
“A Company of Rogues”: Richard Head and the Irish Picaresque

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Abstract. Redefinitions of the origins of crime fiction have led to a renewed interest in earlier texts which do not follow the objective and empirical methods favoured by the standard Poe/Holmes canon of crime writing. As well as pre-modern enigma tales, early modern rogue narratives also provide an interesting field with which to reappraise the origins of the genre. Irish writing has a rich history of “rogue” narratives which, borrowing heavily from the Iberian picaresque tradition but adapting this to the particular circumstances of Ireland, provides a fascinating glimpse into the origins of Irish crime writing. Richard Head’s *The English Rogue* (1665) is of enormous importance as the first concerted application of Iberian picaresque models to an English-language context. The later use of the picaresque by William Chaigneau and Charles Lever would reveal how this Spanish model was uniquely adaptable to Irish circumstances and would influence both mainstream and crime narratives by Irish authors.

Key Words. Crime fiction, picaresque, early-modern narrative, Spain, Richard Head, William Chaigneau, Charles Lever.

Resumen. Nuevos estudios sobre el origen de la novela negra han renovado el interés por los textos pioneros del género, los cuales no siguen los métodos estandarizados que son característicos de la ficción detectivesca, según el patrón establecido por Edgar Allan Poe o por el personaje de Sherlock Holmes. Además de proporcionar cuentos relacionados con la resolución de un misterio, las historias de pícaros de comienzos de la modernidad también ofrecen un terreno interesante en el que valorar los orígenes del género. La literatura escrita en Irlanda cuenta con una larga tradición de narraciones centradas en pícaros, dedudoras de la tradición original de la Península Ibérica, pero adaptadas al contexto irlandés, y estas narraciones a su vez ofrecen perspectivas de gran interés sobre el origen de la novela negra irlandesa. La novela *The English Rogue* (1665), de Richard Head, es un texto de gran importancia en este campo pues supone la primera vez que modelos de la picaresca ibérica se aplican en un contexto de literatura en lengua inglesa. Usos posteriores del modelo picaresco

por parte de William Chaigneau y de Charles Lever mostrarán que el modelo hispánico se adaptó de forma singular a las características de Irlanda. Posteriormente sería además un modelo de gran influencia en autores irlandeses, tanto de narrativa en general como de novela negra en particular.

Palabras clave. Novela negra, picaresca, ficción a comienzos de la modernidad, España, Richard Head, William Chaigneau, Charles Lever.

There has been a tendency in recent critical studies on crime fiction to reject, at least partially, the canon and pro-Enlightenment focus that the history of the genre had been given by the majority of critics. Crime fiction, it was often claimed, was “rooted in pre-modern enigma stories, implying that rationality was the guiding light of the genre” (Ascari xiii). Such a perspective privileged the objective and empirical methods of detection which would be shaped into a convenient narrative of continuity leading from Poe to Holmes, to Christie and Sayers to Hammett and Chandler. Championed by early critics, few voices differed from this model. Only, perhaps, E. W. Chandler, who in *The Literature of Roguery* (1907) sought models in the various types of early-modern rogue literature from both domestic and continental sources, escaped from the orthodox classification of crime writing which has been dominant in most of the critical writing on the genre. Modern critics such as Kayman, Knight and Ascari have to a greater or lesser degree rejected the unique status of the Poe/Holmes tradition, noting that aspects of crime narratives from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries rely on aspects such as the materiality of the body, the importance of bodily fluids, the predominance of physical violence have their roots in an alternative lineage, one rooted in the popular narratives of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in the picaresque, in the rogue tales, in the broadsheets and Newgate Calendars, in the Gothic and in sensation fiction (Ascari 1). Early Irish crime writing was heavily influenced by all of these forms, and indeed, in the adaptation of the continental picaresque narrative into the English-language rogue tale, Irish writers can be considered to be in the vanguard.

