

INFORMATION TO USERS

While the most advanced technology has been used to photograph and reproduce this manuscript, the quality of the reproduction is heavily dependent upon the quality of the material submitted. For example:

- Manuscript pages may have indistinct print. In such cases, the best available copy has been filmed.
- Manuscripts may not always be complete. In such cases, a note will indicate that it is not possible to obtain missing pages.
- Copyrighted material may have been removed from the manuscript. In such cases, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, and charts) are photographed by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each oversize page is also filmed as one exposure and is available, for an additional charge, as a standard 35mm slide or as a 17"x 23" black and white photographic print.

Most photographs reproduce acceptably on positive microfilm or microfiche but lack the clarity on xerographic copies made from the microfilm. For an additional charge, 35mm slides of 6"x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations that cannot be reproduced satisfactorily by xerography.

8713771

Kreilkamp, Vera

THE ANGLO-IRISH BIG HOUSE NOVEL

City University of New York

PH.D. 1987

University
Microfilms
International 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106

Copyright 1987

by

Kreilkamp, Vera

All Rights Reserved

PLEASE NOTE:

In all cases this material has been filmed in the best possible way from the available copy.
Problems encountered with this document have been identified here with a check mark ☒.

1. Glossy photographs or pages _____
2. Colored illustrations, paper or print _____
3. Photographs with dark background _____
4. Illustrations are poor copy _____
5. Pages with black marks, not original copy _____
6. Print shows through as there is text on both sides of page _____
7. Indistinct, broken or small print on several pages ☒
8. Print exceeds margin requirements _____
9. Tightly bound copy with print lost in spine _____
10. Computer printout pages with indistinct print _____
11. Page(s) _____ lacking when material received, and not available from school or author.
12. Page(s) _____ seem to be missing in numbering only as text follows.
13. Two pages numbered _____. Text follows.
14. Curling and wrinkled pages _____
15. Dissertation contains pages with print at a slant, filmed as received ☒
16. Other _____

University
Microfilms
International

THE ANGLO-IRISH BIG HOUSE NOVEL

by

VERA KREILKAMP

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty
in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City
University of New York.

1987

©1987

VERA KREILKAMP

All Rights Reserved

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English
in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy.

April 23, 1957

Date

Morris Dickstein

Chair of Examining Committee

April 19, 1957

Date

D. C. Green

Executive Officer

Morris Dickstein

William L. Winters

William L. Winters

Supervisory Committee

Abstract

The Anglo-Irish Big House Novel

by

Vera Kreilkamp

Advisor: Professor Morris Dickstein

Big House novels in Anglo-Irish literature, set on country estates owned by members of the Protestant Ascendancy class, describe the tensions between two cultures: an Anglo-Irish gentry society and the subject population of Catholic Ireland. In the course of almost two centuries, these Anglo-Irish novels exhibit recurring themes and conventions, most notably the symbolic setting of a beleaguered and decaying Big House collapsing before the forces of Anglo-Irish improvidence and the rising nationalism of Catholic Irish society. The figure of the deracinated or alienated landlord, whose irresponsibility is experienced by his tenants as the loss of order and security, recurs throughout the tradition. Through devious economic manipulations, the figure of an outsider--often a Catholic land agent or rising professional--brings down the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Big House. Major novels in this tradition provide an interpretation of Irish history which differs sharply from Yeats's elegiac celebration of the Ascendancy class. By examining the discrepancy between the semi-feudal ideals of a colonial Anglo-Irish society and the shabby realities of

Big House life, the novelists create complex structures of irony.

This study examines major works of fiction in the Big House tradition, beginning with Maria Edgeworth's touchstone novel, Castle Rackrent, including nineteenth-century Gothic versions by Maturin and Le Fanu, and concluding with several innovative works by contemporary novelists who recreate or reinvent the form. The following novels examined suggest a continuity in Anglo-Irish fiction: Maria Edgeworth's Castle Rackrent (1800) and Ennui (1809); Charles Maturin's Melmoth the Wanderer (1820); Charles Lever's The Martin's of 'Cro Martin (1856); Sheridan Le Fanu's Uncle Silas (1864); Edith Somerville's Mount Music (1919) and The Big House of Inver (1925); Elizabeth Bowen's The Last September (1929) and The Heat of the Day (1949); Molly Keane's Two Days in Aragon (1941), Good Behaviour (1982) and Time After Time (1983); Aidan Higgins's Langrishe Go Down (1966); Jennifer Johnston's The Captains and the Kings (1972) and How Many Miles to Babylon (1974); John Banville's Birchwood (1973) and The Newton Letter (1982); William Trevor's Fools of Fortune (1983).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.	Defining the Form	1
2.	Establishing the Form: Maria Edgeworth's Big House Fiction	19
3.	Charles Lever and the Politics of the Big House	57
4.	Ascendency Guilt in the Anglo-Irish Gothic Big House Novel: Charles Maturin and Sheridan Le Fanu	77
5.	The Big House Fiction of Somerville and Ross	97
6.	Stages of Disloyalty in Elizabeth Bowen's Big House Fiction	127
7.	Molly Keane: The Persistence of Anglo- Irish Illusion	154
8.	Jennifer Johnston and William Trevor: Big House Conventions in the Contemporary Realistic Novel	181
9.	Recreating a Form: the Big House in Aiden Higgins and John Banville	201
10.	Conclusion	238
	Works Consulted	242

Chapter One Defining the Form

The Big House Novel and Irish History

Anglo-Irish Big House novels represent a major tradition in Irish fiction. Set on isolated country estates owned by members of the Protestant Ascendancy class, they dramatize the tensions between two cultures: an Anglo-Irish gentry society, the landed proprietors of the Big House, and the vast subject population of Catholic Ireland. In the course of almost two centuries, these novels reveal recurring themes and conventions, most notably the setting of a beleaguered and decaying Big House collapsing before the forces of Anglo-Irish improvidence and the rising nationalism of Catholic Irish society.

The very term "Big House", used in Ireland to describe the homes of the Anglo-Irish gentry class, is illuminating. These country houses were constructed of native limestone in alien architectural forms; they were built by representatives of a colonial British power, by a race of men who felt themselves Irish, but who were caught between two countries and two identities, separated from their tenants by the barriers not only of class, but of religion, language, and national origin. To the native Irishman these gentry houses were simply Big Houses, not, as in England, Great Houses. As one commentator has suggested, "scale may not be confused with moral grandeur" (McCormack, Introduction, Uncle Silas xx).

An examination of the actual sizes of these houses, however, reveals that in comparison to the Great Houses of England, typical Anglo-Irish gentry homes, and certainly most of those depicted in Big House fiction, are modest in scale. While estates like Castletown, Powerscourt, and Russborough, great houses with sweeping wings, colonnades, and elaborate facades, certainly exist in Ireland, the typical Big House was built, as Elizabeth Bowen suggests, to house a family,

its dependents, and a modest number of guests. "They have few annexes, they do not ramble; they are nearly always compactly square" ("The Big House," Collected Impressions 196). In Classic Irish Houses of the Middle Size, Maurice Craig points out that the term Big House indicates more about the status of the landlord than the actual size of the residence (3). Bowen's analysis of the expression suggests that the very height of these Georgian stone blocks in a country of peasant hovels, as well as the historical resonances of colonial oppression they evoke, creates a special inflection of "hostility and irony" when the term is used (196).¹ In describing the Big Houses of his youth--certainly the larger rather than the smaller ones--Thomas Henn emphasizes their isolation from the main thoroughfares of Ireland: "The avenue that leads off the main road will be long, winding, perhaps as much as a mile" (208). Such distances between the gentry home and the village, even if significantly shorter than Henn's recollections, suggest the social isolation and defensive self sufficiency of Anglo-Irish life and the spatial barriers the Big House erected against Catholic Ireland.

This study will provide an extended analysis and description of a particular literary tradition spanning nearly two centuries of Irish life. The first significant Big House novel emerges in 1800 when Maria Edgeworth published Castle Rackrent; her evocation of a decaying house and family reveals a society in crisis. Although Edgeworth informs her readers that she wrote Castle Rackrent to expose the failures of the past (Preface, Castle Rackrent 5), her novel stands as a seminal work in a tradition depicting the ongoing decline of Anglo-Irish society. Molly Keane's Time After Time or William Trevor's Fools of Fortune, both

¹ Eric Partridge's A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English reports that since 1925 the term Big House has become a general term for large and threatening institutions, particularly prisons and mental hospitals. The negative connotations of the term clearly transcend its Irish setting.

published in 1983, are recent examples of the persistence of the Big House novel in contemporary Ireland. In Georg Lukacs' terms, all of the works I am examining, from Edgeworth to Keane, are historical in their focus. They are thus written with a sense of how the individuality of character derives from the historical peculiarity of an age and with an awareness of human existence as always historically conditioned (24). Place and time in these novels represent not simply the neutral backdrops or settings for human behavior, but as Lukacs suggests, problematic and specific worlds in which the struggle between different classes becomes, to a large extent, the central focus of the narrative action. While these novels are not strictly historical novels, as James Cahalan defines that genre in Great Hatred, Little Room: The Irish Historical Novel, they emerge from and dramatize, most often on a private rather than a public level, the major political conflict in Irish history.²

Not surprisingly these novels have drawn the attention of cultural historians as well as literary critics. Oliver MacDonagh, for example, describes the realistic nineteenth-century novel as "ample, discursive, domestic and generally, if quite innocently, sociological in content" (3). He turns to the Big House novel as a metier-- "as close, perhaps, as it is possible to get in literature to that of the historian" --which yields, if in a fragmentary and subjective form, central insights for a recovery of the Irish past (3). In his social and cultural history of modern Ireland, Terence Brown uses analyses of Big House literature to evoke the situation of a Protestant minority culture in an emerging Catholic sectarian state (110-13; 119-20).

² Cahalan defines the Irish historical novel as dealing with periods of political crisis in modern Ireland prior to the author's experience, as concerning itself with a public political focus, and as depicting at least one real historical personage (Introduction xiii). None of the Big House novels examined in this study fulfill these criteria.

While my interest in the Irish country house tradition is primarily literary, I have found that historical and sociological information cannot be isolated from textual analysis in my examination of the Big House form. The descriptions of several actual estates which served as the models for fictional houses in the novels have, I hope, enriched my exploration of the complex relationship between the artistic imagination and the world of fact. Similarly, a brief running commentary on Irish social and political history furnishes a necessary gloss on my readings of the novels.

The Big House tradition provides an unsurpassed literary record of a turbulent two centuries of Anglo-Irish history. This literature reveals the tensions of a people caught between two nations, for the novels attempt to describe how an Ascendancy class of Protestant Irishmen, British in heritage or political allegiance, attempted to reconcile the contradictions of their lives as landlords of an Irish Catholic tenantry. These nineteenth- and twentieth-century landowners were members of the ruling Protestant Ascendancy which occupied land systematically expropriated from the Catholic Irish--of both Celtic and Norman origin--after the Elizabethan, Cromwellian and Williamite land settlements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The tradition of Big House fiction provides an interpretation of Irish history which differs significantly from Yeats's celebration of the Protestant Ascendancy class in poems such as "Coole Park, 1929," and "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931." Rather than celebrating Anglo-Irish gentry life, Big House novels generally provide a record of decline and fall, a process accelerated by the stubborn arrogance of a colonial power facing the consequences of its own improvidence or greed and by the historical rise of organized and politically effective Irish nationalism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The literary tradition arising from this response to a historical process is embodied in a series of novels taking the Anglo-Irish country house as its symbolic center.

Behind the familiar European image of feudal lord and vassal or of powerful landlord and subservient tenant, lie the special complications of Anglo-Irish history which help explain the Big House tradition. Seamus Deane, a contemporary critic of Anglo-Irish literature, points out the problematic existence of the term "aristocracy" when referring to the Anglo-Irish who occupied the Big House. Deane argues that the Protestant Ascendancy has historically been a predominantly bourgeois rather than aristocratic social formation. "The Anglo-Irish were held in contempt by the Irish-speaking masses as people of no blood, without lineage, with nothing to recommend them other than the success of their Hanoverian cause over that of the Jacobites" ("The Literary Myths of the Revival: A Case For Their Abandonment" 32). Even Elizabeth Bowen, a powerful spokesman for the aristocratic ideals of her own Anglo-Irish class, admits the dubious origins of her Cromwellian ancestors, whom she describes as late seventeenth century "squatters" without an idea of social life to integrate them.

They had as yet no position. To the Catholic gentry, to the workers left on their land, they were still anathema--they could buy service, they could not buy good regard. They were confronted everywhere by cryptic faces or disparaging smiles. The vanished old order still held the country people in a thrall of feeling. (Bowen's Court 87)

Historically then, the Big House marked the presence of a wealthy Anglo-Irish class which conquered and occupied Celtic Ireland. Thus for the conquered Irish, the Big House evoked memories of expropriation, exploitation, and injustice--and, simultaneously, the existence of a remote and glamorous power, of inaccessible social position and wealth. Yet in spite of the success of the Anglo-Irish conquerors in establishing themselves as an Ascendancy, the claims of an older, uprooted native Irish aristocracy existed as the constant discordant threat, the subterranean and derisive response to the pretensions of a parvenu Anglo-Ireland. For the proprietors of the Big House, who occupied land which may well have once belonged to their present tenants, the struggle to

retain possession of their property in the face of growing Catholic restiveness transformed an eighteenth-century Ascendancy class into a nineteenth-century Protestant garrison. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, land wars and new land legislation effectively removed landlords from control of their former estates.

Since Anglo-Irish fiction emerges from a history of conquest and colonial occupation, to study the genre of the Big House novel is to study the gradual evolution of a literary symbol set against the turbulent political history of class and religious conflict. Thomas Flanagan's seminal analysis of Irish fiction points out that unlike the English novel, nineteenth-century Irish fiction is preoccupied with national self definition, with the writing not only of Irish novels, but of novels about Ireland.

That a novel should take as its theme the shape and feel of the culture itself was an assumption that ran counter to the English novel, because it ran counter to English life. Fielding and Richardson and Jane Austen wrote English novels, to be sure, but not novels "about England." Only a culture which felt urgently and consciously a need for definition could have produced the novels of Maria Edgeworth....

(The Irish Novelists 101)

Publishing her Irish fiction in the early nineteenth century, as Jane Austen was beginning to write in rural England, Maria Edgeworth did not have the luxury of taking the stability of her society for granted. While Austen assumed the permanence of the social structure she lived in and wrote about, Maria Edgeworth could not make the same assumptions. In 1798, with the rebellion of the United Irishmen and the French invasion of Ireland, the social system she and her father represented and sought to reform seemed on the verge of collapse. Living among Anglo-Irish colonists who witnessed this uprising against the crown, Edgeworth wrote, "All that I crave is that if I am to have my throat cut, it may not be by a man with his face blacked with charcoal" (qtd. in Newby 32). To write a novel set in Ireland was to write about a culture in crisis; thus the subject of

Edgeworth's Irish fiction was shaped by her responses to questions of national identity.

The fate of the Big House in the twentieth century suggests the inexorable working out of Irish history. During the struggle for independence from 1919 to 1921 and the subsequent Civil War, close to two hundred Irish country houses were destroyed as symbols of a conquering civilization, often without consideration for the politics of their owners. Some Big Houses associated with Anglo-Irish literature survived as tourist attractions (the Gore-Booth's Lissadell), as schools or nunneries (Maria Edgeworth's Edgeworthstown House) or through purchase by new, often foreign owners who took on the enormous burdens of preservation (Aidan Higgin's Springfield House or Edward Martyn's Tulira Castle). Other country houses withstood the years of political crisis only to fall victim to the inability of their owners to maintain them or to the neglect of a new nation hostile to its colonial heritage. Thus Lady Gregory's Coole Park, the eighteenth century Big House which served as the center of the Irish Literary Revival, was torn down in 1941, reputedly for the price of its stone. In 1961, a few years after Elizabeth Bowen found herself unable to meet the costs of maintaining Bowen's Court, the house was demolished by its new owner. Yeats's premonition about the fate of Coole Park represents his fears for a whole culture.

Here traveller, scholar, poet take your stand
 When all these rooms and passages are gone
 When nettle wave upon a shapeless mound
 And saplings root among the broken stone...
 ("Coole Park, 1929," Collected Poems 238)

Critical Goals

The tradition of the Anglo-Irish Big House novel, beginning with Maria Edgeworth's Castle Rackrent in 1800 and persisting into the twentieth century

with the contemporary novels of Aidan Higgins, Molly Keane, Jennifer Johnston and John Banville, is a recognizable sub-genre of Anglo-Irish fiction. It is, however, a tradition in need of description and analysis. While most critical surveys of Irish literature mention the Big House novel and several studies discuss it in a few paragraphs or pages (Cronin, The Anglo-Irish Novel 17-18; Rafroidi 12-14; MacDonagh), the continuing thematic relationships between major novels in this tradition have not been fully explored. In Happy Rural Seat, an intelligent and comprehensive study of English country house literature in the twentieth century, Richard Gill's discussion of the Irish variant of the tradition suffers from an emphasis on those writers-- Yeats and Bowen-- who seem far more elegiac about the passing of the Big House than most of the novelists I have examined.

In this study I am seeking to establish connections between novelists-- in their attitudes toward a historical process of decline and in their formulations and reformulations of literary conventions. Thus I am defining a tradition, tracing it through almost two-hundred years of development, and examining the ways in which eleven different authors formulate their fictional responses to historical crises. They are self-conscious and professional novelists whose apparent limitations of class and caste--ten of them are representatives of the beleaguered and dying Anglo-Irish society they take as their subject--become strengths. Writing from within Anglo-Ireland, Big House novelists reveal its weaknesses. As serious artists, they explore and expose the myths of a feudal reciprocity upon which their own culture is based.

The justification for my attempt to write a comprehensive study of the Big House tradition in fiction seems self evident, for the form is far from a moribund literary tradition in modern Ireland. In spite of the census figures reporting the shrinking Protestant population in Ireland, the Anglo-Irish novel continues to thrive. Since Irish independence from England in 1921, more than a dozen

significant Big House novels have appeared: Edith Somerville's The Big House of Inver (1925); Elizabeth Bowen's The Last September (1929), The Heat of the Day (1949); Aidan Higgins's Langrishe, Go Down (1966); John Banville's Birchwood (1973), The Newton Letter (1982); Jennifer Johnston's The Captains and the Kings (1972), The Gates (1973), How Many Miles to Babylon (1974); Molly Keane's The Rising Tide (1937), Two Days in Aragon (1941), Good Behaviour (1982), Time After Time (1983); William Trevor's Fools of Fortune (1983).

As I approached nineteenth- and twentieth-century Anglo-Irish authors through the conventions of a specific literary tradition, I rediscovered several of them as literary innovators working within a well-defined genre. The allegorical writings of Le Fanu and Maturin, the historical sweep of Somerville's The Big House of Inver, the meditations on history achieved by Higgins in Langrishe, Go Down, the mordantly comic exposure of Anglo Ireland by Molly Keane, the startlingly modernist literary self-consciousness of Banville's Birchwood--these are all distinctive innovations emerging from the Big House tradition. In my individual chapters on each of these writers, I am seeking to draw attention not just to their relationship to the tradition, but also to their distinctive reformulations of it.

While certain authors-- Edgeworth, Somerville and Bowen--have been previously examined as Big House novelists, no comprehensive study of the Irish country house novel from 1800 to the present exists. Edgeworth, Lever, Le Fanu, and Somerville provide the literary form or series of conventions from which the contemporary Big House novel emerges. Rather than condemning this enduring literary sub-genre as impoverished, parochial, or anachronistic (as Seamus Deane does), I hope to show how a rich literary tradition provides each Big House novelist with a set of conventions to redefine and recreate. The recent novelists-- particularly Higgins, Keane, and Banville--provide me with a special

opportunity to engage in some critical speculation about the transformations of a traditional genre in contemporary literature.

Literary Conventions of the Big House Novel

All Big House novels depict that preoccupation with a dying landlord class which is so central to Maria Edgeworth's touchstone novel, Castle Rackrent. Following the conventions established by Castle Rackrent, these Big House novels combine domestic realism with a mythologizing sense of Irish social history. Several twentieth-century works by Somerville, Keane and Banville, incorporate that brilliant satiric view of a dying class which controls Edgeworth's masterpiece. Certain recurring patterns emerge as one explores the tradition :

1. The significance of the ruined house as the archetypal image of a decaying social class dominates, for example, not only Castle Rackrent, but many subsequent Anglo-Irish novels as well: Uncle Silas, The Big House of Inver, Langrishe, Go Down, Birchwood, The Captains and the Kings, Time After Time. (An anecdotal story about a recurring nightmare suffered by Sheridan Le Fanu suggests the haunting power of this symbol in the mind of nineteenth-century Anglo-Ireland. According to Nelson Browne, Le Fanu dreamed of "a mansion so ruinous and tottering that it looked as if it might at any moment fall upon and bury the helpless dreamer" [30].) As a result of the Anglo-Irish conflict and Civil War of the early twentieth century, when hundreds of Big Houses became targets for outrages and raids, the image of a great destructive conflagration controls novels by Somerville, Bowen, Keane, and Trevor.

2. An account of the decaying family line, of genealogical breakdown and collapse, accompanies the depiction of the decline of the house. Thus as with Poe's House of Usher, in Big House novels the decaying family and residence are symbolically merged. Such a fusion of house and family line begins with

Castle Rackrent, but is particularly evident in the Gothic strand of the Big House form in Maturin and Le Fanu which is exploited by Banville's contemporary Birchwood.

3. A major figure in many Big House novels is the deracinated or alienated landlord whose irresponsibility is experienced by his tenants as the loss of order, security, and permanence in their lives. The theme of the alienated and increasingly isolated landlord reappears in contemporary novels where the source of alienation is no longer absenteeism but powerlessness.

4. Through devious economic manipulations, the figure of an outsider-- usually a Catholic land agent or rising professional man-- brings down the Big House. A central theme in the nineteenth-century Big House novel is the threat of these Catholic outsiders to the snobbish social insularity as well as to the economic stability of Anglo-Ireland. Marriage between the Protestant Ascendancy class and an aspiring Catholic world is viewed with some alarm; generally Catholics are acceptable when they remain within the bounds set up by traditional landlord-tenant relationships--as the loyal and picturesque house niggers of a colonial society. In the twentieth century, when the Big House is an economic liability rather than a prize, the outsider's depredations are psychological rather than economic.

Myths of Feudalism

The Irish Big House exists as a mythic as well as a historical configuration. To study the literary symbol of the Big House in Anglo-Irish literature, then, is to study the relationship between history, politics, and myth ---and the ways in which history and politics themselves become myth, transforming the record of Anglo-Irish conquest, assimilation, prosperity, and decline into fictions which were sustained by two cultures.

Behind the historical tenant-landlord relationship in both Ireland and

England lies a mythic formulation of an ideal feudal community of hierarchical reciprocity, a lost Eden in which loyal vassals serve their beneficent lords in exchange for economic security and stability. The classic English literary expression of this feudal ideal exists in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English poetry, most notably in Ben Jonson's "To Penshurst", a poem which expresses the aristocratic justification of hierarchy and celebrates a feudal vision of reciprocity between lord and tenant. Raymond Williams observes that this idealization of country house life in English neo-pastoral poetry accompanies the replacement of a brutal feudal order by an exploitive system of agrarian capitalism (38); thus the myth of an Edenic generosity of spirit and of settled social and economic relations voices itself in English literature precisely at a historical period of social transformation to a new and even less reciprocal order. Lukacs notes that in the nineteenth century, the period in which the Big House novel is emerging as a literary form, the Romantic cry against Capitalism, against the debasement of all culture into commodities, led to a new view of the "social idyll of the Middle Ages, seen as a period of peaceful co-operation among all classes, an age of the organic growth of culture..." (26).

The relative stability of nineteenth-century British political life permitted the neo-pastoral, feudal ideal of country house literature to survive in English fiction as an enduring formulation of community and stability well into the twentieth century (in James's The Portrait of a Lady, Forster's Howards End, or Waugh's Brideshead Revisited, for example); however this ideal of an harmonious hierarchical order is predictably a less viable force in Irish fiction. In writing about English country house literature, Richard Gill focuses on the landed gentry estate as a symbol of community and communal values (15); the Irish tradition reflects different historical conditions. The Anglo-Irish Big House shares with its English counterpart an idealized image of social and economic reciprocity between tenant and landlord; but in Irish fiction, where the pressures of a turbulent history

exert themselves more directly on literature, this ideal exists as a lost value, as a vision of stability which can occasionally be nostalgically evoked, but seldom dramatically realized. Thus in the first Big House novel, Maria Edgeworth's Castle Rackrent, the vision of harmonious coexistence between landlord and tenants is already disrupted.

Castle Rackrent, which depicts the breakdown of order and collapse of systems of reciprocity, establishes the pattern for future Anglo-Irish novels. Instead of celebrating social and economic stability, Irish Big House fiction records the absence of such stability; instead of depicting the country house as the symbol of organic community, the Big House novel reveals the failure of community; rather than existing in the timeless world of a mythic Eden (or in Jane Austen's small country villages isolated from politics), the country estates in Irish fiction are usually depicted in periods of historic crisis for Anglo-Irish society--in the decades, for example, preceding and following union with Britain (Edgeworth, Maturin), during and following Catholic emancipation (Lever, Le Fanu), during the late nineteenth or early twentieth-century periods of land agitation (Somerville), in the midst of the twentieth-century war of independence (Bowen, Keane, Trevor), in the contemporary world of economic and social impotence for the Big House proprietor (Higgins, Keane, Johnston).

Maria Edgeworth and Charles Lever relegate the formulations of an idealized relationship between landlords and tenants--the powerful myth of feudalism--to the mouths of characters who are destined to be discarded by history. Thus in Castle Rackrent, the family retainer Thady Quirk, who loses his very identity with the fall of the house of Rackrent, is the spokesman for an outdated feudal fealty. Mary Martin, Charles Lever's young heroine who advocates an idealized neo-feudal stewardship of the family estate, is isolated and abandoned by the end of The Martins of Cro' Martin. Later Big House novelists writing in the twentieth century continue to emphasize the growing

irrelevance of a landlord class to the course of Irish history. In her best novels --The Real Charlotte, Mount Music, and The Big House of Inver--Edith Somerville describes how the reactionary politics, the inertia, or the moral failures of Anglo-Irish landlords encourage the depredations of a predatory middle class. Contemporary novelists such as Aidan Higgins or Molly Keane go further, indicating what their nineteenth-century predecessors barely imply: that the ever receding ideal of the cultivated Big House at the center of an organic community is based on false interpretations of the past. This ideal of a harmonious and morally ascendant ruling class suggests Keane in Good Behaviour and Time After Time rests on carefully constructed patterns of delusion, on willfully misinterpreting the past in order to construct self protecting illusions of stability. John Banville's contemporary parodies of the Big House literary form carefully depict the process by which such illusions are created.

Politics and Criticism

The Big House novel has had an uneasy reputation in twentieth-century Ireland, for critical responses to the form are as ambivalent as are the narrative stances of the novels themselves. In 1931, within a decade of the establishment of the Irish Free State, Daniel Corkery attacked the tradition as part of as an alien "colonial literature" of "spiritual exiles" who were writing to explain Ireland to English audiences (7-9). Reading Anglo-Irish literature has become a political as well as an aesthetic experience, for how one responds to the literary work depends with a particular intensity on how one interprets history, on where one's loyalties lie. Recent critical responses to the Big House tradition, particularly as it reveals itself in Yeats's poetry, suggest how Anglo-Irish cultural symbols still evoke powerful political responses.

In recent years the big guns of Irish literary criticism have been directed against what one critic calls the "literary myths of the Revival" (Deane, "The

Literary Myths of the Revival: A Case For Their Abandonment") or another sees as "the perils of nostalgia." (Kiberd). The immediate target of this critical reinterpretation is the rejection of modernism by the Irish Literary Revival, but Yeats's vision of the Protestant Ascendancy as representing the high point of Irish culture receives special attention. Yeats identified the "ancestral houses" he knew--the Gore-Booth's Lissadell, Edward Martyn's Tulira Castle, Lady Gregory's Coole Park--as the surviving symbols of a triumphant Ascendancy fusion of life with art. This identification led him to a poetry expressing a personal mythology of history which legitimized his distaste for modern culture. For Yeats in "Ancestral Houses," the hierarchical Big House represented Ireland's last stand against the chaos of modern egalitarianism and mechanism.

Surely among a rich man's flowering lawns,
 Amid the rustle of his planted hills,
 Life overflows without ambitious pains;
 And rains down life until the basin spills,
 And mounts more dizzy high the more it rains
 As though to choose whatever shape it will
 And never stoop to a mechanical
 Or servile shape.

(Collected Poems 198)

The strand of resistance to the Big House genre which runs through twentieth-century Irish literary criticism is hardly surprising when one looks at recent census figures for Ireland. With only three percent of the population identified as Protestant, hostile readings of Yeats's deification of the Ascendancy class seem predictable, indeed inevitable. Modern Ireland, a country dominated by that very middle-class Catholic population--that "servile shape"-- that Yeats deplored and that Big House novelists cast in the role of antagonists, responds to its Protestant heritage with some ambivalence. The occasionally hostile readings of the Anglo-Irish tradition suggest, moreover, the difficulty of responding to these

novels in a politically neutral context, of reading them as one reads, say, Mansfield Park or Howards End.

Authors of Big House novels are called to account if their fictional worlds are seen as historically flawed, if their vision of Ireland betrays the too limited perspective of their culture. Maurice Colgan, for example, suggests that Castle Rackrent is not a "great" novel because Maria Edgeworth "is unwilling or unable to inform the reader about significant political factors in society she is describing" ("The Significant Silences of Thady Quirk," 41). The tone of the Anglo-Irish Big House author toward Catholic Ireland often becomes a touchstone of literary excellence; thus Ann Power, while writing a laudatory piece on Somerville and Ross, points out that "however great their sympathy with the Irish attitude toward life, however keen their appreciation of the Irish intelligence, there always creeps in that deadly touch of condescension..." (48). Seamus Deane, a leading critic of the Revival, attacks the whole Big House tradition, arguing that the mythologizing of Anglo-Irish culture by Yeats created a false history and an impoverished literature. "The reemergence of the Big House novel, with all its implicit assumptions, demonstrated the comparative poverty of the Irish novelistic tradition" ("The Literary Myths of the Revival: A Case For Their Abandonment" 32).

While Deane's attack on the Big House form represents a political judgment of modern Irish cultural fixations rather than a critical evaluation of any particular fictions, the Irish preoccupation with historical subject matter for fiction makes any simple distinctions between aesthetic and political evaluation particularly difficult. I began my study of the Big House novel by resolving to remain sensitive to the close relationship between Irish fiction and history and to subdue my American discomfort with aristocratic formulations of society. Initially this goal of political neutrality was to serve as a means of evaluating the Anglo-Irish Big House novel in Catholic Ireland as a literary form rather than as a manifestation of a

reactionary social tradition. But the conclusions I came to as I read Big House novels revealed how such a suspension of a particular value system--loosely democratic, nationalist, anti-aristocratic--while probably impossible in theory became unnecessary in practice. The more I explored individual works, the more convinced I became of the enduring literary power of Big House fiction in Ireland precisely because these novels were not simply period pieces, mirroring the values of a moribund and decaying society. Seamus Deane's political argument is mistaken in identifying this fictional tradition with Yeats's glorification of Ascendancy culture, for Big House novelists are acutely preoccupied with recording Anglo-Ireland's responsibility for its own decline, rather than with elegizing a lost golden age. William McCormack speaks, in fact, of "embarrassment" or "shame" as a central preoccupation of Anglo-Irish fiction (Ascendancy and Tradition 240). Only in two novels I discuss, Elizabeth Bowen's The Heat of the Day and William Trevor's Fools of Fortune, do I find a nostalgia for an idealized Big House society which seems to falsify the historical experience of Anglo-Ireland. The other novels examined here are painfully insistent, some more overtly than others, on Anglo-Irish guilt, even as they frequently suggest the sense of loss of writers contemplating the decline of their own culture.

The choice to limit myself primarily to a study of Big House novels emerging from Protestant Ireland has had a significant impact on my project. Several novels about the Big House written from outside Ireland have been eliminated for a consistency of approach. Trollope's The Macdermots of Ballycloran (1847), for example, provides a moving depiction of the ways political pressures and human failure converge to destroy the Anglo-Irish Big House. In the twentieth century, J.G. Farrell's Troubles (1970) presents a brilliant vision of the decline of Anglo-Ireland, again from the perspective of an English rather than an Anglo-Irish writer.

My research for this dissertation has convinced me of the need for yet another study-- a comprehensive examination of the fiction about the Anglo-Irish Big House by writers such as Carleton, Sean O'Faolain, Canon Sheehan, and Padric Colum who emerge from the native Irish tradition. Had I turned, for example, to a novel like William Carleton's Valentine M'Clutchy: the Irish Agent, the angle of vision of that novelist would have mandated different conclusions from those I present. While Oliver MacDonagh's twenty page monograph provides the framework for a synthesizing study of nineteenth-century Ireland from a perspective of both the Big House and the cottage, much work still remains to be done on the native Irish response to the Big House. I suspect that such a study would demonstrate how the Irishman's experience of dispossession and alienation from the land and culture of his birth by the brutal colonialization of the Anglo-Irish becomes, as it were, ironically replicated by the experience of the Protestant landed society in the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.

Chapter Two

Establishing the Form: Maria Edgeworth's Big House Fiction Historical and Critical Background

Behind the Big House literature written by Maria Edgeworth and her literary descendants lie facts about Irish history which haunt the literary genre she created. The narrative of past injustice--expulsions of the rightful owners from their land, brutal conquests, and a century of Penal Laws which deprived the mass of Irish natives of ownership of their land--is not explicitly a concern of Edgeworth's novels. But in her moments of greatest insight as a novelist she acknowledges the power of the Catholic peasant culture which the social and economic policies of her own class sought to destroy.

The Penal Laws, imposed upon Irish Catholics following the defeat of the Stuart forces by William of Orange at the Boyne in 1690, were once and for all to rid Ireland of Catholic domination. After the Williamite settlement, less than one twentieth of the land in Ireland belonged to Catholics. In 1770, Arthur Young, an English traveller in Ireland, described the Land Tenure system in Ireland as he observed it on his travels.

Upon the whole, nineteen twentieths of the kingdom changed hands from Catholic to Protestant. The lineal descendants of great families once possessed of vast property, are now to be found all over the kingdom in the lowest situation, working as cottars for the great-great-grandsons of men, many of whom were of no greater account in England than these poor labourers are at present, on that property which was once theirs. (Young 2: 59)

Young's observations suggest the special complexity of the Anglo-Irish social world in the eighteenth century. The owners of the land are not only the rich and powerful; they are also often usurpers, speaking an alien language and worshipping an alien state religion which was supported by taxes on the whole nation. Their homes are not the centers of post-feudal community, as are so

many Great Houses in England. Historically the Irish Big House all too often symbolized exclusion, conquest, and separateness, rather than community.

The specific measures of the Penal Laws were designed to wrest land from its former owner, to disinherit the Catholic class and render it powerless. Catholics were forbidden to purchase land, to take a lease for more than thirty-one years, to own a horse worth more than five pounds. Efforts were made to break up Catholic landholdings; primogeniture among Catholics was abolished, and thus at the death of a Catholic landlord, his acres were divided up equally among his sons. If, however, a son abandoned his religion and conformed to the Church of England, he could dispossess his own father. Similarly, an apostate wife was freed from her husband's control and was assigned a portion of his money.

The intention of the Penal Laws was to destroy the propertied Catholic class. Catholics were forbidden to educate their children either in Ireland or abroad. The celebration of mass was punishable by death. A Catholic was forbidden to bear arms, to practise law or medicine, to sit in Parliament, to serve in the army or navy. In effect, he was stripped of all the rights and duties of a citizen (Young 2: 60-61; Krans 8). The effect of such laws on the new landlord class of the eighteenth century was predictable. Although recent historical studies suggest that more "good" landlords existed than had previously been acknowledged (Cullen 82-3; Christendon), Young's contemporary impressions of the situation in eighteenth-century Ireland are instructive.

The landlord of an Irish estate, inhabited by Roman Catholics, is a sort of despot who yields obedience in whatever concerns the poor, to no law but that of his will... a long series of oppressions, aided by many very ill-judged laws, have brought landlords into a habit of exerting a very lofty superiority, and their vassals into that of an almost unlimited submission: speaking a language that is despised, professing a religion that is abhorred, and being disarmed, the poor find

themselves in many cases slaves even in the bosom of written liberty. Landlords that have resided much abroad, are usually humane in their ideas; but the habit of tyranny naturally contracts the mind, so that even in this polished age, there are instances of a severe carriage toward the poor which is quite unknown in England. (Young 1: 53-4)

By the mid to late eighteenth century, Ireland was divided into the Ascendancy of nobility and gentry which controlled much of the land, a Protestant merchant and professional class, a vast Catholic peasantry, and a small and slowly emerging Catholic middle class. Among the nobility and gentry were a scattering of Catholic families who had managed to retain their holdings and an occasional former Catholic landed family that had converted to the Church of England.

The new Protestant gentry created by the Penal Laws were for the most part descendants of the English conquerors, settlers rather than natives, with loyalties to England not Ireland. The reckless extravagances and dissoluteness so characteristic of Ascendancy life can be traced to the historical conditions by which power was achieved. Granted the power of an aristocracy, but lacking the traditions of responsibility to accompany such power, the Ascendancy class was notorious for its excesses. Horatio Krans suggests that the traditions of conviviality and hospitality of the Celtic Irish man were all too readily assimilated by the Saxon conquerors, who quickly developed into a lawless, overbearing, profligate class.

Sudden accession to great possessions could not fail to stimulate and give play to all the tendencies to recklessness and extravagance so marked in the Irish upper classes. As masters, though often indulgent, they were autocratic, irresponsible, reckless, and violent, ruling their estates literally as despots, binding and loosing as they chose. (3)

The feudal, agrarian and illiterate condition of the peasant class encouraged the development of despotic attitudes among Ascendancy landlords. In the Personal Sketches of the Ascendancy memoirist, Sir Jonah Barrington, for

example, the best of landlords is described as a kindly tyrant: "a kind Irish landlord reigned despotic in the ardent affections of the tenantry, their pride and pleasure being to obey and to support him" (6).

Maria Edgeworth's family holdings in Ireland predated the Williamite victory of 1690 which ushered in the Penal Laws and large groups of new landowners. But even a cursory reading of Edgeworth history reveals a familiar tale of ebbing family fortunes and a typical Anglo-Irish Ascendancy use of Irish holdings solely as a source of revenue. The Edgeworths of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were soldiers and courtiers, not landlords. Thus the focus of their lives was London or Dublin rather than the family estate in County Longford. Lavish hospitality and extravagant spending by an early John Edgeworth did not save him from the wrath of his Catholic tenantry in 1641 when his home was burned and family barely spared. Later Edgeworths, recklessly extravagant, took to mortgaging the estate and gambling away their wealth. Frank Edgeworth, Richard Lovell's grandfather, for example, lived for a month in London with his wife on a borrowed ten pounds and escaped starvation by dying of pneumonia instead (Butler 14-16).

In her biography of Maria Edgeworth, Marilyn Butler insists that the "well documented" ancestral tales available to Maria provide the models for her greatest fictional creations.

The Rackrents are sportsmen, litigants, drunkards, gamblers, duellists, adventurers in marriage. Maria did not give them a characteristic that she could not have found among her own predecessors. The Edgeworths of earlier time are beyond question the real model for the four generations of the Rackrent family. (Butler 16)

Butler interprets Castle Rackrent as a novel heavily dependent on Edgeworth family history and thus on the history of eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish moral bankruptcy. Her reading is supported by Maria Edgeworth's

own Preface which was written shortly before the publication of Castle Rackrent in England, and at least five years after it was begun in 1893. Written in late 1799, on the eve of Ireland's union with Great Britain, the Preface to Castle Rackrent place the book backward, both in literary and historical time. By associating the Rackrents with Fielding's roistering Squire Weston (and thus with a novel of comic satire published a half century before her own), Edgeworth clearly wishes to avoid any suggestion that she was depicting the world she herself inhabited. In her Preface Edgeworth sets her novel in the era of eighteenth-century misrule and disorder preceding the Edgeworth family's resettlement in Ireland in 1782, and thus also preceding the beginning of Ireland's short lived Parliamentary independence.

The Editor hopes his readers will observe, that these are 'tales of other times;' that the manners depicted in the following pages are not those of the present age: the race of the Rackrents has long since been extinct in Ireland, and the drunken Sir Patrick, the litigious Sir Murtagh, the fighting Sir Kit, and the slovenly Sir Condry, are characters which could no more be met with at present in Ireland than Squire Western or Parson Trulliber in England. There is a time when individuals can bear to be rallied for their past follies and absurdities, after they have acquired new habits and a new consciousness. Nations as well as individuals lose attachment to their identity, and the present generation is amused rather than offended by the ridicule that is thrown upon their ancestors. (5)

Richard Lovell Edgeworth's ambitious plans to reform the system of landlordship in Ireland help explain his daughter and partner's careful antedating of her greatest literary work and only sustained satiric portrayal of the Irish landlord. In Ennui and The Absentee, novels which emerge from that mode of didactic realism which was to dominate her writing after Castle Rackrent, the serious deficiencies of the landlord class are amenable to reform. But in Edgeworth's first and seminal work about Ireland, where her protagonists are

presented through the consciousness of a gullible victim of declining feudalism and rising capitalism, Edgeworth relentlessly exposes the landlord as greedy, indolent, philandering, drunken and irresponsible. In The Irish Comic Tradition, Vivian Mercier suggests that Edgeworth was never able to "master" the subtle satire and irony of Castle Rackrent again in her later works as she came to feel more implicated in the conditions of her adopted country (197).

In a memorandum for his memoirs, her father announces the idealistic vision of stewardship which impelled him to settle permanently in Ireland. Furthermore, it makes clear why Maria, who quickly learned to act as her father's assistant estate manager, desired to dissociate the woeful excesses and improvident landlordism of the Rackrent family from the vision of a new Ireland she and her father were struggling to implement.

In the year 1782, I returned to Ireland, with a firm determination to dedicate the remainder of my life to the improvement of my estate, and to the education of my children; and further, with the sincere hope of contributing to the melioration of the inhabitants of the country from which I draw my sustenance.

(qtd. in Edgeworth, Memoirs 2: 6)

In recent years Edgeworth's novel has been attacked on the grounds that its author's limited historical perspective reflects a general literary weakness in the book. This recent controversy surrounding Castle Rackrent reflects critical problems which emerge as we read other Anglo-Irish Big House novels--works which are obviously historically conditioned, but not necessarily historically "correct" in the same way to all readers. Maurice Colgan, for example, has explored Castle Rackrent primarily as a historical document and found it wanting ("The Significant Silences of Thady Quirk"). The Preface and Glossary, directed to an English audience anticipating the Union of Ireland with England, suggest that by 1799 Edgeworth is eager to present her novel as a retrospective view of a

fast disappearing world. Her extended sub-title, "An Hibernian Tale Taken From Facts And From The Manners Of The Irish Squires Before The Year 1782," makes her intention clear. Her assumption, however, that post-Union Ireland would easily shed its identity as a nation elicits predictable modern critical commentary. Colgan finds the book evasive and remarkably deficient in its depiction of Irish history.

Omitting the lively style and idiom of its narrator, Thady Quirk, and some picturesque detail, Maria Edgeworth's first Irish novel, Castle Rackrent (1800), could have been set in England. All determining characteristics of Irish social life in the eighteenth century, e.g. the Penal Laws, the colonial situation and the fierce resentments which erupted into open warfare in 1798 are ignored. ("After Rackrent" 17)

Colgan argues that Edgeworth's historical evasions leave the reader of Castle Rackrent "dissatisfied" and prevent the book from achieving real greatness. Many of Colgan's specific complaints--that as former O'Shaughlins, the Rackrents cannot own land, or as a Catholic, Jason would be inadmissible as a lawyer under the Penal Laws--are dissolved by the arguments of Cronin (Anglo-Irish Novel 32-33), Flanagan (Irish Novelists 70) or McCormack (Ascendancy and Tradition 118-9). These critics point to the waning power of the Penal Laws by the late eighteenth century or suggest that in changing their name, the Rackrents also changed their religion.

