: 170-71).¹⁴

13. See Nigel Townson's chapter "¿Qué hubiera ocurrido si los partidos republicanos se hubieran presentado unidos en las elecciones de 1933?" ["What would have happened if the republican parties would have stood united in the 1933 general elections?"] (2004: 139-174).

As regards to the first counterfactual (“What would happen if the Head of the British crown were an Irish citizen?”), the variables that Gilford explores and the way certain characters come to terms with this unexpected circumstance stress the relevance of the suggested and, in the context of the novel, preposterous alternative. What Gilford seeks with this question is not only to undermine the monarchy as one of the founding principles on which the ideal of Britishness is sustained, but mainly to unveil fears that the British society could have experienced in the course of its history. In this vein, William Hadesty argues that alternate history “calls ‘what happened’ into question, thereby problematizing accepted theories of why it happened in the way that it did, how it may have affected the present, and what it may yet do to affect the future” (2003: 81). Focusing again on Kevin O’Quinn, the upbringing that he is supposed to receive as heir to the British crown suddenly collapses when he is kidnapped. In what seems to be an obvious parodic reversal of this process, Kevin’s tuition in Ireland has nothing to do with the rigidity and severity that he would have gone through had he stayed at Buckingham Palace. His easy-going and anonymous life in Ireland contrasts with the pomp, protocol and scheduled agenda that his duties as Prince of Wales would have surely entailed. It is precisely this background that scares Willow, who cannot put up with the idea of an Irish being crowned King of England:

Inspector Willow experienced a frigid feeling in the vicinity of his spine. Where had the lad been all these years? What sort of people had he associated with? What kind of ideas had been put into his head?... Poor chap, Willow thought, he’d had a bit of a shock.... To be told suddenly that one is the long-lost Prince, nay King of England after one has become accustomed to being Irish, no less belonging to a primitive, backward race (1969: 179).

14. The vision of the monarchy is rather negative even by those characters as Inspector Willow, who defend its values. This is how the officer describes the job of being king to Kevin: “‘You might give this kingship business a whirl,’ Willow suggested softly. ‘It’s not a bad job, you know. The pay is good. Not much to do except to let people admire you in your uniform and call you ‘Your Majesty’” (1969: 198)

From this moment onwards, Willow’s only goal is to remove any Irish trait Kevin could still retain. He strongly believes that the English subjects would never accept an Irish as their king, which explains why Kevin must necessarily be cleansed and purified. However, O’Quinn experiments complete dislocation because he initially rejects to accept the responsibility of being king, which he sees as a betrayal to his already deeply rooted Irish values. After ruminating over the pros and cons of assuming the English crown, Kevin considers that this could be the most feasible way of conquering England, as Red Hugh O’Donnell had commanded him in Ballydoon. With Kevin O’Quinn taking over the English throne, Gilford eventually rounds up the counterfactuals he suggestively proposes along *The Crooked Shamrock*. The ending of the novel, which describes Kevin’s ceremony of coronation, is, perhaps, the best means to illustrate how alternate history actually works: “When the archbishop set the jewelled crown to the golden head of him that had been Richard Edward Albert George, all who witnessed the occasion readily conceded that no sovereign in a thousand years had seemed more fitting to the role. Even his chosen name was fitting, and no one argued with it. King Kevin the First” (1969: 251).

It goes without saying that alternate history novels always respond to the personal and even politicised vision of their writers. This kind of narratives in which authors give free rein to their most speculative approaches usually hide behind a desire to change the past in order to improve the present. This essentially means that, as well as with mainstream history, allohistory is greatly determined by a strong ideological component, which, for instance, leads novelists or historians to either glorify or undermine a hypothetical victory of the Southern states in the American Civil War. Beyond the mere literary game or playful speculation, alternate history emerges as a realm that can help readers and critics alike to open up new and, on most occasions, unexplored paths. *The Crooked Shamrock* is sustained on a series of counterfactuals that do not only aim at questioning the bases of any monarchic system but also and, more importantly, at re-examining and challenging the always vexed Anglo-Irish relations, which

since the 1990s have dominated public Irish discourse, whether in the heated revisionist debates of the 1990s or in the current commemorations of key historical events.

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Juan Elices is Senior Lecturer in English Literature and Director of the Language Centre at the University of Alcalá (Spain). He has conducted extensive research on theory of satire, dystopia, alternate history and censorship. His publications include various books and scholarly articles and his current research interests focus on the sociological and literary manifestations of the Irish economic boom and on the Irish dysfunctional family.