Garrido Ardilla identifies three distinct but converging types of “crime” or “rogue” narrative which were being produced in the English language in the seventeenth century. These included the presumably indigenous “cony-catching” pamphlets which had started to appear in the late sixteenth century, the ever-popular criminal biographies which would later develop into the enormously successful Newgate Calendars, and the picaresque narratives influenced by the popularity of translations into English of the great Spanish picaresque novels. The anonymous *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554) saw its first English-language translation in 1576, while Mateo Alemán’s *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599-1604) was first translated by James Mabbe as *The Rogue* in 1622. Francisco de Quevedo’s *El Buscón* was written around 1604 and published, without the author’s permission, in 1626, with a first English translation appearing in 1657 (Garrido Ardila 123). The lack of copyright legislation meant that these and other key Spanish picaresque works were the object of numerous translations, adaptations and abridgements and the first English language copy of the picaresque tale is generally considered to be Thomas Nashe’s *The Unfortunate Traveller: or, the Life of Jack Wilton* (1594) which contains many of the characteristics of its Spanish models.

It is, however, with the Irish writer Richard Head’s *The English Rogue* (1665) that the picaresque narrative in English starts to take shape. What little is known about Head we learn through the short biography of the writer in William Winstanley’s *The Lives of the Most famous English Poets* (1687). A personal friend and acquaintance of Head’s, Winstanley

relates that Head was born in Ireland to an English clergyman father who was killed during the Irish Rebellion of 1641. Being taken by his mother to live in England, Head was a student at Oxford where his father had studied although, it would seem, the writer did not graduate as, Winstanley tells us, he was bound as an apprentice to a Latin bookseller in London before marrying and setting up his own bookselling business but, being “addicted to play” (Winstanley 208), he lost his savings and returned to Ireland where he wrote a play *Hic et Ubique*, which, according to Deena Rankin, shows some of the features of the picaresque in a work which raised “compelling methodological questions concerning the ways in which we might legitimately decipher the influence of his accident of birth” (Rankin 117). This work provided Head with the public respect and financial wherewithal to return to London where he had the play printed and which, dedicated to Lord Monmouth, he hoped would have some success on the burgeoning London theatre scene. The play was not, however, as successful as Head had hoped and, once again, opened a bookselling business. Losing large amounts of money once again on gambling, Head started to write the first part of *The English Rogue* which “being too much smutty, would not be Licensed, so that he was fain to refine it, and then it passed stamp” (Winstanley 209).

First published in 1664 or 1665, and censored for obscenity, *The English Rogue* was republished in 1665 by London publisher Henry Marsh. The narrative is told in first person by Meriton Latroon, the “rogue” of the title who, by birth at least, is in fact Irish rather than English. For Garrido Ardila, this is the first of “a prolific string of Guzmanian imitations published in the last years of the seventeenth century” (124). The same critic looks to the Spanish picaresque model for the protagonist’s name, as Latroon is obviously a transposition of the Spanish *ladrón* (thief) and Meriton could come from the Spanish *mérito* (merit), so Meriton Latroon would be the Meritorious (or worthy) Thief.

Latroon, like Head himself, is the son of a Protestant clergyman who, like Head’s father, is killed in the 1641 Rebellion. Taken, again like Head, by his mother to England, Meriton, as a child starts on a life of criminal activity by stealing and torturing geese, before being sent to boarding school where he indulges in extortion and continues to develop his cruelty towards animals. Running away from school, the protagonist joins a band of wandering gypsies with whom he learns how to beg and steal. The narrative breaks at times while the narrator provides lists, most significantly a glossary of “canting vocabulary” he has picked up from the gypsies and thieves with whom he associates.

Moving to London, Latroon is employed by a merchant as an apprentice. He joins a group of fellow apprentices in the city who make an illicit living from defrauding their masters and eventually gains fame and infamy as a skilled professional thief, forger and confidence trickster. Apart from his illegal activities, Meriton also has an active if immoral sex-life, which Head describes in ribald detail. He makes a maidservant pregnant and tricks her into believing he is willing to accompany her and the unborn child on a new life in Virginia. On the morning they are to elope, the rogue accompanies the girl to the ship but disembarks before it sets sail, leaving the hapless maid alone to face a new life in the colonies. Even as the ship is sailing out of the port Meriton seduces and robs another woman he meets on the shore.

Latroon becomes a highwayman, a professional armed criminal, and working alone or in groups, he terrorizes the passengers he comes across on the highways around London before being captured and sentenced to hang. The final part of the novel takes the rogue on travels as he is sold as a slave and later freed when he is shipwrecked off the Indian coast. At the end of the work he marries an Indian woman and, amidst promises of repentance and reform, apparently settles down to a happily married life with his exotic bride.