But Colgan's deeper criticism of Edgeworth is unarguable. The first great Anglo-Irish novel is written from within the colonial Big House and assumes the Rackrents' rights to their position. The novel never challenges Ascendancy claims to the Big House, but questions the landlord's wisdom, decency, and ability to retain his legitimate rights. By giving the Rackrents an Irish rather than an Anglo-Saxon ancestry as well as by presenting her tale as past history, Edgeworth further attempts to dissociate her criticism of land tenure practices from contemporary Ascendancy politics. Writing from within a colonial class,

Edgeworth does not choose in Castle Rackrent to reflect or acknowledge the radical discontent which she personally witnessed in the 1798 United Irishman Uprising, a discontent preceded by a series of isolated attacks on landed property throughout the late eighteenth century. When she does briefly describe the Uprising in Ennui, she fearfully refers to the spirit of rebellion as a "disease" or "epidemic infection" (323) which contaminates the peasants, and is quelled when the influence of "men of property, and birth, and education, and character, once more prevailed" (327).

A reading of Castle Rackrent primarily as historical document leads some critics to use the novel as a piece of evidence of the Anglo-Irish and British failure of historical perception. To one commentator, Anthony Mortimer, speaking primarily of Maria Edgeworth's intentions as she wrote her Preface, "Castle Rackrent foreshadows that failure by its attempt to make the past irrelevant, by its assumptions that the old patterns of oppression and dispossession need have no bearing on the future" (121). Thus the novel's primary value for such a critic lies in revealing in its text those evasions which expose the limits of its author's (and presumably her social class's) ideology.

Mortimer's and Colgan's analyses of Edgeworth's historical evasions provide a useful method for approaching Edgeworth's Preface. With the help of their historical interpretations of Castle Rackrent the modern reader begins to comprehend the strategy whereby an enlightened colonial writer shaped her intransigent historical material into fiction and then presented it to an English audience she wished, for Ireland's sake, to conciliate. Cronin's careful reinterpretation of Castle Rackrent's Preface and Postscript as works of conscious irony, "a little less than confidently optimistic" (Anglo-Irish Novel 29) about Ireland's future in the forthcoming Union, suggests both the care with which Edgeworth sought to ameliorate the devastating criticism of Irish landlords

she presents in her novel, and the power of that criticism over her overtly optimistic vision of Ireland's future. One need not, however, assume that Edgeworth's need for strategies of evasion transforms Castle Rackrent into second rate art. Her historical evasions are not, as Colgan implies, the mark of a deficient novelist, but rather the means by which an artist thoroughly entrenched in her society defends herself against the all too revealing world she depicts in her literary masterpiece. Without that savagery which Swift directed against the Anglo-Irish in "A Modest Proposal," Castle Rackrent performs the moral function of all great satire. For all of Edgeworth's qualifications about the meaning of her work, her novel exposes the hypocrisies and improvidences of the Ascendancy class with a power she was never again to achieve.

The disagreement between Marilyn Butler, Edgeworth's biographer, and Flanagan points to yet another critical controversy which has arisen around the novel. Flanagan's reading of Castle Rackrent emphasizes the book as an historical work which, because it is "an almost perfect work of fiction" (The Irish Novelists 68), has far reaching symbolic implications for all Anglo-Irish literature about the Big House. Thus for Flanagan, and for many later critics, Castle Rackrent exists as the seminal depiction of Ascendancy decline and loss. Flanagan's assertion that Castle Rackrent is the "brilliant requiem of the Protestant nation" (23) is vigorously opposed by Edgeworth's biographer. Taking the Preface at face value, Butler insists that the characters in the novel have nothing to do with any future pattern of Anglo-Irish decline Edgeworth perceived around her. Butler furthermore suggests that on a "serious" level Castle Rackrent is the "least historical" of Edgeworth's novels, and that it predicts little of the future because it was so involved with the past" (356-7).

It is, however, difficult if not impossible to disregard the impact Castle Rackrent has had for generations of readers as the archetypal novel of

Anglo-Ireland's decline, in spite of Edgeworth's disavowal of such a meaning and in spite of her biographer's support of a far more limited historical reading of the book. Clearly the reader with some interest in historical context must be aware of consciously stated authorial intention as she analyzes a work of literature (notwithstanding Wimsatt's and Beardsley's warnings in "The Intentional Fallacy"), but she need not be bound by such intention. She must also remain alert to the effect of a work on its audiences, both on its contemporary readers and on later ones. The following discussion of Edgeworth's work will argue that Castle Rackrent establishes motifs and conventions which provide ample support for a reading of it as a symbolic presentation of past Ascendancy decline and a prescient (even if unacknowledged) vision of future decay, which is to be recorded in later Big House fiction.

Colgan's and Mortimer's readings of Edgeworth, which emphasize the limitations of her historical perceptions, are useful reminders of how novels, like more straightforwardly historical texts, create subjective interpretations of historical events. The primacy of the social and political world in the Anglo-Irish novel demands a constant awareness of various interpretations of Irish history if the novels are to be seen in their fullest context. The reader of Castle Rackrent, however, seems no more justified in criticizing Edgeworth for failing to write about the Rebellion of 1798 than Jane Austen's readers are justified in scolding her for failing to write more extensively about the effects of the Napoleonic Wars on her characters. While the critic may demand that serious fiction impose morally coherent values on its subject matter, it is the contention of my study that we must accept the perspective of an artist whose vision is conditioned by her class and position, limited as this perspective may seem to contemporary readers. In her greatest moments as a writer, Edgeworth, like several Big House

novelists examined here, begins to reach beyond her own world and to move towards attitudes and perceptions which transcend those of her society. But she writes primarily as a member of an elite colonial class in Ireland, and her achievements should be interpreted within the context of the assumptions of that society.

Castle Rackrent: the Landlord, his Retainer, and his Antagonist

In Castle Rackrent Maria Edgeworth articulates that indictment of the landlord class which controls and dominates all subsequent Big House novels. Castle Rackrent insists that power and position are lost from within, from internal rot, not simply from the stresses of political change or historical inevitability. The Rackrents lose their land and their position as well as their family line because of slovenly irresponsibility, arrogant assumptions about their own entitlement, and pitiful inability to see beyond their own hedonism and greed.

For Maria Edgeworth, the decaying house and the neglected land speak of the Big House landlord's failure. The inadequate landlord is the dominating theme of Castle Rackrent (1800) and the didactic center of two of her subsequent Big House novels, Ennui (1809) and The Absentee (1812). In Castle Rackrent the image of the neglected estate becomes a central topos, exposing moral decay and social exploitation. The literary complexity of the point of view of the novel, in which the unreliable narrator, the old family retainer, Thady Quirk, ironically reveals the offences he cannot register, has tended to obscure the detailed, near documentary condemnation of land-tenure practices implicit in the authorial voice behind Thady's. Edgeworth's role as the purported "editor" of Thady's memoirs suggests her affinity with the playful and self consciously intrusive narrative voice of the eighteenth century novel, particularly

as it emerged from Defoe's "histories" of Robinson Crusoe or Moll Flanders and was developed by Fielding. But unlike Defoe's protagonists, Thady shares few values with his "editor"; thus his flawed perceptions become a powerful instrument for releasing a satiric vision of Ascendancy culture.

Castle Rackrent consists of Thady's descriptions of four Rackrent landlords, beginning with his memories of stories told to him about the semi-mythical Sir Patrick and ending with an account of the lonely death of the last Rackrent. Edgeworth reports that Thady was modelled on a family steward and that as she wrote the novel, the character seemed to stand beside her and dictate to her (Memoir of Maria Edgeworth, iii, 152 qut. in Butler, 241-2). Her seemingly unconscious mastery of the idiom of this provincial servant class creates the first major dialect novel in English.

In fewer than one hundred pages, Thady's admiring voice presents those very qualities in the Rackrents --improvidence, sloth, drunkenness, greed--which the author (and the reader) condemns. Thady has learned not so much to suppress his own opinions but rather to accommodate them to the interests of his masters. With a Swiftian economy, Edgeworth thus manages to expose almost every possible abuse of the landlord class and to write what Vivian Mercier has called "the best satire on the Protestant Irish after Swift" (186). In the long tradition of the Big House novel, only Molly Keane in her recent Good Behaviour, again manages to use the ironic device of the unreliable narrator--the duped victim of Big House life-- for such an unremitting exposure of the failings of the Anglo-Irish.

For the modern reader, the exact status of that particular class which Edgeworth presents in Castle Rackrent warrants clarification. While the name of the Rackrent's home suggests some grandeur to the twentieth-century tourist of the Big House, virtually every Irish county house built before the middle of the

seventeenth century was a castle of some sort--usually a simple fortified tower with an attached domestic wing, or in later forms, a semi-fortified domestic building (Bence-Jones xviii). The larger and grander country homes, monuments of Irish Classicism or Palladianism, which were introduced by the end of the 1720's and which have become part of the tourist's image of the Irish Big House, have little to do with the "castle" Edgeworth is describing in her novel.

From the little direct evidence Edgeworth offers her readers, Castle Rackrent is a modest edifice indeed. Its demesne seems to consist of desolate peat bogs and recently planted trees (27). Unlike the typical Anglo-Irish Big House, it is not isolated from the Catholic village, for one of its doors opens on to the village streets and attracts an angry mob of townsman when it becomes known that the last Rackrent has become dispossessed by his agent (79). When one proprietor and his new bride approach the castle by the back road, they must walk rather than ride, for the back way is too narrow for a carriage. The scale of this castle is often far from grand: the door to the smelly kitchen is so low that the feathers on the bride's hat are broken as she enters. When she complains of the odors, her husband assures her, probably with some characteristic understatement, that "... it's only three steps across the kitchen " (47).

Instances of grander aspirations exist, however, for while the first Rackrent proprietor described accommodates his guests in a converted chicken house, later Rackrents possess a barrack room, which Edgeworth tells us in her Glossary was the customary accommodation for large numbers of occasional visitors in "gentlemen's houses in Ireland" (108). Moreover the cultural aspirations of the last Rackrent bride, who has "fine taste for building and furniture, and play-houses"(48), mandate that the barrack-room be turned into a

theatre. Rooms in Castle Rackrent are sometimes designated in the terminology of the middle-class home rather than the aristocratic castle; thus Thady speaks of the "parlour" where Condry Rackrent takes leave of his wife, although Lady Rackrent orders that the servants call the leaking and shabby "long passage" between the two master bed chambers the "gallery," as in a legitimate Great House (65). Yet as the Rackrents' aspirations for position and culture increase--the last heir squanders all his money running for parliament--their financial circumstances and the condition of their house decline.

In Irish Houses of the Middle Size Maurice Craig's reminds us that the Big House in Ireland is often modest in scale (112). Brian de Breffny and Rosemary ffolliott observe in The Houses of Ireland that many smaller eighteenth-century houses designed to resemble gentlemen's residences were constructed around essential farm buildings and given "grandiloquent names which were not necessarily a measure of their grandeur" (84). These architectural historians support W.C. McCormack's careful analysis of the protean architectural imagery of the novel as implying "less than a guarantee of castle-like scale in Castle Rackrent" (Ascendancy and Tradition 115) and as suggesting the power of bourgeois social dynamics in Ascendancy literature. The pretenses of castle living in Edgeworth's novel often seem reduced to the squalor of declining gentry farm life.

Sir Patrick Rackrent, the first of the four generations chronicled in the novel, exists in Thady's mythic memory as the personification of abundance, the archetypal hospitable Irish landlord. That his body is seized for debt at his lavish funeral matters less to Thady than that his life fulfills a grand vision of Irish hospitality.

On coming into the estate, he gave the finest entertainment ever was heard of in the country --not a man could stand after supper but Sir

Patrick himself, who could sit out the best man in Ireland, let alone the three kingdoms itself. He had his house, from one year's end to another, as full of company as ever it could hold, and fuller... (9)

Thady's remarks about the condition of Castle Rackrent after Sir Patrick's death reveal the costs of such mythic excess and simultaneously introduce a central motif of the Big House genre: the progressive stripping down of the house and the slow disintegration of its dubious authority.

The cellars were never filled after his death--and no open house, or any thing as it used to be--the tenants even were sent away without their whiskey--I was ashamed myself, and knew not what to say for the honor of the family... (12)

The next owner of Castle Rackrent indulges in quite another abuse--less congenial to Thady's feudal notions of stewardship, hence even more transparently criticized by the authorial presence behind the narrator. Sir Murtagh Rackrent reverses the lavish hospitality of his predecessor and institutes a regime of exploitation which bleeds his oppressed tenants. With the help of his deplorable wife, "of the family of Skinflints," Sir Murtagh manages to undermine the quasi-feudal bond between tenant and landlord rather than to rectify the excesses of Sir Patrick. Sir Murtagh and his wife perfect the methods whereby the Irish landlord could exercise arbitrary power over his tenants. In the guise of a Lady Bountiful, Lady Murtagh exacts every possible item of labor and goods from her tenants.

However, my lady was very charitable in her own way. She had a charity school for poor children, where they were taught to read and write gratis, and where they were kept well to spinning gratis for my lady in return; for she had always heaps of duty yarn from the tenants. and got all her household linen out of the estate from first to last...(13)

Thady's descriptions of Lady Murtagh's policies reveal how she manages to feed her household without expense, relying instead on feudal "gifts" from her

tenants."...duty fowls, and duty turkies, and duty geese, came as fast as we could eat 'em, for my lady kept a sharp look out" (14). Tellingly, Thady identifies himself not with the plundered peasants of his own class, but with the gentry household benefitting from such greed.

Lord Murtagh's contributions to the bleeding of the tenants include demanding rents on the exact day they are due ("making English tenants of them, every soul"), discouraging the repair of fences so he can impound stray animals, calling in his "herriot," the payment of the tenant's best animal upon the tenant's death. The duty fowl or tribute exacted by Lady Murtagh is more than matched by her husband's abuse of the tradition of duty work which bound tenants to furnish their landlords with labor and horses for several days a year. By forcing them to use their labor to pay his rents, he prevents them from improving their own holdings.

Then his herriots and duty work brought him in something-- his turf was cut-- his potatoes set and dug-- his hay brought home, and in short all the work about his house done for nothing; for in all our leases there were strict clauses with heavy penalties, which Sir Murtagh knew well how to enforce--so many days duty work of men and horse, from every tenant, he was to have, and had, every year...
(15)

Maria Edgeworth's detailed knowledge of the abuses to which the Irish landlord subjected his tenants was based on personal experience. In her contribution to her father's memoirs she describes the appalling conditions Richard Edgeworth found on his estate and the measures he took to remedy them. Edgeworth resolved to collect his rents himself and thus ended the tyranny of the oppressive land agent. Sub-divisions were forbidden in order to protect the land from dangerous over-population. The kind of unspoken blackmail the Murtagh Rackrents engaged in was abolished: "He never made any oppressive claims of duty fowl-of duty work, of man or of beast. In the old leases made in his

father's time, such had been inserted ; but he never claimed or would he accept of them, though such were at that time common. He was, I believe, one of the first to abolish them" (Memoirs 2:15).

Like most Rackrents, the childless Sir Murtagh dies suddenly. His widow, a woman with "Scotch blood in her veins," leaves none of her personal wealth in the estate, but instead flees Castle Rackrent after her husband's death with the household goods she has furnished. In his sense of abandonment, Thady expresses his own loss most poignantly, but also reiterates the theme of the depleted house-- "So the house was quite bare.... I had nobody to talk to, and if it had not been for my pipe and tobacco should, I verily believe, have broken my heart for poor Sir Murtagh"(19).

The career of the next proprietor of Castle Rackrent, Sir Kit, ushers in the spectre of the absentee landlord which dominates Edgeworth's next two Irish novels. Kit's dissolute career in Bath exemplifies the dangers of absenteeism for Irish tenants. Kit leaves his newly inherited estate after a brief spree of lavish spending which harkens back to Sir Patrick's days.

A fine life we should have led had he stayed amongst us, God bless him! --he valued a guinea as little as any man--money to him was no more than dirt, and his gentleman and groom, and all belonging to him, the same--but the sporting season over, he grew tired of the place... (20)

Once Sir Kit is gone, his land is turned over to the worst scourge of the Irish tenant, the agent or middle man who does the beloved landlord's dirty work for him. The tenants are "fettered" to provide Sir Kit with the money he needs for his life in Bath. Leases are offered to the highest bidder, old tenants turned out, improvements ignored, yet Thady absolves Kit of any blame: "--but I laid it all to the fault of the agent; for, says I, what can Sir Kit do with so much cash, and he a single man? but still it went" (21). Kit's solution to his desperate financial state

(even his agent resigns in despair) is to marry a rich Jewish heiress, but after harrowing her to sell her diamonds and locking her up for seven years, he dies violently in a duel. Lady Rackrent escapes with her jewels and her income, leaving Castle Rackrent in the hands of the new agent, Jason Quirk, Thady's grasping son who oversees the final collapse of the estate.

The darker second half of Castle Rackrent concerns Sir Condry, the most sympathetic of the four masters depicted in the novel. Sir Condry's slovenly failure as a landlord and his subsequent loss of the estate are linked by Thady to his generosity. Thady affirms that he is "... an easy-hearted man that could disoblige nobody, God Bless him" (44). Like his predecessors, however, he marries unwisely, oversees his lands irresponsibly and dies childless. With Condry's death, in fact, the whole pretense of an aristocratic emphasis on a genealogy of the the Big House collapses, for of the four landlords presented in the novel, only Sir Patrick produces an heir. John Cronin notes that in his lowly origins, Condry Rackrent differs from his predecessors (Anglo Irish Novel 35). Thady tells us that Condry is from a "remote branch" (38) of the family and spent his childhood "barefooted and headed, running through the street of O'Shauglin's town, and playing at pitch and toss, ball, marbles, and what not, with the boys of the town, amongst whom my son Jason was a great favorite with him" (39). That Condry seriously considers marriage to Thady's niece, Judy M'Quirk, suggests the last Rackrent's affinity for the peasant class and the genealogical breakdown of the family. His decision to marry a landowner's daughter instead is determined by a drunken toss of a coin, as he proudly disclaims mercantile matrimonial aspirations. Condry's inheritance of the Rackrent estate is thus already a symbol of family decline from the earlier O'Shaughlins, related to the Kings of Ireland. Unable to produce their own children, the Rackrents are forced to turn to remote and plebeian relatives. This

theme of the declining patriarchal line will be taken up in virtually every later Big House novel, particularly successfully in Edith Somerville's The Big House of Inver.

Under Condry's stewardship, Castle Rackrent rapidly deteriorates. Condry and his bride can no longer drive up to the house, for the great piers have tumbled across the front approach. His wife's meager contribution to the estate is spent turning the barrack-room into a theatre, but there is no money to supply the company with candles or turf to light and heat the house. In order to raise money, Condry signs away the house and land to Jason for next to nothing, squanders money on electioneering, and as a Member of Parliament maintains an expensive residence in Dublin. Thady's reaction to the departure of the family for Dublin prefigures the final loss of the house and stirs up Chekovian visions of the old family retainer in The Cherry Orchard, left to die on the abandoned estate.

I was very lonely when the whole family was gone ... There was then a great silence in Castle Rackrent, and I went moping from room to room, hearing the doors clap for want of right locks, and the wind through the broken windows that the glazier never would come to mend, and the rain coming through the roof and best ceiling all over the house, for want of the slater whose bill was not paid.... (61)

In her characterization of Thady and his son Jason in Castle Rackrent, Edgeworth sees beyond the decline of her own class to the tragedy of a whole nation. Her depiction of Thady as a character caught between the world of the Big House and the world of his ancestry suggests the complexity of his narrative role. Early in the novel Thady proudly watches his clever son Jason's machinations first to become a low paying tenant of profitable Rackrent land, and then with evident duplicity, to arrange for the dismissal of the family land agent in order to take the position over himself. Similarly, as Thady describes the different methods by which the Rackrents plunder their tenants, he never condemns his

masters, noting instead, for example, how well the fruits of Lady Murtagh Rackrent's greed feed the whole household (including himself). When at the end of the saga of family decline, Thady turns against Jason and allies himself firmly with his dying master, his progression from proud father of a duplicitous son who will bring down the Rackrents has not been without moments of real ambiguity. We have seen him, for example, inadvertently betray Condry when he introduces "my poor master's greatest of enemies" (58) to his son, and thus sets in place the partnership between Jason and the stranger which will deprive Condry of all of his property.

The twists and turns of Thady's behaviour do not suggest that he is a calculating opportunist as one critic insists (Newcomer 144-45). Thady has, rather, a deeply impaired sense of identity and is torn by his loyalties to conflicting worlds. His fate at the end of the novel, where he firmly repudiates his son's avariciousness but is left with nothing-- a dead and ruined master and an ill attended funeral--suggests Edgeworth's intuitive understanding of the costs of colonialism. As in the American South, where the house servant identified himself with an alien class and denied the claims of his own race, Thady exists finally with no identity of his own. A victim of his own false consciousness, he, not just the drunken and self destructive Rackrents, becomes the poignant casualty of their improvidence.

Jason Quirk, the sly adversary to the Rackrents, is the representative peasant turned middle-class, the usurper of the Rackrent estate and the inheritor of Ascendancy power and property. Although for Marilyn Butler Jason represents the abuses of the past "... the parasite of the old system , not the herald of the new" (357), he clearly anticipates future Big House adversaries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the novels of Lever and Somerville, for example, we witness the gradual transfer of power from the Big House to the emerging

middle class. By the end of Castle Rackrent, Jason, after managing to buy up all the Rackrent debts and mortgages, owns the Big House and all of its land--even the cramped lodge to which Condry retires to die. In Jason, Edgeworth suggests the human costs of personal advancement without quite succumbing to the sentimentality of a simple condemnation of his self-serving ambitions. While Thady condemns his own son, Edgeworth's ironic narrative stance allows the reader an ambivalent response, for Jason's small-minded and efficient manipulations are seen in the context of the large sloppy generousities of a doomed class.

The novel begins with the old family retainer narrating the tale of his own fall--he is "poor Thady" by the end of the novel--as he witnesses the Rackrents' decline. Thady loses virtually everything he values, not only his beloved masters and his identity as a Rackrent retainer, but his paternal bond to his son as well. He finds no joy in his son's victories over the Rackrents, for with Jason's rise comes human loss.

Now I could not bear to hear Jason giving out after this manner against the family, and twenty people standing on the street. Ever since he had lived at the Lodge of his own he looked down, howsomever, upon poor old Thady, and was grown quite a great gentleman, and had none of his relations near him--no wonder he was no kinder to Sir Condry than to his own kith and kin. (62)

Again and again Thady is shocked by his son's toughminded attitude toward his betters. He objects to Jason's "short and cruel" riding of the exhausted Condry over his unpaid bills and finally can control his sorrow no longer.

"Oh Jason! Jason! how will you stand to this in the face of the country, and all who know you, (says I), and what will people tink and say, when they see you living here in Castle Rackrent, and the lawful owner turned out of the seat of his ancestors, without a cabin to put his head into, or so much as a potato to eat?" (77)

By choosing a peasant retainer as her narrator, Edgeworth emphasizes the failure of the Big House proprietor in human as well as economic terms. The victims of the Rackrent inadequacies are made articulate in Thady's voice which represents more than two hundred years of service. The Rackrents bleed and betray those who love them most; their weaknesses and inability to fulfill their responsibilities bring to power the Jasons of the world, who will usher in a new, cold order of efficiency and self-interest. Although Thady begins his tale by telling us that he washes his hands of his son's doings and will die "true and loyal to the Rackrent family," he is left with nothing but his memories. The last of the Rackrents has died dispossessed and, but for Thady, friendless and unmourned. Even Judy M'Quirk, the peasant girl Condyl once considered marrying, abandons her old admirer when she hears that he has lost his estate: "Better luck, any how Thady, (says she) than to be like some folk following the fortunes of them that have none left" (92).

The threatening ascent of the commercial over the feudal ethos is recognized and acknowledged with bitterness in the portrayal of Jason, the hard-headed emerging middle-class professional who turns against his old playmate Condyl Rackrent. Jason's mental agility is revealed and his victory over his future employer foreshadowed when Thady tells us that in the village grammar school, Jason helped the grateful Condyl with his school learning. On occasion, Jason anticipates William Faulkner's Snopes clan, leaders of the emerging social class in Yoknapatawpha County. The outrages of the Snopes in Faulkner's world become their means of reconstructing the social order in their own image; Jason, too, is creating a new world for himself.

The "natural" feelings which Thady finds so lacking in Jason and so alive in the villagers living on Rackrent land are perceived, however, with some characteristic ambivalence. In one of the most poignant scenes of the novel,

Jason pressures Condry to sign his last possessions over. "Crying like a child" and accused by his son of being "old and doating," Thady turns for comfort to some neighboring children playing at marbles.

...seeing me in great trouble, [they] left their play and gathered about me to know what ailed me; and I told them all, for it was a great relief to me to speak to those poor childer, that seemed to have some natural feelings left in them: and when they were made sensible that Sir Condry was going to leave Castle Rackrent for good and all, they set up a whillalu that could be heard to the farthest end of the street...
(78)

The comfort and reassurance that Thady receives from the village children takes the form of their "great anger against my son Jason, and terror at the notion of his coming to be landlord over them" (79). Yet the mob of villagers expressing their indignation is easily appeased by Condry, who reassures them that he and Jason are still good friends and sends them some whiskey to drink. "... that was the last time his honor's health was ever drunk at Castle Rackrent" (80). Thady's understated description of Condry's funeral suggests the limitations of "natural" feelings, for Condry is buried with few mourners. Unlike his ancestor Sir Patrick, "he had a very poor funeral, after all" (96). The loyal feudal peasants do not flock to honor their ruined master.

In Castle Rackrent Maria Edgeworth establishes the central characteristics of a literary tradition which survives today. The decaying house, that archetypal image of social decline and of the irresponsible landlord, reappears in subsequent Big House novels, most recently in works by Aidan Higgins, Jennifer Johnston, John Banville, and Molly Keane. In several of the novels which follow Edgeworth's seminal work--Lever's The Martins of Cro' Martin or Edith Somerville's Mount Music and The Big House of Inver-- the antagonist to the Big House is, like Jason Quirk, an aspiring land agent or emerging professional who slowly and inexorably displaces the Big House proprietor. In more recent fiction,

where the Big House has lost its economic and political ascendancy, antagonists make psychological rather than economic assaults on Anglo-Ireland.

Edgeworth's portrayal of the loyal peasants in Castle Rackrent suggests the ineffectuality of sentiment in preserving outmoded social and economic structures presided over by inadequate landlords.

The most accurate commentary on Edgeworth's prescient vision of the doomed colonial system she and her father devoted their lives to reforming and supporting emerges not from a literary critic, but from the parodic recasting of her themes by the contemporary novelist John Banville. In Birchwood, Banville sums up the effect of the landlord's decline on his tenantry: "The first unmended fence will mean the first snigger behind you back outside the chapel yard, an overrun garden will bring them grinning to the gate, and a roof left in visible disrepair will see them poaching your land in daylight (50). While the forms of an economically or politically moribund feudal relationship seem to retain a genuine emotional content in Thady Quirk and in later peasant characters in several Big House novels, Maria Edgeworth anticipates the course of social history in describing Condy Rackrent's funeral. The Big House is not saved by the sentiment of a loyal peasantry. Thus in spite of Edgeworth's assertion that her work depicts the forgotten practices of a bygone age, Castle Rackrent exists in literary history as the first of a series of novels depicting the decline of her own class.

The Alienated Landlord in Edgeworth's Later Irish Fiction

The occupants of the Big House in Maria Edgeworth's novels may be of old Irish stock as in Castle Rackrent and Ennui, or of Anglo-Irish lineage as in The Absentee. But in all three of Edgeworth's novels about Irish land owners, those who own the land are in some way deracinated, alienated from, or at odds with

the ideal role of a feudal landlord. For Edgeworth the feudal relationship, which in theory formed the moral basis for land tenure in Ireland, is disturbed in these novels--not because of an active national political movement against the Big House (that was to appear later for her with Daniel O'Connell's campaign for Catholic emancipation)--but because of a personal failure of responsibility by the landlord. In her novels such failure had far-reaching moral as well as practical costs for Ireland. The novels are written from the perspective of a reforming Anglo-Irish landlord; they provide a moral indictment of her own class, never a political critique of a colonial system. (By identifying the landlords in Castle Rackrent and Ennui as men of Irish rather than English origin, Edgeworth explicitly avoids any such critique.)

The indictment of landlords in Castle Rackrent is most complex because of the irony inherent in the voice of its narrator, Thady Quirk, through whose admiring eyes the devastating tale of the fall of the Rackrent house is revealed. The Rackrent family, which Thady tells us goes back to the Kings of Ireland, has died off by the end of Thady's narrative. Thady's pride in the ancient lineage of the Rackrents is undercut by his simultaneous revelation that only by disavowing that ancient line, by changing the family line from O'Shaughlin to Rackrent (and, by implication, by changing the family religion from Catholicism to Protestantism) can the Big House survive. Thus in the seminal Big House novel, we are presented with a denial of Irish identity undertaken to secure possession of the land.

In Edgeworth's two later novels about absentee landlords, Ennui (1809), and The Absentee (1812), absenteeism becomes a thematic means of studying the effects of such deracination. But already in Castle Rackrent, when Kit returns from his dissipations abroad looking like a "skeleton" of himself, Edgeworth succinctly delivers her judgment about the effects on the landlord of abandoning

his responsibilities in the homeland. In Ennui and The Absentee, Edgeworth explores the costs of the willful denial of Irish identity to the social position and to the psyche of the landlord. In these didactic novels the point of view shifts from that of the loyal retainer who inadvertently reveals the failures of his landlord to the landlord himself in the process of discovering his own deracination.

Ennui is a long, rambling tale of an absentee Irish landlord, Lord Glenthorn, who leads a purposeless and dissipated life in England. Returning to his Big House in Ireland, he begins to confront his responsibilities, and in spite of the difficulties he encounters there, he learns to distinguish between effective stewardship and his former neglect of his land. In the melodramatic and largely unassimilated ending of the novel, he discovers that he is not the genuine Lord Glenthorn, but a changeling, the son of his foster mother or nurse, who substituted him for the young lord. A nobleman in character if not blood, he relinquishes his position to the real Earl (who has been raised as an Irish peasant) and pursues a career in law. Without the benefit of wealth and position, the former Lord Glenthorn achieves prominence in his new profession. Subsequently he marries a woman who will inherit his former estates after the peasant blacksmith who discovered he was the real Lord Glenthorn begs to relinquish his unwelcome title and position. Thus, most improbably, the genealogically false but morally and socially fit heir is restored to the Big House.

On occasion, Ennui, a much maligned novel, provides a rudimentary psychological study of an absentee landlord so uprooted, so out of touch with his Irish roots and the real purpose of his life--stewardship of his vast Irish domain--that he is physically impaired by a listless, even suicidal ennui. Although Marilyn Butler praises Ennui as one of the best of Edgeworth's Irish tales, inaugurating a new style of social realism, critical readings of the novel have generally been negative. Harden, for example, suggests that Edgeworth's depictions of

Glenthorn's dissipations represent a "didactic attack upon the sins of boredom and laziness," poorly balanced by her literary descriptions of Ireland (148). Flanagan suggests that much of the novel "is not fiction at all, but an exposition of Lovell Edgeworth's theories of politics, economics, social arrangements, education and morality..." (83). Although Ennui is undoubtedly an overly didactic and rambling work, far inferior to Castle Rackrent, no critic has attempted to discuss the connection between the protagonist's disease and his identity as a man uprooted from his Irish origins. The novel's attention to the healing power of a disorderly and unsocialized country suggests how Edgeworth's overt emphasis on her theme of the landlord's moral education (according to English standards) is undermined by her recognition of the primitive appeal of Irish landscape and society.

Ennui begins in England, where we observe the effects of deracination on the fabulously rich Lord Glenthorn. His illness, Edgeworth's judgment of his failure of stewardship, is spelled out in rudimentary psychological terms. Glenthorn's ennui is a neurotic "disease" which manifests itself in his "utter abhorrence" of and "incapacity" for voluntary exertion:

Unless roused by external stimulus, I sank into that kind of apathy, and vacancy of ideas, vulgarly known by the name of a brown study. If confined in a room for more than half an hour by bad weather, or other contrarieties, I would pace backwards and forwards, like the restless cavia in his den, with a fretful, unassuming pertinacity. I felt an insatiable longing for something new, and a childish love of locomotion. (214)

Gaming, gluttony, epicurism, sensual indulgence, marriage to a heiress all fail to appease Glenthorn's malady. Realizing the extent of his own degeneracy, Lord Glenthorn muses on the possible moral corruptions available to the man in the state of ennui.

I thank God that I was not born an emperor, or I might have become a monster. Though not in the least inclined to cruelty, I might have acquired a taste for it, merely for desire of the emotion which real tragedies excite. (224)

When he meets Ellinor, his old Irish nurse (later revealed to be his real mother), who comes to seek him out in England, he begins to feel the first stirrings of his eventual cure. Ellinor's appearance on his English estate causes a near fatal accident to Lord Glenthorn, whose horse shies at seeing the old Irish woman in her red great cloak. Glenthorn's fall, his subsequent illness and near death lead to a temporary spiritual renewal, which reveals to him an unknown source of vitality. Ellinor talks to him as no one has ever talked to him before.

When she sat up with me at nights she talked on eternally; for she assured me there was nothing like talking, as she had found, to put one asy asleep. I listened or not, just as I like; any way she was contint. She was inexhaustible in her anecdotes of my ancestors, all tending to the honour and glory of the family; she had also an excellent memory for all the insults or traditions of insults which the Glenthorns had received for many ages back, even to the times of the Kings of Ireland long and long before they stooped to be lorded; when their "names, which it was a pity and murder, and moreover a burning shame, to change, was O'Shaughnessy." (231-32)

Ellinor reveals that the Glenthorns (like the Rackrents) are of old Irish stock, tracing their heritage to the Gaelic Kings of Ireland. As she nurses the seemingly dying Lord Glenthorn, she gathers symbolic resonances. Ellinor is the strange Irish hag on the English estate of a powerful landowner, but she is also the Shan Van Vocht, the traditional female personification of Irish sovereignty. In her talks with Glenthorn she suggests the diminution of power he has undergone by deserting his native land and his true home. She tells him that in Ireland he would be a feudal lord, not a mere landlord, with possession over vast territories and tenants who were almost vassals.

For many a long year, she said, it had been her nightly prayer, that she might live to see me in my own castle; and often she was coming over to England to tell me so...and now, could she see me in my own Castle Glenthorn, she would die content-- and what a pity but I should be in it! I was only a lord, as she said, in England; but I could be a'l as one as a king in Ireland. (232)

The issues of power and powerlessness loom large in Edgeworth's Irish fiction. Kit Rackrent returns from England looking like a man near death, a skeleton of himself; Lord Glenthorn suffers from a debilitating psychic illness while he resides on his vast estates in England. The fabulously rich young man agonizes in the grip of ennui and depression. Immediately after Ellinor tells him of his feudal powers in Ireland, he loses his young wife (his potency?) to his unscrupulous English steward. Edgeworth's description of the physical and psychic costs of deracination suggest her sense of the unacknowledged power of Irish identity for the absentee landlord.

Like Ennui, Edgeworth's next Irish novel, The Absentee, reveals the costs of absenteeism not only to the Big House itself, but to the social and psychic identity of the absentee landlord. In this novel Edgeworth arrives at her clearest didactic position about absenteeism: the loss of self respect in the Anglo-Irish landlord who abandons his Irish holding in favor of the social decadence of London life. In the course of the novel, Lord Colambre, the young Irish landlord who has been educated in England, discovers that his mother is a laughing stock in the London society she hopes to conquer. In her eagerness to disavow her Irish origins, she transforms herself into an anxious social climber.

A natural and unnatural manner seemed struggling in all her gestures and in every syllable that she articulated--a naturally free, familiar, good natured, precipitate, Irish manner had been schooled, and schooled late in life, into a stern, cold, still, stiff deportment which she mistook for English. (87)

Similarly the hero's father, Lord Clonbrony, is diminished and socially humiliated

by the relinquishment of his Irish identity.

Lord Clonbrony , who was somebody in Ireland, who was a great person in Dublin, found himself a nobody in England, a mere cipher in London. Looked down upon by the fine people with whom his lady associated, and heartily weary of them, he retreated from them altogether, and sought entertainment and self-complacency in society beneath him, indeed, both in rank and education... (104)

For Edgeworth, the Big House in Ireland embodies a wholly different pattern of meaning from that of the English country estate. Norman Jeffares argues that Edgeworth's classical attitudes toward landscape generally led her to stress its "practical" and "utilitarian" qualities rather than to evoke its emotional resonances ("Place, Space, Personality and the Irish Writer" 17) . However on occasion in her Irish novels, her descriptions of landscape suggests that Edgeworth writes with more affinity for the late eighteenth-century interest in antiquarianism and patriotic romanticism than Jeffares acknowledges. In Ennui the description of Lord Glenthorn's two properties--Sherwood Park in England and Glenthorn Castle in the west of Ireland-- reveals the power of Irish identity. Sherwood Park, in its tasteful merger of nature and art, recalls Jane Austen's description of Pemberley, the Great House in Pride and Prejudice which is the embodiment of the easy coexistence between social man and the natural world. Yet the very tastefulness of Sherwood Park, the natural cultivation expressed by the estate and its demesne, becomes an attack on absenteeism, for Lord Glenthorn's ennui is only intensified by the perfection of his English holdings.

Sherwood Park, my English country seat, had but one fault, it was completely finished. The house was magnificent, and in the modern taste; the furniture fashionably elegant, and in all, the gloss of novelty. Not a single novelty omitted; not a fault could be found by the most fastidious critic. My park, my grounds displayed all the beauties of nature and of art, judiciously combined. Majestic woods waving their dark foliage, overhanging-- But I will spare my reader the description,

for I remember falling asleep myself whilst a poet was reading to me
an ode on the beauties of Sherwood Park. (215)

The savage splendor of Glenthorn Castle, his Irish holding, which he first sees as it emerges from behind a promontory of rock, suggests a more primitive set of values, a substitute of the romantic vision for the neo-classical.

...it seemed to rise from the sea, abrupt and insulated, in all the gloomy grandeur of ancient times, with turret and battlements, and a huge gateway, the pointed arch of which receded in perspective between the projecting towers. (251)

Glenthorn's arrival at his Irish castle underscores the medieval setting of Ireland.

These people seemed "born for my use:" the officious precipitation with which they ran to and fro; the style in which they addressed me; some crying "Long Live the Earl of Glenthorn!" some blessing for me for coming to reign over them: all together gave more the idea of vassals than of tenants, and carried my imagination centuries back to feudal times. (251)

The Gothic description of the Irish Big House, a vast, dark, gloomy castle hovering against the western coast of Ireland with "an air of savage wildness" (253), suggests Edgeworth's vision of the deep and repressed sources of power in the Irish landscape. The potential healing properties of such power are never fully developed in the novel, although upon arriving at his ancestral home, Glenthorn is transformed. Lulled to sleep by the sounds of the sea booming against the castle walls, Glenthorn finds that his insomnia disappears and that, according to Ellinor, he is "sleeping like an angel" (253).

In Ireland, in a scene modelled on Richard Edgeworth's experiences as a returning landowner to Ireland, Glenthorn is overwhelmed by crowds of suitors begging for favors. He discovers that he is no longer a man with a will of his own or with time at his disposal and ends the day exhausted, but supported by his pleasure in the enormous power he seems to wield. Suddenly involved in the

day to day working of his vast holdings, he finds himself, "a man who had never looked into an account," jealously settling the affairs of his estate with his agent "without a yawn of boredom" (257).

Edgeworth's social critique of Irish peasant society as slovenly and in need of the Edgeworthian training she and her father advocated works against the covert symbolic implications of her use of the Gothic mode in her description of Glenthorn Castle in Ennui. Nevertheless, her juxtaposition of the descriptions of the English and Irish county houses suggests not the cultivated taste of Sherwood Park, but rather its effeteness, over- refinement and tedium when contrasted with the dark and gloomy Irish Big House. Moreover, in this vision of the anachronistic survival of a Gaelic fealty of vassal to lord, she comes closest to dramatizing, rather than nostalgically evoking, the vision of a feudal Irish community which exists as a lost ideal in the Anglo-Irish Big House tradition. Glenthorn's servants in England, insistent on their rights and privileges, are the product of society beginning to deal in contracts and capital exchange. In Ireland he encounters another kind of domestic--feudal retainers rather than hired servants. Although his Irish tenants and domestics can be manipulative and childlike, and after the troubles of 1798, a few even engage in conspiracay against the Big House, they are depicted always as personally involved with the ancient Glenthorn line. Unlike an English servant at Sherwood Park who refuses to comply with a request not written into his contract, the Irish domestics at Glenthorn castle respond to a master rather than an employer. (Again in The Martins of Cro' Martin, written forty-seven years after Ennui, when Charles Lever describes the worship of a young mistress of the Big House by peasants on an isolated island in the West of Ireland, the Big House novel dramatizes this lost feudal bond to the "chief" rather than the Anglo-Irish landlord [Lever 2: 309].)

An unacknowledged contrast between Irish primitivism and English

effeteness--as embodied in the descriptions of Glenthorn's two estates--lies covertly beneath Edgeworth's themes of moral education. The Big House in Ireland is the scene not of decadence, but of a potential dissoluteness, a dissoluteness which has its origins in the easy intermingling of a peasant and aristocratic culture. The primitivism of Irish culture becomes, for example, an invigorating stimulus to the jaded sensibility of the deracinated hero of Ennui--primarily because it creates an opportunity for vigorous self exertion, but also because it reveals a life without the social restraints and refinements of cultivated society. One of the most interesting and potentially disturbing questions inherent in any literary study of the Big House lies in the connection between savagery and vitality and its relationship to corruption, ruin, and decay. Writing more than a century after the publication of Ennui, Edith Somerville, in her most powerful Big House novel, The Big House of Inver, turns to the dangers of this commingling of peasant and aristocratic cultures in Ireland.

The strangeness or exotic nature of Irish culture for the English sensibility is underscored in Edgeworth's Irish fiction, most frequently, perhaps, for its comic potential. In The Absentee Lord Colambre steps out of his ship unto his "mother earth" and finds himself "surrounded and attacked by a swarm of beggars and harpies, with strange figures and stranger tones" (161). Lord Glenthorn in Ennui travels into a Bedlam world where passengers are expected to ride in a coach

in a most deplorable and crazy state; the body mounted up to a prodigious height, on unbending springs, nodding forward, one door swinging open, three blinds up, because they could not be let down, the perch tied in two places, the iron of the wheel half off, wooden pegs for linch pins, and ropes for harness. (243)

The sense of Ireland as the "other place," the savage land resistant to the civilizing forces of English reason and good sense, becomes the occasion for Edgeworth to develop her didactic emphasis in her Irish novels after Castle

Rackrent. The overt theme of Ennui is the moral education of the landlord; Glenthorn must learn to curb his undisciplined desire to express his seemingly unlimited feudal powers through easy gestures of largess which reward the lazy supplicating tenant at the expense of the industrious. After many errors of judgment he begins to follow the advice of his austere but admirable Scotch agent, Mr M'Leod, and to apply Edgeworthian principles of responsible estate management to his holdings. The novel's emphasis on this theme of the landlord's education, however, has deflected critical attention from Edgeworth's ambivalent attitude toward the phantasmagoric even Gothic world she occasionally presents as Ireland. With its emphasis on the decaying family house and the dissipations of generation after generation of a family line, Castle Rackrent can be seen as a type of Gothic fiction. In the later Irish novels, written after the Union and thus more consciously aimed at persuading an English reading public of the desirability of the moral education of the landlord, Edgeworth is still using the Gothic to express her ambivalent recognition of the subversive power of Irish disorder and eccentricity. Julian Moynahan's observations about the role of the Gothic in Irish literature seem particularly relevant to Ennui, where Edgeworth's use of the Gothic mode on occasion undermines her moral thesis.

Gothic literature often carries a heavy political or meta-political charge. The Gothic seems to flourish in disrupted societies, to give a voice to the powerless and unenfranchised, and even at times to subvert or contradict the overt best intentions of the author.

(Moynahan 44 , my underlining)

In Ennui the most memorable reminder of Ireland's resistance to alien civilizing forces occurs when Lord Glenthorn attempts to build his foster mother a pretty slate-roofed English cottage to replace her smoke-filled hovel. To Glenthorn's chagrin the house decays rapidly, partly because of the inability of

the Irish workmen to build it properly but also because of Ellinor's disorder and her desire for a smoky turf-thatched home. Glenthorn reacts with rage to Ellinor's dissatisfaction with his gift; he calls her "a savage, an Irishwoman, and an ungrateful fool" (275)-- presumably synonyms in the English mind. Her answer to him, however, shames him into compliance with her wish to live in a thatched Irish hut rather than an English cottage.

