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Emer Nolan’s critical study of Irish fiction of the nineteenth and early twentieth century presents itself as an alternative to the traditions of the realist (and often anti-Catholic) and Anglo-Irish gothic genres. She begins with a less familiar fiction by Thomas Moore, works her way through the Banim brothers, Gerald Griffin and Charles Kickham, and ends with an analysis of Joyce’s Ulysses. Although there is a strange lacunae in the argument in relation to Joyce (of which more later), the book is fascinating for what it reveals of writers dealing with their own internalised Britishness. Writers like the highly popular Kickham exhibit a schizoid eye to a potential English readership and pre-empt easy dismissal of Irish cultural formations by English readers.

Nolan argues that agrarian insurgence, which was so prominent a feature of Irish life and fiction (especially Big House and later, gothic fiction) between the 1820s and the Land War of the 1880s, was difficult to accommodate in available fictional genres, and that several generations of Irish writers challenged bigotry and race theories by presenting the Irish masses as recuperable, culturally and politically, for modernity. In making this case, novelists frequently essentialised and extolled the virtues and traditions of the Catholic underclass – their frugality, for example, was construed as a protection against capitalism and overindulgence in consumerist luxury, on the proviso that basic material needs were met.

Her account of Moore’s Melodies (1808–34) focuses on the dual process of creating, by displacing recent histories into the ancient past, a lament tradition which documents a collective trauma, and also the aestheticising of rebellion. Poetry was useful to Moore for celebrating resistance, but not if it occurred in the recent past. The longing for release is indefinitely deferred and made safe for the parlours of
England. It is indeed instructive to learn how close and yet distant he was kept by his close friend, Robert Emmet, from the 1798 rebellion. By his own testimony, he supported the United Irishmen for ‘every step of their journey toward rebellion, “but the last”’ (p. 7). His more controversial and deeply subversive Memoirs of Captain Rock appeared in Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine in 1824. Written in response to a fact-finding tour into the conditions of the rural poor with Lord Lansdowne in 1823, it was a text that ‘sanitised the most fearful attributes of Irish popular culture’ (p. 15), allaying fears of agrarian violence. It created a collective that is heroic in its banditry, but that also exemplifies the process whereby decent men are transformed by material want into terrorists. Moore’s representation, however, does involve painting out actual atrocities. Moore also makes much of the wit and irony that is the defence of a people who are oppressed, and reinscribes Irish misrule as a site of carnival, and in this way confronts his readers with what they most fear: escape from the rule of law, and hyperfertility. Comedy in this text, Nolan argues, is affirmative, giving promise of ‘the kind of alliance between the intellectual and the common people of which the leaders of 1798 had always dreamed’. (p. 52)

Chapters 2 and 3 examine the ways in which John and Michael Banim, Gerald Griffin, and in a very different genre, the idealising and appeasing Charles J. Kickham, work through, more timidly it has to be said, the legacy of Moore’s Captain Rock. What is common in these texts is the need to defend Irish communality, religiosity (though not necessarily Catholicism), and cultural difference. For Nolan, the insistent question posed is ‘can the peasantry become a citizenry, or some version of the modern political subject?’ What is revealing in her analyses is the extent to which covert literary practices like allegory served nationalist agendas, and how muted these are because of what in Australia we would call ‘cultural cringe’, pre-eminently the pathology of colonialism.