The English Rogue was an immensely popular work. Leah Orr recognizes at least three rewritten versions, three prose abridgements and no fewer than 8 imitations published within

eighty years of the publication of the work, while twelve unrelated works mention the work by its title (“English Rogue” 361). We must add to this an immensely successful short verse abridgement and the fact that *The English Rogue* was the first English-language prose fiction to be translated into any continental language – a German translation was published in 1672. Such was the popularity that Henry Marsh’s successor at his London publishing house Francis Kirkman, for George Saintsbury “the Curll of his generation” (48), requested that Head write a sequel to the work. Head refused, apparently because, as Kirkman states in his introduction to the second edition, so many readers thought the story autobiographical that the Irish writer did not want his name to be associated with any further adventures of his anti-hero. Whether this were indeed the case or rather, as Orr suggests this was a “ruse by Kirkman to make the narrative seem more controversial” (“Pícaro” 362) must remain a matter of conjecture, but three further parts of *The English Rogue* were subsequently published and, despite speculation, their authorship remains doubtful. While critics agree that Head was not solely responsible for the sequels to the narrative, there is some doubt as to whether the Irish writer collaborated with Kirkman – or the hired scribes employed by the publisher – or not. Part Two is almost universally accredited to Kirkman or his hired hack, while Parts Three and Four inspire doubts with many critics suggesting a joint authorship with at least minimal involvement of Head. The attribution of the first part to Head is based on the corresponding entry in the Stationer’s Registry (Orr, “Pícaro” 362), while there appears to be no independent corroboration of the authorship of the other parts, despite the fact that they are both Head and Kirkman are credited with their authorship.

What critics do tend to agree on is the superiority of the original instalment of *The English Rogue* over its sequels, *The English Rogue: Continued in the Life of Meriton Latroon, and Other Extravagants: The Second Part* (1668) and *The English Rogue: Continued in the Life of Meriton Latroon, And other Extravagants, Comprehending the most Eminent Cheats of Both Sexes: The Third Part* (1674) and *The English Rogue: Continued in the Life of Meriton Latroon, and Other Extravagants: The Fourth Part* (1680). E. W. Chandler calls Head’s original narrative “the first and best part” and believes that if the work had been completed (in its subsequent parts) as Head had intended “it might not have been deserving of unqualified blame” (81). Leah Orr believes that Head’s single-volume edition “has a complete narrative arc” with “no indication that a sequel was planned” (“Pícaro” 363), while C.W.R.D. Moseley criticizes Part Two for its lack of narrative resources by having the rogue narrator, instead of relating his own adventures, meeting the “simple expedient of meeting talkative strangers” (103). For Moseley also Parts Three and Four, despite the presumed collaboration of Head, are more repetitive than the original narrative.

Head’s narrative is, however, for the modern reader of crime fiction, an interesting link in the pre-history of the genre. It follows only loosely the Spanish models on which it was partially based. Like these models, *The English Rogue* has the episodic plot typical of southern European picaresque, with the focus on a single main character, while the narrative is based on the events in the life of this rogue character who “commits more or less petty crimes rather than pursuing a grand adventure or ambition” (Orr, “English Rogue” 72). Usually told in the first person, these fictions generally aim towards complying with the basic rules of realism while frequently introducing satire – towards the authorities, towards the masters, towards the church and towards the dominant social classes. They share an almost organic unity between form and content and the narrative is generally “shaped by the actions of the main character” (Orr, “Pícaro” 73). Significantly, in the Spanish picaresque, the *pícaro* or rogue is often immoral, regularly sacrilegious and refuses to bow down before the injustice of ill-used authority, but his crimes are usually minor ones based on petty theft, fraud, confidence tricking and other stratagems aimed at ensuring the rogue’s very survival. In these original Iberian examples of the genre the *pícaro* rarely commits serious crimes. Garrido

Ardila argues that Head's novel is not fully picaresque because Meriton "is not a rogue because he is never forced to become one" (124). The English-language rogue narratives, from Head onward, would seem to combine the features of the Spanish model with the domestically popular criminal biographies which involved real criminals and which generally ended in repentance before the execution of the protagonist.