"Savage I am, for anything I know; and fool I am, that's certain; but ungrateful I am not," said she, bursting into tears. She went home and took to her bed; and the next thing I heard from her son was, "that she was lying in the rheumatism, which had kept her awake many a long night, before she would come to complain to my honour of the house..." (275)

Lord Glenthorn's capitulation to Ellinor is accompanied by a recognition that his own standards of comfort are inappropriate for an Irish peasant. Behind his newly awakened sense of cultural differences lies a certainty of the higher values of his own standards, a perception of Ellinor's habits simply as the product of her insufficiently advanced civilization. However, he resolves to control his impetuous desire instantly to improve the Irish. "In the impatience of my zeal for improvement, I expected to do the work of two hundred years in a few months..." (276). The didactic point of the scene is clear: the "civilizing" of the native Irish will proceed slowly, and the wise Big House landlord must adapt to the native's stage of development or risk failure. The emotional power of the scene between Ellinor and Glenthorn, however, suggests quite another message. Glenthorn is shamed by his anger towards Ellinor. In spite of the didactic framework of the scene which insists on the desirability of the English values of order and tidiness, Edgeworth implies the emotional validity of Ellinor's life, even as it is depicted as disorderly, slovenly and improvident. The reader's response to Glenthorn's moral education, in which he learns to respond with sympathy to the needs of a

peasant woman and to feel ashamed of his own anger, diminishes the effect of his priggish certainties of colonial superiority.

The characterization of Ellinor as a loving peasant woman tragically estranged from her own son who has been raised as an aristocratic landlord, is, as Marilyn Butler has recognized, one of Edgeworth's major achievements of the novel. "Ellinor is something rare and perhaps new in literature, a peasant character who is treated with respect" (371). Uneducated and in English terms amoral in her insistence that Glenthorn keep the secret of her substitution of her own son for the real Earl, Ellinor is nevertheless presented without any condescension--and with significant complexity. Unlike Thady who never comprehends the implications of what he tells, Ellinor understands only too well the barrier she has created between herself and her son. When Glenthorn insists, against her remonstrances, on renouncing his title after learning the truth of his parentage, she simply wills herself to die, rather than living with the burden of her estrangement from her son.

For all her faith in the power of benevolent English standards of stewardship, Edgeworth cannot quite manage to end Ennui with a fully satisfying vision of Glenthorn Castle ruled by a reformed landlord, one whose genealogical deficiencies are more than balanced by the superiority of his reformed character. The ending of Ennui, where Lord Glenthorn discovers he is not a real Earl, but a changeling, allows Edgeworth to return with renewed didacticism, to her emphasis on nurture over nature. The blacksmith's praise of his foster brother's unselfishness in renouncing his position touches the heart of Edgeworth's belief in moral education: "Any man, you see, may be made a lord; but a gentleman, a man must make himself" (372). The former Lord Glenthorn, learning that his mother had exchanged him for the genuine heir, abdicates his title and wealth and undergoes a period of moral growth in relative (middle-class) poverty.

Finally he becomes the model hero--just, benevolent, self-educated, hardworking -- and marries an heiress who will conveniently restore his property to him. In theory, his tenure should represent the perfect assimilation of Edgeworth's ideal English traits to an Irish setting.

But Ellinor's treatment of her English cottage foreshadows the final destruction of the Big House at the hands of the family of Christy O'Donoghoe, the authentic Lord Glenthorn who has been raised as Ellinor's son. Glenthorn Castle is destroyed by the imposition of a peasant culture on the Big House. Christy cannot contain his wife and son, who prodigally riot and waste the resources of the estate. Finally the Big House is consumed by flames ignited by "peasant" behavior as Christy's son drunkenly sleeps with a candle inserted in the head of bed in an antique mansion filled, not with the mud of the peasant hovel, but with old wood and draperies. Having lost his wastrel son in the conflagration, the real Lord Glenthorn relinquishes his title and retreats in despair to his blacksmith forge.

More than a century after Edgeworth wrote Ennui, scores of Irish Big Houses were destroyed by fires lit by hostile Irishmen. Edgeworth's occasional depictions of the power of a native peasant culture suggest her awareness of its threat to the values she preaches and account for some of the fictional contrivances and evasions with which she attempts to legitimize her campaign for enlightened resident landlords. As Maurice Cogan suggests, her efforts in Ennui to suggest that the "good" landlord can be from Irish peasant stock so long as he displays the proper English virtues simply obscures the realities of colonial policy in eighteenth century Ireland ("After Rackrent" 37).

In some of her greatest moments as a writer, however, moments which work against the didacticism of her position as a spokesman for enlightened English systems of land tenure and for the effect of nurture over nature, Edgeworth

imaginatively acknowledges the subversive power of that culture she plans to reform. But any acknowledgment of such power is carefully masked. *Ennui* ends with the former Lord Glenthorn, now reformed into the model estate owner, planning to rebuild his Big House and, presumably, to usher in a period of responsible and benevolent landlordism. However this peasant who has been raised as an Earl does manage to shed his real name--the unpleasantly "Irish" O'Donoghoe--and take on the impeccably English name of his new wife. If Irish peasant origins can be reformed and refined out of social and moral conduct, all reminders of them had best be masked. Edgeworth does not tell us in what architectural style the new Big House will be built, but we can conjecture that the savage splendor and "gloomy grandeur...with turret and battlements" of the old castle will be replaced by a more practical and efficient structure in the mode of her father's utilitarian ideals.

Chapter Three Charles Lever and The Politics of the Big House

Historical and Critical Background

Wise stewardship of the Big House becomes the moral touchstone of Maria Edgeworth's Irish fiction. The decaying house indicates the moral decline of the landlord; the abandoned house is equated with his loss of identity. Edgeworth could continue to write novels about Ireland only so long as she could envision a world where her father's high-minded vision of reform was carried out by an Anglo-Irish ruling class. With the beginning of organized Catholic opposition to Protestant domination of Ireland, the vision of a humane and entitled ruling class governing its tenants with benevolent firmness became less possible as a subject of her fiction. The election of 1832, when Edgeworthstown tenants voted against the Big House candidate was a source of sorrow and disillusionment to her. Puzzled and alienated by the new Ireland ushered in by Daniel O'Connell's Catholic Emancipation movement, Edgeworth ceased writing fiction about her country.

It is impossible to draw Ireland as she now is in a book of fiction--realities are too strong, party passions too violent to bear to see, or care to look at their faces in the looking-glass. The people would only break the glass, and curse the fool who held the mirror up to nature--distorted nature, in a fever. We are in too perilous a case to laugh, humour would be out of season, worse than bad taste.

(M.E. to Michael Pakenham Edgeworth,
14 Feb. 1834, qtd. in Butler 452)

Edgeworth's literary descendant and admiring disciple, Charles Lever, however, chooses the social climate of O'Connell's Ireland as the subject of his Big House novel. A political novelist from the Protestant middle-class, he is fascinated by the ways in which social change is brought about by political realignments and pressures. With a father who was a prosperous English-born

builder and architect married to a descendant of a Cromwellian planter family, Lever was raised, not within the Big House, but among prosperous merchant and professional families in Dublin. As a young man Lever studied and practiced medicine and then turned to journalism and finally novel writing as a profession. In 1845 he became a self imposed exile from Ireland, leaving the country to escape the political factionalism he found himself embroiled in. Once abroad, Lever turned with greater and greater seriousness in his fiction to the urgent political and social problems of the Anglo-Irish.

Maria Edgeworth's alienation from 19th century politics was typical of her class, and in essence, became the central problem of the Anglo-Irish life which Lever was to depict in The Martins of Cro' Martin. Having ceded control of their own destiny to the English Parliament by the act of Union in 1800, the nineteenth century Anglo-Irish found themselves no longer an ascendancy class, but an English garrison in a conquered country. Charles Lever's middle and later novels, particularly The Martins of Cro' Martin, provide an eloquent depiction of the ways in which the landlord class hastened its own decline. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Big House landlord's sense of being Irish, not English, remained as a central focus of identity, but existed now without any political content. While the 1829 Catholic Emancipation and the Reform Act of 1832 led to the eventual loss of Protestant control over parliamentary seats, the fact of Protestant ownership of land seemed to assure landlords that their wealth and position would give them a major voice in public affairs. In the course of the nineteenth century, however, particularly after the Great Famine in the 1840's, hostility to the principle of Protestant landlords became a central political rallying point. Local agrarian outrages continued, and by the 1870's open resistance to the status and power of the landlord became a principle of the Home Rule Party. The Big House was not the focus of feudal loyalties; it represented, instead, a political symbol of inequity in a country which had come to believe that the total

destruction of the landlord system was a necessary step in the restoration of its nationhood (Beckett 91).

During the nineteenth century, Catholic Emancipation and the increasing power of the Catholic clergy accelerated the growing articulateness of sectarian hostility within the nation. As the one organized public institution serving the Catholic majority, the Church assumed a larger and larger role in political life. Under the Penal Codes of the eighteenth century, the inarticulate and inchoate Catholic masses represented the general threat of any suppressed class; now, carefully orchestrated political challenges replaced more random hostility.

Charles Lever occupies an uneasy position in the world of Irish letters. His early comic novels--The Confessions of Harry Lorrequer (1837), Charles O'Malley, the Irish Dragoon (1841), and Jack Hinton (1843)--established his reputation as a light-hearted recorder of Anglo-Irish military high life. His later works, written after he left Ireland for a life of self imposed exile, were largely ignored by his critics. Lever was attacked, on the evidence of his early novels, by a long list of distinguished readers: by Carleton, for "bearing false witness against his country;" by Yeats (Representative Irish Tales 25-6) and E.A. Boyd (73) for using the Irish for comic relief; and by Corkery (16), for writing colonial literature. Although conceding that in The Martins of Cro' Martin the novelist "seems to be fumbling toward a subject which might engage his feelings," in The Irish Novelists Flanagan calls Lever's novels "travesties" and excludes them from his seminal study of nineteenth Irish fiction (46). Even a less hostile critic such as Gwynn in Irish Literature and Drama dismisses Lever's significant later works as having value only because of his sympathy for a doomed and picturesque landlord class (79). For the most part, Lever has been passed over as a serious novelist.

Signs of a critical reappraisal are evident, however, in a series of articles in which recent critics have turned to his middle and later Irish novels for their

somber depictions of the political and social complexities of nineteenth-century Ireland (Meredith; Jeffares, "'Lever's 'Lord Kilgobbin'"; Rix). Norman Jaffares, especially, has claimed Lever as a major novelist, who, as he writes his thirty-three novels, moves "toward a detached impartiality" in his portrayal of Irish political life, a detachment which culminates, for Jaffares, in his last and greatest novel, Lord Kilgobbin (48).

The Martins of Cro' Martin

The Martins of Cro' Martin (1847), Lever's eighth novel, written in Florence during his middle period shortly after he left Ireland, is not a fictional masterpiece; almost eight hundred pages of close print and a loose and baggy plot make its popularity among modern readers unlikely. Yet Lever's complex series of attitudes toward the approaching collision between Anglo-Irish and Catholic society, while falling short of the "detached impartiality" Jaffares finds in Lord Kilgobbin, represents an important literary treatment of the fall of the Big House. His study of the decline of Anglo-Irish power is, moreover, significant in the evolution of political fiction in Ireland. By transforming the abstractions of nineteenth-century Irish political ideology into the felt life of social experience, Lever establishes himself as a serious political novelist.

Too politically aware to ignore the historical processes which were to destroy his own class, yet too bound to his Anglo-Irish heritage to welcome the new Ireland ushered in by O'Connell's Catholic coalition, Lever writes as an observer of a political transformation which he cannot support. Much like Trollope in his political novels, he registers, often with great dramatic conviction, those positions which he regrets: a rancorous but prophetic speech of a Catholic politician, a measured judgment of the economic instability of the Big House by a successful Catholic businessman, an irrefutable prediction of Anglo-Irish defeat

by the Chief Secretary of Ireland. Even as the reader struggles to negotiate the complicated plots and sub-plots of The Martins of Cro' Martin, he experiences Lever's transformation of political abstraction into the dense texture of social life. On the panoramic canvas of his Big House novel, Lever demonstrates how political change at Dublin Castle or at the local polling places portends social disruption for the peasantry, the Catholic middle-class, and the Anglo-Irish gentry.

Lever's shifting attitudes toward his subject matter are at least as interesting as the story he tells. The novel presents contradictory positions which together reflect the narrator's ambivalence toward the changing political landscape of nineteenth-century Ireland. Lever writes both as a conservative believer in an ideal feudal dispensation who turns against the rancor of contemporary politics and as a politically acute critic of a dying Anglo-Irish culture. His novel becomes most compelling as he juxtaposes these two positions, alternatively revealing his nostalgic hunger for an ideal order represented by the Big House and his perception of the abuses of that order which contribute to political turmoil and social transformation.

The Martins of Cro' Martin traces an Anglo-Irish family estate in Connemara from 1829, the year of the Catholic Emancipation Act, to a postscript which describes how Cro' Martin falls into the hands of the courts set up by the Encumbered Estates Act in 1848. Lever loosely bases his novel on the fall of the actual Martin estate in Connemara, an estate so vast that Richard Martin, the builder of Ballinahinch Castle in the late eighteenth century, reputedly boasted to George IV that he had "an approach from his gatehouse to his hall of thirty miles length" (Bence-Jones 25). In her Tour In Connemara And the Martins of Ballinahinch, Maria Edgeworth reports that the country people used to consider Richard Martin, "not only the lord of all he surveyed, but the lord of their lives"(63). But she also notes the breakdown of this semi-feudal state when she remarks that with the advent of the law in Western Ireland, his son, Thomas Martin, was

"no longer the unrivalled King of Connemara" (64). Edgeworth's letters about her visits and correspondence with the Martin family from 1834 to 1847, particularly her amused and affectionate description of Mary Martin, Richard Martin's somewhat pedantic grand-daughter, suggest that Lever creates his novel without any interest in describing the actual personalities of the Martins of Ballinahinch. His novel uses the general plight of the debt-ridden family of the "King of Connemara" to create a fictional depiction of the fall of one of Ireland's powerful Big Houses. If we compare his account of the Martin household with Maria Edgeworth's letters about the historical family--undoubtedly colored by her optimistic belief in the power of enlightened stewardship--we quickly realize how Lever's novel darkens her picture of the Irish landlord. (Harold Edgeworth Butler, the editor of his great aunt's Tour of Connemara, rather disapprovingly notes that Lever's "actual story owes but little to fact" [112])

The novel dramatizes the seemingly inevitable fulfillment of the political process whereby Irish landlords actively participated in their own destruction. It depicts the gradual loss of power of the Big House as the newly enfranchised Catholic majority began to flex its political muscle. Lever writes with an acute sense of the costs of social dislocations; history itself provides a sobering footnote to his tale. The fall of the actual Martin family brought loss and destitution to the peasants on that estate rather than freedom from oppressive rule. When the Law Life Assurance Company bought the huge Martin property of Connemara, it evicted all small tenants and steadily increased rents. Failing to find work as laborers, many of the evicted tenant families were forced to move to the workhouse or emigrate (Daly 36). The historical Mary Martin, left virtually penniless by her losses after the Great Famine, emigrated to America with her husband and died there in childbirth shortly after her arrival in 1850 (Edgeworth, Tour In Connemara 112).

In the The Martins of Cro' Martin, the Big House is the center of a vast estate,

rumored to be half a county in size, virtually a private kingdom in Western Ireland. Cro' Martin Castle stands as an architectural map of Irish history from the early centuries of Norman occupation:

With few pretensions to architectural correctness, Cro' Martin was, indeed, an imposing structure. Originally the stronghold of some bold Borderer, it had been added to by successive proprietors, till at last it had assumed the proportions of a vast and spacious edifice, different eras contributing the different styles of building, and presenting in the mass traces of every architecture, from the stern old watch-tower of the fourteenth century to the commodious dwelling-house of our own.

(1:2)

Cro' Martin is no decaying Castle Rackrent, but a castle in fact as well as name. Lever's descriptions stress the luxury of the Martins' dwelling, filled with priceless furniture, carpeting, tapestries and art work, all in striking contrast to the abject poverty of the tenants beyond the park walls. The opulence of the house suggests its social isolation from the surrounding bleakness of Connemara. Lady Dorothea Martin's library, for example, is "fitted up in the most luxurious taste,--with rarest gems of art, and cabinet pictures of almost fabulous value,-- to supply which foreign dealers and connoisseurs had been for years back in correspondence with her Ladyship" (I:140).

Yet to Lady Dorothea, the English mistress of all this luxury, travelling to her estate "snugly encased in furs", the walls of the park estate are the boundaries of her prison. The beautiful grounds, the stately trees, the "battlemented towers of the princely residence" (I:135) evoke no feelings of appreciation--only boredom. Even Lord Godfrey Martin, whose Norman-Irish family has controlled this private kingdom for generations, responds to the beauty of his vast holding with neither pride of possession nor aesthetic pleasure, but simply with "dreamy, unremarking indifference" (I:135).

More ominous than the Martins' failure to cherish their land is their inability to accept the political and social change which is occurring in Ireland as a result of

Catholic emancipation. They react with characteristic resistance to the emerging power of Dan Nelligan, the powerful shop-keeper of Oughterard who serves as an unofficial town banker and wields political power through his wealth. When Martin reminds his wife that Nelligan's son Joseph has won highest honors at Trinity College, and warns her of the Nelligans' growing influence, her reply (and his comment on it) is telling:

"A very shocking feature of the time we live in!"...

"So it may be: but there it is--just like the wet weather, and the typhus, and the sheep-rot, and fifty other disagreeable things one can't help."

"But at least they can avoid recurring to them in conversation, sir.

There is no need to open the window when the look-out is a dreary one." (I:121)

The Martin estate is doomed by the failures of its landlords: by Lady Martin's arrogance toward her native Irish tenants and the middle-class Catholic world of Oughterard, by Lord Martin's indolence, vanity, and self indulgent refusal to accept the responsibilities of his position. In their luxurious setting, totally isolated from the lives of their tenants, the Martins display the worst characteristics of aristocratic hauteur.

Even the stripping down of the family estate, a recurring motif in the the Big House novel, appears in The Martins of Cro' Martin, not as a slow process of loss and decay, but as yet another assertion of the Martins' arrogance toward Catholic Ireland. In the chapter entitled, "A Country Auction" (I:328-42), Lever describes the sale of the live stock on the estate when the Martins abandon Ireland. The magnificence of the stables--with ornamental fountains, copper sluices, mahogany partitions--impresses the Catholic tenants and townspeople who come to view and purchase. Lever's narrative intrusions remind the reader of the domestic loss represented by the breakup of a home, but the scene itself suggests how even in its decline, the Big House retains its distance. During the day of the sale, the vast crowds of the curious are carefully kept from the house

and herded into the stable yards. The easy intermingling of peasant and gentry which accompanies the fall of the Rackrents is absent here; in its defeat, the deserted Cro' Martin stands as a monument of snobbish exclusion rather than as a reminder of human loss. As they wander through the grounds, the crowds of country squires, shopkeepers, and small farmers, are "all subdued into a kind of reverence for a spot from which they had been so rigidly excluded..." (I:333).

After the ignominious defeat of their political candidate by a manipulative young liberal aristocrat in the local elections of 1829, the Martins abandon their Irish estate in disgust. Finding solace in the elegance of Parisian society, a vengeful Lady Martin directs that her disloyal tenants be hounded: rents are to be called in, customary privileges abolished, evictions initiated. While in Paris, however, she and her family find themselves trapped between the rebellious workers and the French army. While Lever's own political conservatism about Irish society never leads him to advocate radical solutions to Irish social problems, his depiction of revolutionary Paris in 1830 suggests the complexity of his views. In his cosmopolitan setting, Lever is able to sympathize with a radicalism he rejects for Ireland. These stirring scenes at the barricades are not merely romantic adventures provided by a cosmopolitan author, but the ominous reminders of the price of political isolation from the masses. Lady Martin's personal secretary and companion, Kate Henderson, escapes the values of her employer's world by embracing the ideology of Republican France. Lever's admiration for Kate's personal solution to her situation as a dependent of the Big House is not translated into a thoroughgoing approval of political radicalism. Yet if French political solutions are never advocated for Ireland, Lever's characterization of Kate's ardent Republicanism, and his depiction of the Parisian workers at the barricades --the canaille to Lady Martin-- reveals a powerful sympathy for the underclass.

Beneath the wealth and power of the Martin's Ascendancy class exists the

world of the middle-class Catholic shopkeepers, lawyers, and estate managers who gaze longingly and with growing hostility at Cro' Martin. In his depiction of this rising Catholic class which will, in the course of the novel, defeat the Big House and move toward political control of Ireland, Lever distinguishes and discriminates carefully. He both expresses and attempts to transcend his class-bound suspicions of a rising Catholic Ireland. Unlike Maria Edgeworth, whose vulgar social climber, Mrs Raffarty, in The Absentee or whose conniving Jason Quirk in Castle Rackrent represents the social or moral failings of a Catholic middle-class, Lever creates a thoroughly sympathetic Catholic. Joe Nelligan's meteoric rise from obscurity as the son of a Oughterard shopkeeper to the position of Chief Justice of Ireland is achieved through intellectual brilliance rather than through political ambition. Joe's deepest embarrassments, in fact, lie in the way many of his fellow Catholics use his academic success at Trinity for their political ends.

The fulsome adulation of some, the stupid astonishment of others, but, worse than either, the vulgar assumption that his success was a kind of party triumph,--a blow dealt by the plebeian against the patrician, the Papist against the Protestant,--shocked and disgusted him. (I:21)

For Lever, Joe Nelligan's moral probity is grounded in a deeply ingrained childhood loyalty to the Martin family and in his personal devotion to Mary Martin, the Martins' niece. He handles Mary's lost glove as a "relic," and adorns his chambers at Trinity with a single ornament: a lithograph of Cro' Martin Castle. Even as he becomes a major political force in Catholic Ireland, he fails to display that hostility to the Big House which would satisfy the more rancorous of his party. To the Viceroy of Ireland, who purposefully appoints Joe Nelligan to high political office without consultation with the Catholic leadership, Joe's political independence from Daniel O'Connell distinguishes him from other Catholic aspirants for office.

He was the first of an order of men who have contributed no small share to the great social revolution of Ireland in late years. With talents fully equal to the best in the opposite scale of party, and a character above all reproach, he stood a rebuking witness to all the taunts and sarcasms once indiscriminately levelled at his class; and, at the same time, inspired his own party with the happy knowledge that there was a nobler and more legitimate road to eminence than by factious display and popular declamation. (II: 384)

The search for an acceptable new man of Ireland leads Lever to a curiously apolitical Catholic politician; clearly social revolution is best left in the hands of the moderate, an intellectual rather than a man of action, a countryman with deep childhood ties of affection to the Big House and a properly distant and humble adoration of its daughter. Thus in characterizing Joe Nelligan, Lever manages to have it both ways: Joe is both the new Catholic hero of Ireland and the loyal admirer of the Big House.

The characterization of Maurice Scanlan, the Martins' Catholic electioneering agent, however, represents Lever's darker and more ostensibly classbound view of the new Ireland. Presented as an ambitious social climber and brilliant horse dealer, Scanlan, with his humble social origins, has that intimate knowledge of the peasant class by which he manipulates and twists his fellow countrymen to his own will. He is presented as a shrewd but vulgar parvenu, a sychophant to the Big House who makes himself ridiculous as he tries to advance his presumptuous designs on Mary Martin. Serving the Tory Martins when they are ascendant, he switches allegiance to the Jewish moneylender who gains control of the estate. With an eye to the main chance, he shrewdly warns the Martins of their stubborn adherence to reactionary political positions, but he mistakenly confuses self interest and cunning for wisdom. Self congratulatory, irredeemably vulgar as he bows, sidles, simpers, and smirks before Mary, Scanlan is an object of contempt in the novel. Like Edith Somerville, a later Anglo-Irish novelist, Lever views marriage between the Big

House and Catholic Ireland with alarm. While Joe Nelligan's humble, unspoken worship of the niece of the Big House is a sign of his delicate sensibilities, Scanlan's corruption is dramatized by his offer to save Cro' Martin from its creditor if Mary Martin is handed over to him as his reward.

Less individualized than the middle-class Catholics in the novel are the lower classes, the Irish peasants whose role is to suffer poverty, famine, and disease. In his descriptions of the peasantry, Lever occasionally suggests a degeneracy which accompanies dire poverty. In some ways these descriptions represent the most ambivalent paragraphs in the novel, for here Lever displays his class fears, his guilt, and his uneasiness before the suppressed rural masses. Even as he sympathizes with the terrible poverty of the peasants, he suggests a moral shiftlessness and propensity to mindless submission which call into question the value of their feudal loyalty to the Big House which he depicts in later scenes.

Bronzed, blear-eyed, and weather-beaten, seamed with age and scarred with sickness, shrewd-looking, suspicious, and crafty in every lineament, there was yet one characteristic predominant over all,-- an intense and abject submission, an almost slavish deference to every observation addressed to them. Their dress bespoke the greatest poverty; not only were they clothed in rags of every hue and shape, but all were barefooted, and some of the very oldest wore no other covering to their heads than their own blanched and grizzled locks.... The expediency of misery had begotten the expediency of morals, and in all the turning and winding of their shifty natures you could see the suggestions of that abject destitution which had eaten into their hearts. (I:8)

In his 1872 preface to his novel, Lever reveals his most conservative attitudes toward his subject, the changing relationship between tenant and landlord in nineteenth-century Ireland. In the preface he tells his readers that he wrote the The Martins of Cro' Martin in Florence, free from the "...influence of any distinct code of public opinion," suggesting, thus, that his narrative stance is

cosmopolitan rather than narrowly parochial. As the recorder of a period of great change in Irish society, he strives for a critical objectivity about political events; however, his preface reveals that nostalgia which is rooted in a political conservatism about Irish society.

Ireland, at the time I speak of, was beginning to feel that sense of distrust and jealousy between the owner and the tiller of the soil, which, later on, was to develop itself into open feud. The old ties that have bound the humble to the rich man, and which were hallowed by reciprocal acts of good will and benevolence, were being loosened. Benefits were canvassed with suspicion, ungracious or unholy acts were treasured up as cruel wrongs. The political agitator had so far gained the ear of the people, that he could persuade them that there was not a hardship or a grievance of their lot that could not be laid at the door of the landlord. He was taught to regard the old relation of love and affection to the owner of the soil as the remnants of a barbarism that had had its day, and he was led to believe that whether the tyranny that crushed him was the Established Church or the landlord, there was a great Liberal party ready to aid him in resisting either or both, when he could summon courage for the effort. (I:viii)

In such passages, written at a time of accelerating violence against Irish landlords, Lever reveals his affinity with the feudal past, with the warm, reciprocal, "hallowed" ties of affection between landlord and tenant. In spite of his careful presentation of himself as the "cosmopolitan" non-didactic observer of the Irish social scene ("I have not the shadow of a pretext to be thought didactic..."), he, one of the most politically acute of Irish novelists, shares with Maria Edgeworth a distrust of political solutions to Irish social problems. In his preface, where politicians are "agitators" who lead guillible peasants into a problematic future, Lever occasionally sounds like an early Charles Dickens, advocating human decency and kindness as the solution to all injustice.

I had not, I own, any implicit faith in Acts of Parliament, and I had a fervent belief in what kindness, when combined with knowledge of Ireland could do with Irishmen. I have never heard of a people with

whom sympathy could do so much, nor the want of it be so fatal. I have never heard of any other people to whom the actual amount of a benefit was of less moment than the mode it was bestowed. I have never read of a race, who, in great poverty and many privations, attach a higher value to the consideration that is bestowed on them than to the actual material boons, and feel such a seemingly disproportioned gratitude for kind words and generous actions. (1: xi)

Mary Martin, the niece of Lord and Lady Martin, is Lever's mouthpiece for the hope that kindness combined with enlightened policies of land improvement--rather than political action--will preserve the Big House. In speaking to young Joe Nelligan, the rising star of the Catholic community, Mary emphasizes the irrelevance of the political process to her people. "Just remember, for a moment, that of all the laws you great and wise men are making, over which you rant and wrangle, and assail each other so vindictively, how few will ever touch the interests or descend to the fortunes of those for whom you assume to make them (1:127). Called the "Princess of Connemara" by the peasant tenants, Mary struggles to protect them from the constant threat of unemployment, famine, and illness.

While Lord and Lady Martin view their property as a source of income, Mary's bond to the tenants assumes a system of obligations. She initiates projects to build roads and to clear forests, organizes vast drainage schemes, has quarries opened, founds schools and hospital dispensaries. Like a feudal lady of the manor, she establishes a relationship to the tenants which is personal, beneficent, and alternately stern and tender. She exists in novel as a saintly anachronism, a reincarnation of the ideal feudal landlord. "[The]... craftiest devices of your legislation never uproot an old prejudice nor disturb an antiquated superstition; while I, and such as I... can by a little care, or even a little counsel--comfort many a failing heart, cheer up many a sinking spirit, and better still, do good service by teaching the poor man that he is of one family with those better off than himself, and that he is not an outcast because he is lowly!" (1:127).

To the peasants Mary becomes an object of reverence, drawing around herself centuries of nostalgic longing for a lost Celtic community.

Oh, if courtiers could feel one tithe of the personal devotion to the sovereign that did these poor peasants to her they regarded as their chief, what an atmosphere of chivalry would breathe within the palace of royalty! There was nothing they would not have done or dared at her bidding; and as she crossed their threshold, and sat down beside their hearth, the tears of joy that rose to every eye showed that this was an event to be treasured till memory could retain no more. (II:309)

If Mary Martin, the Protestant scion of the Big House, dramatizes one vision of the ideal landlord, or even the idealized memory of the Celtic chief, the variety of characters who speak against her program of reform suggests the ambivalent position from which Lever writes The Martins of Cro' Martin. His nostalgic longing for an age of social stability which Mary's program represents does not--or cannot-- suppress his hard-headed political observations of a revolutionary century. Lever writes, finally, without Maria Edgeworth's certainty that this "good" landlord will heal Ireland's wounds.

Mary Martin represents the reconciling forces of an idealized feudal order, but her efforts are resented by those Catholics who recognize her dangerously reactionary power. Mary's detractors are not, for the most part, sympathetic characters. But neither are they total caricatures; they present their objections to her methods with some dramatic and political conviction. To one local politician, a follower of Daniel O'Connell, Mary's presence in the countryside is an alarming move backwards in history, motivated not by charitable impulses, but by careful calculation.

"...she's trying hard to bring back the old feudal devotion to the Chief, which was the bane of Ireland. She wants the tenants to have no will of their own, but just to vote whatever the landlord tells them. She had the impudence to tell my 'august leader' that she had no need of him down there, that the country was too poor to waste its energies in

factionous squabbles."...

"All policy , all scheming!...She sees how the family influence has declined, and is fast becoming obliterated in this country, by reason of their worthlessness, insolence, and neglect of the people; and she's just shrewd enough to see how far a little cajolery goes with poor Paddy; but as my 'august leader' observed, it is not a freize coat, nor a pair of brogues, that can compensate for the loss of the freedom that is every man's birthright; and it is not by an ounce of tea, or a dose of physic, we'll ever see Ireland great, glorious, and free." (1:115)

On occasion Lever describes Mary as she is viewed by her devoted peasant nurse, as the the "Princess," " the proud scion of a proud stock, who ruled over a territory rather than a mere estate." But to the local priest, Mary's good works among the poor threaten the growing political ascendancy of the Catholic church over the Big House. "If she'd let the people alone about their religion. I'd think better of her" (1:115). To Joe Nelligan's shopkeeper father, the sharpest business mind of Oughterard, her reforms at Cro' Martin are financially disastrous: "...if what I hear be true, she is spending more money on the property than the fee-simple is worth" (1:115). To Martin's parsimonious Scotch agent, she brings the dangers of education and higher expectation to a properly suppressed peasant class. He blames the momentous defeat of the Martins' Tory candidate in a local election on the dangerous changes Mary Martin has initiated:

"I did my best, by warning, and indeed by thwarting, so far as I could, these same changes. But I was not listened to. I foretold what it would all end in , this amelearating the condition of the small farmer-- this raising the moral standard o' the people, and a' that. I foresaw that if they grow richer, they'd grow sturdier; and if they learned to read, they'd begin to reflect. Ah my leddy, a verra dangerous practice this same habit of reflaction is, to folk who wear ragged clothes and dine on potatoes." (1:298-99)

Lever characterizes most of Mary's critics-- the politician, the priest, and the land agent--as self serving men. In his preface he bitterly suggests that were Mary Martin to practice the same benevolence in contemporary Ireland (1872), the priest, the agitators, the National Press, and the people themselves would be

certain to warn "against whatever promised to establish peace and contentment to the land" (I:xi). The most convincing arguments against Mary's efforts to reform the Big House emerge, however, from one of her strongest admirers in the novel-- and from one of Lever's most attractive characters. In creating the aging lawyer Valentine Repton, a former associate of Gratton and Curran in the golden days of the Ascendancy class "before the Union," Lever provides his novel with a voice incorporating that complex analysis of action which genuine historical perspective imposes on the writer. Repton's voice, neither didactic nor idealizing, is unique to Lever's fiction. Inconceivable in an Edgeworth novel, Repton speaks with the worldly authority of unsentimentalized political experience. He evaluates the course of Anglo-Irish history with a tough-minded realism which avoids either cynicism or sentimentality. His admiration for Mary Martin's "noble career" and for her efforts to save the Big House does not mitigate his judgement that "the experiment comes too late." In an article on Maria Edgeworth and Lever, Thomas O'Keefe has suggested that through Repton, Lever speaks to a character much like Maria Edgeworth (87):

"It is too late to try the feudal system in the year of our Lord 1829, Miss Martin. We live in the age where everything is to be redressed by a Parliament. The old school compact between proprietor and peasant is repealed, and all must be done by 'the House.' Now, if your grandfather had pursued the path that you are doing to-day, this crisis might never have arrived; but he didn't young lady. He lived like a real gentleman; he hunted, and drank, and feasted, and rack-rented, and horsewhipped all around him; and what with duelling of a morning and drinking over-night, taught the people a code of morals that has assumed all the compactness of a system. Ay, I say it with grief, this is a land corrupted from the top, and every vice of its gentry has but filtered down to its populace!" (I:172)

To Repton and to those Anglo-Irish in power, the emerging ruling class is clear. The Catholic church, not the Big House, will dominate a new Ireland. Here the Chief Secretary of Ireland advises the Viceroy :

"Old families uprooted, old ties severed; the people with no instinct than lawlessness, hesitating which side to take. Their old leaders, only bent upon the political, have forgotten the social struggle, and thus the masses are left without guidance or direction. It is my firm conviction that the Church of Rome will seize the happy moment to usurp an authority thus unclaimed and the priest step in between the landlord and the demagogue; and it is equally my belief that you can only retard, not prevent this consummation. " (II:329)

For Lever, the new order which is to be ushered in is sadly lacking in those human qualities which Mary Martin represents. Mary's old Irish nurse Catty responds to change much as Thady Quirk does in Castle Rackrent. To both loyal Catholic retainers, the new age of social mobility brings only loss:

"There's change enough, and too many already...I remember the place upwards of eighty years...There was no mill there then nor a school-house, no, nor a dispensary either! Musha, but the people were better off, and happier when they had none of them. ... Now it's all readin' and writin', teaching honest people to be rogues, and give them new contrivances to cheat their masters...Money is in everybody's heart. ...Tis all money...To be rich they're all strivin'...." (II: 286-7)

Even Daniel Nelligan, the hard-nosed, budding capitalist shopkeeper of Oughterard acknowledges the power of the past and the glamor of the Big House. He cannot refuse Mary's request that he ignore his partisan feelings and allow her to befriend his family.

"It's more than a prejudice , after all," muttered he, as he looked after her as she drove away. "There's something deeper and stronger in it than that, or else a few words spoken by a young girl couldn't so suddenly rout all the sentiments of a lifetime! Ay, Ay," added he, still to himself, "we may pull them down; we may humble them; but we'll never fill their places." (I:341)

By the end of The Martins of Cro' Martin the Anglo-Irish gentry are routed, but the peasants gain nothing from the fall of the Big House. Indeed, Mary Martin's place cannot be filled. When the Martins abandon their land and

become absentee landlords, their tenants are left to their fate. Desolate and poverty stricken, they succumb to the depredations of famine and its accompanying horrors--slow starvation, cholera, and typhus. Lever's descriptions of Ireland of the 1830 's as a wasteland of disease and hunger anticipate the Great Famine to come in the 1840's when he was writing the novel.

A dreadful malady walked the land, and its victims lay in every house! The villages were depopulated, the little clusters of houses at cross roads were stricken, the lone shealing on the mountain side, the miserable cottage of the dreary moor, were each the scenes of desolation and death. It was as though the land were about to be devastated, and the race of man swept from its surface! (II: 131-2)

Images of abandonment and death dominate the last sections of the novel. In her efforts to care for the dying tenants, Mary Martin contracts typhus and dies of it. Her uncle, Lord Godfrey Martin, now an absentee landlord leading a purposeless life in Paris and Baden-Baden, feels alone and dispossessed. He dies of a stroke far from home, imagining himself back in Ireland and calling out for the niece he left on his estate to assume his own responsibilities. The uncle and niece are buried together at Cro' Martin, surrounded by their grieving tenants who can look forward to a future of increasing bleakness.

Cro' Martin is briefly rescued from the bankruptcy of Lord Martin's profligate son by the revelation that Mary's father, the self-exiled Barry Martin, not the dead Godfrey, was the true heir to the estate. Such melodramatic solutions are, however, merely temporary, for the estate is finally claimed by the courts and lost by the Martins. The complicated plot machinations at the conclusion of The Martins of Cro' Martin, involving the unmaskings of true and false heirs, recall the end of Edgeworth's Ennui, where the Earl of Glenthorn learns that a peasant blacksmith is the legitimate master of the Big House. Such preoccupations with genuine and spurious genealogy suggest how for the Anglo-Irish novelist, family decline is caused not only by irresponsible behavior by the landlord, but also by

the breakdown of orderly lines of succession.

Lever can find hope for Ireland only in his idealized vision of Joe Nelligan, the brilliant son of Catholic Ireland who carries his sorrow at Mary Martin's death with him as the "great disappointment of his life." Thus Joe is formed by the double strands of his national heritage-- by his vision of a hierarchial feudal world represented by Mary Martin and the Anglo-Irish Big House and by the reality of Catholic Ireland's displacement of the Ascendancy. In The Martins of Cro' Martin the Big House survives only as an idealized moral force in Joe Nelligan's memory, a force which refines Joe and saves him from contamination by the rancorous political reality of a new world which Lever cannot accept even as he exposes the rot in the old.

Chapter Four

Ascendancy Guilt in the Anglo-Irish Gothic Big House Novel:

Charles Maturin and Sheridan Le Fanu

Historical and Critical Background

Charles Maturin's Melmoth the Wanderer (1820) and Sheridan Le Fanu's Uncle Silas (1864) are not written in the realistic tradition of Lever's novels. These masterpieces of Gothic terror exist, however, in a powerfully allusive relationship to the realistic Big House novel in Ireland, echoing but transforming the basic conventions of the form established by Castle Rackrent. The affinity between Maturin's and Le Fanu's Gothic creations and the Anglo-Irish Big House novel emphasizes certain compelling features of Ascendancy life in nineteenth-century Ireland: a preoccupation with a loss of position and prestige, with spiritual and physical decay, and with the guilt of an oppressor class fast losing ground to new Catholic political challenges. Thus while Melmoth The Wanderer and Uncle Silas exist outside the major realistic tradition examined in this study, both novels immediately evoke that atmosphere of guilt and desolation, that disquieting sense of loss and cultural isolation which dominates nineteenth century Anglo-Irish fiction.

The masking of much social and political content in Melmoth the Wanderer and Uncle Silas by Gothic conventions should not obscure the multiplicity of sources for the novels. On the one hand, both emerge from a Gothic literary tradition with recognizable conventions: decaying houses, haunting family portraits of doomed relatives, innocent but victimized heroines, guilt-ridden and demonic but tormented villains, and in the case of Maturin's novel, virulent anti-clericalism. But the novels are not merely literary artifacts, brilliant apogees of the Gothic tradition; they also represent complex social and political responses

to nineteenth century Anglo-Irish society transmuted into literature. Central to each work are the latent subversive political implications of Gothic literature which lend themselves so well to colonial Ireland. In both works, demonic villains act out in their appalling behavior both their guilty identification with systems of power and their tormented domination by them. Suggestions of the Gothic appears covertly in Edgeworth's Ennui, in the description, for example, of Lord Glenthorn's estate which implies the subversive power of an archaic and uncivilized Ireland. In Maturin's and Le Fanu's darker and more fully developed Gothic works, the form becomes a means of exploring the costs of oppressive colonial systems upon those exploiters trapped within them. In his preface to Melmoth The Wanderer, William Axton describes the inescapable enthrallment of the Gothic hero-villain to the sources of his corruption. Axton's emphasis on the guilty conscience of the hero-villain suggests a certain congruence between the Gothic form and the Big House tradition of colonial Anglo-Ireland.

Equally a victim of despotism and an exploiter of it, he has been perverted by an authoritarian environment so that he both turns it to the gratification of his will for power and is twisted by his effort to break away from it or to undermine it. His individuality permanently threatened, he thirsts to realize himself in tyranny at the same time he is guiltily aware of his evil. (x-xi)

As Anglo-Irish novels, Melmoth the Wanderer and Uncle Silas are created by authors who, while solidly entrenched in Ascendancy life, are writing from within an urban, political and literary Dublin world, rather than from within the Big House itself--Maturin as a flamboyant but unsuccessful member of the Church of Ireland hierarchy attempting to supplement his meagre income and Le Fanu, more than a generation later, as a struggling literary entrepreneur. The consciously literary quality of their novels suggests that both were created by authors who saw themselves as professional writers seeking to satisfy public demand, not primarily as landed proprietors bent on defending or reforming a

social system which supported them.

As Julian Moynahan has noted (46), the French Huguenot ancestry of both writers suggests yet another biographical source for their distinctive use of Anglo-Irish themes in their novels. Melmoth the Wanderer was written during the early years of the Catholic struggle for emancipation in Ireland, and while the novel echoes familiar anticlerical themes established by Maturin's Gothic predecessors (most notably by 'Monk' Lewis), it also suggests a deep rooted anxiety about Catholic power which far exceeds that of his Anglo-Irish contemporaries. Although Maturin expresses strong sympathy for Irish cultural nationalism in several of his works, his religious anxiety is perhaps best explained by his family's identification with the history of victimized French Huguenots rather than with the more secure Anglo-Irish Protestants. In their early fiction, however, for example in Maturin's Milesian Chief or Le Fanu's Purcell Papers, both authors express a covert sympathy with the native Irish gentry class, dispossessed and exiled by the Cromwellian intruders, much as their own Protestant ancestors were dispossessed by the Catholic hegemony in seventeenth-century France. The harsh if allegorized attacks on Ascendancy isolation from Catholic Ireland which can be found buried in both Melmoth the Wanderer and Uncle Silas suggest ways in which Maturin and Le Fanu use the conventions of Gothic literature to both mask and release their complexly motivated political responses to Anglo-Irish society in a century of resurgent Irish Catholic nationalism.

Although Maturin and Le Fanu have been interpreted and praised primarily for their creation of Gothic masterpieces, a few recent critics have begun to explore the social and political contexts of their work. Peter Mills Henderson's dissertation on Maturin argues, for example, against the traditional emphasis on Maturin's Gothic traits and proposes a convincing reinterpretation of him as a commentator on Ireland's social condition in the early nineteenth century.

Henderson's reading of Melmoth as a spiritual and social allegory rather than simply as another Gothic sensation novel is echoed by W. J. McCormack's radical reinterpretation of Le Fanu's Uncle Silas as an allegory of Anglo-Irish guilt. In a short study on Maturin, Robert Lougy emphasizes that Tory, Protestant identity which left Maturin permanently estranged in his native country and preoccupied with recording this estrangement through his characters (86). Most recently, Julian Moynahan's brief but richly suggestive article, "The Politics of Anglo-Irish Gothic: Maturin, Le Fanu And 'The Return of the Repressed,'" notes how Maturin viewed early nineteenth-century Ireland as essentially a "living Gothic" (47), and explores the affinity between Gothic literary conventions and the earliest major Anglo-Irish novel.