This work is posited on a strange diachronic trajectory whereby the novels are seen to map a shift from political communalism in the early and mid nineteenth century, via sexual liberation and liberation from church, into a form of political and personal individualism (in the period of first wave feminism), to modernity, of which the apotheosis (undesired by the author) is globalizing consumerism, said to be central to Joyce’s project in Ulysses. I find this schema strangely idiosyncratic, largely because it is so monolithic and single-factorial and the details of analyses are a great deal more compelling than the overall trajectory. The textual material she analyses is more interesting, varied, nuanced and complex than the simplifying template projected over it.
Sometimes the schema drives the reading, forcing novels into a politics they seem not to profess: a case in point is the reading of Emily Lawless’s *Grania: The Story of an Island* (1892). To look for, and fail to find, ‘an allegory of social or national renovation’ is to read this text narrowly, and to no useful outcome. The novel is, as Nolan herself admits, of ‘enormous significance in the history of Irish fiction’ (p. 144), but precisely because of its careful articulation of sexuality, its subversiveness of social and church mores, and its insistence on the social and interpersonal destructiveness of macho drinking rituals. If Grania has to die to dramatise these first wave feminist impulses, then it is no more surprising than that Jane Eyre is forced into unnatural marriage with Rochester, or Maggie Tulliver drowns at the end of *The Mill on the Floss*. The alternatives for Grania are clearly sketched in the representation of other women with whom she identifies, all of whom live miserable family lives on the edge of starvation, or yearn to become nuns. It is an extraordinarily trenchant critique of masculinity for its time, as devastating as Barbara Baynton’s *Bush Studies*, which postdates it, though it offers much more by way of sugar-coated romance (ultimately thwarted) en route.

On the whole, I found Nolan’s analysis of the politics of the nineteenth-century male-authored novels she deals with more compelling than her treatment of Joyce. Even if we accept the achievement of individualism and modernity as the outcome of her teleology, there is much more sane anti-nationalist politics in Joyce than she concedes, both in chapter 12 of *Ulysses* and in *Finnegans Wake*. I debate the reading of Bloom that she offers in the final chapter as ‘avatar’ of consumerism. Bloom’s accounting exercise in chapter 17 of the novel makes very clear that he is a canny needs-based consumer. There are few luxuries in his spending, unless lemon soap is considered that, or the cheap banbury cake he buys for the seagulls is deemed an extravagance, and much that points to his communalism (his major expenditure is a donation to Paddy Dignam’s family). It seems to me that Joyce, metafictionist that he is, invents Bloom’s occupation of advertising canvasser, not to laud consumerism, but rather to critique it, expose its seductions and wiles. Bloom’s ideal modern state is not a consumerist one, but, expressed in Joyce’s typical parodic hyperbole:

> the reform of municipal morals and the plain ten commandments. New worlds for old. Union of all, jew, moslem and gentile. Three acres and a cow for all children of nature...Tuberculosis, lunacy, war and mendicancy must now cease. General amnesty, weekly carnival with masked license, bonuses for all, esperanto the universal language with universal brotherhood. No
more patriotism of barspongers and dropsical impostors. Free money, free rent, free love and a free lay church in a free lay state. (p. 462, 1922 text of *Ulysses*)

This seems a long way from individualism and rampant consumerism. If Gertie and Molly are subject to the lures of advertising, and they are, then these inform a quite canny recycling of materials so as to appear more consumers than indeed they can afford to be. Social materialist understandings of poverty seem to me to be the hallmark of Joyce’s fiction. Insofar as Irish political history is a nightmare, it is Stephen, the least concerned of all the characters in the novel about money, who exemplifies its pressures.

I find the detail in this book far more compelling than its overall argument. However, the work helps me to a richer reading of Thomas Moore and his enduring legacy in fiction (as well as via the *Melodies*), and back to the remarkable Emily Lawless, so I’m grateful for that.

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Identifying Stephen with Joyce enables a positive judgment, but it does so from outside the narrative. Because that identification is speculative, the narrative remains open to opposing interpretations. View.


Emer Nolan. Published 2007. History. Tracing the history of the Catholic-authored novel in nineteenth-century Ireland, Emer Nolan offers a unique tour of Ireland's literary landscape from its early origins during the Catholic political resurgence of the 1820s to the transformative zenith brought on by James Joyce's "Ulysses" in 1922. Nolan observes that contemporary Irish literature is steeped in the ambitions and internal c