George Saintsbury was critical of Head's literary stature, claiming that the Irish writer "can give us the company that Colonel Jack kept in his youth and Moll Flanders in her middle age", but is incapable of creating a character with the depth and intensity of Colonel Jack or Moll themselves (50). C.W.R.D. Moseley also laments the lack of character development in the modern sense of the word (104) while E. W. Chandler, for whom both Head and Kirkman were "poor devil hacks" complains that *The English Rogue* was lacking in unity and that "it attempts no study of character or manners; it imitates but one phase of Spanish roguery, and neglects everything that made them a link in the development of the modern novel" (81). Nevertheless, he also credits Head with more ability and originality than the Englishman, who he accuses of converting the "world of roguery" created by Head into a "world of villainy and crime" which revealed "the same decadence that has marked picaresque literature as a national development" (81). Leah Orr shows a greater tolerance to the perceived shortcomings, at least of Head's original volume if not of the Kirkman-inspired sequels. The critic admires the protagonist's "signature narrative style" with his "half-apologetic, half-brazen description of his crimes" ("*English Rogue*" 363) and his paradoxical attitude towards his criminal activity which, she argues, would later be used in such influential works as Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*.

Significantly, perhaps, and perhaps because of the title, few critics dwell on, or even acknowledge, the "Irishness" of both author and protagonist. John Wilson Foster, who gives Head's birthplace as Carrickfergus, sees Meriton's illegitimacy as standing as "a memorable metaphor for the unrootedness of the British in Ireland" (7) and observes in Head's sprawling episodic narrative the roots of future Irish works such as *Tristan Shandy* or *Ulysses*. Garrido Ardila detects a possible significance in the trauma which Meriton has endured as a result of the Irish Rebellion of 1641 and his father's death in this uprising and hence that society or the circumstances of history are responsible for the rogue's anti-social behavior, but goes on to demolish this hypothesis because, he claims, "the fact that the setting of his roguish adventures is England, where he is no outsider, renders the satire much less patent" (124). Here the critic ignores the fact that the protagonist Meriton Latroon is Irish, and as such does not, perhaps, understand the complex nature of the rogue's relationship to the two countries, England and Ireland. Such confusion regarding Latroon's national origin is perhaps understandable, and Garbiñe Iztueta, while praising *The English Rogue's* reflection of changes taking place in the late seventeenth century, particularly with regard to the rise of commerce and the newly-established social relations which were being established in the cities, treats the novel as being "English" and as pertaining to an English – not just an English-language – tradition (124).

The sense of displacement which the protagonist experiences could well point to the liminal status of this character – neither Irish in Ireland nor English in England. Deena Rankin recognizes the significance of Head's Irish birth and how this is mirrored in that of his protagonist. She suggests that the author "can be figured as a writer between England and Ireland" whose "fascination with origins and wanderings – that by now familiar cocktail of birth, blood and dislocation – not only drives his fiction, but also goes some way to explaining the autobiographical tension of his writings" (117). More recently Derek Hand has noted the unresolved sense of identity apparent in the work, stressing how Meriton "at some level, is either Irish or English or, rather, is both Irish and English simultaneously" thus undermining any feasible notion of stable national characteristics (25). Hand also discusses the early

chapters of the work in relation to “the dilemma of this project of self-creation for the Protestant Irish community” (25) linking, perhaps, Head’s narrative to William Chaigneau’s *The History of Jack Connor* (1752), discussed below, and even, perhaps, and temptingly, to the neo-picaresque works by recent Northern Irish writers such as Colin Bateman, Robert McLiam Wilson, Nick Laird or Zane Radcliffe.