With a little creative misreading one could claim that the Gothic strain in this literature is a major one all the way through. For is not Castle Rackrent, which focusses on a decayed but titled house, on decline and fall, on visiting the sins of the 'old ones' on later generations, a Gothic romance in the Faulknerian if not the Radcliffian mold. It is indeed, except that the thing is worked as a sly and bracing middle-to-low comedy and the story lacks anything remotely resembling a broody Gothic hero of relentless will and suicidal tendency. (44)

Charles Maturin's Melmoth The Wanderer

In Melmoth The Wanderer, Maturin's wildly extravagant fictional superstructure, the missing element of the "broody Gothic hero" is amply supplied. Set not just in Ireland, but in Spain, England, and an island off India, Maturin's collection of six intricately interwoven plots is centered on the damned Melmoth, who must wander through the world searching for a victim who will release him from a Faustian pact. In exchange for one-hundred fifty years of youth and supernatural powers, Melmoth has bartered his soul with the devil.

But unlike Faust, he can free himself from eternal torment if he finds a substitute victim, one who will succumb to his temptations, enter into the satanic pact, and exchange destinies with him. Thus Melmoth is Faust and Mephistopheles in one, traversing the earth in search of his reprieve, the guilt-ridden, tormented villain with roots, certainly, in the tradition of Romantic Satanism, but emerging most directly, Maturin tells us in his preface to the novel, from a passage in one of his own sermons.

At this moment is there one of us present, however we may have departed from the Lord, disobeyed his will, and disregarded his word-- is there one of us who would, at this moment, accept all that man could bestow, or earth could afford, to resign the hope of his salvation?-- No, there is not--not such a fool on earth, were the enemy of mankind to traverse it with the offer! (Preface 37)

Maturin presents Melmoth, then, as a warning of the extraordinary man's capacity for total corruption; Melmoth's failure to find reprieve for his sin, as evidence of the faith of the rest of humanity.

Maturin's decision to make his Faustian protagonist an Anglo-Irish absentee and his choice to frame his collection of plots with the tale of the decay of an Anglo-Irish estate places his novel in the tradition of Big House fiction. The novel begins in 1816 when young John Melmoth, the impoverished scion of a declining landed Anglo-Irish family, is summoned to the death bed of his only living relative. This uncle is a miserly and secluded old man whose paranoic suspicion of his Irish retainers and whose fear of poverty have reduced his country seat to desolation--"...penury had been aggravated and sharpened into downright misery" (43). His lodge is in ruins; the approach has been transformed into a miry road; the kitchen fare is squalid. The uncle's life-long "oddities and infirmities" have led to a collapse of authority and affection. As he lies dying, his obsequious and brutalized retainers reward his mistrust by stealing his liquor and food, under the guise of mourning his approaching death.

The introductory and concluding sections of Melmoth The Wanderer, the framework for an intricate series of five other Gothic stories of terror, provide the novel with a powerful realistic backdrop in Ireland. Set easily within memory of the infamous act of Union, when the Ascendancy was accused of selling its country for a handful of titles, the story of Old Melmoth's death is essentially a study of Anglo-Irish guilt. All illusions of a feudal bond between landlord and tenant are gone. The hatred the old miser feels for his retainers is based on his terror of their depredations of his property. Although he dies a rich man, leaving his nephew a handsome patrimony, his last words attest to his obsessive suspicions and fear of loss. He shocks his nephew by begging that he intercede with the minister for a parish coffin, and as the housekeeper attempts to clothe the dying man in a clean shirt and nightcap, he cries out desperately: "They are robbing me, --robbing me in my last moments,-- robbing a dying man. John won't you assist me,-- I shall die a beggar; they are taking my last shirt,-- I shall die a beggar" (57).

Maturin provides no direct explanation for the miser's fears, but the story of his family history which his nephew learns after the old man's death provides a familiar historical basis for Anglo-Irish guilt and paranoia. At first John Melmoth's darker musings about his uncle's terror lead him to assume a criminal past, some personal culpability toward his tenants.

If his uncle was not superstitious, might he not have been guilty, and might not his strange and sudden death, and even the terrible visitation that preceded it, have been owing to some wrong that his rapacity had done the widow and the fatherless. (61-2)

The housekeeper's answer to his inquiries are, however, reassuring, for she convinces him though his uncle was harsh, he was personally honest. "He would have starved all the wrong, but he would not have wronged it for a farthing" (62). His guilt, then, has more complex sources. Finally the young heir seeks

information about his family's history from a witchlike peasant sybil, and as he meditates on her revelations, he sits amidst the squalid reminders of his family's decline.

As Melmoth leaned against the window, whose dismantled frame, and pierced and shattered panes, shook with every gust of wind, his eye encountered nothing but that most cheerless of all prospects, a miser's garden--walls broken down, grass-grown walks whose grass was not even green, dwarfish doddered, leafless trees, and a luxuriant crop of nettles and weeds rearing their unlovely heads where there had once been flowers, all waving and bending in capricious and unsightly forms, as the wind sighed over them. It was the verdure of the churchyard, the garden of death. He turned for relief to the room but no relief was there, --the wainscotting dark with dirt, and in many places cracked and starting from the wall-- the rusty grate, so long unconscious of a fire, that nothing but a sullen smoke could be coaxed to issue from between its dingy bars-- a tattered almanack of 1750, a time-keeper dumb for want of repair, and a rusty fowling -piece without a lock.
(63-64)

Sitting amidst this symbolic squalor--the almanac of the Penal Law days, a "dumb" clock which cannot record history or time, and a useless gun-- overlooking the sere and wasted landscape of his patrimony of death through distorted, shattered windowpanes, he recalls what he has just learned, "with the air of a man who is cross-examining an evidence, and trying to make him contradict himself" (64). In his own family's history, Melmoth hears the familiar story of Anglo-Irish injustice and expropriation. Unlike Glenthorn in Edgeworth's Ennui who learns from an old peasant woman of his noble family history --that he is descended from the kings of Ireland-- young Melmoth hears of his family's guilt. His peasant informant reveals that the first Melmoth who settled in Ireland was an officer of Cromwell's army who was given land confiscated from a native Irish family. But more ominously he learns of a mysterious, satanic elder brother of this first settler, a "damned magician," an ageless spectre who travelled abroad in his youth and who returns to Ireland to haunt the deathbeds of those family members known to be "of evil passions or habits" (65). The threatening peasant

outsider of the traditional Big House novel is thus transmuted in its Gothic form into the insider, the ominous personification of a guilty Anglo-Irish conscience who haunts the corridors of the decaying estate.

The setting for these revelations suggests that the damned ancestral Melmoth, the satanic apparition and personification of evil who dominates the subsequent four hundred pages of the novel, is a figure with roots not only in the Faustian legends of Europe and in the tradition of satanic Romantic hero villains, but also in a particularly Anglo-Irish vision of guilt. Old Melmoth's paranoic fear of dispossession by his Irish tenants and his miserly withholding of money and care from his Irish land evoke those "evil passions or habits" which warrant the visitation by his satanic ancestor which precipitates his death.

While the above reading of the framing tale of Melmoth The Wanderer only begins to touch the extraordinary richness of the multilayered novel, Maturin's insistence on the Anglo-Irish nationality of his doomed protagonist suggests his attempt to create not only an archetypal figure of tormented pride and damnation, but also, through the frame story, a more localized vision of sin. Although Melmoth represents an incarnation of Anglo-Irish guilt, Maturin's virulent attacks on the Catholic hierarchy throughout the subsequent tales complicate any simple allegorical readings of the novel. But Maturin's anti-Catholicism in a period of rising Catholic pressure for emancipation does not lead him to excuse the failures of the Protestant Ascendancy. By framing his novel with a story of the breakdown of reciprocity between Irish tenant and landlord, and by depicting the Catholic tenants on the old miser's estate much as Lever does--as the illiterate, obsequious victims of neglect and exploitation--the Church of Ireland clergyman lashes out at the failures of his own class to rescue the Catholic peasantry from the superstition and ignorance of their own creed.

If we are to push the allegorical reading of the novel very far, Melmoth is, of course, the quintessential absentee landlord, wandering throughout Europe

searching for his own reprieve, while his family estate slides into decay. On one occasion Maturin calls attention to Melmoth's Irish origins as he wanders the streets of Madrid, as if to resist the reader's impulse to view him solely as a transcendent figure of doom, free from any specific human or national history. "He is said to be a native of Ireland--(a country that no one knows, which the natives are particularly reluctant to dwell in from various causes)" (433). Or again, when Immalee, the innocent young woman Melmoth possesses and destroys, recalls him, she remember "those sweet songs of his country which he had taught her in his happier moods" (442).

With Melmoth's failure to save himself through a sacrificial victim, he returns for his punishment from the exotic Gothic world of Catholic Spain to the Irish Big House, the decaying family lodge which he had deserted one hundred fifty years ago. There, before the horrified eyes of his descendant, young John Melmoth, and one of his intended victims, the Spaniard Monçada, the Wanderer reappears: "Your ancestor had come home"... "his wandering are over..." (696). "In this apartment..." "I first drew breath, in this I must perhaps resign it,--would I had never been born" (701)! Even in Melmoth's actual death, when he is presumably dragged over a cliff by the satanic forces that pursue him, Maturin carefully distinguishes between florid literary visions of damnation and the cold, grey landscape of the Wanderer's actual end in Ireland. Melmoth spends his last night in spiritual terror:

He dreamed that he stood on the summit of a precipice whose downward height no eye could have measured, but for the fearful waves of a fiery ocean that lashed, and blazed, and roared at in bottom, sending its burning spray far up, so as to drench the dreamer with its sulphurous rain, The whole glowing ocean below was alive--every billow bore an agonizing soul, that rose like a wreck or a putrid corse on the wave of the earth's ocean--uttered a shriek as it burst against that adamantine precipice--sunk and rose again to repeat the tremendous experiment!
(697-698)

Melmoth's actual death struggles, accompanied by cries of supplication or blasphemy--his terrified listeners cannot distinguish which -- occur not by the nightmare "fearful waves of a fiery ocean", but by the shore of the Irish sea. Young Melmoth and his companion follow a path through a field which looks "as if a person had dragged, or been dragged, his way through it" (702) to the edge of a summit of rock among the cliffs of the Wicklow coast. The ocean they look down at and by which they find the Wanderer's handkerchief -- "the wide waste, engulfing ocean!" (703)-- is, in its representative Irish particularity and its grey, gaping desolation, as terrifying as the most florid Gothic nightmares of eternal doom. The return to an abandoned Ireland is a return to the terror of a grey, desolate punishment.

Sheridan Le Fanu's Uncle Silas

Although Sheridan Le Fanu's Uncle Silas, the other great Gothic creation of nineteenth-century Irish fiction, was written almost half a century after Maturin's Gothic masterpiece, the two novels share a preoccupation with Ascendancy guilt. Le Fanu's complex relationship to Anglo-Irish political life suggests why Uncle Silas, like Melmoth The Wanderer should be read not simply as a Gothic sensation novel, or as an exploration of psychic repression and projection, but also as a symbolic exploration of the beleaguered, isolated, and finally culpable position occupied by the Anglo-Irish Protestant landowning class in the nineteenth century. Le Fanu's life reveals his profoundly ambivalent relationship to his own background. In Sheridan Le Fanu And Victorian Ireland, his biographer, W. J. McCormack, traces Le Fanu's childhood as the son of an early nineteenth-century Church of Ireland clergyman fast losing ground-- both income and prestige--to Catholic resistance to the tithe. As a child Le Fanu witnessed attempted violence against his own family and as an adult, he strongly opposed

Daniel O'Connell's Catholic leadership and the Whig alliance with O'Connell. Yet Le Fanu's growing dissatisfaction with Tory solutions to the erosion of Protestant power led to his flirtation with the reconciling cultural politics of the United Irishmen and his subsequent feelings of betrayal at finding himself closely linked with the revolutionary Anglo-Irish figure of William Smith-O'Brien in the abortive revolution of 1848. After this political crisis in his life, Le Fanu abandoned his early historical fiction in which he identified, like Maturin, with the decaying remnant of a safely defeated and exiled Jacobite gentry class and turned instead to the masked and symbolic exposure of Protestant Anglo-Ireland guilt which we see in Uncle Silas. (McCormack, Sheridan Le Fanu chps. 2,3)

As an Irish Big House novel, Uncle Silas exists, like Melmoth The Wanderer, at many removes from the social realism of Edgeworth's and Lever's fiction. Without a reference to Irish politics, with a setting in nineteenth-century England rather than in Ireland, and with the plot of a conventional novel of terror, Uncle Silas's links with the form established by Castle Rackrent seem tenuous. Read, however, with an awareness of its historical contexts, the novel stands as a powerful symbolic assault on Ascendancy culture from within that culture itself. Uncle Silas demands, as its subtlest commentator, McCormack, has demonstrated, an apprehension of its symbolic patterning and a willingness to engage in allegorical interpretations. As the reading just offered of Maturin's Melmoth The Wanderer suggests, such modes of criticism enrich rather than diminish the traditional interpretations of these Anglo-Irish novels as major achievements of Gothic fiction.

The problem of setting--in England rather than in Ireland--is easily dissolved. While Uncle Silas was written in 1864, it is closely based on an early piece Le Fanu included in The Purcell Papers. Written in 1838, this short story, "Passage in the Secret History of an Irish Countess," represents one of his earliest works with a Protestant Big House setting. An eighteenth-century

Anglo-Irish countess tells the terrible story of her youth. Raised by a cold but duty-bound widowed father, she was left after his death with her uncle, an isolated landlord living under an unproven but powerful charge of murder. The narrator's father resents the suspicion and ostracism of his brother by the Irish aristocracy. To prove his faith in his "deeply injured" brother, he appoints him guardian to his daughter and leaves him her fortune in the event of her premature death; thus unwittingly he places his unprotected child in the clutches of a violent criminal with powerful motives to see her dead. In her new guardian's decaying mansion house of Carrigvarah in County Galway, the orphan is terrorized by the marital aspirations of her loutish cousin who seeks her fortune, and, after she angrily rejects her cousin, by the threats of her uncle. Imprisoned within the demesne walls, threatened with the madhouse for her terrors, she fearfully awaits her uncle's move and finally escapes his brutal attempt to murder her (1-102).

The Irish setting of this tale of terror and its preoccupation with the decay and corruption on the uncle's Galway estate reveals Le Fanu's interest, as early as 1838, with questions of guilt within the Ascendancy class. While "Passage in the Secret History of an Irish Countess" barely hints at the complexity and psychological depths of Uncle Silas, the early story serves as a virtual plot outline for the novel; moreover it clearly establishes its original venue, which was changed to England because of the demands of Le Fanu's English publishers (McCormack, "Introduction" xvi). (As a nineteenth-century Irish writer, Le Fanu, like Edgeworth, Lever, and Maturin, was constantly subject to pressures by British publishers to write for a British audience only superficially acquainted with Irish society.) In an essay written in 1946, Elizabeth Bowen responds to the familiar Anglo-Irish characteristics of the novel.

...Uncle Silas has always struck me as being an Irish story transposed to an English setting. The hermetic solitude and the autocracy of the great country house, the demonic power of the family myth, fatalism,

feudalism and the 'ascendency' outlook are accepted facts of life for the race of hybrids from which Le Fanu sprang. For the psychological background of Uncle Silas it was necessary for him to invent nothing. Rather, he was at once exploiting in art and exploring for its more terrible implications what would have been the norm for his own heredity. ("Uncle Silas," Collected Impressions 4)

In Uncle Silas Le Fanu reconstructs several of the conventions of the Anglo-Irish Big House novel. The setting of a gloomy country estate, isolated and beleaguered, exists both as Knowl, the seemingly 'safe' childhood home of the narrator, Maud Ruthyn, and in the second half of the novel, as the more terrifying prison of Bartram-Haugh, her Uncle Silas's vast crumbling Derbyshire mansion where she must live after her father's death. Knowl's dark wainscotting, its "grim and pale" portraits and shadowy corridors are balanced by its cheerful fires, its "pretty" and "graceful" paintings, and by the loving servants who surround Maud. But the spectre of death haunts her first home as well as her second. The tapping and sighing ghosts who frequent the corridors of Knowl foreshadow terrifying human violators who will threaten Maud at Bartram-Haugh. In Melmoth The Wanderer and Uncle Silas the intruders are no longer outsiders --ambitious Catholics acquisitively eyeing the Big House--but threatening family presences, tormented villains living in the private hell of personal damnation. Thus in Maturin's and LeFanu's psychological explorations of Anglo-Irish guilt, the traditional Gothic spectres became emblematic of Ascendancy crimes.

Bartram-Haugh's appearance is wilder and darker than that of the well maintained Knowl. The symbolic pattern of enclosure and constriction surrounding this ancient family estate is clear as Maud first enters her new home.

...we wheeled into a wide semicircle formed by the receding park walls, and halted before a great fantastic iron gate, and a pair of tall fluted piers, of white stone, all grass-grown and ivy bound, with great cornices, surmounted with shields and supporters, the Ruthyn bearings washed by the rains of Derbyshire for many a generation of Ruthyns, almost smooth by this time, and looking bleached and

phantasmal, like giant sentinels, with each a hand clasped in his comrade's, to bar our passage to the enchanted castle-- the florid tracery of the iron gate showing like the draperies of white robes hanging from their extended arms to the earth. (182)

The seemingly inaccessible "enchanted castle" is soon transformed into a walled prison, with barred windows and an enclosed courtyard; the Ruthyn coat of arms no longer bars passage into the castle but prevents Maud's escape. The gates are locked against her flight, the orphan is drugged, the murder of the innocent is planned.

Bartram-Haugh is occupied but not owned by Silas Ruthyn, whose dissipated life and tarnished reputation have reduced him to poverty and who is supported by his brother, Austin. A terrifying figure of scorn and anguish, Silas shares with Melmoth the baleful, glaring eyes of the damned soul, eyes which attest to the private hell the two characters have each created for themselves. As oppressors and guilt ridden victims, both men suggest the ways in which the characterization of the Gothic villain reflects a subversive, if covert, political attack on a colonial system. Silas neglects and despoils his home, an ancient and magnificent family estate. As Maud arrives, she see giant trees uprooted by a recent storm and weed-filled avenues which give to Bartram-Haugh "a forlorn character of desertion and decay, contrasting almost awfully with the grandeur of its proportions and richness of its architecture" (183). "It was plain that not nearly a tithe of this great house was inhabited; long corridors and galleries stretched away in dusts and silence, and were crossed by others, whose dark arches inspired me in the distance with an awful sort of sadness" (196). As the romantic young girl wanders about Bartram Haugh, she is reminded with a "pleasing terror" of the Gothic settings of Mrs Radcliffe's romance (197); through such a literary analogy Maud seeks to protect herself from terrors which are finally more malignant than any conceived of by Mrs Radcliffe.

The personal luxuries with which the degenerate Silas surrounds himself--

his jewelled pencil case, his silk hanging, fine wines and chains and seals--are accounted for by his misuse of his trust, for he is engaged in illegally deforesting his niece's property. The bleaching trunks and limbs of ancient oak trees lying about the estate and numbered for sale are reminders of his greed, but to the blind, romantic imagination of his niece, they suggest the fall of the Ruthyns .

I sighed as I passed them by, not because it was wrongfully done, for I really rather leaned to the belief that Uncle Silas was well advised in point of law. But alas! here lay low the grand old family decorations of Bartram-Haugh, not to be replaced for centuries to come, under whose spreading boughs the Ruthyns of three hundred years ago had hawked and hunted!
(323)

Like Thady Quirk in Castle Rackrent , Maud mourns what she perceives as the poignant decline of a once great family, but until faced with the actual plot against her life, she refuses to accept her trustee's account of her uncle's illegal business dealings-- and thus refuses to acknowledge her family's guilt.

The two country estates portrayed in the novel, Austin's Knowl and Silas' Bartram-Haugh, evoke the dark isolated splendor of traditional Gothic settings, but without that subterranean affirmation of disorder which we find, for example, implicit in Maria Edgeworth's contrast between the orderly English estate and the wild Irish castle in Ennui. Edgeworth's use of the Gothic setting in Ennui suggests a subversive freedom, not a constriction; a potential for disorder, but also for health and renewed life for the young hero, Lord Glenthorn. But Knowl and Bartram-Haugh are both simply houses of terror in Uncle Silas; they represent first barriers and then solitary confinement--imprisonment, not freedom--for the young heroine. On each estate Maud is isolated and abused, kept from her loving aunt, subjected to the sadistic control of a grotesque French governess, Madame de la Rougierre, and to the terrifying attacks of her loutish cousin. The distinctions between her childhood with a seemingly loving father and the terrifying months of her youth with her Uncle Silas begin to collapse

when we realize how the events of the first half of the novel foreshadow and contain within them the seeds of the violence of the second. Or as McCormack puts it, "The recurring plot of Le Fanu's fiction is the recurrence of history in the present, the past re-enacting itself" ("Introduction, Uncle Silas xviii).

The doting servants at the well maintained estate of Knowl are certainly different from the from the disreputable and violent band of attendants which Silas gathers around him in his decaying mansion, but Maud is a victim in each of her domiciles. At Knowl she suffers from her father's brooding isolation; from her terror of the ghosts which haunt the dark corridors; from Austin's melancholy and hints about his impending departure; from her nightmares, in one of which her father appears to her as her Uncle Silas later will, "white and malignant," pronouncing the word "Death" (30). When her loving Aunt Monica angrily leaves Knowl after Austin rejects her sensible warnings about Maud's sinister governess, Maud's comment on her home is revealing: "Knowl was dark again--darker than ever" (74).

Knowl's manicured gardens and wooded demesne are not exempt from the terrifying violence which Maud is to endure later at Bartram-Haugh. While picnicking on the grounds of her father's estate with Madame de la Rougierre, she is accosted, insulted, and barely escapes being kidnapped by unknown ruffians-- later revealed as agents of her Uncle Silas who are probably working in league with her governess. Among them is Silas's son Dudley Ruthyn, whose brutish vulgarity, when combined with his father's refined viciousness, attests to degeneracy of the Anglo-Irish family line. Le Fanu's preoccupation with violent attacks on a helpless girl may well have roots in his childhood terrors during the tithe wars, as well as in the conventions of Gothic literature, but in Uncle Silas violence and sexual threats to the young come from within Anglo- Ireland rather than from without. Maud is accosted by agents of her own family; thus her father's obsession with his family name suggests why his initial fury at the

mysterious assault on his daughter subsides, and why he accepts with equanimity the escape of the attackers, an escape which will spare Maud unwelcome "publicity and annoyance" (88).

Austin's insistence on "solitude and silence" (102), his absolute psychological domination of Maud and the household staff --even his daughter seldom dares address him before being addressed by him --, his Swedenborgian religion which isolates him from his community, and his obsessive preoccupation with vindicating his family name suggest the psychic condition of a beleaguered social class. In an allegorical reading of Uncle Silas, Austin represents an Anglo-Ireland fast losing ground to historical change, unable to transcend his obsessive paranoia and thus spare his posterity, a posterity represented in the novel by his victimized and helpless daughter. His culpability for Maud's future suffering is unmitigated by the abstract idealism of his intention, for he makes Maud a living sacrifice to his devotion to his family name.

It may cost you something--are you willing to buy it at a sacrifice? Is there--I don't speak of fortune, that is not involved-- but is there any other honourable sacrifice you would shrink from to dispel the disgrace under which our most ancient and honourable name must otherwise continue to languish.
 ... I believe it to be a duty to take care of others beside myself. The character and influence of an ancient family is a peculiar heritage--sacred but destructible: and woe to him who either destroys or suffers it to perish.
 (102-104)

The two landlords in the novel, Austin Ruthyn, the narrator's father, and Silas Ruthyn, the criminal uncle to whom she is handed over, are each portrayed as proud, alienated men, landlords cut off from their surroundings, living in smoldering resentment against the gentry neighbors who will not forget the unsolved murder of a guest in Silas's home. Between Austin and Silas, Le Fanu portrays virtually every possible failing of the Ascendancy, achieving a specificity of attack which Maturin's far more abstract vision of Anglo-Irish culpability does

not even attempt. The Ruthyns are of an ancient lineage

... who had refused a baronetage often, and it was said even a viscounty, being of a proud and defiant spirt, and thinking themselves higher in station and purer of blood than two-thirds of the nobility into whose ranks, it was said, they had been invited to enter. (1)

Austin's unsuccessful attempts to enter political life lead him to a life abroad of connoisseurship and study. Returning to Knowl, he chooses a life of "remarkable seclusion" and aloofness from the concerns of his country. Silas represents a far darker pattern of Anglo-Irish life, embodying that explicit criminality which the young John Melmoth dreads to hear about his dying uncle and which he discovers embodied in the legend of his fearful ancestor Melmoth the Wanderer. Silas, who marries beneath him, games away any money he has and finally lives as a social outcast. Filled with rage against those who have turned against him after the surfacing of rumors about a murder in his home, he disguises his unregenerate impulses in the trappings of piety and comforts himself with opium. While earlier Big House novels emphasize the failures of the proprietor as landlord to his tenants, Le Fanu adds a true Gothic dimension to the attack on Anglo-Ireland. He explores a deep personal moral degeneracy within the Ascendancy class: the crippling pride in family which allows Austin to sacrifice his innocent daughter to his blind faith in his brother; the criminal greed which provokes Silas's murderous attempt on his niece.

Austin's single-minded pride in his family lineage and his refusal to see beyond his own obsession to the real needs of others-- what McCormack refers to as the gentry class's "reduced apprehension of reality" ("Introduction," Uncle Silas xvi) --is a common theme in Anglo-Irish literature. We need only look back to Lever's portrayal of the isolated and doomed landlord class in The Martins of Cro' Martin, or forward to Edith Somerville's depiction of the foolishly irrelevant Talbot-Lowrys who fail to compromise with historical forces and thus to contain

their own losses in Mount Music, to find the same pattern of genealogical obsession and decline Le Fanu is exploring, albeit in a masked and symbolic form.

McCormack's interpretation of Uncle Silas stresses the simultaneity of the two parts of the novel; for McCormack Silas is virtually a reincarnation of potentials within the seemingly good father, Austin. From this dualistic reading of the novel comes that brilliant insight which places Uncle Silas centrally in the tradition of Anglo-Irish Big House fiction. If Knowl, the childhood home of the past, cannot be evoked as the image of harmonious order and safety, then the whole notion of a once coherent Ascendancy culture begins to collapse:

It is tempting to read the two-part structure of Uncle Silas in terms of a simplified literary sociology in which Austin and Knowl are images of an orderly eighteenth-century hegemony, Silas and Bartram-Haugh as its degenerate or betrayed inheritance in the Victorian age. ... the temptation is best answered by a return to the novel and the reciprocity with which Le Fanu fully relates the two settings to each other. ... Le Fanu offers no view of an Edenic past or of a serene history; if the present is a vicious falling away from previous harmony, then it is the past which is exposed as inadequate or treacherous or illusory. (McCormack, Introduction, Uncle Silas xvii- xviii)

McCormack's reading of Uncle Silas as an exposure of the myths of a feudal stability is relevant to virtually every Big House novel discussed in this study. The ideal of a beneficent feudal landlord is merely the illusion of the abandoned retainer like Thady Quirk in Castle Rackrent or the defeated Big House lady like Mary Martin in Lever's The Martins of Cro' Martin. In Uncle Silas Maud's idealizing of her father and uncle-- representing her wish fulfillment rather than a realistic assessment of her guardians--almost costs her her life. In Anglo-Irish fiction the proprietors of the Big House are improvident and irresponsible at best (the Rackrents); more typically they are exploitative of their dependents or blinded by pride in class (the Melmoths or the Martins). Le Fanu goes further

than any of his predecessors in assigning culpability to the Anglo-Irish landlord. In Uncle Silas the Big House turns upon itself, for Austin Ruthyn's pride in family and Silas Ruthyn's vicious greed condemn Maud to suffering and near death. Not until Molly Keane's Good Behaviour, written more than century after Uncle Silas, do we again see such an exposure of the illusions of order and stability which sustain the Big House, and such a unmerciful depiction of the ways in which a beleaguered society savagely destroys its own young.

Chapter Five

The Big House Fiction of Somerville and Ross

Historical and Critical Background

To move from the world of mid-nineteenth century Anglo-Irish fiction--from Charles Lever's depiction of the waning of a powerful landlord class or Le Fanu's Gothic allegory of Anglo-Irish guilt-- to the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century world of Somerville and Ross is to move to a society not merely in decline, but in the advanced stages of disintegration. The viability of the Big House and traditional systems of land tenure came under specific attack in late nineteenth-century Ireland. After the brutal evictions during the Great Famine, post-famine landlords continued to use their power of eviction, although on a much lesser scale, as a policy to clear land of small holders to free it for more profitable cattle grazing (Lyons, Ireland Since the Famine 114). By the late 1870's the continuing economic insecurity of Irish tenants encouraged vigorous mass actions organized by the newly formed Land League-- specifically boycotting and the resumption of rural outrages as a reaction to eviction (Lyons, Ireland Since the Famine 165). The agricultural depression of the 1880's led to lowered rents; thus small farmers became debtors, threatened by foreclosures of mortgages. Squeezed between inflexible costs and declining rent rolls, landlords suffered major losses along with their tenants (Solow, ch.5). A series of land reforms attempted to deal with the increasing hostility of the Irish peasantry toward the landlord class which erupted into a Land War between 1879 and 1882.

By the 1890's parliamentary legislation began to shift control of Irish land from the Ascendancy class to the tenantry. Finally the revolutionary Wyndham

Land Act of 1903 encouraged landlords to sell their property to tenants by reducing the interest rate on loans and by extending the time of repayment to sixty-eight years. While many landlords in Ireland welcomed this legislation for relieving them of the costs of maintaining burdensome estates, others were bitterly resentful of the British government. Owners who wished to retain their holdings felt that England had abandoned them; now they were, in effect, forced to sell their land to their tenants and abandon their hereditary roles as proprietors of the Big House. Another piece of legislation proposed by Lloyd George in 1909, which imposed a series of land taxes, including a twenty percent tax on unearned increments in land values, when coupled with the Land Court's willingness to grant rent reductions to tenants, solidified bitterness among these landlords (Donoghue 53).

In this time of crisis for the Anglo-Irish landowner, Edith Somerville and Violet Martin emerge as writers from Big House society, not from that unlanded, professional, urban Protestant class which produced Lever, Maturin, or LeFanu. Their Anglo-Norman origins, their families' long associations with Ascendancy Ireland, and the security of their social position among the Anglo-Irish gentry class all suggest that these literary partners --who took Somerville and Ross as their pen name-- would speak out of a deep loyalty to their class and background. In fact, they do not.

The major novels of Somerville and Ross belie their popular reputation as comic writers and affectionately nostalgic recorders of an equestrian society in their Irish R.M. stories. Not only in The Real Charlotte, the masterpiece of their literary collaboration, but especially in the novels Edith Somerville published under the joint pen name after the death of Violet Martin in 1915, Somerville and Ross fiction casts a cold eye on the world of the Big House. The differences in background and political allegiances between these two writers help explain why the most searching and detailed examinations of Big House society occur, in fact,

in the novels Edith Somerville wrote after Martin's death.

Violet Martin, the "Ross" of the literary partnership, belonged to a powerful clan of Connemara, one of the Tribes of Galway, whose family decline provided a loose framework for Charles Lever's The Martins of Cro' Martin. Norman-Irish in origin, the Martins came to Ireland with Strongbow and converted from Catholicism a few generations before Violet Martin's birth. Her family home, Ross, near Oughterard in County Galway, was the first of four Martin Big Houses to be built in Connemara. Smaller than the 200,000 acre property of Ballynahinch, which was constructed by her great-grandfather Richard Martin and became the setting of Lever's novel, Ross survived as a family property longer than any of the other Martin homes. While Ballynahinch was lost to the Martins shortly after the Great Famine, Ross remained in family hands until 1924, when it was sold during the Troubles (Bence-Jones 246).

Edith Somerville's family lineage was marginally less distinguished than her literary partner's. Although like her second cousin Violet Martin she was a descendant of the eminent and incorruptible Charles Kendal Bushe, Lord Chief Justice of Ireland who voted against the Union, the Somervilles were much smaller landlords than the Martins. Because they depended on trade and Army commissions rather than land for support, their position was not seriously affected by the Famine, which ended the Martin family's ownership of Ballynahinch and which permanently changed the semi-feudal relationship between tenant and landlord at Ross. A recent biography of the writers points to the unusually strong nationalist sympathies of the Somerville family and notes, for example, that in 1858, the year of Edith's birth, her grandfather, a friend of the Fenian leader O'Donovan Rossa, hid two Fenians fleeing to America. Even earlier, during the Tithe Wars, this same grandfather distinguished himself by defending his tenants against government forces (Lewis 20).

The great achievement of Edith Somerville and Violet Martin is to

acknowledge in their fiction the disintegration of an Anglo-Irish Big House society they and their ancestors had celebrated and sought to preserve. Both women spent a significant portion of their lives struggling to support their family homes, channelling much of their literary earnings into the maintenance of Drishane and Ross. The significance of their artistic achievements can be comprehended most fully when we read the fiction in the light of their memoirs of childhood or of their family histories: Edith Somerville, writing about her home, Drishane, in Cork, and Violet Martin, writing about Ross, in Galway. Second cousins with shared ancestral roots in the landed gentry society of West Cork and Galway, both women grew up with deep attachments to the traditions of their class and looked back with pride to their illustrious Anglo-Irish ancestors.

In Martin's history of her family, the political silences of a pre-modern Ireland are celebrated with an elegiac nostalgia. She writes of a semi-feudal life at Ross in 1846, the first year of the Famine.

The quietness of untroubled centuries lay like a spell on Connemara, the country of his ancestors; the old ways of life were unquestioned at Ross, and my father went and came among his people in an intimacy as native as the soft air they breathed. On the crowded estate the old routine of potato planting and turf cutting was pursued tranquilly; the people intermarried and subdivided their holdings; few could read and many could not speak English. All were known to the Master, and he was known and understood by them, as the old Galway people know and understood; and the subdivisions of the land were permitted, and the arrears of rent were given time, or taken in boat-loads of turf, or worked off by day-labour, and eviction was unheard of. It was give and take, with the personal element always warm in it: as a system it was probably quite uneconomic, but the hand of affection held it together, and the tradition of centuries was at its back. (Somerville and Ross, "The Martins of Ross" Irish Memories 4)

Martin's bitterness at the wounding separation between tenant and landlord as a result of the late nineteenth-century Land Acts is powerfully felt. Her writing suggests her unequivocal resistance to the nationalist historical perspective.

She speaks of the mutual dependence of landlord and tenant as "a delicate relation, almost akin to matrimony, and like a happy marriage, it needed that both sides should be good fellows" (26). The Land Acts designed to protect tenants are perceived with irony:

In 1870 came Gladstone's Land Act, which by a system of fines shielded the tenant to a great extent from "capricious eviction." As evictions, capricious or otherwise, did not occur at Ross, this section of the Act was not of epoch-making importance there; its other provision, by which tenants became proprietors of their own improvements, was also something of a superfluity.

("The Martins of Ross" Irish Memories 26)

Such passages suggest why the Martin family was unprepared for the 1872 election, when the tenants of Ross turned against the Big House candidate and inflicted a "personal wound" on Violet Martin's father (Irish Memories 7). Like the defeat of Maria Edgeworth's family's candidate forty years earlier, such recurring political shocks to the nineteenth-century Big House demonstrate how easily landlords mistook the repressed hostility of their tenants for a passive feudal devotion. While most critical opinions and anecdotal evidence suggest that of the two writers in the Somerville and Ross partnership, Violet Martin was the more subtle stylist and sophisticated thinker, the level of political conservatism evident in her personal writing suggests why Edith Somerville wrote her great Big House novel only after Martin's death in 1915.

In writing about her collaborator's memoir of Ross, Somerville accurately places Martin's version of the Big House of her childhood into a fictional historical world of the "old days."

Martin has, in her memoir of her brother Robert, given a sketch of life at Ross as it was in the old days, in its patriarchal simplicity, its pastoral abundance, its limitless hospitality, its feudal relations with peasants. Its simplicity was, I imagine, of a more primitive type than can be claimed for any conditions that I can personally remember in my own county.

("Old Forgotten Things" Irish Memories 62)

Somerville's choice of language is significant. To call Martin's piece a sketch suggests a pictorial and personal recreation of mood and ambiance, not an attempt at objective documentation of a historical period. Her language of critical praise accurately reveals her own perception that an aura of nostalgia surrounds Martin's vision of Ross in its "pastoral abundance" and "feudal relations." Somerville's memoir of the Big House of her ancestral world is significantly different from Martin's. Her essay "Drishane," although a far less evocative piece of writing than Martin's memoir, suggests a more matter of fact and objective view of her past. She begins her description of Drishane by acknowledging the power of childhood memories in evoking nostalgia. Thus nostalgia, when it is evoked, is a self-consciously perceived route to memory rather than a controlling force distorting the historical perception :

But even if the details of childhood fail us, or are at best uncertain, some impressions will hold their places in memory, and for me, among the most ineffaceable of these is the picture of what, as a child, I believed to be the most wonderful and splendid house in the world, my grandfather's old house, in which, after the patriarchal fashion of an older Ireland, my father and mother lived with him and my grandmother, and there bred up such a family as I have heard described as being both long and serious. ("Drishane"

Wheel-Tracks 1-2)

Somerville's first major work after Violet Martin's death is Mount Music, a novel indebted to the nostalgic memories of her earliest years at Drishane, "that most wonderful and splendid old house." But Mount Music is also committed to registering the life of the Big House in the context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Irish political history; in its strongest moments, the novel transcends its nostalgia and achieves a historical objectivity and toughminded judgment of an Anglo-Irish society which attempted to ignore history.

Edith Somerville was writing Mount Music and The Big House of Inver in the same period in which Yeats was creating a series of poems evoking Coole Park

and other "ancestral houses" in "Meditations in Time of Civil War." In this poetry the beleaguered Anglo-Irish Big House, for Yeats a symbol of the defeat of the strong by the weak, comes to represent those aesthetic and aristocratic values lost by the modern world. In the contemporary Big House Yeats finds public metaphors for an intensely personal and idiosyncratic vision of Ascendancy history whose claim for validity lies not in history itself but in a complex theory of art and society by which the deeds of a few great men are made the measure of an age. Only in his late play "Purgatory," his last major statement on the Big House which was published fourteen years after Somerville's The Big House of Inver, does Yeats turn to a view of Anglo-Ireland which is close to that of the novelists. The power of "Purgatory" (1939) lies in its narrative disgust with the failures of Ascendancy culture, with the corruptions of blood and genealogy which lead, as they do in so many Anglo-Irish novels, to greedy violence, decay, and defeat.

Unlike Yeats's earlier works, "Purgatory" reflects a similar revulsion against contemporary Anglo-Ireland which Standish O'Grady, the father of the Literary Revival, was expressing as early as the 1880's. Watching the landlords of Ireland steer themselves into certain extinction, O'Grady articulates--albeit with greater rhetorical fervor--the same vision of Big House society that the Anglo-Irish novelists were creating.

Alas! I believe there never will be, as I know there never has been with the cycle of recorded things, an aristocracy so rotten in its seeming strength, so recreant, resourceless, and stupid in the day of trial, so degenerate, outworn, and effete. You have outlived your day. In the normal course of things, in the the natural growth of nations, I see how you should have been wiped out of existence some half-century since--would have been, but for England; long since would have fallen down and been forgotten but for the imperial crutch.
(213)

With their dark visions of Anglo-Irish decline, O'Grady and the late Yeats

approach that devaluation of Ascendancy descendants which Edith Somerville achieved in The Big House of Inver: "...to kill a house/ Where great men grew up, married, died,/ I here declare a capital offense" ("Purgatory" Collected Plays 432). But while Somerville's novel conveys O'Grady's and Yeats's horror at the costs of late nineteenth- and early twentieth- Anglo-Irish prodigality, she is far less certain than they of the "greatness" of even the earliest inhabitants of the Big House. In her masterpiece, The Big House of Inver, Somerville's devaluation of the Anglo-Irish reaches far back into the eighteenth century itself--the period of Ascendancy achievement exalted by the Literary Revival.

Committed to the circumstantial realism of the novel form, Somerville chooses to turn not to the extraordinary and culturally evocative Big House like Coole Park, which served as the center of the Literary Renaissance, but to the far more ordinary fictionalized estates of Mount Music or Inver, modelled on houses she knew or perceived about her. These were houses, grand and not so grand, whose contemporary owners were isolated from culture, unaware of the art treasures they may have inherited, preoccupied with horses or fox hunting, not books and ideas. (O'Grady's comment on his fellow Anglo-Irish is telling: "Christ save us! You read nothing, know nothing" [240].) Like her nineteenth-century predecessors Edgeworth and Lever, Somerville uses the Big House form not to idealize a dead or dying culture but to register those steps by which that culture went down to defeat.

The problems involved in reading the works of Somerville and Ross have been daunting for modern critics. Writing in the shadow of a self-confident eighteenth century Ascendancy, Edgeworth can be pardoned for her political loyalty to her class and praised for her careful depiction of the reforms it must undergo if it is to survive. If she is, in Daniel Corkery's terminology, a "colonial" rather than an Irish author, writing for the English not the Irish reader (9), she is at least driven by a reformer's vision of the failures of the system she represents.

Until the recent revival of interest in his work, Lever was simply dismissed as a frivolous colonial novelist, seen as part of what Corkery labelled a "shameful literary tradition" in Ireland (10). The present reinterpretation of Lever capitalizes on the obvious neglect of his later novels and seeks to depict him as a serious historical writer, rather than simply as a lackey of his class.

But Somerville and Ross have long presented intransigent problems for critics. The bulk of their work appears in the last years of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth; thus they are contemporaries of the early Yeats, Lady Gregory, Synge, and Douglas Hyde--Anglo-Irish writers who turn to Celtic mythology and peasant culture as sources of a legitimate national heritage. Somerville and Ross, however, remain resolutely Anglo-Irish in their interests. In all but one novel, they write about the Big House and the Protestant Irish community, unapologetically ignoring that peasant mythology which became a central focus of the Literary Revival. As Big House ladies disconcertingly remote from the political or cultural nationalism of the early twentieth century, they are castigated by some of their warmest critics. In a laudatory overview of their achievements written in 1945, B.G. MacCarthy admits that, "it would be too much to ask that they question the system by which ownership was retained" (187), but in a subtle revival of Corkery's discriminations between Irish and colonial literature, she emphasizes their identity as gifted colonial writers.

They lived in Ireland, but were not of it, enclosed as they were within that pale of inherited ideas which forbade the application of logic to their position in relation to 'common people.' Too English for the Irish, too Irish for the English, they were poised between two worlds. (189)

Ann Power similarly warns how their position as gentry women led to a fatal flaw.

However great their sympathy with the Irish attitude to life, however keen their appreciation of the Irish intelligence, there always creeps in that deadly touch of condescension, and even in the most affectionate portrayal is the fatal sense of displaying the Irish to an English

reader-- the trap which lies in wait, however cunningly hidden, for all Irish writers who address an English audience. (48)

Thomas Flanagan is one of the few critics who approaches Somerville and Ross for what they are, not for what some readers wish they had been. In 1966 Flanagan disposed of the recurring political cavils against them in his response to yet another critical objection, this time to Lennox Robinson's observation that in Somerville and Ross there is "a touch-- it is only a touch -- of 'we' and 'they', of the contrast between the Big House and the Cabin" (Preface, Cummins X1). Flanagan's rejoinder seems just right in its unapologetic acknowledgment of the historical reality of a hierarchical society. To Robinson's objections he suggests, "This is much like saying that Faulkner writes of Negroes with just a touch of 'we' and 'they.' Somerville and Ross were daughters of the Big House, and the Cabins belonged to the other Ireland" ("The Big House of Ross-Drishane" 56).³ Turning away from the fruitless critical debate initiated by Daniel Corkery's separation of colonial from Irish literature, Flanagan considers what has been achieved by the Big House form rather than its political inadequacies. Somerville and Ross write about the Ireland they knew, and Flanagan's approach to their novels should encourage future critics to explore how these works provide that close observation of a particular social reality which is the achievement of much significant fiction.

³ If Faulkner could, in fact, in his greatest novels, transcend the white Southern vision of the Negro, his depictions of the poor-white Snopeses and the aristocratic Sartorises, for example, remain firmly grounded in the distinctions established by a class system.

Mount Music

Mount Music was published in 1919, more than a century after Jane Austen's last novel, but in it Edith Somerville presents the same microscopic examination of a small canvas of country house and village society that is the focus of Austen's fiction. In Mount Music Edith Somerville follows Austen's advice about successful writing: "You are now collecting your People delightfully, getting them exactly into such a spot as is the delight of my life; --3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on--" (100). Austen's advice seems relevant to Mount Music, for like the greatest English country house novelist, Edith Somerville writes about the nuances of a small social hierarchy, about the social discriminations and snobberies in village life with the ease and assurance of a master.

The differences between Edith Somerville's and Jane Austen's works suggest how in contrast to Anglo-Irish literature the English country house novel depicts a world where historical and political changes remain as the background not as the foreground of the fiction. In Austen's Persuasion, for example, Sir Walter Elliot heads a declining landed gentry family. Meanwhile a new class of self-made men, men such as the post-Napoleonic British naval officers Admiral Croft and Captain Wentworth, are renting the estate Sir Walter can no longer afford to maintain or are marrying into his family. In Austen's fiction, the economic expansion and social transformations of a newly rising class which is making its way into gentry society exists merely as the background for the novel's emphasis on those moral discriminations by which the inhabitants of a changing society are judged. In Somerville's Big House novels, however, the decline of the Anglo-Irish landed class is the thematic focus, not just the historical background of the fiction.

An examination of Austen's work also suggests how social change in Irish

fiction is far more polarized, far more characterized by conflict and radical loss for the landed class than in England. In Austen's social landscape, an aristocrat like Darcy in Pride and Prejudice easily befriends young Bingley, whose family has acquired its wealth in trade and who is seeking to purchase his own estate; in Emma, Mr Weston has gradually moved up the social ladder into the world of the landed gentry. While a sense of strong class demarcation exists in Austen's social landscape, the rigidity of class distinctions is gradually eroding. As Raymond Williams has so admirably demonstrated, Austen is depicting a society which is in the midst of assimilating itself to social mobility and shifting class distinctions (113-119). Those characters in her novels who are most insistent on halting the breakdown of strict social barriers are seriously flawed, and like Lady Catherine De Bourgh or Sir Walter Elliot are presented as caricatures rather than as fully developed personalities. But in Anglo-Irish fiction social change brings acute political loss to the Big House. Change is portrayed not as a series of gradual shifts in the systems of economic distribution and social status, but as radical and, on occasion, violent transformations of political institutions. These transformations are enfranchising and enriching the Catholic majority, but rapidly eclipsing the power and privileges of the ruling Anglo-Irish class. Thus social change in Anglo-Irish literature appears as far less gradual and organic than in English fiction. From the perspective of the Big House, the bearer of such change emerges from a hostile and alien social group.

A very specific sense of history is always in the foreground in Mount Music, a history carefully presented from the point of view of the Irish Big House in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Spanning the years from 1894 to 1907 when the Land Acts were taking effect, the novel depicts a period of crisis for the Anglo-Irish. This world of political crisis, so remote from the English country house novels of Austen and still only the ominous shadow of World War I and encroaching suburban values in Forster's Howards End, constantly intrudes

on the lives of the characters in Mount Music. For the Big House children who are dreading going back to school after the holidays, "there was always a hope of a 'rising,' in which case it would be the boys' pleasing duty to stay at home and fight", either against the Land Leaguers or "the English oppressors of a downtrodden Ireland" (8). The Big House lovers--Christian Talbot-Lowry, professing her loyalty to the King, and Larry Coppinger, asserting his Home Rule convictions-- include political argument in their repertoire of love talk and almost lose each other because of political differences.

At the pinnacle of society in Mount Music are the Talbot-Lowrys, the Anglo-Irish owners since Elizabethan times of the Irish estate, Mount Music, and their Catholic cousin Larry Coppinger, proprietor of the adjoining property, Coppinger Court. The Talbot-Lowrys and the Coppingers live in the days when "the class known as Landed Gentry was still pre-eminent in Ireland. Tenants and tradesmen bowed down before them with love sometimes, sometime with hatred, never with indifference" (11). Larry's religion, the disturbing result of his English Catholic mother's powers of persuasion over her Irish Protestant husband, upsets the clarity of social discriminations in late nineteenth century Anglo-Irish society. Working as domestics, stable hands, and farmers on the grounds of Mount Music and Coppinger Court, are the Roman Catholic servants and tenants whose feudal loyalty to the Big House inhabitants undergoes a perceptible shift in the course of the novel. Finally, in the neighboring village of Cluhir, reside the Mangans, the middle-class Catholic family whose ascent to property and power parallels the descent of the Talbot-Lowrys. In the course of the novel, Dr. Mangan, the clever and manipulative Catholic family patriarch, gains control of the mortgages against the Mount Music estate and arranges a marriage between his daughter and Larry Coppinger. At his death he is plotting to push his son into marriage with Christian Talbot-Lowry, the youngest of the daughters of the Big House.

In Mount Music the sectarian rift between the occupants of the Big House and Catholic Ireland is powerfully felt and provides the major source of division between groups of characters.

Religion, or rather, difference of religion, is a factor of everyday Irish life of infinitely more potency than it is, perhaps, in any other Christian country... . It is, no doubt, possible to write of human beings who live in Ireland, without mentioning their religious views, but to do so means a drastic censoring of an integral feature of nearly all mundane affairs.

(19)

The novel's heroine, the sensitive and intelligent Christian Talbot-Lowry, characterizes the Irish "Spirit of Nation" as Religious Intolerance, and Somerville carefully delineates the shades of anti-Catholic feelings among the various members of the gentry class. Faced with the erosion of their wealth and social position, the Big House occupants use religion as a powerful means of maintaining a sense of superiority. Larry Coppinger's role in the novel suggests Somerville's own sense of the dangers inherent in the erosion of religious and class barriers. As a Catholic member of the gentry class, he is a prime target for middle-class Catholic aspirations. Against his best interests (his love for Christian Talbot-Lowry), Larry is drawn into a disastrous romantic involvement with Dr. Mangan's vulgar daughter and into nationalist politics. Larry's personal charms are associated with a certain shallow gullibility. Practically destroyed by his attempt to break down the barriers between the Big House and the other Ireland, he must be rescued from the Mangans' Catholic world by a series of improbable plot devices.

Mount Music is most successful on a social, sectarian, and political level, as a portrait of an isolated class accelerating its own decline. With its occasional coy verbal mannerisms, its sentimental attachment to the heroine, Christian Talbot-Lowry, and its proposterous deus ex machina which restores the rightful Big House lovers to each other, the novel never achieves the control of character

and plot achieved in the best of Edith Somerville's novels, The Big House of Inver. It stands, nevertheless, as an perceptive vision of the Big House in crisis.

In her non-fictional writing Edith Somerville could, on occasion, idealize the Big House as a lost survivor of a golden age culture, a sort of monastic center preserving and protecting a civilization under siege. In writing of Violet Martin's efforts to restore Ross, she lapses into elegy.

Ireland, now, is full of such places as Ross was then. "Gentry-houses" places that were once disseminators of light, of the humanities; centres of civilization; places to which the people rushed, in any trouble, as to Cities of Refuge. They are now destroyed, become desolate, derelict.

("The Restoration" Irish Memories 154-55)

Here Somerville anticipates Yeats's creation of a whole body of work in the 1920's emanating from the Big House as a the symbol of order, culture and light in a time of troubles. But Yeats's models--Lady Gregory's Coole Park or Edward Martyn's Tulira Castle--are not typical landed gentry homes like Somerville's family home of Drishane or Violet Martin's Ross. The strength of Mount Music is to provide an alternate and more representative vision of Anglo-Irish culture.

In her fiction Somerville's eye is colder than in her reminiscences and essays. For all its lingering evocation of what is lost, Mount Music maintains an unsentimental view of a dying class. The house at the center of the novel is an ancient Elizabethan structure," large, intensely solid, practical, sensible, of the special type of old Irish country-house that is entirely remote from the character of the men who originated it"(12). Its solidity is English rather than Irish and it has been kept up because its present owner, Major Richard Talbot-Lowry, has married an English heiress, the daughter of an Earl who comes equipped with a careful financial trustee in London. In the beginning of the novel, the house appears as the nostalgic center of childhood memories, much like Drishane in Somerville's memoirs. "All her memories are steeped in sunlight. It was all fun

and fights, and strawberries and dogs, and donkey riding, and the hot evenings on the big river, with the hum of flies in her ears"(Mount Music 42).

The charm of Mount Music is specifically Anglo-Irish: that quality of casual living that fills the architecturally solid structure "gloriously with horses and hounds, and butts of claret, and hungry poor relations unto the fourth and fifth generations"(13). In Mount Music, however, charm is associated with disorder, with cluttered drawing room where priceless objects jostle against rubbish and with rat and cockroach-infested back stairways and kitchens. In her descriptions of such disorder in the Big House, Somerville anticipates the most recent novels of Molly Keane and suggests the ways in which the pleasantly easy-going habits of the Talbot-Lowrys slide into a slovenliness which serves them ill in the 1890's. The ease and charm of their lives rests on the assumption of the loyalty of their retainers; they are at a loss when the smiles, welcoming bonfires, and homecoming gifts are eliminated. Major Talbot-Lowry is bewildered by the resistance of his tenants to his refusal to sell his property to them under the Wyndham Land Act of 1903. He is then enraged at their response to this refusal: the burning of his favorite covert; the denial of his hunting rights; and, finally, an outright attack on his daughter as she hunts.

Somerville's affection for the vague and ineffectual Lady Isabel Talbot-Lowry and her blundering husband is clear, but the expression of that affection is tempered by an unsparing depiction of their limitations. Major Talbot-Lowry's political conservatism dooms him.

The common lot of Irish landlords, and Pterodactyli, was upon him, and he was in the process of becoming extinct. It was his fate to see his income gradually diminishing, being eaten away, as the sea washes away a bulwark-less shore, by successive Acts of Parliament and the machinery they created.... (156)

But the "well-meaning" and "stupid" Major Talbot-Lowry is not merely a gallant victim of his fate, for his pig-headedness hastens along the historical

process.

He and his generation, reactionary almost to a man, instead of attempting to ride the waves of the rising tide, subscribed their guineas to construct breakwaters that were pathetic in their futility. Gallant in resistance, barren in expedient, history may condemn the folly of the Old Guard of the "English Garrison," but it cannot deny, even though it may deride, its fidelity. (156-7)

Somerville's affectionate regard for Talbot-Lowry's "fidelity" does not mitigate her toughminded analysis of his conservatism. "He had ... the desire to disparage and disprove new ideas, that is a sign of a mind incapable of originality, and anxious to assert itself negatively, since it must otherwise remain silent" (178). Talbot-Lowry's feudal attitudes towards his servants and tenants are subjected to as unsentimental an analysis as is his political conservatism. His tenants are to assent to his bullying, because he owns them: "...the Mount Music tenants were his, as they had been his ancestors', to have and to hold, to rule, to arbitrate for, and to stand by, as a fond and despotic husband rules and stands by an obedient wife, loving her and bullying her (but both entirely for her good)" (178). In such an ironic image of a loving "marriage" between tenant and landlord, Somerville clearly distinguishes her own political perspective from that of her former literary collaborator. In her memoir of Ross, Violet Martin could, but quite without irony, compare the relationship between tenant and landlord, to a "delicate relation, almost akin to matrimony" (*Irish Memories* 26).

Perhaps the most significant achievement of Mount Music is to dispell the heroic aura of high culture and ceremony with which Yeats was endowing the Big House. Talbot-Lowry's arrogance toward his tenants' demands, his refusal to bend with history does not make him a heroic figure for Somerville. The intellectual vacuity of the Big House is never more explicit than in the characterization of the pig-headed stupidity of the Major and the vapid helplessness of Lady Isabel before their daughter's intelligence. Mount Music's

comfortably cluttered drawing room, " a place full of the magnetism that is born of happiness," exists quite without intellectual content.

The claims of literature were acknowledged, but without enthusiasm. A tall, glass-fronted cupboard, inaccessibly placed behind the elongated tail of an early grand piano, was filled with ornate miniature editions of the classics, that would have defied an effort--had such an effort ever been made--to remove them from their shelves, whereon they had apparently been bedded in cement, like mosaic. (159)

While Somerville acknowledges the power of tradition in Mount Music, her portrayal of the Talbot-Lowrys as limited and doomed conservatives undercuts the novel's nostalgic celebration of Anglo-Irish life. Our last vision of them is devastating in its irony. Hounded by creditors, they determine to retreat to an English suburb and rent Mount Music to a mythical rich Englishman. Their hasty departure, without dignity or awareness of their irrevocable loss, allows them to betray their ancestral home with characteristic mindlessness--"...too agitated by their coming journey to have a spare thought for sentiment; too much beset by the fear of what they might lose, their keys, their sandwiches, their dressing-boxes, to shed a tear for what they were losing, and had lost" (313).

The most interesting character in Mount Music is the Catholic Doctor Mangan, whose rise in fortune and position parallels the growing poverty and loss of prestige of the Talbot-Lowrys. With her characterization of Dr. Mangan, Somerville reveals her deepest ambivalences about the possibility and desirability of social change. Of all Somerville's characters, Dr. Mangan is the most obvious descendant of Edgeworth's Jason Rackrent or Lever's Maurice Scanlan. Like them, he manipulates and plots against the enfeebled and foolish Big House proprietor until he owns Mount Music. In Anglo-Irish fiction a rising man from a lower social class is not, like Bingley in Austen's Pride and Prejudice, a friend and potential fellow landlord, but rather an alien usurper and enemy. Mangan's ambitions, moreover, are not limited to financial control; from the

beginning of the novel we see him plotting to arrange a marriage between his daughter and Larry Coppinger--and later between his son and Christian Talbot-Lowry. He is singleminded in his pursuit of his goal. When Larry is injured in a hunting accident, the doctor nurses him in his own home for weeks, thereby gaining the boy's affection and loyalty. Mangan trains his wife to make herself agreeable to the gentry ladies by attending their charity fairs and spending lavishly. He is ruthless in using his medical authority to break off the engagement between Christian and Larry which interferes with his ambitions for his own daughter.

Magnan is, however, perceived as a warm and generous man--a pillar of the Catholic community. His single-minded ambitions to raise the status of his family are seen always in the context of his role as loving father and husband. The vulgarity of his wife, rumored to have been his cook, is more than balanced by her good nature, beauty, and genuine affection for him. Somerville seems helpless before the genial hypocrite she has created, who gently and ruthlessly strips the Big House owner of his property. The author's solution--to kill off Dr. Mangan as he is selflessly travelling to visit a sick patient--suggests her unwillingness in this novel to face the inevitable working out of her own plot--and of her nation's historical process. With the death of Dr Mangan and with the equally unexpected elopement of his daughter, Larry Coppinger is free to marry Christian Talbot-Lowry. Thus Mount Music ends in wish fulfillment--not with the expected loss of the Big House, but with its unlikely restoration by a new and wiser generation.

The Big House of Inver

For the scholar of Irish literature, discovering Edith Somerville's The Big House of Inver (1925) is not difficult, for virtually all histories of Anglo-Irish fiction

mention the novel, and several articles written in the last twenty years praise it (Power; Flanagan, "The Big House of Ross-Drishane; Martin; Cronin, "An Ideal of Art'..."). To the casual reader, however, the novel is virtually inaccessible. Out of print in America since a 1925 edition, and only recently published in a paper-back edition in England (1978), the book has been obscured by the popularity of the fox hunting and humor of the Irish R.M. stories and among most critics, by the preeminence of The Real Charlotte, a novel which deals more peripherally with the Big House.

The subject of The Big House of Inver is the death of a social class, the final destruction of Anglo Irish culture. In this, the most successful of Edith Somerville's Big House novels, the house itself is consumed not by the fires of class warfare but by the wanton carelessness of its owners. As several critics have noted (Power 51; Martin 47; Cronin "An Ideal of Art'..." 7-9), The Big House of Inver is a twentieth century retelling of Castle Rackrent; its appearance in 1925 suggests the persistence of a genre and the continuity of its themes.

Although set in 1912, as Anglo-Irish landlords were slowly succumbing to the forces of effective Irish nationalism, the novel constantly moves backward, and finally becomes a book about Irish history, like Castle Rackrent or The Martins of Cro' Martin, focusing on the slow decay of a once powerful family. At the center of the novel hovers the empty and abandoned but still splendid Big House, dominating the landscape, clammy with damp, overgrown with vines. No longer occupied by its owners-- the Prendeville family-- it stands looming over the sea, a reminder of the incommensurability between the heroic architectural image and its debased human inhabitants. The genesis of the novel is well known, for as its epilogue Somerville reprints relevant extracts from a letter written to her on March 18, 1912, in which Violet Martin recounts a visit to the abandoned Tyrone House in County Galway:

Yesterday I drove to see X- House. A great cut stone house of three stories...

Perfectly empty... It is on a long promontory by the sea and there rioted three or four generations of --s. living with country women, occasionally marrying them, all illegitimate four times over.... About one hundred and fifty years ago a very grand Lady -- married the head of the family and lived there, and was so corroded with pride that she would not allow her two daughters to associate with the neighbours of their own class, She lived to see them marry two of the men in the yard....

Yesterday , as we left, an old Miss X, daughter of the last owner, was at the door in a little donkey-trap. She lives near in an old castle, and since her people died she will not go into X- House, or into the enormous yard, or the beautiful old garden.

She was a strange mixture of distinction and commonness, like her breeding, and it was very sad to see her at the door of that great house. If we dared to write up that subject--!

Thirteen years after receiving Martin's letter, and ten years after her literary collaborator's premature death in 1915, Edith Somerville finally fulfilled the suggestions voiced in Martin's fleeting impressions of Tyrone House, the seat of the St George family. In her letter Martin summons up the evocative power of the ruined Big House and the degeneration of the family line which is such a familiar theme in Anglo-Irish literature. The relationship between St George family history and the novel Edith Somerville wrote is complex and ambiguous, for history in Anglo-Ireland is often more spectacular than fiction itself. Although Martin's letter reflects only the outsider's impressions of a derelict, abandoned mansion and the rumors of family degeneration, the actual story of the decline of the St. Georges reads, on occasion, more melodramatically than the novel which it inspired.

While a contemporary family member argues that the St Georges had not come down in the world nearly as much as Martin imagined in her letter (Mark), the historical record is revealing. The decline from a position as one of the leading landed families in County Galway was, according to some contemporary accounts, accompanied by a family eccentricity and an occasional consorting with Catholic Ireland which Somerville evokes in her novel (Manuscript of

Journal of Louisa Beaufort, qtd. in Mark 23). The grandeur of the fictional Inver house mirrors the lavish eighteenth-century mansion of the St Georges, just as the scale of life depicted in the novel's account of Big House life evokes descriptions of St George christening parties for eight hundred guests and funerals attended by a thousand tenants (Mark 27, 54). Similarly, reports of late nineteenth century St. George descendants living as virtual squatters in various corners of the mansion with the cooking done over an open fire in a room on the top floor suggest how accurately Somerville's fictional account of Anglo-Irish decline mirrors a historical reality. But two episodes of St George family history are conspicuously missing from the novel. The family's embroilment in charges of "relentless severity" in evicting destitute peasants from the estate during the Great Famine --charges vigorously denied by the St George landlord in a 1848 speech in Parliament (April 5, 1848 The Times , qtd. in Mark 35-41), and the actual destruction of the uninhabited and unfurnished Tyrone House in 1920 by the "savage rage of the infuriated rabble" according to a contemporary newspaper (qtd. in Mark 57) are present only in the historical record. Edith Somerville's secondhand fictional evocation of Tyrone house (she never saw the mansion herself) depicts the costs of Anglo-Irish profligacy and irresponsibility with an unsparing eye. But her extraordinary novel of Anglo-Irish decline avoids that fullest acknowledgment of the bitterness of class and sectarian conflict which the historical record itself provides.

In her earlier novel about the Big House, Mount Music, Somerville depicts the family estate as the center of nostalgic memories of childhood idylls. Inver House, however, is initially presented, much like Lever's Cro' Martin Castle, as a showcase, a monument to the arrogance and pride of the Anglo-Irish Prendeville family. The first chapter of the novel is a tour de force; beginning with its initial sentence, it provides a rapid history of the Prendeville exuberant prodigality. "The Big House of Inver stood high on the central ridge of the promontory of Ross

Inver, and faced unflinchingly the western ocean"(1). The arrogance of the family is reflected in Robert Prendeville's choice of a site for his mansion. Aloof from the village, unsheltered from the elements, in view of a tall and square tower built by the earliest Norman Prendeville settlers in Ireland, the site was chosen to allow an unobstructed view of Prendeville ships smuggling claret into Ireland from France. The description of Inver House evokes the balanced and harmonious vision of neo-classic Georgian England; thus the Anglo-Irish Big House, built of native limestone in alien forms, is the architectural monument of a conquering race. It suggests that grace which is born of lawless arrogance.

Inver House embodied one of those large gestures of the minds of the earlier Irish architects, some of which still stand to justify Ireland's claim to be considered a civilized country. It was a big, solemn, square house of three stories, built of cut stone, grandly planned, facing west in two immense sweeping curves, with a high pillared portico between them and stone balustrades round the roof... (9)

Certain architectural details reveal the self confidence of its builders. Over the door of the house is carved the family crest and the family motto, "Je Prends." In 1912 the nouveau riche purchaser of Inver House, Sir Harold Burgrave gazes enviously at the marriage stones taken from the original family home and inserted into the steps of the eighteenth-century mansion.

"Prendevil-Martine," "Prendevill-O'Rorke," "Prendevilles-Devannes." The names with their archaic spelling, and the roughly-carved coats, blurred and lichen by age, deepened in Burgrave the sentiment of respect of the old house and jealousy for its owners. He thought of his father, and of how he had paid a whacking price to the College of Heralds for the coat- of-arms, and the crest that now adorned the back of his watch. These people, these Prendevilles here, had 'em for nothing. (172-3)

In Somerville's novel civilization is ironically equated with physical beauty-- of houses and horses and people-- and with debased moral standards. The eighteenth century Robert Prendeville's son, Beauty Kit, is a "bad boy, dissolute

and drunken"(9), but so handsome and rich that he marries Lady Isabella, the beautiful daughter of the Marquis of Breffny; her shadow of defeated pride hovers over the subsequent generations of Prendevilles. To Inver House, Lady Isabella brings a post-chaise full of Italian artisans to decorate the mansion ceilings and create of it a perfect specimen of Irish Georgian architecture. However, like the aristocratic Lady X, obliquely referred to in Martin's 1912 letter, in her pride of family Lady Isabella isolates herself from the local gentry. Turning herself into "an iceberg of pride" and refusing to allow her children to associate with their neighbors, she must suffer the shame of watching her son marry the daughter of the estate game-keeper and her daughters go off with the grooms.

This pollution of the family lineage accompanies that dissipation of Anglo-Ireland which Edgeworth evokes so powerfully. "Five successive generations of mainly half-bred and wholly profligate Prendevilles rioted out their short lives in the Big House, living with country women, fighting and drinking, gambling" (11). In passages evocative of the Rackrent family history, the narrator describes the haphazard means by which the family inheritance is squandered.

The legitimacy of the succession was secured by means and stratagems that need not be recorded. Somehow out of the mire an heir would be evolved and acclaimed, and the process of drinking and dicing away the lands of Inver would be carried on with all the hereditary zest proper to a lawful inheritor. (11)

A nineteenth century family descendant, Jas Prendeville, comes into his ascendancy early in his life on his tumultuous christening day, a day which suggests that same vision of Anglo-Irish history which endows Castle Rackrent with its disturbing power. After Jas is christened at a church on the strand, his father rushes from the church to fight a duel, wading with his opponent and seconds into the sea to escape the police. The mortal combat, witnessed with delight by hundreds of onlookers, evokes that lawless and exuberant wastefulness which runs as a thematic strand in Big House fiction since

Edgeworth.

One wonders, if anywhere, save in Western Ireland, could such a sight have been paralleled. The four young bloods waist-deep in the shining sea, with the blue sky of June above them, and the seagulls squealing over their heads, and young Madam Prendeville, with the newly christened Jasper and his retinue of nurses, sitting in her yellow chariot by the edge of the tide. The sands, right and left of her, were thronged with the people of three parishes; fish-women and fishermen from the near-by village of Cloon, and wild men, Prendeville tenants, from back in the bogs of Iveragh and Moyroe, all gabbing in Irish their views as to the merits of the combatants, betting on the result, enjoying to ecstasy such nerve-strain as they were capable of feeling.

(12-13)

Jas Prendeville is a fitting heir to his father; combining improvidence with carelessness, he wastes away his life and remaining fortune drinking with the local fishermen. He enters into an affair with the daughter of a compliant owner of a favorite public house, who "was sufficiently medieval... to accept with composure, a certain Droit de Seigneur, that was, as a rule, based rather on might than right" (23). After unsuccessfully attempting a military career Jas retreats to the Norman tower beside the roofless Inver house and gradually sinks to the level of his fishermen companions.

Shibby Pindy, Jas's illegitimate daughter and thus one of the many descendants of Prendeville breeding with the country people, is Edith Somerville's great creation in the novel. She is a character emerging from an inspired vision of the morass of Irish and Anglo-Irish history which lies behind the contemporary action of the novel. Her surname, Pindy, is the local appellation for those Prendeville descendants with an ambivalent relationship to the family line; her given name, Isabella, corrupted to Shibby by generations of tavern usage, suggests how "the much blotted family escutcheon" perpetuates the social shame of Lady Isabella's daughters more than a hundred years after they abandoned their own class.

Shibby becomes a family retainer, a quasi-servant, and a powerful maternal

force, residing with her father, Jas, and her legitimate half-brother and sister in the Norman tower of Inver. Indomitable, handsome, wily, and, on occasion, ruthless, Shibby dreams of reinstating her beautiful half-brother Kit-- the image of his profligate eighteenth-century ancestor, Beauty Kit-- into Inver House. Shibby's struggles to reassert the Prenderville line are brilliantly evoked: she haunts local auctions, for example, to fill the decimated rooms of the mansion with the tawdry Victorian furniture she buys out of her own savings; she schemes endlessly to provide Kit with the education, and failing that, the marriage he needs to reinstate himself into his patrimony.

The forces of history and genetic weakness, however, conspire against Shibby, for her step-brother's startling beauty and grace are accompanied by all the deficiencies of the Prenderville male line. Lazy, pleasure-loving Kit loses his only chance to reclaim the Inver demesne from the Weldons, his family's land agents whose steady rise to social eminence mirrors the fall of the Prendevilles. Shibby plots and contrives to arrange a marriage between Kit and the Weldons' daughter Peggy and thus recover the demesne lands of Inver which have been dubiously, if legally, appropriated from a drunken Jas by Peggy's wily grandfather. Instead of pursuing Shibby's plans, however, Kit cheats at horse races and consorts with the debauched local daughter of a shebeen keeper, a girl who refuses to accept with proper silence and equanimity the fate that Irish history has traditionally allotted to the victim of the droit de seigneur. Thus Kit's chances to reclaim his family lands are doomed, for his wild behavior frightens off the respectable middle-class Protestant Weldons, who turn to safer English matrimonial material for Peggy.

A character like Defoe's Moll Flanders or Hardy's Tess Durbeyfield, Shibby Pindy embodies, with an exacting literalness, an archetypal pattern of fictional significance. She represents a brilliant vision of false consciousness, for she is trapped by her sex and ancestry into worshipping Kit's beauty and Prenderville

blood, that very strain of aristocratic lineage which defiled her own hapless mother. She devotes herself singlemindedly to her cause. " 'The King shall have his own again!' Inver should once more worthily house a reigning Prendeville! Her boy should live as a gentleman should, as his ancestors did" (51).

Shibby's majestic presence and shabby life suggest the costs of colonial occupation for its victims. She is driven by the fiercely proud ambitions of Lady Isabella, her eighteenth-century ancestor whose portrait she so strikingly resembles. At once the crafty and ruthless peasant mother, dreaming, for example, of poisoning Kit's village mistress, and the dark and haughty aristocratic lady who can terrify her neighbors with her baleful glances, Shibby lives her life enthralled to the very forces which have destroyed her chances for happiness. Unable to forget her shameful heritage as Jas's illegitimate daughter, she refuses all marriage offers, even one from a respectable doctor she loves, and lives instead as "the one faithful though unacknowledged daughter" of the Big House (50). She becomes, as it were, an acolyte to Kit's beauty, devoting herself to preserving his patrimony from further defilement, somehow finding the money to repair its roof, patch its leaks, and refurnish it in preparation for Kit's ascendancy. The magnificent drawing room of Inver House, with its heavy teak doors, its chipped but still elegant marble fireplaces, its century old portraits of Lady Isabella and Beauty Kit, becomes her "secret temple," and she is filled with pride as she, with an untutored peasant taste, furnishes it with Victorian clutter.

In creating Shibby as a powerful but victimized old woman, Somerville draws not only on the traditions of Anglo-Irish literature, but on those of Celtic Ireland as well. If Shibby is the reincarnation of Lady Isabella Prendeville and a tradition of ruthless Big House ladies (Lady Dorothea, for example, in The Martins of Cro' Martin), she is also her mother's daughter, the Irish victim of her own Anglo-Irish inheritance. Thus in creating Shibby, Somerville boldly appropriates for the Big House novel the Celtic tradition of the Shan Van Vocht, the old woman

of Ireland whose adherence to a lost cause and whose personal victimization symbolizes the victimization of a nation.

The "nation" Shibby loses, however, is of course that Anglo-Irish nation which oppressed her maternal ancestors. Other victims of this arrogant pattern of oppression recur in the novel; not only is Shibby's own mother deserted by her father, Jas, but Kit also abandons his disreputable, pregnant mistress, Maggie Connor, whose mad despair leads to her death. Shibby is never aware of the larger historical patterns of colonial occupation which have victimized her and others like her; she sees Maggie Connor, for example, solely as the terrible obstacle to her dreams for Kit, never as a victim like her own mother. In her loyalty to her worthless stepbrother and to her own Prendeville blood--bequeathed to her by a father who has never acknowledged her and had once offered her servant's wages--Shibby's tragedy is total. Learning that Kit has lost Peggy Weldon and colluded with Jas in selling Inver House to Peggy's rich English fiance, she confronts her loss:

"The curse of God is on me!" she said in a low voice, "what use is there to strive? Laugh away, boy! You're easily pleased! Your sweetheart has left you for another man and your fancy-girl is drowned, and now your house is sold!" (302)

As Shibby walks from the Big House, her look of despair attracts the attention of the local people. Unlike Cathleen Ni Hoolihan, the celtic Shan Van Vocht who is transformed from a withered crone into a young girl with "the walk of a queen" (Yeats, Collected Plays 57), Shibby goes down to defeat with Anglo-Ireland: "God! As bad as she was before, she looks dead altogether now!" (303).

A recent critic has suggested that Shibby's unconsciousness of her place in Irish history and of the implications of her own tragedy is the fatal flaw of The Big House of Inver. Such a flaw, then, relegates the novel to the status of Corkery's

"colonial" literature , an alien literature which exploits Ireland for an English audience and which fails to achieve any vision of a truly "Irish" (i.e. nationalist) experience (Martin 52). In the context of such criticism, Shibby's enthrallment to the Big House reflects the limitations of her creator's historical perceptions. Thus Somerville is herself seen as trapped in the limited vision of her character, whose blind loyalty to Ascendancy culture prevents her from transcending her false consciousness.

Writing from within Anglo-Ireland, however, Somerville offers a toughminded vision of how history actually works itself out for all victims of colonialism. The arrogant power of Big House glamor, both in its ascendancy and in its decline, can bind to it even those whom it destroys. Critical revivals of Corkery's distinctions between "colonial" and "Irish" literature or Seamus Deane's arguments against the existence of a genuine aristocratic Ascendancy seem beside the point in discussing The Big House of Inver. Through its exposure of the wasteful and prodigal glamor of the Big House (a glamor embodied in images of architectural grandeur and in the ignorant and dissolute violence of Yeats' "hard-riding country gentlemen") , and through its simultaneous refusal to deny the power of that glamor, the novel represents an extraordinary exploration of the complexity of Irish history as it actually existed for some rather than as it perhaps should have existed.

Edith Somerville published the The Big House of Inver in 1925, a few years after scores of Anglo-Irish houses, including the mansion which inspired the creation of the novel, were torched by Irish nationalists as symbols of English oppression. In The Big House of Inver, however, this Anglo-Irish writer blames her own class for its decline. Old Jas Penderville's accidental burning down of the house he has just sold off is an effective symbolic conclusion for the novel. But the Big House is already dead. It has been destroyed not by the new class of Irishmen represented by the Prendeville's small-minded agent, Johnnie Weldon,

the Jason Rackrent of the twentieth century, who will collect insurance for the new owner he has found for the house, but by the generations of Predevilles who have squandered their own heritage.

Chapter Six

Stages of Disloyalty in Elizabeth Bowen's Big House Fiction

Historical and Biographical Background

The period of Irish history leading to independence, partition, and Civil War following the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921 was devastating for the Anglo-Irish remaining in the territories of the new republic. Protestants in the south found themselves defeated by their historic political antagonists, the Catholic Irish, and abandoned not only by the British government but also by their fellow Protestants in Ulster who demanded partition rather than merger with the new nation. Thus as Catholic Ireland finally regained political and social autonomy, the Anglo-Irish lost any remaining vestiges of political power or social ascendancy. As they perceived themselves abandoned by England, their growing genealogical obsessions and pride in being Anglo-Irish increasingly masked their sense of inferiority to their English counterparts.

The insecurity of Big House life from 1919 to 1923 reflects the conditions of warfare being waged first between the English and the Irish and then between fellow Irishmen in the Civil War. The brutal struggle of ambush and counter-ambush which drove men to extremes of fear and cruelty naturally intensified the long existing hostility toward the Big House as a symbol of colonial domination. In this period, approximately two-hundred Anglo-Irish country houses were burnt down by republican forces (Bence-Jones, *Author's Addenda* x; Brown 110). Such guerrilla warfare accounted for the destruction of close to ten percent of the existing Big Houses in Ireland; the effect of such conditions of terror for landowners powerfully demonstrated to the Anglo-Irish their isolation and vulnerability. In The Anglo-Irish and the New Ireland Patrick Buckland reports,

for example, that in 1922 some southern loyalists felt that a massacre of all Protestants was a "certainty" in the "near future" (278). This period of national crises provided the setting for Bowen's The Last September, Keane's Mad Puppetstown and Two Days in Aragon, and Trevor's Fools of Fortune.

Without any political role in the new nation and without any belief in real democracy, the Anglo-Irish watched the creation of a markedly sectarian, egalitarian state from which they felt excluded. In spite of the efforts of early leaders such as Arthur Griffith and Kevin O'Higgins to allay the fears of southern unionists and to integrate the Protestant minority into the new government (Lyons, Culture and Anarchy in Ireland 112), real integration never occurred between the remnants of a elitist landowning class and the new democratic state. The legacy of bitterness inherited by the Free State assured that Anglo-Irish hopes of joining a society recognizing and accepting cultural differences were to be denied. Terence Brown describes how the new dispensation decisively isolated the already fragmented Protestant Irish into three groups: the farmers of the remaining Ulster counties who looked to Northern Ireland for community; the urban professional and business class most eager to assimilate itself into the new order; and, finally, the remaining remnant, the isolated Anglo-Irish landowners whose very existence affronted nationalist sensibilities (109).

As a small Protestant minority with a seemingly disproportionate amount of wealth and former social ascendancy, the landowning Anglo-Irish were tolerated, but merely as anachronistic survivors without any voice in the creation of a new Gaelic, Catholic society. The Protestant population of Ireland, a sizeable twenty-five percent before partition, had amounted to more than ten percent of the Irish Free State in the early 1920's, but dwindled to less than six percent by the 1940's (Beckett 152). The southern Anglo-Irish who had contributed heavily to the British cause in World War I felt betrayed and thrown to the wolves by

England's Irish policies. Thus more than one third of the Anglo-Irish who remained at the signing of the treaty chose, often with a sense of bitterness and betrayal, to abandon their country. Others remained, often isolated in their genealogical preoccupations and caste snobbery which masked their newly awakened political insecurity and old feelings of social inferiority before the English. Bewildered and unprepared for the loss of their "Irish" identity, Big House families found themselves regarded as aliens in the new nation occupying the land of their ancestors. The dispossessors were finally dispossessed.

Of the novelists writing about the Big House in the twentieth century and witnessing the final death throes of Anglo-Irish ascendancy, Elizabeth Bowen is the most familiar to American and British readers, not only through two popular novels--The Last September and The Heat of the Day--but also through Bowen's Court, her history of her family home, written in England during the early years of World War II. Although Bowen lived in England for the greater part of her life, her identification with her Anglo-Irish background had a major influence on her career as a novelist. In an essay, entitled "Disloyalties," she discusses the powerful effect of regional background or of "ancestral pieties" on the writer like herself. In the same essay, however, she suggests that the serious writer must disengage himself from the faiths and assumption of his society, must, in fact, go through a crisis of pain and loneliness and a sense of loss in order to shed the haunting power of past loyalties. With approval she quotes Graham Greene's comment, "Isn't disloyalty as much the writer's virtue as loyalty is the soldiers?" (Afterthought 195)

Bowen's assertion in "Disloyalties" of the imperative disavowal of past sanctities by the writer suggests a painful course she has charted for the serious artist. Her successful achievement of that "disloyal" distance from the assumptions of her own culture might, therefore, legitimately operate as a

self-imposed yardstick of her own artistic growth. In her own fiction, however, Bowen moves from a painful disloyalty to past sanctities in her early work, The Last September (1929), to a far more conservative adulation of the Anglo-Irish Big House culture evident in her later novel, The Heat of the Day (1949). Unlike other Big House novelists considered in this study she moves, then, from major artistic achievement to an easier nostalgia for the past.

Bowen's Irish fiction embodies the tensions and discordancies of Anglo-Irish life and literature. Born into a gentry family from County Cork, her inherited baggage included a formidable family history of Cromwellian settlers of Ireland from Wales, an austere Georgian mansion, Bowen's Court, (of which she was the the first female heir), and all the assumptions of the Anglo-Irish which assured their isolation from the native Irish and from the modern world. For a child growing up in professional Dublin society and summering in Cork at Bowen's Court, Catholics were simply " 'the others' whose world lay alongside ours but never touched."

As to the difference between the two religions, I was too discreet to ask questions--if I wanted to know. This appeared to share a delicate, awkward aura with those two other differences --of sex, of class. So, quickly, in a child's mind, does prudery seed itself and make growth that I remember, even, an almost sexual shyness on the subject of Roman Catholics.
(Seven Winters 52)

Bowen's autobiographical pieces reveal her family's isolation from the native culture and society of Ireland. Although she grew up in Dublin with educated parents who were surrounded by the literature and theatre of the Literary Revival, Bowen heard nothing of that movement until 1916 when she was living in England (Bowen's Court 401). Her early vision of Ireland was, however, confident and even arrogant--evoking in its certainties and its utter misapprehension both the insularity and the poignant self centeredness of the

child --and of the Anglo-Irish class. She speaks, for example, of her "endemic pride" in her country which was founded on a child's mistaken conflation of the words "Ireland " and "island". Assuming that all countries surrounded by water were named after her native land, she congratulated herself on living in a country that was a prototype, not an imitation, like England (Seven Winters 12). In Seven Winters she also observes that growing up as child in Dublin she did not understand "that we Protestants were a minority , and that the unquestioned rules of our being came, in fact, from the closeness of a minority world" (51). Disenchantment, implies the detached adult writer of these reminiscences, is inevitable.

Bowen's novels dealing with the Anglo-Irish Big House differ in their use of that literary symbol. Her shifting tone toward a deeply personal subject--the survival in the modern world of the pattern of life which Bowen's Court came to represent for her--suggests the complex and ambivalent attitude which she maintains toward her culture. A virtual orphan from the age of thirteen after the death of her mother and the mental instability of her father, Bowen's adolescent life as an absentee from Ireland accentuated the normal Anglo-Irish sense of being hybrid. For Bowen, however, that disloyalty toward the fixed patterns of the past which she sees as the mark of artistic breakthrough and growth struggles against formidable obstacles. The very creation, for example, of a history of her ancestral home represents an act of piety and an attempt at self definition. Bowen's Court, the nonfictional text which expresses so many of the assumptions implicit within her fiction, was written between 1939 and 1941 , more than ten years after the publication of The Last September and before The Heat of the Day. In it Bowen conceives of her Irish home as a symbol of permanence and continuity, a refuge from the chaos of her London residence during the bombing raids of the Nazi offensive. She celebrates the survival of Bowen's Court in

Ireland, "this ...country of ruin" (Bowen's Court 15), seeing her Georgian house, built of native limestone by an alien power, as finally integral to --even harmonious with-- the grey gleam of the Irish landscape.

This is Bowen's Court as the past has left it--an isolated partly unfinished house, grandly conceived and plainly and strongly built. Near the foot of mountains, it has little between it and the bare fields that run up the mountain side. Larger in manner than in actual size, it stands up in Roman urbane strongness in a land on which the Romans never set foot. It is the negation of mystical Ireland: its bald walls rebut the surrounding, disturbing light. Imposed on seized land, built in the rulers' tradition, the house is, all the same, of the local rock, and sheds the same grey gleam you see over the countryside. So far, it has withstood burnings and wars. (31)

The ironies of Anglo-Irish history being what they are, Bowen's Court survived fewer than fifteen years after World War II. After struggling unsuccessfully to support the house, Bowen sold it to a local farmer in 1959, never anticipating his destruction of it within a year. Writing while Bowen's Court still stood, she celebrates its builder, her ancestor Henry Bowen, or Henry III as she audaciously names him to differentiate him from his predecessors and successors. Royal in vision if not position, in 1775 Henry created a austere and spacious limestone building, a house filled with light and space, which represented, according to his descendant, an exaltation and an obsession.

The stern and cold force of his unconscious nature perpetuated itself in stone as the house went up. But Henry was, at the same time, a man of his time's Renaissance: his sense of what was august in humanity made him make his house an ideal mould for life. He was more than building a home, he was setting a pattern. (169)

In an essay written in 1942, the same year in which she published Bowen's Court, Elizabeth Bowen expands on this pattern. She asserts that "the idea" from which the Anglo-Irish Big House sprang "was before everything, a social one....

Society--or, more simply, the getting-together of people--was meant to be at once a high pleasure and willing discipline, not just an occasion for self-display" ("The Big House," Collected Impressions 199). The Big House was designed then for an idea of society, with huge public rooms and staircases "...the most ornate, spacious parts of these buildings were the most functional--the steps, the halls, the living-rooms, the fine staircases--it was these that contributed to society, that raised life above the exigencies of mere living to the plane of art, or at least style"(196).

The pattern Bowen's Court set had far-reaching effects on Henry's descendants, for "if a Bowen made Bowen's Court," we are told, "since then with a rather alarming sureness, Bowen's Court has made all the succeeding Bowens" (32). In this study of her family and her house--virtually synonymous concepts in her book-- Elizabeth Bowen describes the life of a minor Anglo-Irish dynasty and interleaves her narrative with passages from the history of Ireland. She insists on the part her family played, if unconsciously, in the "drama outside themselves" and thus conceives of their history as representative--significant. We are reminded here of the other major twentieth-century elegist for the Anglo-Irish, and in particular, of Yeats's claims for his Anglo-Irish predecessors as significant men of gentle birth: "Merchant and scholar who have left me blood/That has not passed through any huckster's loin, / Soldiers that gave, whatever die was cast" ("Pardon, Old Fathers," Collected Poems 99).

Bowen's Court is a persuasive work, presenting a representative Anglo-Irish family as neither particularly eccentric or improvident, insisting always on the decencies of ordinary well-born provincial men and women, projected by history into positions of moderate power and moderate wealth. Although her ancestors were occasionally flawed as landlords and householders--for example in their self-destructive and obsessive forays into litigation to regain a lost family

property--they are also presented as humane and even heroic in their relief exertions during the Great Famine. Bowen's Court depicts few of the wildly dissolute or irresponsible Anglo-Irish landlords found in the memoirs of Barrington or in many Big House novels. With one minor exception (Henry IV), Bowen landlords were neither absentees or debauched sensualists; the drunken prodigality of Edgeworth's Rackrents or Somerville's Prendeilles is absent from this history as is the vindictive treatment of the peasantry by the Big House which Lever depicts in The Martins of Cro' Martin.

A central insight of Bowen's Court appears when Bowen begins to describe the declining post-union Anglo-Irish culture which found itself gradually eased out of political ascendancy. "Property was still there, but power was going" (258). She traces the growing eccentricity, obsessiveness and darkening gloom of her culture in response to to an emerging sense of dislocation. Fantasies of living solely as feudal lords of the manor began to replace serious confrontations with political realities. One great landlord, a despot with power over three counties, Big George, the Earl of Kingston, was unable to face his tenants' refusal to vote for his political candidate in the 1825 elections. Gathering them all around him in his Great Hall, he went mad before the assembled crowd.