Despite the success of *The English Rogue*, which ran to twelve editions by the end of the century, and despite Head’s apparent involvement with Kirkman’s parts three and four of the saga, Head did not himself duplicate the successful formula implied in his rogue narrative. *The Complaisant Companion, or New Jest; Witty Reparties; Rhodomontados and Pleasant Novels* (1674) was, as the title suggests, a multi-genre potpourri which, however, for Calhoun Winton is significant in that, in the “novels” presented therein – in fact short one to two-page tales of tricksters and cheats – Head created a brand of “nugget fiction” of the type that could be found in chapbooks and pamphlets and would later be used in periodicals and which might be regarded as an ancestor of the short crime fiction that would appear in the nineteenth century. Also of interest is Head’s *The Miss Display’d* (1675), a fascinating example of early female picaresque. The heroine, Cornelia, had an Irish mother and an English father. After an affair with the knight who is her master while in service, she moves to Dublin where she sets up a successful brothel. Containing some excellent descriptions of the low-life of seventeenth-century Dublin with its playhouses and taverns, the use of a third person narrator would seem to deprive it of the sense of reckless urgency found in *The English Rogue*, and, when after moving to London, arrested and sent to Newgate to await execution, the ubiquitous acquittal of the heroine strikes the reader as merely formulaic: Cornelia ends up a rich woman living in Paris.

While Head did not profit from the rich vein he had discovered in *The English Rogue*, other writers were quick to take up the challenge. Starting with Frances Kirkman, a large number of European writers would shamelessly copy the formula used in Head’s narrative. The use of the formula title reveals, according to Leah Orr (“English Rogue” 368), the fact that, although all subsequent rogue tales were, like Head’s model, related to Spanish picaresque models, the primary influence on these works was that of the Irish writer. The last quarter of the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth century saw the appearance of a large number of rogue narratives, often published anonymously. Among others there was *The German Rogue*, *The French Rogue*, *The Scottish Rogue* and *The Highland Rogue*. Suggestively, there was also *The Irish Rogue*, an anonymous work, presumably written by an English writer, first published in 1690, which is narrated in the first person by its protagonist, Teague O’Divelly. The work, replete with anti-Catholic and anti-Irish sentiment (Orr, “English Rogue” 368) was republished in 1740 with the name of the protagonist changed to Darby o Broghan.

The eighteenth century also saw the publication of another great Irish picaresque narrative, William Chaigneau’s *The History of Jack Connor* (1752). Chaigneau (1709-1781) was born in Dublin of Huguenot descent and published the novel anonymously in both Dublin and London. A second edition, with numerous revisions, was published the following year. *The History of Jack Connor* has a contemporary setting – the narrative starts around 1720 – and, according to Aileen Douglas, exudes a “mood of Enlightenment optimism” which has more in common with Tobias Smollett’s *Roderick Random* than with Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, despite the “elaborate complements” paid to the latter (28). Certainly, in common with Smollett, Chaigneau is interested in the liminal status of his protagonist and explores, like the Scottish writer, questions of national identity in both overt and covert fashion.

The eponymous hero Jack Connor is born in Ireland, the illegitimate son (as we discover towards the end of the work) of a Protestant landowner and a Catholic peasant mother, the tellingly-named Dolly Bright. Dolly has worked as a servant for Sir Roger

Thornton who, on discovering the girl's pregnancy, married her off to Jeremiah Connor, a Williamite soldier who has remained in Ireland after the wars and who Jack regards as his father. Wounded after a discussion with his wife, Jeremiah is obliged to undergo surgery during which he is blinded by an inefficient surgeon. Blindness of the main wage earner in eighteenth-century Ireland meant almost inevitable poverty, and the family is forced to turn to begging in order to survive. After the blind man's death when Jack is six, his mother abandons her child to cohabit with a lustful priest and leaves him outside the home of the Truegood family in County Meath. The names of the characters, like that of the mother, reflect the characteristics of their bearers, and Jack is raised by the well-meaning steward at Truegood's household, Mr Kindly. Jack is on good terms with the members of the family, becoming a friend and schoolmate to Truegood's heir, Harry, but is forced to leave after being discovered in bed with the schoolmaster's niece.

After leaving the Meath home, Jack wanders through Ireland, England, France, the Low Countries and Spain before eventually returning to Ireland. Meeting and being employed by such characters as Mr Champignon, Mr Sangfroid, Sir Peter Shallow and Sir John Curious, Jack, who changes his surname to Conyers, is involved in numerous petty crimes and sexual escapades as well as, like his predecessor Meriton Latroon, becoming a highway robber and being sentenced to death only to be reprieved at the last minute. On his travels across Europe, becoming an accidental soldier and companion to the Wild Geese he encounters in the various armed forces, Jack develops both materially and spiritually. Being informed of the true nature of his birth in Cádiz, Jack returns to Ireland where, discovering also that he is a blood relation to the Truegood's, he marries Harry's sister Lady Harriot. Bernard Escarbelt compares Jack's real and spiritual journey through life as "a sort of pilgrim's progress, an onward march towards a form of salvation which allows little room for divinity except when Providence and God's grace manifest themselves by affording social advancement" (57). Certainly Jack's social elevation is in stark contrast to the rough living conditions of the Irish peasantry depicted in the opening scenes of the novel and, as was often the case with Anglo-Irish fictions, the wholehearted acceptance by the protagonist of Protestant values and social manners perceived as being English.

Ian Campbell Ross accepts that the novel can be loosely classified within the picaresque tradition despite "significant variation" (270), and the novel makes overt reference to Le Sage's *Gil Blas*, itself a French adaptation of the Iberian picaresque model. Much more, however, than Richard Head, William Chaigneau examines the Irish background of his protagonist and the ways in which this affects and conditions his behaviour. Jack's changing of his name from Connor to Conyers reveals a symbolic rejection of his birth-right, and this rejection is further emphasized by his attempts to develop an English accent and, in continental Europe, to pass himself off as an Englishman. Although Ross (273) detects the anti-clericalism typical of most picaresque or rogue narratives in the novel, the work also shows a distinctively anti-Catholic side, as it constantly privileges the values and codes of Protestantism against those of those of the Roman church. Both Ross and Escarbelt recognize the importance of *Jack Connor* as a work of Irish prose fiction. While the former laments the neglected status of *Jack Connor* and other eighteenth-century novels by Irish writers, he concludes that the work is "an authentically Irish novel" which is "among the best examples of eighteenth-century Irish fiction" (278). Escarbelt tentatively agrees with those critics who have called the work "the first Irish novel worthy of the name" while stressing that it was written at a time when both literature and publishing "essentially belonged to England and targeted English readers, for whom the indigenous Irish world was remote, little known and well-nigh incomprehensible" (51). Derek Hand importantly recognizes that, while following the format of the picaresque, the novel "attempts to take Ireland, Irishness, Irish themes and

concerns seriously from a fictional perspective” and can be seen as “an enchanted moral fable – a parable - for the Irish Protestant community in the eighteenth century” (39-40).

Jack Connor contains numerous descriptions of Irish rural life, and this alone makes the work exceptional in terms of eighteenth-century fiction (Ross 276) and the first part of the narrative ranges across the country portraying Counties Meath, Limerick and Tipperary, as well as the city of Dublin. The harshness of life in the Irish countryside is conveyed at times with great realism, and Chaigneau criticizes the economic conditions of the peasantry and how “the Transition from an Irish Cottager to a Beggar, is very natural and common in the Country” (Vol. 1, 11). Although Jack aspires towards Englishness – by changing his surname and adopting an English accent and English manners – he constantly reveals his sympathy towards the Irish and the injustices they suffer both in their own country and overseas. Chaigneau observes “the wretched Condition of the poor Inhabitants” and expresses his belief that “their Idleness and Sloth, with the Swarms of ignorant Priests, and the Treatment of some Landlords, kept them in a constant miserable Situation, and even depriv'd them of sufficient Spirits to wish a Change of Condition” (Vol. 1, 52). The ill social conditions undergone by the Irish peasantry is, for the writer, caused by the peasants own laziness, the depravity of Catholic priests and the negligence of the landlords.

Chaigneau’s underlying Protestant ideological leanings constantly come to the fore. The model schools that Lord Truegood has established on his estate are a sign of Protestant enlightenment, and this is reflected in Jack’s decision when, now a moneyed gentleman, he returns to visit the hovel in which he was raised and comes to the decision to donate a large sum of money to be used to set up Protestant schools in the Irish countryside. Despite the symbolic significance of Jack’s reclaiming his Irish surname (Ross 277), the rogue has mellowed into a defender and stalwart of English values and, according to Douglas, “the abandoned barefoot boy has so successfully taken on the characteristics of a Protestant English gentleman that he can be invited to colonise his native land” (29). Nevertheless, in his travels through Ireland and Europe, Jack is the protagonist of a sadly-neglected narrative which, like Head’s earlier work, can be situated at the centre of picaresque narrative, an important ancestor of later models of crime fiction.¹