It was democracy, facing him in his gallery, that sent Big George mad. In other cases, the line between sanity and insanity was less perceptibly crossed; many gentlemen only became "interesting"; the cult for the glen and tear made a market for lyrics; the tendency to darken houses began. Anglo-Ireland began to claim and patent the everlasting Irish regret. Society-- which can only exist when people are sure of themselves and immune from fear--was no longer, in the Anglo-Ireland I speak of, in what I call the magnetic and growing stage; it was on the decline; it was breaking up. (258)

Bowen identifies the decline of her people with that absence of political judgment which was fatal to all the Anglo-Irish, and which was personally

evident, she seems to imply, in her own childhood "endemic pride" of country. For the "new Irish" formed by the Cromwellian settlement, the grafting on to an alien land had seemed successful. But they were mistaken.

If Ireland did not accept them, they did not know it-- and it is in that unawareness of final rejection, unawareness of their being looked out at from secretive opposed life, that the Anglo-Irish naive dignity and , even, tragedy seems to me to stand. (160)

Bowen's Court unflinchingly faces the injustices of her family's ascendancy, acknowledging that they "got their position and drew their power from a situation that shows an inherent wrong" (453). But her book, measured and qualified as it is in her praise of the Bowens, is finally an elegy to an idea of "reason, order and light," to a house that should be certain to elevate," (31) and above all to a vision of society which was possible to realize fully only when the Ascendancy was unchallenged by democratic forces. Written when the modern world seemed to be collapsing under the forces of fascist aggression, Bowen's Court represents a deeply conservative commitment to the idea of property . For Bowen, the eighteenth-century gentry homes of Ireland are monuments to an ideal of civilization, hierarchical and stable, which was preferable to the social fragmentation of the twentieth century. She quotes Arthur Young's observation in 1776 (the year in which Bowen's Court was officially occupied) that the monumental building program occurring in Ireland could not fail to impress new ideas, a feeling of respect and love on a country changing "from licentious barbarity to civilized order"(208). While dryly pointing out Anglo-Ireland's failure to provide such an idea of order for all of Ireland's people as contributing to the rise of democracy and the decline of the Ascendancy, Bowen argues, almost as if for an abstract good, for the civilizing effects of property.

One may say that while property lasted the dangerous power-idea

stayed , like a sword in its scabbard, fairly safely at rest. At least property gave my people and people like them the means to exercise power in a direct, concrete and therefore limited way. I have shown how their natures shifted direction-- or the nature of the débordement that occurred --when property could no longer be guaranteed. Without putting up any plea for property--unnecessary, for it is unlikely to be abolished-- I submit that the power-loving temperament is more dangerous when it either prefers or is forced to operate in what is materially a void. We have everything to dread from the dispossessed. In the area of ideas we see more menacing dominations than the landlord exercised over land. (455)

If Bowen's Court is an intelligent and measured history of Anglo-Irish society, it is nevertheless bound by those conservative values which prevent its author from questioning the deepest assumptions of her culture which caused its decline. Propertyless Catholic Ireland is strikingly absent from the book; we are told that in Bowen's Court Catholics were treated with respect, tolerance, and distance; the lives of the vast majority of Irish do not impinge on Anglo-Irish society. Property rights of the Ascendancy class, even as they are admittedly based on expropriation, are sacred, and Bowen admires the enlightened or "rational" unionism of her father, Henry VI, who sought to base such rights on "morals and discipline"(398). Neither through irony nor political speculation does Bowen achieve that questioning stance toward Anglo-Irish culture which would seem to lead to the disloyalty toward ancestral pieties which she herself has established as the mark of major artistic achievement. The power of Bowen's Court resides in its elegiac resonances, its intelligent and graceful merger of the narrative of the Bowens' lives with the history of Ireland, and with its powerful argument for the conservative view of life as embodied in the Anglo-Irish Big House. It represents, finally, a moving statement of loyalty to the past rather than the painful task of disloyalty.

The Last September

Bowen's first novel set in Ireland, published in 1929, more than a decade

before Bowen's Court, is another matter. In The Last September, the Big House is destroyed in the holocaust depicted on the final page of the book, when Danielstown and other neighboring Anglo-Irish homes light up the sky of the district, and IRA soldiers silently drive their cars out of the gates of the estates they have destroyed. Alternatively anticipated, dreaded, yearned for, and denied, the burning of Danielstown evokes complex responses from the reader. Amidst the expected shock and sadness at the destruction of a beautiful artifact, emerges a sense of necessary completion--even fulfillment

The politically motivated burning of Danielstown, that highly charged symbol of Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, is a more powerful symbol of cultural waste than holocausts in earlier Big House novels--when Christy O'Donoghoe, for example, accidentally sets fire to his ancestral home in Edgeworth's Ennui (proving the inappropriateness of a peasant upbringing for aristocratic life) or when Somerville's Jas Pendergast unintentionally ignites the magnificent Inver House which he has mortgaged away and just sold. Reading accounts of earlier destructive fires, we realize how our responses to them are conditioned by modern Irish history, how the burning of two hundred Big Houses during the twentieth-century Anglo Irish conflict and the Civil War has become the event which reduces all previous fires to foreshadowings, anticipations, and prefigurations of the great conflagration which was to come.

...in February, before those leaves had visibly budded, the death--execution, rather--of the three houses, Danielstown, Castle Trent, Mount Isabel, occurred in the same night. A fearful scarlet ate up the hard spring darkness; indeed, it seemed that an extra day, unreckoned, had come to abortive birth that these things might happen. It seemed, looking from east to west at the sky tall with scarlet, that the country itself was burning; while to the north the neck of mountains before Mount Isabel was frightfully outlined. The roads in unnatural dusk ran dark with movement, secretive or terrified; not a tree, brushed pale by wind from the flames, not a cabin pressed in

despair to the bosom of night, not a gate too starkly visible but had its place in the design of order and panic. At Danielstown, half-way up the avenue under the beeches, the thin iron gate twanged (missed its latch, remained swinging aghast) as the last unlit car slid out with the executioners bland from accomplished duty. The sound of the last car widened, gave itself to the open and empty country and was demolished. Then the first wave of a silence that was to be ultimate flowed back, confident, to the steps. Above the steps, the door stood open hospitably upon a furnace. (206)

Bowen's imagery here implies the fatedness or "design" of the political "execution" of the Big House; the "open and empty" countryside, upon whose bosom of night the cabins "pressed in despair" is unnurturing, without comfort. Nature itself becomes disarrayed as "the unnatural dusk" and wind from the flames create the illusion of daylight in night; an "extra day" is issued in. The flames which transform the formerly hospitable hall into a fiery furnace announce the "abortive birth" of a new dispensation, implying that necessary terror of unloosed anarchy evoked by Yeats in "The Second Coming", a poem emerging from the same period of Irish history as the burning of Danielstown. The "first wave of silence" after the executioners depart prefigures the lasting silence of Ireland's new ruins. "Sir Richard and Lady Naylor, not saying anything, did not look at each other, for in the light from the sky they saw too distinctly" (206).

The meaning of the political events in The Last September, set in the late summer of 1920, is so integrated into the social and psychological texture of the book that the violence these events represent seems to emerge as much from the unconscious impulses of those living at Danielstown as from the Irish political history. Unlike Bowen's Court, this early novel is subversive to ancestral pieties, arriving with painful inevitability at that state of "disloyalty" Bowen praises. By February, 1921, Danielstown is ripe for burning.

Sir Richard and Lady Naylor live at Danielstown, administering their estate with the benevolent condescension of nineteenth-century landlords. Meanwhile

twentieth-century Ireland is invading their demesne. Purposeful men in trenchcoats walk through the shrubberies, searching for weapons buried on Danielstown land. Armoured lorries filled with British soldiers patrol the edges of the demesne and their "furtive" sounds menace the after-dinner conversation of guests sitting on the steps of the Big House. The Naylor's young niece and a houseguest are threatened by a gunman in a deserted mill on the property, while a neighboring estate is invaded by rebels looking for firearms.

Amidst the major political crisis of modern Ireland, the Naylor's adopt the strategy of denial, preferring not to hear, not to countenance rumors of those hostilities which are ushering in the Anglo-Irish Treaty and their own extinction as a class. With the characteristic ambivalence of the Anglo-Irish, they are torn between their traditional hospitality and cultural ties to the occupying British garrison and their vision of themselves as benevolent Irish landlords of a loyal feudal community. As Margaret Scanlan observes, however, the benevolence the Naylor's direct to their own tenants allows them to ignore the grievances of the Irish (71). Sir Richard's reaction to reports of rebel guns buried on his property attempts to ward off involvement in the actualities he can not face. "I will not have the men talking, and at all accounts I won't have them listened to" (25). Instinctually loyal to his Irish tenants, he charges the British army with doing nothing but dancing and terrorizing old women in their search for weapons. His wife, reflecting a similar preference for the pieties of an ancestral feudal bond to her tenants, whether or not they are IRA soldiers, adopts an identical strategy of evasion. "From all the talk you might think almost anything was going to happen, but we never listen. I have made it a rule not to talk, either" (26).

Lady Naylor's discomfort with the British forces sent to protect her class from the Irish rebels is fraught with her snobbish perception of the changes the Great War has brought to the English army. "The Army's not what it was." After the

decimation of a generation of young men in the war, the ranks of officers are now filled with middle-class recruits. Lady Naylor's snobbery leads her to humiliate Lois's admirer, a young British subaltern with an unacceptably middle-class background. Her familiar Anglo-Irish pride in genealogy recalls the manipulative talents of Lever's Lady Martin and anticipates Molly Keane's countless matriarchical monsters whose lives have been reduced to fulfilling the empty forms of power when real power is gone. Oppressing the young becomes the most accessible outlet for waning authority.

A painfully accurate assessment of the Anglo-Irish situation comes from a Naylor houseguest, Hugo Montmorency, a deracinated former landowner who has sold his ancestral home, and even before the political collapse of Anglo-Ireland, has failed to find a role for himself. When asked by a fellow guest--- "How far do you think this war is going to go? Will there ever be anything we can all do except not notice?"-- his reply is devastating in its assessment of his society. Bitter, purposeless Hugo not only suggests that his class has no legitimacy, but he implies that its legitimacy never existed.

"Don't ask me," he said, but sighed sharply as though beneath the pressure of omniscience. " A few more hundred deaths, I suppose, on our side--which is no side--rather scared, rather isolated, not expressing anything except tenacity to something that isn't there-- that never was there." (82)

Danielstown itself, the austere stone house clearly modeled on Bowen's own home, is presented in a series of images which suggest a darker vision of Anglo-Ireland than that to be presented more than a decade later in Bowen's Court. Filled with light and space, the house nevertheless diminishes the individuals occupying its vast rooms--forcing them into the patterns of dignity and aloofness it projects.

The pale room rose to a height only mirrors followed above the level

of occupation; this disproportionate zone of emptiness dwarfed at all times figures and furniture. The distant ceiling imposed on consciousness its blank white oblong, and a pellucid silence, distilled from a hundred and fifty years of conversation, waited beneath the ceiling. Into this silence, voices went up in stately attenuation. (20)

In her 1942 essay, "The Big House," published thirteen years after The Last September, Bowen writes with admiration of the idea of life implicit in the architecture of the eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish country home, praising a culture which could value society over personality.

What is fine about this social idea is that it means the subjugation of the personal to the impersonal. In the interest of good manners and good behaviour people learned to subdue their own feelings. The result was an easy and unsuspecting intercourse, to which everyone brought the best that they had--wit, knowledge, sympathy and personal beauty. (Collected Impressions 199)

At Danielstown, however, where the sense of the past is alive and oppressive, the social idea dwarfs and silences the individual. While never going as far as Molly Keane will in anatomizing the devastating effects of "good behaviour" in the Anglo-Irish Big House, in The Last September Bowen suggests the personal costs of life devoted to a social ideal. Sitting beneath the family portraits at dinner, the family members and guests are transformed into "thin, over-bright" unconvincingly painted images-- "startled, transitory." They dwindle personally in the overwhelming space of the room while above, the "immutable figures" of the family portraits "cancelled time, negated personality and made the lower cheerfulness, dining and talking, the faintest exterior friction" (24).

From Lois' perspective on the front steps of Danielstown, the Big House imposes itself on the countryside just as it dominates its human inhabitants. Surrounded by lawns giving way to dark lines of trees, the house "was highest of all with toppling immanence, like a cliff" (30). However, looking down at

Danielstown from the road above, it seems to Lois that they lived in a forest.

She wondered they were not smothered; then wondered still more that they were not afraid. Far from here too, their isolation became apparent. The house seemed to be pressing down low in apprehension, hiding its face, as though it had her vision of where it was. It seemed to gather its trees close in fright and amazement at the wide, light, lovely unloving country, the unwilling bosom whereon it was set. (66)

In such a passage Bowen is most explicit about the claustrophobic, smothering quality of Big House life, isolated by location (as well as religion and class) from easy social intercourse with an unloving and unnurturant mother Ireland whose bosom it has ravished with its alien limestone structures. The imagery of this passage prefigures Danielstown's fate, when again the "bosom" of Ireland offers no comfort to those witnessing the terror of the final holocaust.

For Lois the world of Irish politics as it interacts with her life represents the emergence of the real, "the actual," into the rigid world of social convention and snobbery at Danielstown. Her desire for experience--social, political, and sexual-- causes her to cry out to her inadequate and conventional suitor against her situation. "How is it that in this country that ought to be full of such violent realness, there seems nothing for me but clothes and what people say? I might just as well be in some kind of cocoon" (49). After a stifling dinner at the Big House, Lois walks alone into a path of the shrubberies, fearful of, yet drawn into, the darkness and the sensuality of the tips of leaves which touch her bare arms and which feel "timid and dank, like tongues of dead animals". Watching the family party from the woods, she sees their safe encasement, even fossilization, in Danielstown's luxurious cocoon. "The shuttered-in drawing room, the family sealed in lamplight, secure and bright like flowers in a paperweight--were desirable, worth much of this to regain"(33). As Lois stands in the darkness, she is startled by footsteps representing the faceless ghosts she thinks she dreads.

But instead of a ghost, she witnesses the figure of a man in a trenchcoat with a resolute profile striding through her uncle's demesne. His physicality and purposefulness awakens her. Suddenly, "...not to be known seemed like a doom: extinction."

Lois's sexual reaction to the intruders in the Danielstown demesne has been noted in the critical literature on The Last September (Blodgett 41-3; Heath 39-40; Tracy 8-12). The fusion of political and sexual intimations in her response to her secret confrontations suggests the fears and desires of a young girl on the edge of adulthood--as well as the political dichotomy between the Big House and Ireland. Lois responds to the young man as he strides past her with "contemptuous unawareness," inspired by his forboding and forshadowing intention which "burnt in the dark like an almost visible trail" (34). Her assumption of an exalted selflessness in him reminds her of her drifting life and inability to love. "Here was something else she could not share. She could not conceive of her country emotionally." Running to report her experience, she sees Danielstown in the dark; the encapsulated safety of its drawing room now seems "excluded, sad, irrelevant" before the power of the fuller life she has just witnessed. With a new fear and a contempt for the ordinary, patterned routines of the Big House, she decides to keep her experience to herself. "Conceivably, she had just surprised life at a significant angle in the shrubbery" (34).

Lois's second encounter with Ireland occurs when she and Marda Norton, a house guest at Danielstown, encounter a gunman sleeping in a decaying mill on the estate. Like Elizabeth Bowen herself, Lois and Marda are both Anglo-Irish women with strong ties to England, virtually absentees in Ireland. Nineteen-year old Lois has been raised in England by her mother, and now orphaned, has returned to Ireland after completing her education. Twenty-nine year-old Marda, after breaking off several engagements, has resolved to marry a rich Englishman.

The scene at the mill, a major dramatic focus of the novel, becomes a powerful initiation of both women into the life of their own country. The fusion of the sexual and political imagery of the scene again suggests how successfully Bowen integrates the 'Lois' plot of her novel-- the story of a young woman's attempted passage into adulthood-- with her vision of Ireland's political transformation in the twentieth-century.

Lois views the decaying mill with a horror so excessive that it invites interpretation. Roofless, floorless, tottering, with hinges which bleed rust, the "dead mill now entered the democracy of ghostliness, equalled broken palaces in futility and sadness"(123). As a prefiguration of the destruction of Danielstown, the mill serves as a powerful symbolic setting in the novel, but it serves as well as Lois's nightmare of "brittle, staring ruins,"(123) reminding her, as Robert Tracy has noted (12), of that terrifying image of sexual horror and family decay evoked by Poe's House of Usher. Marda's desire for adventure leads the two women to a sleeping gunman, whose fright when he awakens ends with the presumably accidental firing of his gun, with Marda's surface wound, and with the waiting Hugo Montmorency's revelation of his passion for her. The short blunt pistol of the Irish rebel, the women's "embarrassment" and sense of exposure before him, Marda's bloody mouth, their sexual bonding against the deracinated and sterile Hugo, their protection of the gunman, and above all, their immediate focus on their desire for love and fecundity emphasizes the sexual resonances of the experience. After rebuffing Mr. Montmorency the women, both purportedly virginal, retreat into a female intimacy in which they nervously confess that their behaviour was "goatish" not girlish. Marda, seemingly inconsequently, expresses her desire for children--"I should hate to be barren"(128)-- while Lois, at the moment of greatest danger, thinks that she must marry Gerald. Both Tracy (11) and Heath (40) comment on how the scene provides a sexual initiation of

sorts for Lois, as she firsts perceives the abortive relationship between Hugo and Marda.

Bowen juxtaposes Lois's emotionally liberating encounters with potential violence against the Big House with a portrayal of the oppressive life that Danielstown imposes on its young. Lady Naylor's nephew Laurence, the bookish undergraduate discontentedly visiting on his vacation from Oxford, expresses in crassest political terms that realism which no one else will face. He shocks Mr. Montmorency by his desire to smash the decorum of Danielstown's illusions. "I should like something else to happen, some crude intrusion of the actual. ... I should like to be here when this house burns. ... And we shall all be careful not to notice"(44). Lois's Schadenfreude is less politically conscious, but as she contemplates the pattern on a fading rug in glamorous Marda's bedroom, she "hoped that instead of fading to dust in summers of empty sunshine, the carpet would burn with the house in a scarlet night to make one flaming call upon Marda's memory"(98). By pitting the unfulfilled young dreaming of an apocalyptic future against the defeated or self deluding old, Bowen's Last September is strikingly disloyal to that conservative tradition she will eulogize more than a decade later in Bowen's Court.

In this early novel Bowen's vision of Ireland, characterized by the purposeful intruders on the Danielstown demesne, recalls the subversive strand in Maria Edgeworth's Ennui which obliquely celebrates primitive sources of power in Ireland. Although in Edgeworth's novel the savagery and dissoluteness of native Ireland must be reformed, the ennui-ridden Lord Glenthorn is revitalized by his encounter with a wildly disordered and unsubdued nation. The savage splendor of his dark and gloomy Irish castle represents a healing release from the well-bred perfections of his English home. Life in the twentieth-century Anglo-Irish Big House, however, has become so attenuated, so controlled by social ritual and

political denial, that only when Lois brushes against that violence which aims to destroy her world does she begin to feel and indirectly express desires which would take her beyond the cloistered life of Danielstown.

Lois's two encounters with Ireland in which sexual and political longings emerge on an unconscious level suggest that isolation from "the actual" that the Big House has imposed on her. The forbidden Irish rebels are the only sexually potent figures in The Last September, but they represent possibilities of life which are inaccessible to her. Like most Anglo-Irish writers Bowen does not contemplate a social or sexual bonding between the Big House and the cabin, but the potential for such community emerges indirectly in Lois's unconscious reactions to the hidden and forbidden Ireland.

The Heat of the Day

When Bowen began to write The Heat of the Day in 1944, the apparent breakdown of western culture under the aggression of the Axis powers engendered a more conservative vision of the Big House in her fiction, a vision closer to that portrayed in her recently written Bowen's Court than that in The Last September. In her novel written in the shadow of World War II, the Big House no longer represents an archaic idea of a society which does not exist, but an ideal of order and stability in a fragmented world. For Stella Rodney, the English protagonist of The Heat of the Day, the Irish estate her son inherits becomes a psychic retreat: from her own sense of her generation's responsibility for the political collapse of Europe, from her lover's betrayal of his country, from the ordeal of living through the bombings and tensions of wartime Britain.

Stella is a divorced woman in her forties working for the British intelligence. Through Harrison, a mysterious agent pursuing her, Stella discovers that her

lover, Robert Kelway, is selling information to the Nazis. Meanwhile, her twenty-year-old son Roderick inherits Mount Morris, an Irish estate formerly owned by an eccentric cousin of her dead ex-husband. Amidst the confusing terror she experiences as she gradually accepts the truth of Harrison's accusation against Robert, the image of Mount Morris assumes more and more significance, finally symbolizing the survival of traditional values in a collapsing society.

For the most part, the novel structures itself around the interiors of buildings; at one point Stella observes that "outside" meant the harmless world while the terror of wartime life is "indoor-plotted; this was a war of dry cerebration inside windowless walls"(142). Stella inhabits a rented, furnished flat in London in a building occupied by commercial offices during the day, but totally empty at night. This is the site of her love affair with Robert, the traitor to his country, and of her meeting with the mysterious and seemingly homeless Harrison who offers to spare Robert if she will begin an affair with him. Here, too, Robert jumps or falls to his death as he is about to be arrested.

As the setting for her affair with Robert and for Harrison's ominous revelations, the apartment is most striking for its absolute anonymity and lack of history. When complimented for the pretty things with which she surrounds herself, Stella is quick to deny ownership; " 'It's not mine,' she flickered. 'Nothing in this flat is' "(28). Sealed off from the world by its blackout curtains, the room lacks any apprehension of time. They become the setting for a wartime liaison, where Stella and Robert live in a garrison world, a social vacuum in which "one knew people well without knowing much about them" (95).

In an effort to learn more about Robert, Stella accompanies him to his childhood home, Holme Dene, the awful symbol in the novel of the modern disintegration of taste and tradition. A suburban version of an old manor house,

with imitation oak beams and gables, Holme Deane is evoked with such distaste by Bowen that as she describes it she lapses, on occasion, into writing which is close to diatribe. Built purely as an investment property, listed as for sale on the estate agent's books since it was purchased by the Kelways, Holme Deane suggests a transient society in which the sense of place is transformed into the quest for profit.

In an effort to manufacture history and dignity, the builder of the house created a series of elaborations and complications of architectural style.

The concentrated indoorness of the lounge was made somehow greater rather than less by the number of exits, archways, and outdoor views; the staircase, lit from the top and built with as many complications as space allowed, descended into the middle of everything with a plump. (108)

Upstairs, as elsewhere, it had been planned with a sort of playful circumlocution--corridors, archways, recesses, half-landings, ledges, niches, and balustrades combined to fuddle any sense of direction and check, as far as possible, progress from room to room. (256)

Architecturally Holme Deane is the antithesis of the rationally proportioned, austere Georgian house described in Bowen's Court or The Last September. Gabled and trimmed, draped with blood red virginia creepers, surrounded by "a tennis pavilion, a pergola, a sundial, a rock garden, a dovecote, some gnomes, a seesaw, a grouping of rusticated seats and a bird bath," Holme Deane is conceived to discourage social contacts rather than to encourage them. The primary activity of its formidable matriarch, Mrs Kelway, is to see and condemn everything about her. The head of a "man-eating house," she provides Robert with memories of "unstated indignities suffered by [his] father" (259). Mrs. Kelway's position at tea, in the stuffed lounge of the house seems "strategic," giving her command of all the windows of the room. She fails to communicate with her children, or convey respect or affection; instead she spies on and

dominates them.

For Robert, the two upper floors of the house are packed "with repression, doubts, fears, subterfuges, and fibs"(256). Passages are filled with twists so family members can avoid embarrassing each other by inadvertent meetings. Although their private hours are spent "nerving themselves for inevitable confrontations," the family "intelligence service" is unrelenting. Private walks are deemed "hiding"; letters slipped into the gate post-box rather than left to be scrutinized on the hall table are unacceptably furtive. Holme Dene demands control over all behavior and breeds self-righteousness, smugness, and apparently, in Robert, a self hatred leading to treason.

In her creation of Robert's house and family, Bowen is guilty of that snobbery of which Elizabeth Hardwick accused her shortly after the publication of The Heat of the Day. Suggesting that Robert Kelway's treason is reduced to a matter of bad breeding and bad middle-class values, Hardwick sees in Bowen

the moral intransigence of the interior decorator, the wrath of the goddess of the drapery and the table setting. Peace is a well-lit drawing room, purity is light, airy, spacious.... The guilty lead an uneasy existence among the thick, dark, impersonal objects in a furnished room (Eddie in The Death of the Heart) ... or bear upon their souls the terrible scar of one of those boy's dens in which the coins, birds' eggs, trophies and snapshots of youth are kept intact by a vulgar family (Robert Kelway in The Heat of the Day). (1116)

In The Heat of the Day, where Bowen's revulsion against her contemporary society engenders a powerful nostalgia, her hierarchy of values too often slides into a worship of social lineage and inherited property. Stella's own good breeding--she is the descendant of faded landed gentry--distinguishes her from the vulgar Kelways. Among her memories are "a handsome derelict gateway opening onto grass and repeated memorials round the walls of a church" (115), all giving her that certainty of and thus indifference to position which frees her

from the desperate social climbing and financial scramblings of the middle class. "How can they live, anyone live," she asks Robert of his family, "in a place that has for years been asking to be brought to an end?" (121) The symbolic role of the Anglo-Irish Big House that Roderick inherits thus becomes part of a pattern of valuation in The Heat of the Day. The continuity of inherited land is a saving force in a world of Holme Deanes, where houses are built for financial speculation, not to be lived in and passed on from generation to generation.

Possessing Mount Morris gives Stella's fatherless son a "historic future" and meets his "capacity for attachment" (50). Roderick is a deeply traditional, even conventional young man, seeking for the "authoritarianism" or customs and habits of a homelife which Stella's unconventional situation could never provide. As a child, she remembers, "he liked going out to tea with families who had a brook through their garden, hypothetical snakes in their uncut grass, collections of any kind in cabinets, a haunted room, a model railway, a funny uncle, a desk with secret drawers" (61). Like Gerald in The Last September, unimaginative but solid, Roderick represents and seeks traditional virtues. But while Gerald is clearly too limited and unimaginative to bring Lois to some resolution, Roderick exists in The Heat of the Day as a successful reassertion of traditional values. In inheriting Mount Morris, he has, his mother understands, "been fitted into a destiny; better it seemed to her than freedom in nothing." (175).

The Big House in The Heat of the Day endows men and women with a historical context, a role and a social position in life. Mount Morris transforms Stella from an unconnected divorcee in London into "the master's mother." Studying her face in a mirror in the shuttered drawing room, she "became for a moment immortal as a portrait. Momentarily she was the lady of the house" (173). Feeling that her generation had broken "the fatal connection between the past and the future" (176), Stella envisions her son as redeeming the "broken edges"

of that connection which "she felt grating her soul" (176). Suddenly, for example, she imagines him bringing his future bride to the house. Roderick, too, becomes aware of his role in the future for the first time when he visits Mount Morris, contemplating the possibility of his death, thinking of his lack of a real heir, his lack even of a will.

For both mother and son, visiting neutral Ireland in the midst of the war means entering a different world, experiencing an enclosed society so certain of its continuity in history that it is indifferent to the passage of time. The future was not an ominous void to eccentric Cousin Francis, the last owner of Mount Morris, but rather a certainty, an event, as it were, to be anticipated and planned for. Thus he leaves careful directions, "injunctions, admonitions, and warnings," for the stewardship of his home:

Clocks, when and how to wind...Fire Extinguishers, when and how to employ... Locks and Hinges, my method of oiling ... Live Mice caught in traps, to be drowned Not dropped into kitchen fire... Tim O'Keefe. Mason, not to work here again unless he does better than last time. Beggars, bona fide 6d., Old Soldiers 1s , Hysterics, Puppies, in case of ... In case of Blocked Gutters...In case of Parachutists...Birds in Chimney, in case of...In case of Telegrams...In case of River entering Lower Lodge...In case of My Death... (164)

Reading his instructions for the future, Stella regrets that she had not "any such clear directions as to her own life" (164), and half longs to remain in Ireland assuming the simple role the Big House imposes on her. Awakening from a trance-like deep sleep in the morning, she walks to the the river and experiences a peace "of the moment in which one sees the world for moment innocent of oneself" (177). Stella's epiphanic experience is described in terms of her recognition of a "rapture of strength," a "breathless glory," an "unfinished symphony of love" in the world about her (177). These vague expressions of fulfillment are followed by news of the turn in the Allied war effort--Montgomery

has broken through in Egypt. Forever in Stella's future Mount Morris is connected with a "mirage of utter victory" (179).

Roderick too experiences an epiphany, a mystic identity with his land on his first day at Mount Morris. In taking possession of his inheritance, he is possessed by it.

The place had concentrated upon Roderick its being: this was the hour of the never-before--gone were virgin dreams with anything they had of himself in them, anything they had of the picturesque, sweet, easy, strident. He was left possessed, oppressed and in awe. He heard the pulse in his temple beating into the pillow; he was followed by the sound of his own footsteps over his own land. (312)

The imprecision of such prose, evoking ecstatic mystical experiences in vague and sentimental language (What is an "unfinished symphony of love" or a "picturesque, sweet, easy, strident" virgin dream?), suggests how problematic Bowen's writing become under the influence of nostalgia. The Irish sections of The Heat of the Day do little to place Mount Morris in a social or political context. The dismay of Cousin Francis, its former owner, over Irish neutrality is noted but never fully explored. In fact the very qualities of the inviolate Big House to which Stella and Roderick respond--its peacefulness and isolation from war-torn England--are a direct result of Ireland's refusal to participate in the Allied war effort. Bowen's concern with Ireland's neutral stance in World War II is evident in an apologetic defense of neutrality she wrote for The New Statesman in 1941 ("Eire"). But in The Heat of the Day neutrality is simply the necessary condition for Ireland's actual and symbolic isolation from the modern world.

In deifying the twentieth-century Big House, Bowen, like Yeats, praises an institution without social or political substance. Its reality is grounded in its aesthetic evocation of an idea of order and hierarchy which no longer exists (and which, in Ireland, never did exist except as an idea). But while Coole Park, Tulira Castle, and Lissadell, Big Houses Yeats knew and elegized in his poetry,

represent an ideal of aristocratic high culture and service for him, Bowen makes no such claims for Mount Morris. There, mere survival in a timeless world is sufficient. The library filled with hundreds of books is quite "without poetry"(163). The cold, dark drawing room-- mirrored, veneered and ornately furnished-- evokes "virtue" and "honour" but has driven former mistresses mad by its empty echoes and its insistence on eternity. Bowen emphasizes how in spite of the centuries of social life occurring at Mount Morris, the drawing room projects upon its occupants an image of silence and perpetuity. For the former ladies of Mount Morris "conversation was a twinkling surface over their deep silence" (175). The very dominance of the past which oppresses conversation and stifles the young at Danielstown becomes a saving force at Mount Morris.

In The Heat of the Day continuity is enough. In a world where history is quite literally collapsing about them, Stella and Roderick turn with relief to a country which has encapsulated itself in the silent past. Mount Morris is the real thing; Holme Deane is the crass imitation. Mount Morris represents the forces of good breeding and social certainty which the vulgar middle-class world of the Kelways' England cannot achieve. Mount Morris breeds eccentric Cousin Francis' loyalty to the Allies; Holme Deane creates Robert Kelway's treason. In The Last September those characters who remain committed to the feudal ideals represented by Danielstown are doomed by their fantasies to experience catastrophic loss. But in The Heat of the Day Bowen attempts to transform the isolated Big House-- the symbol of a dying social order-- into a representation of social permanence. The price for such a transformation is evident in the passages just quoted and in the snobbish hierarchy of values the novel presents. In failing to achieve a disengagement or "disloyalty" from the past, in turning in a time of crisis to the simple answers provided by ancestral pieties, Bowen sentimentalizes history and weakens her fiction.

Chapter Seven

Molly Keane: the Persistence of Anglo-Irish Illusion

Unlike Elizabeth Bowen, who wrote her most penetrating fictional analysis of Big House life early in her career and who turned then to a nostalgic idealization of Anglo-Ireland, Molly Keane achieves her greatest artistic and critical success in her late novels. Reading Keane's twelve novels about life in the Anglo-Irish Big House in chronological order reinforces one's respect for the authority of age, the judgment of experience. Her last two Big House novels, Good Behaviour (1981) and Time After Time (1983), published when she was in her late seventies, after almost a three-decade hiatus in the appearance of her fiction, represent a major achievement in her long career. With these two novels, a talented but minor writer moves into the world of serious literature.

Good Behaviour and Time After Time pick up thematic strands found in the best of her earlier fiction but represent a new and fiercely corrosive dissection of a society she could evoke with glamour and nostalgia in much of that early work. With age, Keane has achieved a chilling distance from her Anglo-Irish heritage, a distance which allows her to cast a cold eye on life and to view it with comic detachment. In her last two novels, Keane emerges as a major interpreter of the Big House tradition. She indicates what her nineteenth-century predecessors barely implied: that the ever receding ideal of the cultivated Big House at the center of an organic community is based on a fictive vision of the past. This ideal of a harmonious and morally ascendant ruling class, suggests Keane in Good Behaviour and Time After Time, rests on carefully constructed patterns of delusion, on willfully misinterpreting the past in order to construct self-protecting illusions of stability.

Keane's last two novels provide a mordantly comic vision of the decline of the contemporary Big House. If she takes artistic liberties in her exuberant

depiction of physical and moral decay, her picture of the economic collapse of Anglo-Ireland is supported by social and cultural historians. Since late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century land legislation stripped Anglo-Irish country estates of much of their income producing property, contemporary Big Houses are no longer economically viable. The architectural historian, Mark Bence-Jones, for example, in a mood of "unrelieved pessimism" predicted in 1977 that "in a few years time there will be no major Irish country houses left in private occupation" (Preface xxviii). The Anglo-Irish historian J. C. Beckett, in reviewing the declining population of Protestant Anglo-Ireland, remarks with equal pessimism that "it seems not unlikely that before the end of the century Protestantism will be virtually extinct in the greater part of Ireland" (152).

While a novel such as Aidan Higgins' Langrishe, Go Down depicts the final defeat of the Big House, Keane's recent works are far from pessimistic elegies to a dying world. If Anglo-Ireland is seemingly depicted in its death throes in her novels, a final demise is never quite contemplated. In a somewhat similar vein, the journalist Frances Fitzgerald's account of her recent visit to her distant relative Desmond FitzGerald, the twenty-ninth Knight of Glin, records the ways in which contemporary land-poor Big House dwellers accommodate themselves to their poverty: hiring lunatics from the local asylum to serve dinner to important guests, doing the house work and farm labor of their vast estates themselves, burning peat in the winter as the local farmers do. On occasion, Fitzgerald's unsentimental account of an isolated and dying aristocracy comes strikingly close to Keane's depiction of the Swift family in Time After Time. While describing the extraordinary odds against the survival of the Big House, Fitzgerald, like Keane, suggests the possible accommodation of the Big House to a new Ireland. She describes, for example, a young landlord who manages to support the ancestral home his family has owned for twenty-one generations by becoming a travelling salesman in his spare time, selling refrigerators and other kitchen appliances to

his local "Irish Irish" friends (156).

Early Work

Under the pseudonym of M. J. Farrell, Molly Keane has been writing fiction about Big House society since the late 1920's. Born into a gentry family with an English father and an Anglo-Irish mother, her background, like Edith Somerville's or Elizabeth Bowen's, provided her with ample material for her fiction. In a recent "Profile" in The New Yorker, Keane describes her childhood in a Big House in County Wexford as eccentric, occasionally brutal, and quintessentially Anglo-Irish. "Horses and hunting were the thing" (Kierstead 102). Her early novel, Young Entry (1928), written, she asserts, to supplement her clothing allowance, is a dated story of two modern Anglo-Irish girls whose love lives are described through their hunting exploits with their future husbands. This minor work contains some lively dialogue and suggests several themes Keane develops in later novels, themes dealing with oppressive guardians of the young, and of fox hunting in the Irish countryside as the fulfillment of a society's sexual, intellectual, emotional--as well as athletic--needs. In Young Entry, the native characters are caricature stage Irishmen, wily, loyal, depraved, superstitious by turn, living in a downstairs servant world perceived through the affectionately condescending lens of the Anglo-Irish class.

In her next novel, Taking Chances (1929), Keane turns to a study of tragic passion, tracing the effects of a English visitor, Mary Fuller, on the Sorriers, of Sorristown. The novel again evokes an Anglo-Irish society which measures men and women by their skill at the the hunting and riding which fulfill their lives. Thus the Sorriers are an admirable family because "... they rode straight, shot straight and drank hard: while the dallying of [their] ancestry with the daughters of their tenants had produced in the country a type of good looks that persisted

astonishingly (59)." Nevertheless, this Big House family, seemingly an enduring monument to tradition and stability, is undone by the outsider, Mary Fuller, whose unconventional beauty and reckless passion brings down the Sorriers.

In a few of the novels published in the 1930's or 1940's, Keane begins to perceive the Big House more darkly and to emphasize those themes which control her two recent novels, Good Behaviour and Time After Time, both published more than forty years later. In a number of these novels--particularly in Full House (1935), The Rising Tide (1937), or Two Days in Aragon (1941) and even in the earlier, Mad Puppetstown (1931)--Keane reveals how totally the Big House dominates the lives of its inhabitants. As in Le Fanu's Uncle Silas, where in the name of loyalty to the "ancient and honourable " family name, Austin Ruthyn makes terrifying demands upon his daughter, children in The Rising Tide are expected to sacrifice their lives to the altar of family reputation and genealogy. In Full House and The Rising Tide, the Big House is a claustrophobic prison for its children, presided over by possessive mothers who do their best to destroy their young. Especially in The Rising Tide, the traditions, conventions, and expectations of Anglo-Irish gentry society overwhelm the lives of Big House children. Terrified of their horses, they are forced on gruelling fox hunts; for the sake of propriety, an erring daughter is obligated to marry a man she loathes; spinsters in their late twenties and early thirties are dominated by a tyrannical mother. The Big House is the setting of frightful psychic battles between the generations, and Anglo-Irish life is reduced to oppressive social decorum. Sexuality appears as unpleasant physical couplings which women dread, as doomed passion, or as promiscuity. Fulfilled lives are struck down, and individual happiness is sacrificed to family reputation. With The Rising Tide, Keane anticipates the devastating critique of Anglo-Irish culture which is to dominate Good Behaviour and Time After Time. But in structuring her earlier novel around the glamor evoked by its protagonist, Cynthia French-McGrath, a

manipulative and brilliant chatelaine of the Big House, Keane still rejects that corrosive humor which controls and directs her dissection of Anglo-Irish society in her most recent fiction.

In Keane's novels we are struck by the palpable presences of houses, each of which seems to embody a specific personality imposing itself upon its inhabitants. In The Rising Tide, for example, the castellated Gothic Big House becomes a spacial imprisonment for lives controlled by social positions-- or merely the memories of their positions. "Garonlea where these McGraths had lived for a long time had its share in the forming and making of that sadness in their natures which so few of the family seemed entirely to escape" (16). In the earlier Mad Puppetstown, the Big House is far more nostalgically evoked, but again it is a dominating presence in the book, drawing the novel's protagonist into a life of total commitment to her patrimony. When Puppetstown, the family estate, is deserted during the Troubles, it is evoked as "a sad grey house leaning blind-eyed down her valley, her beauty gone and her gladness withered and shrunken from her" (165). This coy personification of the Big House is sustained throughout the novel, ensuring that the house itself remains the dominating focus:

... Puppetstown awaiting them with the flat, dignified calm that houses whose inmates leave them for a day's jolly assume like a mood or a garment, and discard only when they have with due dignity remitted the unkindness of their children's desertion. For houses can be as jealous as lovers and mothers, and under provocation, more bitter than either. (122)

Two Days in Aragon

Of Keane's two works which deal explicitly with the Troubles, only Two Days in Aragon attempts any significant analysis of the intricate relationship between the Big House and Catholic Ireland. Like Edith Somerville's The Big House of Inver, Keane's one serious attempt at a political novel approaches Irish history as

it is embodied in the lives of generations of an Anglo-Irish family. The Foxes occupy an eighteenth-century Georgian mansion which has managed to retain its surface of integrity into the twentieth century. Keane presents Aragon on the eve of its destruction in 1920, as it hovers among its scented gardens in late spring, its season of most exquisite but doomed beauty. Named as if to evoke an exotic Spanish city, surrounded by magnolias brought from Spain and stone pines from Italy, Aragon survives, not with the defacement of past violence and arrogance, but with the melancholy, overripe perfection preceding decay. The aesthetic merger of nature and architectural form is central to Aragon's meaning, for the house and gardens exist together as a magnificent if decadent cultural artifact.

There was too much beauty around Aragon, and too much beauty is dangerous. A complete thing is near its ending. The white brooms in the garden, even such slight mountainy things, had grown to a false fat stature, sleek as white, overfed cats in their ordered groupings. Behind the brooms rose the trimmed plumes of lilacs, grossly, unbearably sweet at night. A magnolia's horned and flowerless bones were crucified against a shallow alcove in a wall alcoved for no reason but to complete an alcove at the house's farther extreme. (227)

In this novel the corruptions of the Big House are darker and more covert than the violent, sprawling, masculine disorder of Prendeville family history in The Big House of Inver or the willed ignorance and covert snobbery of the Naylor in Bowen's The Last September. In Two Days in Aragon, grand public rooms, designed for expansive living, are built directly over a cellar of labyrinthian quarters "where hordes of servants had slept in dirt and confusion" (192). While such housing reflects the social costs implicit in any aristocratic society, Keane's examination of these costs becomes increasingly explicit. In a brief and somewhat obscure passage which attempts to account for a streak of cruelty in the Foxes, Keane reveals how sexual domination and sadism were part of the Anglo-Irish colonial experience. In addition to the rabbit-warren of servants' quarters, the Aragon cellar contains a long unused and isolated

chamber, originally papered in a peculiar old chinese design and hung with mirrors. This room, "about which there remained an air of past luxuries," is equipped with devices of sexual perversion, "delicate ivory-headed cutting whips and other fine and very curious instruments" (193). The contemporary Fox mistress who discovers the room "imagines with horror that her husband's grandfather "had used such dreadful tools, ... had built this far-off room for his pleasures" (193), but is too shocked to speak of her discovery.

Keane gradually reveals how generations of Fox landlords exercised their droit de seigneur over servant girls of the house. The secret subterranean room in the Big House suggests that the idealized, hierarchical Ascendancy community of peasant and aristocrat celebrated by Yeats was tinged with the sexual practices of De Sade. With a room of Gothic horrors in the basement of Aragon, the architecture of the Big House entombs its own corruption. The spectacularly beautiful house and gardens overlook a river into which the illegitimate infants and aborted fetuses of servant girls were thrown and "where babies' bones were little and green scattered skeletons on the river bottom" (122).

By juxtaposing her nostalgic paeans to Aragon's beauty with her sensational revelations of its past corruptions, Keane comes close to wrenching her novel apart. Two Days in Aragon never achieves that sustained irony which Edith Somerville maintains toward Anglo-Ireland in The Big House of Inver, and on occasion Keane lapses into mere nostalgia--or shocked horror. Her attitude toward Big House society is fractured by the pain of acknowledging the barbarity and lack of restraint upon which the aesthetic perfection of Anglo-Irish architecture is based. The corrosive irony she directs toward her culture in her later novels such as Good Behaviour or Time After Time is missing from this earlier work, which attempts to reveal the shame of colonial history without fully incorporating the implications of that history into its tone.