Almost a century after the publication of *Jack Connor*, Charles Lever (1806-72) produced a strange but interesting example of late picaresque in his *Confessions of Con Cregan: An Irish Gil Blas* (1849). The overt reference to Le Sage’s eponymous hero in the subtitle places the work firmly within the neo-picaresque, and Lever’s hero provides a witty and often ironic version of the established rogue figure. The novel starts with Con’s early life in Ireland, learning the first tricks of roguery from his father, who works as judge’s flunkey, writ-giver and general hanger-on on the edge of the precarious Irish legal system who makes his living through an exhaustive and self-taught knowledge of the intricacies of the legal system. Con himself learns law by making copies of Sessions papers, and effectively “cons” his father by handing over incriminating papers to an enemy of his father’s – the attorney Mr Morrisy – and subsequently ensures his father’s prosecution and subsequent sentence of transportation for life. Con’s betrayal of his father is emotionless and seemingly unmotivated. In fact, young Con also loses out by his father’s exile, as the elder Cregan’s property is confiscated by the Crown and his son is left penniless. Rejected by his neighbours, who tag him with the unwanted epithet of informer, Con is forced to fend for himself. His coincidental meeting with the young Trinity student Henry Lindsay leads him to Dublin where, after seeing – but being unable to participate in – the life of students from rich families, Con is introduced to the seamier side of life in Ireland’s capital. Working as a “horse-holder”, the young rogue is arrested for using one of the horses with which he has been entrusted to ride in a race for gentlemen riders. Using his knowledge of the law to escape punishment, Con is

taken under the wing of the disreputable Sir Dudley Broughton with whom he undertakes a sea voyage which will eventually take him to Quebec.

After a long and eventful stay in Canada, Con accompanies a group to the southern states of the USA before crossing the border from Texas into Mexico. In Mexico he meets the beautiful Donna María but he is forced to flee the country and return to Europe. After numerous adventures involving deception, theft, confidence tricking and not a little debauchery, Con moves from France to Spain, then in the midst of the Carlist Wars. In Spain he is imprisoned but, after escaping to Italy, he once again meets up with the ex-Trinity student Lyndsay. Through his adventures Con has seen a constant rise in his social status and the closing stages see him as possessing a French count ship and holding a position of importance in the French military in Algiers. His return to Ireland is triumphant and the romantic ending seemingly required of the Irish and British variants of the genre sees him reunited with his Mexican love Donna María in Dublin. Like Meriton Latroon, and like Jack Connor, Con Cregan undergoes social and economic progress despite behaving on the wrong side of the law. The cruel circumstances under which all three characters live are mitigated by the ingenuity and seemingly intuitive *savoir-faire* of the protagonists.

For Zea Álvarez, picaresque writing can be seen as a means of unconsciously satisfying our desire to travel through a world which is chaotic and without any apparent order, as opposed to the romance, which satisfies our desire to participate in a beautiful, harmonious and well-ordered world (29). The picaresque, he suggests, takes its comedic impulse at least in part from the contrast between the “serious” version of the journey of initiation – found, for example, in the romance or, more recently, in the realist novel – and the presentation of the same world, but in a “degraded version” in the picaresque. Thus the solemn world of the journey of initiation in serious literature is “transported” into the colloquial picaresque (37). It is easy to see therefore, in the picaresque, features which would become an essential part of Irish narrative throughout the nineteenth, twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The influence of the picaresque is to be found in *Tristram Shandy*, in *Finnegan’s Wake*, in the writings of Wilde, Beckett, Behan and Patrick McCabe. Contemporary Irish crime fiction is also indebted to the picaresque model, with writers such as Patrick McGinley, Ken Bruen, Colin Bateman and Liz Nugent using at least some of the tropes and characteristics of the Iberian model as adapted by Head, Chaigneau and Lever. The narratives of Irish picaresque discussed above present a notable representation of the instability and rootlessness of the Irish subject in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and also provide a compelling introduction to the fiction of crimes from Ireland.

Notes

¹ Ulrich Wicks (1974) attempts to resolve the perceived critical confusion between those who use the term “picaresque” to refer only to works by Spanish writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and those who use the term more broadly for works written within an ahistorical and ongoing literary mode.

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