The reports of a more recent chronicler of the Big House, David Thompson,

writing in his autobiographical memoir, Woodbrook (1974), suggest that for Irish peasants, stories of seventeenth- and eighteenth- century Big House sexual harassment of Irish girls and the exercise of the droit de seigneur were living memories well into the twentieth century (117,120). Thompson's transmission of the brutal stories he was told in the 1930's and 1940's in County Roscommon lends authenticity to Keane's contemporary revelations in her novel and reaffirms the mythic power of memories of Anglo-Irish atrocities to intrude upon and disturb the surface of Big House life.⁴

The sexual arrangements between the Big House and Catholic Ireland provide a focus for Two Days in Aragon through Nan O'Neill, a bastard daughter of the Big House devoted to serving the Anglo-Irish culture of her patrimony. Like Shibby Pindy in Somerville's The Big House in Inver, Nan lives enthralled by the the forces which will destroy her. Her aristocratic father's affection for her beautiful mother, "a stupid loquacious slattern" of a servant girl employed by the Foxes, saves Nan from the watery fate of other illegitimate infants born at Aragon. After Nan's mother is safely bequeathed in marriage to a keeper on the estate,

⁴ A brief exploration of Irish historical documents reveals some anecdotal evidence for such sexual practices, although in the two cases given below, English travellers surely brought significant biases with them to their writing. In describing eighteenth-century Ireland, Arthur Young reveals that "landlords of consequences have assured me that many of their cotters would think themselves honored by having their wives and daughters sent to the bed of their master" (Vol. II,53-4). John Dunton's seventeenth-century letters about his tour of Ireland reports "an ancient custom for the landlord to have the first night's lodging with the maiden bride" (358). Lecky quotes sources attesting to the lawlessness of the early eighteenth-century Irish gentry and to the existence of private prisons in the houses of prominent landed proprietors for the punishment of the lower orders (285). Such accounts, when combined with Thompson's assertions that twentieth-century Irish country people still recounted brutal stories about the enforced droit de seigneur, suggest, at least, the narrative and mythic hold of such stories of Irish and Anglo-Irish relations over the imagination of rural society.

she regales her daughter with stories of the dangers and the glamor of the big House. Physically Nan embodies the power of two worlds, for her fine-boned aristocratic body and features and her coarse golden peasant hair "showed her father's quality and mother's beauty" (111). As an adult, in spite of the vows of her putative father that she will never enter domestic service, Nan chooses to become a nursemaid at Aragon. She escapes her mother's fate by fleeing the sexual danger represented by her Fox employer and cousin she loves. But although Nan marries and bears a son to a local mountain farmer, when she is widowed, she leaves her own child to be raised by her husband's sister and returns to care for the Fox children at Aragon. There she lives out her life simultaneously enslaved and defined by her devotion to Aragon.

Like Shibby, Nan is the powerful chatelaine of the Big House, her temple and shrine, and she skillfully gains ascendancy over the household: "... life was Nan's province, every aspect of life on which she could lay a finger, some octopus [sic] like quality in her seemed able to reach out its sensitive strength and grasp the essential..." (123). At the end of the novel, when Nan is captured by three soldiers of the Irish Republican Army who are eager to punish her betrayal of her own people, she is tied by the neck to a tree and forced to watch the burning down of the Big House. (Ironically, she is killed, not by the IRA soldiers who leave her to witness the holocaust, but by a British army lorry rushing to the fire.) Her horrified responses to the destruction of Aragon reveal how in her conviction that she possesses and controls all the things of the Big House, she is, in fact, totally possessed by them.

...she saw that Aragon was burning. They had tied her here to watch the burning. Tied her so she might watch her own soul burning.

Now she saw the smoke and the rosy flames from her linen-room window. My linen, my pillow cases, my sheets. Like all the furnishings of Aragon, they were hers, she had always experienced a sound satisfaction in so calling things "mine." My good brocade

curtains, my fine new towels. Hers to keep from sun and moth and careless hands--most truly hers who could so cherish them, playing the careful steward to their excellence. (254)

The ironies of Nan's position as servant to her own patrimony are clearest when she stands one night at the top of the wide double stairway of Aragon, desiring to descend it, to pass the portraits of her Fox ancestors, and to arrive at the great public hall of the Big House. Instead she dutifully chooses to traverse the cluttered backways of the house, passing decorative motifs appropriate for the servants' quarters: "a black plaster nigger in a blue starred petticoat that everyone thought so hideous..."(112). On the last day of Aragon's existence, Nan learns that Grania Fox, the daughter of the Big House whom she has nursed from childhood, is sleeping with Foley O'Neill, Nan's dashing young son by her peasant husband. In anticipating Nan's reaction to her affair with Foley, Grania reveals, with a painful exactitude, how deeply Nan identifies with her Anglo-Irish oppressors and how the barriers between two social classes assume racial as well as economic and sectarian dimensions. "For a Fox, a daughter of Aragon, to carry on an affair with an O'Neill from the Mountain was as wrong, Grania knew, to Nan, as the love of black and white people seemed to her" (15). ⁵

⁵ Such suggestions of racial feelings on the part of the Anglo-Irish landlords toward the native Irish, comparable to those held by white slave owners toward their slaves, are not confined to Keane's novel. In writing about eighteenth-century Ireland, the nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish historian W.E.H. Lecky notes that "the upper classes were exposed to all the characteristic vices of slave holders, for they formed a dominant class, ruling over a population who were deprived of their civil rights and reduced to a condition of virtual slavery" (282). The sexual as well as political anxiety of an Anglo-Irish ruling class about a people it attempted to reduce to slavery is certainly expressed in acts like the attempt by the Irish Privy Council to mandate the castration of unrecognized priests in 1719 (Lecky 163), and in the long history of attempts to forbid marriages between Catholics and Protestants-- until the mid- eighteenth century. Lecky's discovery that the sectarian basis of stories of Catholic abductions and "exquisitely brutal" rapes of Protestant heiresses, reported by Fronde, was, in fact, totally unsubstantiated by historical evidence (375-80), further supports the

Nan's immediate plan to terminate Grania's pregnancy reverberates with the ironies of her personal history. The misalliance between the Big House and Catholic Ireland, like that which produced Nan, must be aborted before it spawns her grandchild:

A look of such desperation broke across Nan's face as was near madness. Was this the end of her sacrifice to the God of Aragon? Was the high giving of her life to be twisted to nothingness in an hour? A Fox daughter in vulgar trouble with a servant's child. In just such trouble as the poor country girls who worked in the house had been in with the bad Fox's [sic] of all times, and they had been despised and aborted, their babies, dead or dying thrown to the river... (156)

In Two Days in Aragon, Molly Keane's exploration of the sexual relationship between the Big House and Catholic Ireland, reveals a side of Irish social history that haunts the Anglo-Irish novel. Although intermarriage between the Anglo-Irish and the Norman Irish Catholic aristocracy is seen as a reconciling possibility in some nineteenth works (in, for example, Edgeworth's The Absentee and Le Fanu's early Jacobian fiction), the marital aspirations of a rising Catholic class are another matter for the novelists. The opportunity for marriage between Catholic and Protestant Ireland appears most often as the threat of the outsider to the Big House. As the Catholic antagonist gazes longingly at the Big House, the defensive responses of Big House novelists suggests the sexual as well as the class and sectarian anxieties of Irish society. Lever's portrayal of the Catholic agent Scanlan's aspirations for Mary Martin's hand, when contrasted with Joe Nelligan's respectful and distant adoration of her, indicates how unwilling the nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish author is to contemplate the breakdown of traditional class and sectarian barriers. Edith Somerville's uneasiness in Mount

notion of a sexual anxiety with powerful resemblances to post- Civil War fears in the American South. Molly Keane's fleeting twentieth-century reminders of the analogies between black and white race relations and those between Catholic and Anglo-Ireland underscore the covert racial and sexual fears implicit in Irish history.

Music with the Catholic Dr. Magnan's plans to marry his children into the Big House he is plotting to acquire, reflects a similar discomfort well into the twentieth century. In Somerville's The Big House of Inver, the reverse pattern of downward mobility occurs when the daughters of the eighteenth-century Lady Isabella marry the grooms of the estate; such behavior is seen as an enduring shame to the Prendeville family and the beginning of its rapid decline.

From the point of view of the ascendant class, a less threatening sexual contact between the two Irelands occurs through the servicing of the Big House landlord by the Catholic peasant woman. Both Somerville's The Big House of Inver and Keane's Two Days in Aragon provide the obvious evidence that the droit de seigneur resulted not in the social assimilation of two classes, but in the victimization of one class by another. But figures like Shibby Pindy or Nan O'Neill reveal how sexual exploitation creates not simply new victims, but new aggressors as well. The ruthlessness of Nan's devotion to the Big House makes her a darker and more ominous figure even than Shibby. Nan's final charge in the Aragon nurseries is Miss Pidgie, a frail and senile Fox maiden-aunt who embarrasses the family drawing room and is thus expelled to Nan's care in the attics of Aragon. Nan's sadism to Miss Pidgie suggests an unconscious rage directed at the weakest link in the oppressive power structures of Anglo-Ireland. Terrorizing and starving the helpless old woman, Nan expresses her absolute ascendancy over the one representative of the Big House who can never oppress her. In The Big House of Inver, Shibby directs her anger against Maggie Connor, the Irish girl whose fate is all too similar to Shibby's own mother's and who threatens Shibby's ambitions for her half-brother, Kit. Maggie represents the Irish heritage Shibby has denied rather than the Anglo-Irish one she has embraced. But Nan expresses her deepest contempt and sadism, not toward the frightened and brutal IRA soldiers who present the political demands of her native Irish heritage, but toward Miss Pidgie, that most vulnerable Fox relation who has

failed to live up to Nan's vision of Big House ascendancy. For Molly Keane, as for Sheridan Le Fanu, the punishment for the sins of Anglo-Ireland is visited upon its own descendants.

Good Behaviour and Time After Time

In much of Keane's work the traditional Big House novel, attuned to the history and social pressures destroying a society, transforms itself into the narrower mode of domestic fiction, and, in the last two novels especially, into unsparing black humor and character dissection. While other Big House novelists obsessively examine the relationship between personal and historical maladjustment, most of Molly Keane's Anglo-Irish fiction exists at a curious distance from any direct confrontations with questions of national identity. With the exception of Mad Puppetstown and Two Days In Aragon, where the political troubles of the 1920's impinge directly on the lives of the characters, her gentry world is, at least on the surface of the novels, insulated from Irish history. In ten of Keane's novels, Big House settings are unthreatened by Irish civil strife. On rare occasions the political troubles are referred to, almost as an afterthought, as in The Rising Tide where the Civil War is "an inconvenience to social life," or in Time After Time, where the contemporary characters listen indifferently to the appalling radio news from Ulster as they await dinner. In Good Behaviour, history is relevant only in so far as the father of the protagonist, Aroon St Charles, is injured and a stablehand is killed fighting with the British in World War I. The decade of the twenties, a period of the Free State Treaty, the subsequent Civil War, and the destruction of close to two hundred Anglo-Irish homes, is recalled by Aroon as if she is describing an illustration in the Tatler: liberating clothing, new and intoxicating cocktails, luxurious parties, tennis, and hunting.

In a sense, then, in much of her work Molly Keane is redefining the Big

House novel, recasting it into the form of traditional English domestic fiction insulated from the larger questions of politics and the political transformations of a society. Yet for all the historical insularity of the novels, so domestically centered on the gentry family's life-sustaining attention to social decorum or "good behaviour," these are works which have little in common with the calm certainties of Jane Austen's fictional world--or with the affirmation of a conservative and traditional social order which Bowen dramatizes through her vision of the Big House in The Heat of the Day. By emphasizing social decorum as a moral gauge of the individual, Austen assures her readers of the shared moral assumptions of her society. Because of this insistence on good manners and social decencies, Emma Woodhouse's rudeness to a helpless old spinster, for example, cannot go unreprieved. In Keane's late novels, however, good manners all too often imply self delusion. "Even then I knew how to ignore things, I knew how to behave" (Good Behaviour 13). In both Time After Time and Good Behaviour children ignore their father's sexual exploits and create a series of illusions, a protective layer of consciousness which denies the reality of the breakdown of family, class, and culture.

A historically literate reader of Keane's dark late fiction places the personal maladjustment of her characters in the larger world of the political and economic impotence of twentieth century Anglo-Ireland. The Anglo-Irish characters in these late novels have marginal roles in society. Daughters remain spinsters, or if they marry, unhappily to be sure, they fail to produce children. Gainful employment is unheard of for the proper Big House lady. For the weak and passive men, careers are manufactured out of leisure activities; they turn, on occasion, from their hunting and fishing to sexual liaisons with the servants (on one occasion to an incestuous relationship with a young niece), to homosexuality, or to suicide. The life of the mind or of the spirit is suspect in this gentry world. In Good Behaviour a child is beaten and his governess dismissed when

he is discovered reading poetry (and lying about it) rather than schooling his pony. In Time After Time, a Big House widow reads Jane Austen, but only to counteract the erotica her husband had forced her to study.

The country estates described in these two novels suggest that familiar decay and decrepitude which has overtaken a society led by irresponsible landlords. Good Behaviour's Temple Alice, the remnant of a once grand estate seen in the decades surrounding World War I, slowly bleeds away its resources. Designed to support the fox hunting and fishing of a leisure class, the estate is depleted by its improvident landlords. The narrator's grandfather, for example, draws away the meagre water supply from the house by building a pond on which he can row about to escape his land agent and "other buzzing tormentors of a leisured life "(12). Her father continues the tradition of neglect.

While as though duty bound, Papa was hunting, and shooting in their proper season, at Temple Alice money poured quietly away. Our school fees were the guilty party most often accused. Then came rates and income tax and the absurd hesitations of bank managers. Coal merchant and butchers could be difficult, so days of farm labour were spent felling and cutting up trees--the wood burned up quickly and delightfully in the high fast-draughting Georgian grate. As a corrective to the butcher's bills lambs were slaughtered on the place. Half the meat was eaten while the other half went bad, hanging in the musty ice house without any ice. (72)

In Time After Time, the family estate, Durraghglass, is again the classic locus of the Big House novel, a twentieth-century Castle Rackrent described, on occasion, with a modernist nausea. The novel depicts the lives of four elderly Anglo-Irish siblings--April, Jasper, May, and June Swift-- named, perhaps, with an ironic reference to the past Anglo-Irish eminence and glory represented by the illustrious Dean Swift. The Swifts are trapped into living together in mutual dislike at Durraghglass by their poverty and their psychic disabilities, as well as by their mother's posthumous wishes granting them all rights of residence.

Keane is unsparing in her minute descriptions of the physical deterioration of the Swift homestead. With an extraordinary zest for the noxious details of decrepitude, she describes not just the potholed drive surrounded by a riot of briars and nettles, the weedy cobblestones in the stable yard, the tumbled down piggeries, and slateless cowsheds, but also the grosser manifestations of decay: the pollution of the mountain fed river as untreated raw sewage (including bits of toilet tissue) from the house and stable are released into it, the appalling smells which rise from the kitchen, the filth amidst which Jasper concocts fabulous meals, the mouldy meat he plucks from the dogs' dishes to supplement his pigeon pies, the white fly mites which emerge at night on the kitchen floor. In piling up such physical details to evoke the decline of the Big House, the septuagenarian writer is, one feels, relentlessly unsentimental about the process of aging, willing to face the meaning of rot and decay with a powerful literalness. The neglected house, traditionally the symbol of a dying society, here converges with the image of human decay and old age.

In Good Behaviour and Time After Time, Keane eyes her world with a cold detachment. She describes savagely attentive or emotionally frigid mothers who destroy their children; weak inarticulate fathers who passively acquiesce to parental barbarities for the sake of uninterrupted sexual dalliance or fishing and hunting; children who become closet homosexuals, spinster ladies, or kleptomaniacs. Chastity, that most unnatural of all sexual predilections, is the fate of a disproportionate number of Big House children. Good Behaviour begins with the well bred murder of a mother by the monstrous daughter she has produced. In Time After Time, children destroyed by "Darling Mummie's" love hide their private eccentricities behind locked doors. Their physical disabilities--deafness, blindness, deformed limbs, and dyslexia--suggest the psychic paralysis of their lives and their culture. In Keane's design, the family deformities and disabilities reflect, certainly, the state of their Anglo-Irish cultural heritage.

However the symbolic resonances of blindness and deafness, of crippled hands and retarded minds are so delicately evoked, so concretely embodied in the personality of each character, that symbolic and literal levels are totally fused.

With the detached, even chilling vision of her own class which dominates her recent novels, Keane sloughs off the affectionately condescending tone toward the native Irish which controls several of her early works. and which recalls the class-bound vision of the native Irish found in earlier Big House novelist . In Young Entry, Mad Puppetstown, and Conversation Pieces (1932), for example, attractive young heroines are surrounded by sly, superstitious, and wayward servants, whose loyalty to their young masters and mistresses is equalled only by their good humored unscrupulousness toward their adult employers. These grooms, butlers, mad cooks, and assorted other family retainers recall that humorous vision of the native Irish so reminiscent of Somerville and Ross in their Irish RM stories. The picturesque Irish retainers remain types, perceived through the affectionately condescending categories of a rigid class system. In Good Behaviour, however, Keane's description of Rose, the St Charles family maid, is presented with a humor and an admiration which transcend easy stereotypes. Under the guise of warming the feet of her dying master under his bed sheets, Rose provides him with the sexual pleasures denied by his frigid wife. On one level Rose is still the Irish peasant girl servicing the master with her favors, but the bizarre circumstances of her clandestine sexual generosity to a paralyzed old man undercuts any traditional response to her. Finally, Rose's behavior, so offensive to the proper young nurse and incomprehensible to the virgin daughter, becomes a brilliant victory of the traditional victim of the droit de seigneur. Flouting her superiors, doling out the portions of whiskey and pleasure that will both comfort and kill her dying master, Rose achieves real power and moral ascendancy over the Big House.

In Time After Time, as in Good Behaviour, the house has become a psychic

prison, here trapping four suspicious old people in the regressive patterns of childhood antagonisms. Even the supreme achievement of the Big House, the snobbery which so clearly separates them (the Catholic Irish) from us (the Anglo-Irish), collapses under the wear and tear of genetic decay. The youngest Swift sibling, Baby June, speaking with the provincial accent she learned in the village, "has the shape and weight of a retired flat race jockey--too heavy for her height" (10). She has become, virtually, the family's tenant farmer, attending their formal dinners in her clean jeans and blue Viyella shirt, isolated from the snobberies of her more verbal and mean-minded siblings. The fear of intermarriage between the Big House and Catholic Ireland which haunts earlier Anglo-Irish novels is irrelevant in Time After Time, for the combination of genetic and economic collapse itself accomplishes June's social regression into the sartorial and speech habits of a stablehand.

Generally though, Keane's two later novels focus unrelentingly on the gentry world. Gone are the staffs of obliging native Irish servants who play a major role in several of her earlier novels, for the money to sustain the establishments described in these novels has evaporated. In Good Behaviour, Aroon is the unloved and oversized daughter of this fading Big House, whose memories of her childhood and youth at Temple Alice provide a mordently comic vision of a mean-spirited gentry society trapped in its own rules of decorum. Her unreliable narrative voice, the stunning stylistic tour de force of Good Behaviour, allows Keane to expose her society with an ironic control comparable to that achieved by Maria Edgeworth through the voice of Thady Quirk in Castle Rackrent. Like Thady, Aroon reveals the horrors which she cannot register, freeing Keane from the necessity of overt judgments, in this most judgmental of her Big House novels. With this new freedom offered by her first person narrator, Keane turns with a cold, comic eye to the appalling ways in which her society can abuse its young. The victimized child who turns monster, Aroon endures, for example, the

hypocrisies of her brother, who arranges a romance between his fat, ungainly sister and his best friend in order to cover up a homosexual liason; and those of her father, whose seeming intimacy with his wife masks a lifetime of philandering. Keane's ironically named protagonist-- in Gaelic Aroon means "my love, my dear"-- is despised by her elegant mother who picks at her own food and is contemptuous of her daughter's huge appetite--for food and for love. "The size of anything appalled her..."(180).

In her endless capacity to delude herself, Aroon becomes a microcosm of a social system which avoids confronting the messiness of the emotional life. Grief, cowardliness, passion, even joy, cannot be expressed within the decencies of good behavior. A brother's sudden death, a desolation for his parents, is suffered wordlessly.

Our good behaviour went on and on, endless as the days. No one spoke of the pain were sharing. Our discretion was almost complete. Although they feared to speak, Papa and Mummie spent more time together; but far from comforting, they seemed to freeze each other deeper in misery. (114)

Aroon's world conspires to deny the truth of her own experience. One evening she watches her drunken father knock over an oil lamp, only to be rescued by a coarse and playful Rose, appearing at his side suddenly without shoes and apron. The next morning all is restored: her father brisk and clean shaven, his clothes cleaned, glass swept up, the smell of spilled paraffin overwhelmed by the odor of furniture polish and roses.

I was hypnotized. I was bemused. I was deprived of my certainty that Papa had been terribly drunk and that in Rose's approach to him, there had been something easy and practiced which I could not name. (134)

In the face of the overwhelming evidence of her father's indulgences with her former governess and with Rose, Aroon chooses to ignore the unpleasantness of

the coarse sexual drives seething around her. She cannot acknowledge, for example, Rose's sexual excitations of her dying father, and complains instead of the far less lethal stimulation of her gifts of whiskey to him.

Aroon survives her miserable youth through her recurring fictionalized memories of Richard, her brother's homosexual lover whom she claims as her own. In creating this illusion of Richard's love for her, Aroon turns again and again to the presents he left her, to the evening he crept into her bed (and rapidly crept out), to the moment they ran together on the beach when she felt "light as an antelope" ignoring her huge bosoms "shuddering and swaying "(100). Richard's dubious gestures of love, part of his carefully orchestrated cover for his affair with her brother, become the leitmotifs of her phantasy life.

Now, with all my winter clothes heavy on me (it is the greatest nonsense that fat people don't feel cold) I could sustain my truthful memories and fill the time till he came back to me, as he must. Then, of course, I would put my hand in his again, and drift lightly down the aisle beside him, dressed in white satin. (No. Parchment satin, perhaps, for a big girl.) (175)

Growing up, Aroon absorbs the intricate patterns of avoidance, delusion, and hypocrisy which gives her the power denied her as a child. Her adult voice, controlling and dominating those around her through the power of her self delusion, suggests the awful fulfillment of her culture's training. At her mother's death, which she brings about by forcing abhorred food on a heart patient, Aroon refuses to hear Rose's accusations of murder. Rose's outburst can be ignored because she belongs to that servant class whose unpleasant habits must be tolerated but dismissed. In a chilling self parody of the attitudes toward the native Irish which control her own earlier novels, Keane has Aroon mouth the platitudes of Anglo-Irish racial condescension as she watches Rose.

She was opening the window as high as the sash would go-- that's one of their superstitions, something to do with letting the spirit go

freely. They do it . They don't speak of it....They revel in death....Keep the Last Rites going....She can't wait to get her hands on Mummie, to get me out of the way while she helps Mrs. Cleary in necessary and nasty rituals. (7)

Between her cultural indoctrination and her personal pathology--"I don't trust Rose. I don't trust anybody. Because I like things to be right ,"--Aroon is well defended against the truth. The novel ends ominously, but with a certain rhadamanthine justice. Before her mother's death, Aroon learns that she, not her mother, is the beneficiary of her father's will. "I was claiming what was mine--his love, his absolute love. I wanted them to understand that he had loved me most (243-4)." Thus the humiliated daughter, deprived by her elegant mother even of the food she needs to sustain her ungainly body, turns with all the resources of her self delusion to the woman she hates most in life.

I stood above her, shrivelled back again in her chair, and I spoke to her in a voice I didn't know myself- a voice humid with kindness. "Drink this," I said, "and remember that I'll always look after you." She took the glass and looked up at me from under the absurd tilt of her hat; in an odd way her look reminded me of a child warding off a blow.

Yes . Always, " I reassured her firmly. (145)

In Time After Time, Keane turns again to Anglo-Ireland as a world controlled by illusions, but in this work, she moves, quite without nostalgia, towards a muted reconciliation with her culture. At the center of the Swifts' nostalgic memories of the past is their dead "Darling Mummie," the gracious Big House mistress whose subtle tyrannies over her children doom them to a lifetime of competitive battles to win her love. Forced together by their mother's posthumous control, the four elderly Swifts cannot escape their regressive loyalty to her and to her standards as they live amid squalor. Each child's particular disability-- April's deafness, Jasper's partial blindness, May's withered hand, and Baby June's dyslexia-- was a source of maternal control.

Darling Mummie, in her many widowed years, engrossed herself entirely in her children's lives, ignoring while protecting their various incapacities with such considered and perfect tactfulness that she possessed them as though she was within the cage of their ribs, measuring the beat of their hearts. (46)

Trapped in their childhood rivalries, the Swifts reenact the illusions of a better life. April, the seventy-four year old ex-beauty, spends her dead husband's inheritance on exercise regimens, imported cosmetics and expensive silk and woolen clothes from Paris and London couture houses. Ritually cleansing her skin with the purest of French creams, dressing and undressing herself in the privacy of her locked boudoir, she takes chaste pleasure in her freedom from her husband's insistent sexual experiments. "It's a thing men do. You won't like it," her mother told her on her wedding day (50). The former belle of the county, deaf April solipsistically reenacts the narcissistic pleasures of her past: "She loved putting on her her clothes. Sometimes she would dress superbly for a party, only to make a last minute excuse and stay at home in the isolation of her deafness" (24).

Her one-eyed brother Jasper, injured in a childhood accident by his baby sister, dreams of grand horticultural phantasies which will reconstruct the "civilized courtliness" of Durraghglass' past splendor, an illusionary splendor based on financial irresponsibility. "With the acceptance lent by hindsight Jasper saw the place as it used to be, fully staffed in house and gardens and farm, losing money year upon year while a full social life continued undisturbed" (12). Jasper's chastity, mildly compromised by his affection for a beautiful young monk residing on the adjoining property, is reinforced by his reverent memories of Darling Mummie. Dressed impeccably by her until her death, in well-tailored jackets from Savile Row which he still wears with tattered aristocratic grace, Jasper commits his life to torturing his sisters, and to gardening and cooking. From his "romantic" memories of past repasts, he concocts fabulous dishes out of mouldy ingredients in his filthy kitchen.

May, the third and most armored of the Swifts, is born with a cropped right hand, missing three and a half fingers. In personality much like the adult Aroon St Charles, May spends her life "on a consolation track of busy occupations" (26), creating the illusions of a normal life. In her endless compensatory struggle "to be as good as others, better than others," May transforms herself into a master artisan: the President of the Flower Arranger's Guild, the restorer of her friends' fine china, a prize winning creator of tweed pictures. Behind the locked door of her bedroom, "as strictly tidy as a private room in an expensive nursing home"(25), May arranges her collection of china rabbits on a intricate simulation of a rabbit warren she has constructed. Thus, again and again, she proves to herself and to the memory of her adored mother, the miraculous dexterity of her crippled hand.

To her mother, Baby June's dyslexia was a "more subtle deformity than May's hand, April's growing deafness, or Jasper's one-eyed state "(46). A little too "slow" to learn how to read and write, tiny June was sent to the village convent school rather than the exclusive English establishment her sisters attended. Virtually illiterate, immersed in the concerns of the pigs, hens and cows, the sixty-four year old physically undeveloped youngest Swift does the farmwork of two men.

The novel's dramatic action reveals to the Swifts the truths they have carefully avoided. Time After Time repeats the pattern of other Anglo-Irish novels, for again an outsider attempts to destroy the Big House, to undermine its foundations, in this case by exposing the self-delusions by which the Swifts have survived. But as in Aidan Higgins Langrishe, Go Down, the antagonist is no longer the aspiring Catholic agent or tenant, acquisitively eyeing the Big House and its land. With its peeling paint and dry rot, Durraghglass is no prize, but rather a source of pity and condescension to the Catholic matrons in May's flower arranging group. Psychological attack, not economic takeover, now threatens the

Big House.

Suddenly one day, the Swift's lost, half-Jewish, Viennese cousin Leda appears, seemingly resurrected from the cold, mass grave of some unnamed concentration camp. After her disappearance with her Jewish husband in the 1940's, the Swifts, always eager to ward off "sordid details", avoided contemplating Leda's probable fate. But disturbing recollections of glamorous Leda's two youthful visits to Durraghglass persist. These evocations of Leda stir exciting if painful memories of attraction and rejection for Jasper and May, who remember with humiliation, Leda's insatiable erotic curiosity about their physical deformities. For April Leda represents a perpetual "ghost of happiness", reminding her of their joyful adolescent friendship, but also reviving strange rumors about Daddy's fatal hunting accident after her cousin's sudden departure.

Leda's attempted seduction of three Swifts--the peasant mind of Baby June remains impervious to her insinuations--is a relentless, if not wholly successful act of revenge. Returning to Durraghglass as a blind old woman, Leda comes to disturb the lives of those who excluded her from their golden past; to punish the children whose mother sent her home to Vienna in disgrace for entering into an affair with her own uncle. Leda skillfully unearths the sordid secrets of each of her cousins, insinuating herself into their confidences and once more setting them against each other in their competition for her love. Keane's brilliant stroke in creating Leda as the false victim of history--she was a Vichy collaborator rather than a camp inmate--suggests both Leda's personal viciousness and the easy ways in which victims and oppressors can merge. Leda's name, so resonant in modern Irish literature after Yeats, suggests, with some irony perhaps, both the "knowledge" and "the power" acquired by a victim of history. Her blindness protects her from facing the ravages of age, and thus her return to Durraghglass is at once a true recapturing of the past and a nasty exposure of its fictive quality.

The climax of the novel becomes a sensational breakfast, where Leda's

unmasking of the secrets--truths and half truths-- she has ferreted out of the Swifts turns into an all out attack against the principles of good behavior enforced by Darling Mummie. By exposing the Swifts and their illusions about themselves, Leda relieves herself of years of hatred toward their mother for expelling her from Durraghglass. Leda's revelations in this scene peel away layer after layer of glamor from the Big House. April is unmasked as a secret drinker and pot smoker. Leda reveals that April's marriage to a fox-hunting officer from the "right" regiment and the "right" family delivered her into the hands of a pornographic lecher, who "did it" on trains. Jasper is attacked as a closet homosexual, dallying with a handsome young monk on the adjoining property. Leda humiliates May by suggesting that the local ladies attend her flower arranging demonstrations in order to pity her withered hand. She even betrays the thrilling secret which May shared with her, the kleptomania which keeps May well supplied with her little porcelain figures. Baby June, the former equestrienne star, is not spared. Leda reveals June's loss of nerve as a rider, a terror which helps account for her peculiar dependence on Durraghglass's remaining hired help, the handsome but lazy stablehand, Christy Lucey. The unmasking of the Swifts' well-bred father as her lover climaxes Leda's revelations and explodes the cover-up of his suicide. More primitively, Leda befouls Mummie's violet scented, perfectly preserved clothing hanging in the maternal death chamber she occupies during her visit. Her revenge is complete; all illusions are desecrated.

Leda's revelations obliterate any illusionary dignity or glamor clinging to the Big House. Yet in spite of Keane's chilling tone towards the Swifts, she writes--quite without nostalgia or sentimentality-- with a curious affection for the very nasty characters she creates and for the dying culture she dissects with such pleasure. The novel softens up after Leda's explosive attack, as the Swifts rally together to expel her. Moreover, they reconstruct their lives, building on the truths Leda has revealed. Following Christy's desertion (instigated by Leda), June's

near fatal accident on the horse she is terrified to ride leads her to another talented stablehand. May finds paid work as an antique restorer after being caught stealing a porcelain figure. Jasper's dreams of horticultural splendor seem attainable as he arranges a trade of land for labor with the old monk who comes to end his secret meetings with the handsome young Brother of the adjoining monestary. Leda is punished in full. Literally deaf to her retreating cousin's protests, April deserts Durraghglass to live with Leda at her convent home and to impose her strict dietary and exercise regimens on their lives.

Structurally the novel suffers from the anticlimax of its last section following Leda's great explosive scene of revelations; yet Keane's demonstration of the Swifts' power to survive the collapse of their illusionary world reveals how her vision moves beyond its corrosive humor. In an earlier novel, Taking Chances, written when Keane was a young woman in her twenties, an elderly character, Aunt Edythe, refuses to grow old with grace or peace. Her efforts to retain her youth strike the young characters in the novel as grotesque and obscene.

For whatever things are lovely in old age, to the young there is nothing but that which is hateful to indecency in the thought that their old should not forget, as utterly as though they had never known them, the lusts and passions which are to youth by right of youth....Old witch! What does she think she's doing -dolling herself up like this?... The vulgarity of it, and the pity! Was this all a bright, violent past left you when your clear mind went faintly cracky with age? This, and the greedy excitement that flashed sometimes into old dim eyes and shook in swollen, gouty fingers? (286)

Writing Time After Time in her late seventies, using and recreating the patterns of a traditional form, Molly Keane faces the decline of her culture and the accompanying aging of her childless characters with a wry admiration rather than with the disgust of the young. Although amused and sometimes appalled by the Swifts, Keane never allows herself to hate or pity them. Even if they never managed to live Aunt Edythe's "bright, violent past," the awful Swifts remember

the passions of their youth. They tolerate each other and survive; in this survival their toughminded creator finds some limited affirmation of their Anglo-Irish heritage. The Swift family line will end with their deaths, but their refusal to succumb to self pity, their extraordinary capacity to plot and plan for the future, to scramble greedily for life suggests that even in its defeat the Big House asserts its life. Why indeed should not old men be mad?

Chapter Eight
Jennifer Johnston and William Trevor: Big House Conventions in the
Contemporary Realistic Novel

The contemporary Big House novels written by Jennifer Johnston and William Trevor suggest how an established set of conventions in fiction provide a framework for apprehending the complexities of historical experience --and in Trevor's case the risks an author takes in ignoring these conventions. Since Maria Edgeworth's Castle Rackrent, Big House novels have steadfastly portrayed the landlord as accelerating his own decline. Novels by Edith Somerville, Elizabeth Bowen, and Molly Keane depict the isolation of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Big House from the insistent nationalism of the Catholic Irish community. This recurring portrayal of the landlord as increasingly alienated from the vast majority of his fellow countrymen is supported by historical analysis; as Oliver MacDonagh has suggested the novel is a metier "as close...as it is possible to get in literature to that of the historian"(3). Even a historian sympathetic to the Anglo-Irish position describes the landed Protestant class as profoundly conservative and anti-democratic (Buckland 282), and thus antagonistic to those democratic aspirations of the modern nationalist movement which would remove the social as well as economic barriers between the two Irelands.

In their fiction about the Anglo-Irish, Johnston and Trevor both respond to the psychological costs of the political divisions within Irish society. Both have written about the contemporary crisis in the north--Johnston in Shadows on our Skin (1977) and Trevor in stories such as "Attracta" (1978) and "Beyond the Pale" (1981). Their novels about the early twentieth-century period emerge from a sense of the ongoing tragedy of Irish history--for Catholic and Protestant alike. Although each novelist offers a moving evocation of the Anglo-Irish experience,

Johnson's adherence to the central literary convention of Big House tradition empowers her to write a series of novels which develop and demonstrate the relationship between political history and personal destiny. Trevor's choice to reject the Big House convention and choose that anomaly in Irish history, a politically nationalist landlord, as his protagonist, results in a novel which, in its political implications, seems forced and sentimental. Since the conventions of the Big House fictional form are so inextricably fused with Irish history, any violation of these central assumptions or any retreat into a Yeatsian vision of an ideal community of Protestant landlord and Catholic tenant seems to violate history itself as well as the literary tradition it engendered.

Jennifer Johnston

The conventions of the Big House tradition discipline and illuminate the best of Jennifer Johnston's novels about the landed Anglo-Irish. In The Captains and the Kings (1972) and How Many Miles to Babylon (1974), Johnston explores the ways in which a fragmented and divided society is implicated in the psychic isolation of her protagonists. While these novels are not overtly political, they are, like most twentieth-century Big House fiction, concerned with the relationship between social, sectarian, and class divisions and the personal destiny of Anglo-Irish protagonists.

Johnston's modest but assured fiction is sparse, even underwritten. Creating fiction without the linguistic virtuosity of a post-Joycean like Aidan Higgins or the darker ironies of Molly Keane, Johnston uses the Big House form as a metaphor for human isolation and for the failures of love. The separation between two societies--Anglo-Ireland and Catholic Ireland --becomes the force which both exacerbates and mirrors the loneliness of her early protagonists. Although Johnston has denied any conscious attempt to write Big House novels

in the tradition of Edgeworth or Somerville and Ross, her analysis of her own fiction is revealing. In a recent interview she speaks of herself as writing in the tradition of Jane Austen or E.M. Forster, as creating new versions of the novel of manners on her own "very small canvas". Her description of her fiction as bypassing the innovative modernism of Joyce and "working with fairly strict, rather old-fashioned terms" of the novel suggests the attraction of a traditional form for her. (Johnston, "Q and A with Jennifer Johnston")

In The Captains and the Kings, the most successful of her three Big House novels, we are situated in the familiar neglected mansion, separated from the village by a set of gates, an overgrown drive and an untidy gravel sweep. A lonely old man, waiting for death and occupying a few rooms in his ancestral home, befriends a young boy from the village. The crucial plot elements of the Big House novel are all in place: the decaying house, the tension between Anglo-Ireland and Catholic Ireland, the theme of the outsider who brings down the Big House. But Johnston's novel, written with a complex awareness of her country's social and political history, becomes finally a study of the human need for love. She writes of love's failures and muted triumphs, of the tragic consequences for the individual of crossing caste lines, but of the more terrible fate of those who never escape the sectarian, political, and economic boundaries of their society

Mr Prendergast, the Anglo-Irish protagonist of The Captains and the Kings, has lived an armored life. Rejected by his mother for surviving the Great War which destroyed the elder son she favored, he marries an English woman whose face he forgets a few months after her death, and fathers a daughter whom he arranges to see as infrequently as possible. Rootless until his mother's death, he moves his wife from city to city to escape those acquaintances who threaten to become friends. When the novel opens he is spending his last years in contemporary Ireland on the decaying estate he has inherited from his mother;

there he isolates himself more and more from old acquaintances who would impose their unwanted solicitude on him. Watching the slow decay of his estate he waits for death in the few rooms left inhabitable in the house. Comforted by whiskey and music, Prendergast lives for those moments when he plays Chopin and Schubert, listening for the perfect sounds he imagines but which his fingers have never managed to reproduce.

Into this world of life suspended before death comes young Diarmid Toorish, a truant, red-headed village boy who chooses Prendergast and his house as a refuge from the mean-minded and sordid life of his shopkeeping parents. Dirty and barely literate, Diarmid brings his overwhelming needs with him--for beauty, for education, and for love. He sees Prendergast's home as a grand shop or museum, filled with treasures he recognizes as part of a remote, inaccessible world. With a collection of lead soldiers--the captains and the kings--stored in the Prendergast family nursery for more than fifty years, the two alienated outcasts recreate the flamboyant battles of British history and begin to assuage their loneliness. Johnston's unsentimental vision of Prendergast and Diarmid--a selfish old man and a sullen and dirty adolescent--makes the transforming power of their brief encounter particularly moving. Huddled together in the decaying old house, eating the canned food Diarmid filches from his parents' shop or drinking the whiskey and instant coffee supplied by Prendergast, they create a doomed but loving refuge from their pasts.

The deepening emotional bonds between two marginal characters-- both profoundly isolated from family and caste-- raise darker and darker suspicions. Johnston's portrayal of Diarmid's dreadful father, browbeaten by his wife and thus delighted to victimize another in retaliation for his buried rage, suggests her contempt for the small-minded brutalities of the shopkeeper class. Accusing Prendergast of the seduction of their son, the Toorishs turn on the old man with the furious rage of the suppressed. The local Catholic priest warns Prendergast

that the village "blood is up ... No obstacle is too great. Their corporate mind is on one thing, the kill. And when that happens, God help the fox" (136).

Prendergast's sodden gardener, a jealous hanger-on from his mother's day, aids and abets the hunting down of his employer. Even Prendergast's own caste betrays him when the embarrassed Rector of the Protestant church, a self-proclaimed friend, requests that his parishioner cease serving as church organist.

Only the village priest, who comes with Toorish to inform Prendergast of the criminal proceedings underway against him, begins to comprehend the bond between the neglected child and the old man and to understand the power of the love which has touched them. In an arresting moment in the confrontation scene, Prendergast turns to the priest to reveal his feelings: "I loved the boy. Do love. Yes" (138). Toorish's gleeful reaction to Prendergast's words as a confession of sexual guilt, skillfully elicited by Father Mulchay, reveals the abyss still existing between the village and the Big House, and provokes the priest to a moment of violent rage at his parishioner.

Death saves Prendergast from the disgrace of legal action against him; his heart quietly gives out as the guards prepare to bring him in for questioning, but only after he has achieved an ephiphanic moment as he waits for them, finally playing Chopin's Nocturnes as he imagines they should be played. "He felt as if he had never played like this before. The music came leaping out from under his fingers and filled the world" (139). The gestures of love between Prendergast and Diarmid--a few weeks of shared talk, of refuge from isolation for both of them--have brought him some fulfillment. Even as she depicts the failure of the aborted attempt to cross class and sectarian barriers, Johnston suggests how the friendship between the old man and the child has briefly enriched them.

In this novel Diarmid and Prendergast's diffident and often reluctant search for love leads them to transgress the boundaries of class, of age, and of creed.

For this they are calumniated and punished. Diarmid is frightened into betraying Prendergast and fuels the rage of the village. Nevertheless the novel ends with a vision of the old man's victory rather than with his defeat. He, not the dreadful Toorishs, has listened to Diarmid, told him stories, and, finally, given and received affection. His relationship with the boy has ensured that Diarmid will be separated from the parents he hates and sent off by the village priest to a Christian Brothers school in Cork. In earlier Big House fiction, from Edgeworth through Higgins, the encroaching outsider destroys Anglo-Ireland. But in this novel, the outsider who comes to the Big House brings a kind of redemption, even if he brings death.

In How Many Miles to Babylon Johnston echoes themes and characters from The Captains and the Kings, as she refines and redefines the "small canvas" she has chosen to explore. Set just before and during World War I, the novel portrays Anglo-Ireland in its last years of its political existence and social ascendancy. Again the relationship between a lonely inhabitant of the Big House and a boy from the village brings love but also disaster. The protagonist, Alexander Moore, is introduced as if he were a youthful version of Prendergast, or as one reviewer has noted, as a fully realized version of Prendergast's older brother and rival Alexander, the heroic figure from the earlier novel who is lost in the Great War. ("The Passion and the Glory," Craig) But in How Many Miles to Babylon there are no heroes, even in memory--only victims.

In this work, Johnston begins to deepen that examination of parental inadequacy and rejection which she briefly alludes to in the earlier novel through Prendergast's fleeting memories of his unhappy childhood. Alexander Moore is dominated by his coldly elegant and frustrated mother, a woman who much resembles the monstrous Big House matriarchs in Molly Keane's novels. Like Keane, Johnston recognizes the corruption latent in empty forms of power. Married without love and living without the real authority and responsibilities of

the lady of the manor, this idle twentieth-century mistress of the Big House tends to her garden, feeds her swans, and maims her child. In the tradition of Charles Lever's haughty Lady Dorothea, Mrs Moore rejects contact with all intruders--her son's piano teacher, for example--who might drag intimations of poverty into her drawing room.

Her gentle husband, defeated and reclusive, is the familiar impotent and isolated Big House landlord. His love of his property, however, involves a sense of responsibility to his tenants, who are, he tells his son, the rightful owners of the land.

"Here, the land must come first. You understand. It is this country's heart. It was taken from the people. We...I must be clear... We took it from the people. I would like to feel that it will, when the moment comes, be handed back in good order."

"...We are not totally bad."

(42-3)

A self confessed "peasant at heart," he hesitantly warns his son against human love and teaches him that while life is barren the land is not. Mr Moore's situation--isolated from the people of Ireland but devoted to a land which he senses is not really his--embodies the particular tragedy of many twentieth-century Anglo-Irish landlords. To love the land is far safer for him than to invest himself in any human relationship. Before his wife's withering contempt he is helpless; he cannot prevent her from punishing him for loving his son by sending Alexander into the slaughter of a war which he, unlike the vast majority of the landed Anglo-Irish, fails to support (Buckland 28-35). "I have never aspired to being an Englishman. Nor have I such aspirations for my son" (40).

As a child, Alexander is educated by tutors at home because his mother will not contemplate living alone with her husband; the cold tension of his family life is unrelieved by a sense of community, even with others of his caste. From the children of the village, he is isolated by barriers of class and education. Growing up alone with his parents, Alexander feels no sense of deprivation, having no knowledge of any other life. "Even with them I was alone, and I was the only thing

that made them not alone" (6). Thus he immediately perceives his friendship with a village boy as a hidden joy.

I had a friend. A private and secret friend. I never went to his house nor he to mine. We met, either down by the lake, or up on the hill behind the house where I would take my pony in the afternoons when he finished school. (13)

The brief childhood idyll of freedom that Alexander and his Irish friend Jerry experience as they ride and swim in places hidden from the Big House and the village is never entirely free from the pressures of society. In Johnston's Ireland, freedom from class and religious distinctions is seldom possible, for the tentacles of social stratification exist without any opposing tradition or ideal of a transcendent social equality. Neither Alexander nor Jerry can ignore the different futures their backgrounds will force upon them. When Jerry must seek work in his early teens, he resists employment in the Moore stables in spite of his love of horses.

"But why not? It seems like a great idea to me"

"Well, for one thing we wouldn't be able to be friends any more."...

"I don't see that."

"I'd be working for you. It would be different."

"Not for me, you blathering idiot."

"Your father, you. It's all one. They wouldn't let us be friends."

"Why should they care?"

Yet I knew they would care. He was right. My mother would purse up her mouth with disapproval, her voice rise alarmingly as it sometimes did when she spoke to my father.

"Why is neither here nor there. Your lot would care. My lot too if it came to it. One's as bad as the other." (16)

Although Alexander recognizes that his mother's resistance to his friendship with Jerry is inevitable, his father also reminds him of the "responsibilities and limitations" of his class, of the "chaos" were he to abandon his proper role (29). The Anglo-Irish landlord's love of his fields, his sense of responsibility to his tenants, and even his belief that he is merely a temporary custodian of that land

which his class has taken from the people does not encompass a vision of equality between the Big House and the village. In spite of his devotion to the country of his birth, Alex's father never questions the social gulf between the two Irelands.

The social barriers between Alex and Jerry develop inexorably as they grow older, almost as if independent of parental pressure. The boys mature in very different ways. As an adolescent, Alexander feels he remains inwardly the same, while his English genes propel his body to grow taller and taller. Celtic Jerry, redhaired and freckled, remains short and physically childlike, even as he becomes an adolescent working man, smoking and drinking, smelling of sweat. After they are separated by Alexander's parents, Jerry becomes a Republican, eager to fight in the trenches in order to prepare for the national crisis he sees brewing in Ireland, while Alexander enlists in the Great War in order to escape the horrors of witnessing his mother's hatred of his father.

In France their friendship destroys them. To their British commander, Alexander's Anglo-Irish identity makes him suspect as a loyal officer and doubly suspicious when his friendship with a non-commissioned Irishman is discovered. For Jerry and Alexander, thus, the war is simply an extension of the ordinary peacetime patterns of class barriers. To escape from the war and recapture their memories of Ireland, they court disaster by riding stolen horses through the devastated French countryside. In another escapade, recounted with the poignant understatement reminiscent of the best of Hemingway's war fiction, they leave their barracks and discover a French cafe, in a quiet village seemingly untouched by the war. Their companion, a young English officer, demands of the proprietor, *Où est la guerre. Où?* (99) The answer he receives, from a grieving father who has recently lost his son, serves as a thematic center of the book and suggests that for these young soldiers there will be, indeed, no escape.

"La guerre est partout, monsieur." He spread his arms wide, embraced the room, the village, his whole world sadly between them ...

"Nous attendons, monsieur. Jour par jour, nous attendons. Les Boches, les Belges, les Anglais, même les Français, qui que ce soit, tout le monde souffrira ici." (99-100)

Alexander and Jerry are both finally destroyed by a relentless war machine which sacrifices individual love--Jerry's for his family, Alexander's for his friend--to the most rigid interpretations of military codes. Jerry is sentenced to death for leaving the trenches to search for his missing father, and when Alexander, the designated commander of his firing squad, mercifully shoots his best friend the night before the scheduled execution, he too is condemned. That both men are perceived as victims--in specifically Irish terms--is evident from a brief scene where Alexander watches a soldier mindlessly shooting a swan, one of a pair that appears in the sky, flying north over the battle field as if in search of its Irish home on Alexander's lake.

They were flying low, their wings fanning with dignity the air around. I stopped marching, embarrassed by their presence, as if some old acquaintances had dropped in to visit me at an unbearably inconvenient moment. They skimmed the bare branches of six or seven battered trees and flew obliquely across the line of soldier. As I raised my hand in greeting the sound of a shot reached me. The front bird's neck swung for a moment from left to right and then drooped. An ugly mass of flesh and feathers fell to the ground. (149)

Reading Johnston's early fiction as part of a historical pattern of Anglo-Irish literature reveals both the enduring characteristics of the Big House tradition and the ways in which its forms can become a metaphor for the failures of contemporary Irish society. Earlier Big House novelists like Edgeworth, Lever, and Somerville view the encroachments of Catholic Ireland on the Big House with distaste. The emerging shopkeeper's Ireland of Yeats's "greasy till"-- as prefigured in Jason Quirk's ambitions in Castle Rackrent-- is implicitly condemned as brutal, mean-minded, and vulgar, even when juxtaposed with the

sloppy improvidences of a dying landlord class. But in Johnston's novels such dichotomies no longer hold, for the brutalities of the Big House and the village are, in fact, equal. Diarmid Toorish's parents who beat, neglect, and exploit their child are no better--and certainly no worse--than Alexander Moore's elegant and sadistic mother. In these novels, the outsiders--Diarmid and Jerry-- who encroach on the Big House are searching for love, not power. Society's continuing resistance to the breakdown of class lines condemns individuals to that lonely isolation which is the tragic center of all of Johnston's fiction. Only those characters who risk social rejection -- and in How Many Miles to Babylon who risk death-- briefly manage to escape the armored world of a society which still organizes itself around economic, social, and sectarian barriers.

William Trevor

That a novel includes an accurate report of an historical event is not necessarily a point in its favor. What would be a point in its favor is the presence of that quality we loosely call "true to life," more pertinently true to the moral complexities of political behavior. (Howe 99)

Unlike Jennifer Johnston, whose Big House fiction reflects and works within recurring patterns of a tradition, William Trevor ignores the central convention of the Big House novel. The Anglo-Irish family he chooses to write about in Fools of Fortune is strikingly different from those relics of an Ascendancy world depicted by Jennifer Johnston or Molly Keane. The Quintons of Kilneagh in County Cork are resident landlords who work a small mill on their land. They are neither improvident, foolish, mean-spirited, nor alienated. Nor do they attempt to isolate themselves, like the ostrich-like Naylor in Bowen's The Last September or the snobbish Mrs Moore in Johnston's How Many Miles to Babylon, from the political rebellion which is occurring in Ireland in the early twentieth century. Willie Quinton's memories of his childhood at his beautiful Georgian home suggest an

ideal of community--of an ordered and ceremonious life in which Irish Catholic servants are treated with affection and respect. Mr Quinton's insistence on a quiet and tranquil life at Kiineagh distinguishes him from the blustering fox hunting landlords of earlier Big House novels by Edith Someville or Molly Keane. The Protestant Quintons welcome a defrocked priest, Father Kilgarrieff, into their home as a tutor for their son, and everyone eats fish on Friday in order to accommodate the Catholics in the household. Father Kilgarrieff teaches Willie to admire Daniel O'Connell for his abhorrence of violence and to regret the Irish failure to follow O'Connell's precepts.

The ties between nationalist Kilneagh and England are strong. Willie's uncle has died fighting for the British during the recent Great War, as have several Catholic workers in the Quinton mill. Willie's mother and great-grandmother were both English brides from the grand manor house of Woodcombe Park in Dorset. Nevertheless both of these English born Quinton wives become thoroughly Irish: the first of them died of a fever contracted during the Great Famine while she was distributing food to her starving tenants. Catholic and Protestant differences merge into a common hagiolatry as the Protestant Anna Quinton appears to her mourning husband eleven years after her death as "an apparition like the Virgin Mary" on a distant hill. The devoted widower obeys her request that he give away the greater part of his estate "to those who had suffered loss and deprivation in the Famine" (13).

To most Anglo-Irish the Quintons are traitors to their class: in 1797 they enraged their fellow landlords by refusing the hospitality of their home to a militia man who had shot down six local Irishmen in the streets. They freely gave much of their land to their tenants before the passage of the Land Acts and have long identified themselves with Irish Home Rule rather than Protestant Unionism. From 1918 until his death Mr. Quinton entertains and financially supports the Republican leader Michael Collins, upon whose head Dublin Castle has put a

price. Only because he fears for the safety of his dependents does Quinton refuse to allow Collins to drill his men at Kilneagh. To most southern Anglo-Irish, even the many who were beginning to shed their traditional unionism as a result of serving together with native Irishmen in the Great War, the Easter Rising of 1916 confirmed their worst fears about Sinn Fein and arrested the move toward conciliation with the nationalists (Burkland 51-2). Yet in speaking of the events of 1916 which occurred two years before, Mrs Quinton tells her eight-year old son that she wishes the rising had succeeded: "The whole thing would be over by now" (23).

Tragedy strikes Willie's childhood when a worker at the family mill, a returning Irish veteran of the War who is an informer to the notorious British mercenaries the Black and Tans, is found hanged on the estate grounds, with his tongue cut out. In reprisal a Black and Tans Sergeant Rudkin burns down Kilneagh, killing Mr Quinton and his two daughters in the holocaust and shooting the two gardeners who witness the attack. The rest of Fools of Fortune traces the endless repercussions of such an act of political horror: Willie's beautiful and dignified mother become an alcoholic, obsessed with her husband's English killer. Vengeance is finally achieved ten years after the burning of Kilneagh by a hitherto gentle young man who had seemingly learned to eke out a normal life for himself after his family tragedy. Finding his mother dead by suicide, Willie travels to England where he brutally stabs and virtually decapitates his father's murderer, who now owns a greengrocer's shop in Liverpool. Such is the ordinariness of evil.

In Fools of Fortune Trevor is not satisfied with merely depicting the effect of violence on the consciousness of the victims or observers of political outrage. Instead he seeks for solutions and answers and finds them in the notion of redemptive suffering, or more specifically in a vision of a healing sainthood which comes to those who endure and miraculously transcend the violence which has

scarred them. Like Johnston, Trevor insists on evoking a community of suffering in Ireland, for the agony of the country's history is shared by Catholic and Protestant alike.

The Quinton's young Catholic maid Josephine, who with Willie, his mother, and Father Killgariff, is a survivor of the massacre at the Big House, is described as a woman transformed and redeemed by her vision of violence and suffering. Devoting her life to the broken and alcoholic Mrs. Quinton, Josephine becomes a maid in a home for old nuns after her mistress's suicide. In her old age when Josephine knows she is dying, she sends for the aging Willie to bring him home from his exile; as he walks into her room he hears her repetitive murmurings for the suffering : "Dear Mary, console them.... Console them everywhere." Her nurse tells Willie of Josephine's obsessive prayers "that the survivors may be comforted in their mourning. She requests God's word in Ireland" (226). In an earlier version of this section of the novel, published in 1981 as a short story called "Saints," Josephine is even more pointedly sanctified and sanctifying. She becomes insane, institutionalized in an asylum where the nuns believe she heals the ill and will one day be canonized as a saint.

In his novel, Trevor transfers this aura of sainthood to Willie's illegitimate daughter Imelda, who is born as result of his brief encounter with his cousin Marianne, the third Quinton mother to come from the Woodcombe family in Dorset. (Willie's aborted romance with Marianne provides the central narrative strand of the novel, much of which is written as unsent letters between them.) As a young girl Imelda is driven insane when she discovers the violence of her family history, but as an adult her mad beatitude brings peace to those about her and miraculously restores her parents to each other after fifty years of separation. Like her great-great- grandmother Anna Quinton, who lost her life struggling to save the starving peasants and who appeared like the Virgin Mary to her mourning husband, Protestant Imelda, named after a Catholic saint who had

experienced a Sacred Host hovering over her head as she knelt in prayer, exists as a symbol of healing and redemption in Ireland. The eccentric and seemingly possessed daughter of heroic Willy Quinton, she becomes a legend in the village.

Imelda is gifted, so the local people say, and bring the afflicted to her. A woman has been rid of dementia, a man cured of a cataract. Her happiness is like a shroud miraculously about her, its source mysterious except to her. (238)

Fools of Fortune, a romantic and melodramatic novel, attempts to address the injustices of Irish history by transcending them. In his recent story, "The News From Ireland," Trevor evokes a darker, more complex, and politically more familiar vision of the Big House as he describes a well-meaning but smug and condescending family which arrives from England to take possession of its newly inherited estate during the nineteenth-century Famine. In this short story Trevor, like Johnston, emphasizes that absolute isolation between the Big House and the Catholic tenantry which condemns both classes to future hostility (The News From Ireland 9-46). The Quintons, however, appear to defy every negative assumption about Anglo-Irish landlords. Although they own their house, mill, and demesne, they have freely given much of their land to their tenants. Mr Quinton works at his mill, treats his Catholic servants with respect, and supports the nationalist cause in the rebellion. Nevertheless he and his family (as well as his devoted Catholic servants) are struck down by history as it manifests itself in the seemingly endless and irrational cycle of outrage and reprisal which surrounds the centuries of English occupation of Ireland.

In choosing to write about a decent and uncharacteristically radical Anglo-Irish family, Trevor carefully prepares his readers to accept his vision of Irish politics as so horrific, so intractable and cruel that political distinctions and political solutions are finally irrelevant. Mr. Quinton's decency in hiring Doyle, the local Irish veteran who served with the English Sergeant Rudkin in World War I

and who is killed on Kilneagh grounds for informing to the Black and Tans through his old war companion, seals the Quintons' fate. Only by transcending politics through a vision of redemptive suffering and sainthood can Trevor find meaning in the bleakness of the senseless violence he depicts.

In registering the ongoing brutalities of Irish history in his stories about the contemporary violence in Ireland--in, for example, "Beyond the Pale" or "Attracta"-- Trevor depicts the transforming effect violence has on the minds of his saintlike or spiritually awakened characters (The Stories of William Trevor 691-711, 592-605). Imelda's obsessive visions of the burning of Kilneagh and of her father's brutal vengeance on Rudkin become metaphors for Irish history itself where political heroism and political atrocity are so often inseparable. In the village convent school she attends Imelda is obliquely told of her father's "heroic" act: "Your father will never be forgotten, Imelda, in Lough, or in Fermoy, in all County Cork, He is every day in our prayers" (197-8). But in her nightmare visions of her family's past, Imelda confuses the two atrocities which she cannot erase from her consciousness. In her fantasies, her father's bloody revenge on the greengrocer in Liverpool merges with Rudkin's murder of her grandfather and his two daughters.

She imagined the head, its weight tearing the flesh that still
attached it to the body. (216)

She closed her eyes and in the room above the vegetable shop
blood spurted in a torrent, splashing on to the wallpaper that was
torn and hung loosely down. The blood was sticky, running over
the backs of her hands and spashing on to her hair....
The screaming of the children began, and the torment of the
flames on their flesh. The dogs were laid out dead in the yard and
the body of the man in the teddy-bear dressing-gown lay
smouldering on the stairs. The blood kept running on her hands,
and was tacky in her hair. (218-19)

As powerful as these images of violence become in Trevor's fiction, they

lead him to search for comforting answers for the tragedy of Irish history, and then to sentimentality and a simplification of experience. His vision of the peaceful beatitude of a beautiful middle-aged madwoman who redeems the atrocities of history does not address the social and political issues of Irish life which are implicit in any novel about the Big House and the fate of its landlords. In Irving Howe's terms, Fools of Fortune fails to achieve that truth to "the moral complexities of political behavior" (99) which is the mark of a successful novel concerned with political events.

In rejecting the conventions of earlier Big House fiction which emphasizes the responsibility of the landlord for his losses, Trevor seems to want to suggest the irrelevance of political choices in determining fate. For example, in "The Distant Past", an earlier short story about the Anglo- Irish Middletons, an aging brother and sister occupying their decaying mansion in modern Ireland, Trevor emphasizes how individuals are buffeted by political events they cannot control. The unionism of his anachronistic protagonists is regarded as a quaint, harmless, and picturesque eccentricity by the Irish townspeople, former republicans who are becoming prosperous through tourism. In the years of the town's prosperity, the Middletons' eccentric loyalty to the past--for example displaying the Union Jack on the day of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation--is seen as an admirable quality and brings them attention and friendship. With the development of violence in Ulster, however, tourists abandon the village. Suddenly the quaint unionism of the aging Big House occupants becomes an alienating force. Faced with economic loss, the townspeople turn against their former friends, depriving the Middletons of any sense of community and forcing them to face a friendless and lonesome old age. "Because of the distant past they would die friendless. It was worse than being murdered in their beds" (The Stories of William Trevor 351). Although the Middletons privately question the choice they have made to devote their lives to a decaying estate and to a loyalty to the past, they are

presented as pitiful victims of history, as pawns rather than as actors.

In Fools of Fortunes individuals are even more powerfully depicted as helpless before fate, fools of fortune randomly plucked as victims by the irrational waves of violence which dominate Irish history. In this novel about individuals trapped within political forces, a novel in which Michael Collins, a "great man" from Irish history appears in the plot, Trevor minimizes the implications of the economic and social realities of Big House life as they exist beneath the surface kindness of a good landlord with nationalist sympathies. In spite of his efforts to suggest the closeness between Catholic and Protestant, class barriers are rigid at Kilneagh, and the community which exists there is traditionally hierarchical. Although the Quintons have identified themselves with nationalist causes for centuries, Mr Quinton is described by his son as "very much the Irish seigneur" (16). The accountant at the Quinton mill dares to admire Willie's Aunt Pansy only because he is a Protestant, but his status as a middle-class clerk makes the Big House lady appear inaccessible to him as a future wife--in spite of Mr Quinton's urgings that he propose. Josephine, the contented and devoted servant, is depicted as working from morning to night while the Quintons live a far more leisurely and dignified life.

Wash both night and morning, Mrs Flynn commanded, rise at six-fifteen. Do not speak in the dining-room unless invited to, carry the vegetable dishes to the left of the person being served.... "Yes, Mrs Flynn," Josephine endlessly repeated during her first few days of awkwardness and bewilderment. She blacked grates and shone brass, and seemed for ever to be sweeping floors. Her own small attic room, with its white enamel bowl and pitcher, was as strange as anywhere. (31-2)

The political reality that does not interest Trevor in Fools of Fortune is that even the most decent and politically enlightened people can, merely by their position within structures of oppression, become the instruments which contribute to violence. One need not be a Marxist historian to understand that the existence

of Anglo-Irish families like the Quintons, who, whatever their political stance, owned more and controlled more than their Catholic tenants and employees, contributed to the presence and random violence of the Black and Tans and the Republican forces. Political violence in early twentieth-century Ireland was no more inexplicable than it was or has been in any colonial state where land and property was distributed to colonial forces and taken from a native people. Programs of land redistribution and economic reform seem more effective and enduring answers to violence than vague evocations of redemptive sainthood.

In Mount Music, The Last September, and Two Days in Aragon, Anglo-Irish novelists respond to the ways in which Big House landlords became victims of historical forces which they are unable to comprehend or to control. But in these novels Edith Somerville, Elizabeth Bowen and Molly Keane insist, albeit to different degrees, on the responsibility of the Ascendancy class for its own collapse. Big Houses are not just swept away by history; their owners actively participate in and contribute to the processes by which they are destroyed. Similarly in The Captains and the Kings and How Many Miles to Babylon, Jennifer Johnston works within the conventions of earlier Big House fiction to show how Anglo-Ireland's failure to achieve any integration with the Catholic Irish community condemns her protagonists to a life of lonely isolation. In Fools of Fortune, however, Trevor is simply interested in registering his responses to the terrible injustices of political history as it affects individual lives.

The unfairness of history which traps decent and enlightened people into patterns they have not chosen is a legitimate subject for a serious novel. But Trevor's recreation of the Big House landlord as heroic nationalist victim is less a depiction of Anglo-Irish history than a meditation on the injustice of life, on the randomness of events and control of the individual by fate. The weaknesses of this haunting novel, its final collapse into easy sentimental resolutions, is surely related to its presentation of a Big House which is an historical anomaly and

which, whether or not it reflects a real historical situation, does not feel "true to life" to the reader with some knowledge of Irish history. The elegaic quality of the early chapters of Fools of Fortune evokes a Yeatsian vision of a hierarchical Big House community of peaceloving Protestant landlord and Catholic servants which is difficult to reconcile with Mr Quinton's inclinations to have Republican forces drilling at Kilneagh. Would the Gore-Booth's Lissadell, that "old Georgian mansion" embodying for Yeats the ideal of an aristocratic Big House culture, have retained its symbolic meaning for him had Staff Lieutenant Constance Markievicz brought her troops of the Citizens Army home to drill there?

Chapter Nine

Recreating a Form: the Big House in Aidan Higgins and John Banville

Among contemporary novelists writing about the Big House only Aidan Higgins and John Banville inherit several of the themes, techniques, and preoccupations of the experimental post-Joycean novel. Both write under the influence of literary modernism, emphasizing traditional narrative far less than the exploration of individual consciousness and dissolving the chronological sequences of realistic fiction. Both respond to and emerge from that breakdown of cultural certainties which accompanies all modernist and post-modernist writing.

In Langrishe, Go Down, Birchwood, and The Newton Letter, Higgins' and Banville's choice to use the conventions of a traditional narrative genre as a catalyst for their innovations suggests the generative power of the Big House novel. For both authors the illusionary quality of Anglo-Irish life and its creation of fantasies of the past to compensate for the decay of the present becomes a thematic center from which they create these works. However, in turning to the Big House novel both Higgins and Banville recreate and in Banville's case reinvent the form. Higgins, for example, internationalizes a parochial genre by insisting that the decline of Anglo-Ireland be seen in the context of the initial collapse of the Allies under the Axis aggressions preceding World War II. Thus a specifically local Irish phenomenon becomes emblematic of a universal cultural debacle, implying the decline of Western civilization itself. In the tradition of the naturalism of Joyce, Higgins writes Langrishe, Go Down as a supra-mimetic text, using the map of the Irish village of Celbridge as assiduously as Joyce does when he recreates Dublin. As in Ulysses naturalistic details become symbolic, resonating within the novel with enormous force. Higgins' use of the interior monologue, long subjective meditations by his protagonists, indicates how the

exploration of consciousness becomes the central narrative of his novel. While Higgins' Langrishe, Go Down remains well within the boundaries of realistic fiction, his experiments with style and his vision of a universal cultural decline place him as a writer in the modernist tradition.

John Banville, a far more experimental novelist than Higgins, subverts all traditional literary conventions he adopts. Unlike Higgins' Langrishe, Go Down, which retains a relatively stable sense of character and plot, Banville's two works dealing with Anglo-Ireland--Birchwood and The Newton Letter--are (among other things) literary parodies of Big House fiction, rather than Big House novels themselves. Both works are epistemological and metaliterary enterprises which explore the limitations of remembering and knowing in order to repudiate the very premises of the forms they imitate. Banville's two novels self-consciously play with the conventions of realistic fiction in order to dissolve them. In Birchwood, Banville fragments the traditional fictional elements of plot, space, and time and plays with traditionally Gothic elements in the mode of Maturin and Le Fanu. In the Newton Letter, one of a tetralogy of novels evoking or describing the scientific imagination, the narrator's delusions and misperceptions undermine the realistic conventions the novel purports to imitate. In all of his fiction, but particularly in Doctor Copernicus (1976), Kepler (1981), The Newton Letter (1982) and Mefisto (1986), Banville explores the possibility of a "new novel," "freed of its obligation to psychologize, to spin yarns, to portray 'reality'." By calling into question the comfortable certainties about reality which underlie the traditional novel aimed at constructing a world "symbolic of the world of commonplace experience," Banville attempts to write fictions which undermine and then reinvent the novel genre as absolutely as Einstein's theory of relativity revolutionized traditional physics. (Banville, "Physics and Fiction" 42).

Aidan Higgins

Seamus Deane argues that the persistence of the Big House novel in Ireland reveals the continued dependence of Irish writers on a Yeatsian version of Anglo-Irish history; for Deane the Big House form exists as a narrowly parochial anachronism demonstrating the "comparative poverty of the Irish novelistic tradition" ("The Literary Myths of the Revival" 32). Aidan Higgins' Langrishe, Go Down, one of the more fully realized and historically complex Big House novels to emerge in contemporary Ireland, suggests, however, the richness, not the impoverishment of Irish fiction. Higgins writes both as an Irishman and as a cosmopolitan; he writes not only in response to Yeats, but even more powerfully in the shadow of Joyce's, Eliot's, and Beckett's vision of a dying modern culture. Using the basic structure of the Big House novel, Higgins creates a work which moves beyond the parochialism of a specifically Irish form into the world of international fiction.

Like most innovative novels, Langrishe, Go Down cannot be contained by the descriptive terminology of a single tradition. Higgins' Big House novel reveals the creative force of a writer working within an established form and in so doing, redefining the form. If Higgins is writing yet another account of a dying Anglo-Irish culture, he is also presenting the death in life of the Catholic culture which has inherited Anglo-Irish power and finally the death of European culture itself (Harmon 6). In the last section of the novel, newspaper headlines announce the "Anschluss," the 1938 invasion of Austria by Nazi troops.

To a large extent Higgins replicates the formal characteristics of the Big House novel; his innovations are released through the traditional form. The neglected house, stripped of its furnishings and grandeur, symbolizes the loss of power and prestige of Anglo-Irish culture. The alienated proprietor of the Big House, who fails to take responsibility for his property, has lost his relationship

with the Catholic community, a relationship which ideally gave emotional content to the system of land tenure. Reminders of the power of this purportedly feudal bond exist in earlier Big House novels by Edgeworth, Lever, or Somerville through the portrayal of peasant characters still mouthing the language of feudal devotion. In these earlier novels land owners are brought down by outsiders, rising Catholics whose intelligence, wit, or sheer energy defeats the improvident or isolated Anglo-Irish gentry world. Higgins' protagonist is, however, undone by a true outsider, a German intellectual who exposes the moribund condition of the contemporary Big House.

Higgins' novel focuses on two Anglo-Irish sisters, Helen and Imogen Langrishe, whose purposeless lives reflect the decay of their class; the Langrishe sisters neither work, nor form enduring relationships, nor bear children. The novel begins in 1937, as Helen Langrishe confronts the failures of her life. Then in a flashback to 1932, the second section depicts Imogen's ill-fated affair with a thirty-five year old German intellectual who occupies one of the lodges on the Langrishe estate. The final section describes Helen Langrishe's death and burial in 1938 and traces Imogen's growing isolation and despair as she contemplates her own death.

Springfield House, the Langrishe family home, is the archetypal decaying Big House, echoing the convention established in Castle Rackrent and developed in novels by Le Fanu, Somerville, and Keane. Its architectural mass, with imposing "high rooms, lit up" (93), impresses the outsider as "well pleased with itself, set apart" (99). Its rooms, however, are dilapidated, stripped of most furniture, or decayed. Only the drawing room, filled with "suffocating screens and cushions," second rate paintings or copies of paintings of self-reflecting historical events--"The Sacking of Rome," "Scotland Forever"-- can be used for entertaining. The staff has been reduced to one maid of all work, and the Langrishe sisters wallow in their own disorder. The drive is filled with rotting

leaves; the tennis court is overgrown; the summer house has collapsed.

Behind all this decay lies the characteristic sloth of the Big House proprietor. Major Langrishe, the "absentee landlord permanently in residence" (Higgins, "Imaginary Meadows"¹⁷), is the father of four daughters who leaves them with little inheritance other than his vision of a perfectly idle and passive life. Although Langrishe is a man with a "great dread of mould and decay," who wears suits with moth balls in their pockets, he leads a wasteful and erratic life. Early in his career as a landowner he gives up managing his own estate; in the tradition of the Rackrent landlords, he hands all control over to his land steward. Devoting himself to a life of contemplation and study, he allows his property to disintegrate. His wife's dour warning that the estate will not last into the third generation is fulfilled. "The inheritance had not come. Offers of marriage had not come. The money they had, it had dwindled away. Where had all the fine life gone to, and what would they do now?" (49) In 1937, when the novel begins, his three living daughters, all middle-aged spinsters, must face a life of privation. Helen Langrishe resolves to force her two sisters to confront the social and economic realities before them: "... the old impossible world was ending. They would have to sell the house, that was all there was to it. Solicitors, land-agents, undertakers --as they came tramping in, the Langrishe world was falling down" (18).

Higgins writes in the shadow of Joyce, creating a carefully particularized Anglo-Irish world set not simply somewhere in the Irish country-side, but in Celbridge, County Kildare, part of the eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish Pale. Langrishe, Go Down provides a detailed fictional map of Celbridge. In the course of the novel Helen and Imogen Langrishe wander through the town, passing its grand architectural monuments, reminders of Ascendancy opulence and power. Mentioned again and again are the historic Big Houses in Celbridge, each with its specific historical associations. Dominating the town, at the end of the main street, is Castletown Conolly, the largest and most influential eighteenth-century

house in Ireland, designed by the Florentine architect Galilei for Speaker William Conolly in 1719. Nearby are Oakley Park and a Gothic abbey, the home of Esther Vanhomrigh, Swift's Vanessa. Half a mile outside of town stands Celbridge College, erected by the Conolly family in 1730, and now a girls' school (Maurice Craig, Ireland Observed 29).

Writing with a Joycean particularity about his own birthplace, Higgins creates a dense pattern of social contexts for his novel. The effect of the piling up of place names, each with major historical, social, and aesthetic resonances, creates a complex, even kaleidoscopic layering of meaning in the novel, which comes finally to deal with the effect of history itself, as it passes over and destroys individual lives. Far from idealizing the Ascendancy culture, which left its most golden droppings in Celbridge, Langrishe, Go Down, in a curious way, entombs that culture in its own mausoleums of architectural splendor. While the novel exists in the shadow of Yeats's myth of Anglo-Irish culture, Higgins never for an instant succumbs to that glorious aggrandizement of his own class; instead he writes to destroy the myth:

Kildare is a place of follies. Castletown House with its 365 windows is now the property of the Georgian Society; it was originally the country seat of the Speaker of the Irish House of Parliament. Satan himself is reputed to have dined there. (Higgins, "Imaginary Meadows" 116)

For Helen Langrishe, driving home from Dublin in a claustrophobic bus filled with the "smells of sweat and stout, of long lain in clothes"--the smells of ordinary working class men and women--Celbridge's history merges into her personal vision of death. The act of watching the swiftly passing Ascendancy landmarks from the moving bus becomes a metaphor of loss.

Presently they were crossing the bridge at Celbridge. ... Travelling out between Oakley Park and the abbey. A high pebbledashed wall surmounted by battlements, crowned with ivy, broken glass, overhung by yew boughs. Behind the wall the lawns sloped down to the river, toward a plantation of old trees, gravelled walks by the rivers,

shrubberies of rhododendron, laurel, a giant cedar from Japan, Vanessa's bower.

The bus went into low gear at the foot of the hill. A change before death. The wind moaned through the yews beyond the wall. No sign of a living soul. Brief life, she thought, brief life, breathed on for a while, allowed to live, then blotted out. Paisley's corner now....(16)

In its most powerful moments Langrishe, Go Down is about the loss of historical memory, and even more painfully, about living in a world where history itself has been transmuted into the debris of civilization. For Stephen Dedalus, history is a nightmare; for Helen Langrishe, history consists of the dead monuments of a dead culture.

In Helen's meditations on history, particularly in her memories about the decline of her own Anglo-Irish class, Higgins simultaneously achieves a particularity of reference and a general historical sweep. Standing in the roofless church of Donycomper churchyard, searching aimlessly for the graves of her dead relatives, Helen sees the shards of a distant and more recent history--the partially obliterated inscriptions on family memorials, a font for holy water filled with discolored liquid, a rusting lawnmower once used to maintain the grass, headstones sinking into the grass. Moving beyond her perception of the particular object to her vaguely recalled sense of the history of her people, she remembers her former ambitions:

...to write a history of the whole area, tracing back the names, the grand estates; Swift and later Grattan at the Abbey, Speaker Conolly at Castletown, Charles Napier at Oakley Park. But nothing had come of this. It all lay in bits and pieces in three big green notebooks. Her grasp of history was poor; she could not assemble the material she had collected, no, not in any coherent way. In the course of years the evidence itself was disappearing back into the ground, like the headstones in the graveyard. The landscape, so indifferent to its history, the bloody battles waged upon it and for it, still turned its back upon the living. (39)

In the cemetery, Helen meets an old gardener, the first in a series of characters in the novel who represent inadequate sources of Irish history. She

asks him about the age of the church, but finds that his personal memories about the gentry living in the Abbey, his vague recollections of stories about "a Dutchman ...Venessy's da ..." (41), do not fulfill her desire to know history in some systematic way. Although he can reminisce endlessly, "his tongue wagging effortlessly over the the history of Ireland," he stares "hopelessly" at her when she asks about the age of the church. He talks with certainty about his personal and local memories--the loss of his son in the Great War, the accidental discovery of the Guinness recipe by a former local gardener, the shooting of Michael Collins in the Civil War. On the etymology of Irish names he is helpless, for like the old woman in "Telemachus" who delivers milk to Stephen Dedalus and Buck Mulligan, he speaks no Irish. "I was never a hand at the language myself, although the dear Lord knows we had it baiten into us often enough" (40).

Although the old man's personal reminiscences are not the information Helen seeks, his garrulous memories remind her of her deracination, of her own inability to grasp that self-conscious wholeness of vision he does not have and need not seek.

I am under the trees she thought, under the old Donycomper trees. I hear water flowing. It's the Shinkeen flowing by. He called it the Shinkeen. The old man is speaking to me, telling me all over again the history of my home that I never bothered to know; or, if I did by chance know it once, did not bother to remember. He will never stop talking. I hear it all. No doubt irrefutable facts about dead people and places which still exist. I hear it. In my head I hear it. Do I? No, I hear nothing, remember nothing, am nothing. (41)

In Helen's last monologue in the novel, she lies in bed in 1937, anticipating her own death, which is to come a year later. Moving from this personal vision of death, she turns once more to the death of her culture. She envisions Anglo-Irish history, not as a source of common experience or community, but as a series of disconnected events and buried documents: Parliamentary Statutes, land deeds, ordnance survey records, Land Commission files, wills. In her mind, the

history of Anglo-Ireland is a history of disputed land:

Forfeited over and over again since the Anglo Normans. And 74 acres of it mine today-- a forgotten battlefield that means nothing to me. Nothing. The grand names and the grand estates. Castletown, Allenscourt. Donycomper where Madame Poopoff lives, married to the White Russian. Lilladoon where Miss Kitty Clement lives with her mother. The empty Abbey. Oakley Park.... (77)

Her litany of names and place names of Anglo-Ireland leads not to a recognition of community, but to bewilderment, loss and despair. In her final epiphany, Helen Langrishe perceives her own empty life as the end of Anglo-Ireland. The anguish of her personal history and the nightmare of her nation's history are one.

As it was in the beginning, is now, ever shall be, world without end. Nothing. Invasion after invasion; occupation after occupation. Silent mills, bear testimony. Over grown ruins, bear silent testimony. Round towers beloved of King John, bear testimony. Disused graveyards, bear testimony. Broken monuments of the Geraldines, bear testimony.... History ends in me. Now. Today. (77)

Much of the power of Helen's meditation emerges from Higgins' ability to create interior monologue which reveals a unity of individual consciousness through that fragmentary web of memories, perceptions, and sensations which evoke it. Like the flow of consciousness which characterizes Molly or Leopold Bloom or Stephen Dedalus in Ulysses, Helen's seemingly random memories and associations become coherent when seen as a whole. The brooding resonances of Helen's section of Langrishe, Go Down, dominated by her fragmentary meditation on history, suggest how successfully Higgins imposes modernist techniques of characterization and thematic development on the Big House genre.

The deracination of the Langrishe family has many causes. Although the Langrishe sisters occupy Springfield as if it were their ancestral holding, it is, in fact, a recently attained property, purchased by their father; "the moment he saw

Springfield, he wanted it" (54). Thus the family's occupancy is based on power of cash, not, as in other Big House novels, on an inherited sense of possession. While Helen Langrishe has sought to know something about the history of her home, her information is incomplete--inadequate. Genealogical surveys, an obsession of Anglo-Ireland, fail her.

The house was all about her; there the Warrens had lived, and before them the the Goughs, and before them Timothy Daly, at the beginning of the previous century, according to the Genealogical Office in Dublin Castle. And before Timothy Daly, others no doubt, whom she had never heard of, for she had not been able to trace the house back to its foundations, searching in the Registry Deeds Office in Dublin, in the Death Record Office the Custom House, all to no purpose. (19)

In their recently purchased estate the Langrishe family replicates the patterns of life of the traditional landowning class. In spite of her father's improvidence, Helen remembers that they were "admired and respected" (19) by their Catholic tenants. Imogen recalls how her mother, a "hard, cold woman" who advised her husband to deal harshly with his tenants, was eulogized in her obituary as a Big House lady," a survival of the dead and gone generation" filled with benevolence and generosity toward the poor (47). Yet toward the end of her life, their mother converted to Catholicism, as if acknowledging the isolation of the Anglo-Irish Protestant world. While in the original Big House novel, Castle Rackrent, the Catholic landowner must abandon his faith to gain status and land, the twentieth-century Big House family joins the church of its tenants, in search, perhaps, of a community denied the isolated and estranged Anglo-Irish.

Helen Langrishe's only moments of peace occur in her fleeting responses to the Catholic religion. She listens to the Keenans, tenants in the gate lodge, reciting their prayers :

... Paternoster by Paternoster, Ave Maria by Ave Maria, Gloria Patri by Gloria Patri, a decade at a time, an oratorio for the voices of the humble, the good in heart. She stood listening. It moved her deeply; it always

had. What she was listening to, said in secret, had held the people together, the faith of poor and oppressed Catholic Ireland in the penal times. (17)

In earlier Big House novels by Edgeworth, Lever, or Somerville, the evocation of the loyal Catholic retainer suggests the ever receding ideal of a feudal community. Yet if the Keenans momentarily represent an emotional wholeness, they exist for Helen as an easy, even sentimental, escape from her isolation. Helen's actual encounters with the Irish country man are far less satisfying, and Higgins presents these meetings between the Big House lady and the native Irish with some irony. As Helen leaves the cemetery, she resents the "ostensibly pious attitude" of the old gardener who cannot speak his native language and who assumes she is a Protestant. "He stared ahead into the gloom, moving his lips, in a rapt pose that spoke for the properness of his faith, the rightness of the scene, the edification of his example" (59).

Leaving him, she is further troubled by an encounter with another native Irishman, an encounter that mercilessly exposes the mutual deceptions of the "old style" landlord-tenant relationship. She is greeted by her family's former gardener, Joseph Feeney, but is embarrassed by her own failure to recognize him and by his sentimental recollections of the past. "Sure everything is changed now, Feeney declared. Aye, and not altered for the better" (61). Feeney, for example, remembers her beautiful singing voice--"Aye, like a bird"--while she insists that she never sang, but played recordings on her gramophone. "Galli-Curci. John McCormack. What does it matter now? Let him think what he pleases" (62). Between Feeney's need to idealize the Big House folk and Helen's guilt-ridden fury at his respect, emerges a sense of the burden of falsehood represented by their mutual cultural myth making:

Will you let me go? Will you let me be? We are paupers like the rest of you, except we live in a big house, and enjoy credit. But we can't pay our bills anymore. There's nothing to eat in the place except a

few maggots snipe hanging up in the larder. For all the eating we do,
 we might just as well not eat at all. Porridge and tea, tea and porridge.
 Heavy old stirabout that lies heavy on the stomach all day. Will you let
 me go? (61)

In creating his version of the Catholic antagonist to the Anglo-Irish world, Higgins is most innovative in his departure from the Big House form. The traditional Big House novelist, beginning with Maria Edgeworth, acknowledges the power of the aspiring Catholic outsider to bring down the Anglo-Irish dynasty. Thady Quirk's son Jason possesses all his master's property by the end of Castle Rackrent. Edith Somerville's uneasy sense of the danger of marriages or sexual excursions outside of the safety of the late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century version of the Anglo-Irish Pale is suggested both in Mount Music and The Big House of Inver. In Mount Music, for example, the middle-class Catholic Dr. Magnan gains control of the Big House and plots to marry his children into the gentry class.

But Higgins' new version of the Big House antagonist is a complex figure whose background thrusts Langrishe Go Down into the world of the European fiction and history. Otto Beck's attacks on the Langrishe world suggest the ways in which the Anglo-Irish Big House becomes, for Higgins, the symbol of a dying European culture. Imogen Langrishe's lover, Otto Beck, is neither Irish nor Catholic; he is, rather, a self-exiled German scholar, a Weimar intellectual and potential Nazi who is living in the Big House lodge as he completes a dissertation. Unlike the traditional Big House antagonist, Otto seeks not to own the Langrishe estate, but to use it and its owner for his own pleasures. In using Imogen, Otto violates her.

Higgins places Otto in the intellectual world of post-World War 1 Germany with the same exactitude with which he creates the Irish setting of the novel. Otto's cultural attributes--his reading list of existential philosophers, contemporary German fiction, nineteenth-century German writers revived by Weimar culture

(Holderin and Kleist); the philological thesis topic he is interminably working on; his pictures by Munch; his hostility to his father; his fascination with the animal nature of man--all place him as a post-war German intellectual with ambiguous political leanings (Gay passim). But his professed "indifference" to (superiority to?) politics, his belief in "culturally superior nations" and "culturally insignificant" individuals (166), his admiration for higher education in Germany and the teachings of Heidegger finally suggest those conservative attitudes which lead to extreme right-wing alignments.

Like Joyce, Higgins uses dates for telling purposes. Beck enters Imogen's life in 1932, the year of Hitler's overwhelming parliamentary victory in the Reichstag. He speaks with admiration of Heidegger, the philosopher who gave academic respectability to the Teutonic fascination with unreason and death (Gay 82). Beck yearns to return to study with Heidegger, one year before Heidegger gave his notorious address of May 27, 1933, in which, as the first Nationalist Socialist Rector of the University of Freiburg, he celebrated the glorious "Role of the University in the New Reich" (Greene 459). Beck's stated distaste for the Nazis suggests the intellectual's disdain for their boorish violence and virulent anti-semitism. His lack of homesickness--"Germany is changing. I am well out of it"-- suggests, perhaps, his personal destiny rather than the more ominous one of his generation.

Otto attacks the Langrishe world not through schemes to possess the family land but through his sexual and intellectual domination of Imogen. By mastering her, humiliating her, and casting off her aging body when new sexual opportunities arise, Otto exercises his personal version of fascist aggression against a dying culture. Higgins surrounds the narrative of the Langrishe decline with newspaper headlines chronicling stages of fascist expansion--the arming of Italy, the bombing of Madrid, Franco's speeches on "the destined march of free Spain," the suicide of prominent Austrian anti-Nazi figures at the time of the

Anschluss. Thus Otto's depredations against the Langrishe family are set against a larger cultural debacle.

In Langrishe Go Down, the Anglo-Irish world Otto Beck uses for his own pleasures becomes, like the culture of The Wasteland or Heartbreak House, a symbol of a moribund, flaccid civilization yearning for violation. Helen Langrishe responds to the newspaper reports of fascist encroachments with Schadenfreude rather than with dismay. "Let it be, she thought, let it be. Let it happen, and as violently as possible--with the utmost ferocity...She would not live to see another war"(10). Her sister Imogen yearns to be violated by Otto Beck, her "cruel lover." "I wouldn't mind being his trollop. Him to be cruel to me, as such men are reputed; he could do anything he likes with me. What else is my soft white useless woman's flesh good for? What else?"(91)

The dominant imagery in Otto's relationship with Imogen is that of predator of willing prey. "He could see poultry and game only as potential dinners, his eyes on the white breastmeat. And on mine too, she thought"(179). "How he stared at me with famished eyes! He treats me as if I were meat"(208). A successful sexual act for Otto is one in which he humiliates his partner: "...once again he had run his quarry to earth"(163). When he fishes for trout, he splits open the stomach of the fish to show Imogen the helpless larvae, "twitching in the palm of his hand"--a foreshadowing of her stillborn child.

In view of future German policies, Otto's distaste for certain forms of life become ominous. Cutting a wasp in half with a nail scissor, he observes, "The human eye cannot allow certain shapes...Very hard to resist the temptation not to stamp on certain shapes, put an end to them"(200). His contempt for Imogen expresses itself in images of sadism, just as her sexual enthrallment to him is revealed through her masochism. "You're so soft, Otto said, staring before him with a vindictive face. Some soft spineless insect that's been trodden on. I can feel you beginning to curl up at the sides" (227).

Otto's social position in the novel suggests the snobbery in the Big House, its fear of gossip, the imprisonment of its class structure. As a slovenly dressed, aging bohemian student, Otto strikes Imogen as an "upstart" when he talks in a "too familiar manner" with her in a Celbridge store. She creeps into his lodge under cover of night and insists, on their trip to Dublin, that he enter the bus at a different stop. She refuses to take him on a holiday with her; "There would be talk. Had he no idea how small Ireland was"(205)? The social framework for their relationship is that of the Big House Lady taking a peasant lover, admitting a poacher into the house of the Irish Ascendancy. Otto first appears to Imogen as a satyr-like figure, with a fox's face--a Lawrentian hero, an outsider.

His small- boned body and animal nature suit that first image of him I carried away as a silly girl; a still face staring from among the leaves. Not stepping on a twig, alert and ready to pounce; the fire of life is burning in him... (91)

The realities of their relative strengths assert themselves not in their social relations but in the sexual politics of their affair. Otto is, in fact, not the Lawrentian gamekeeper who sexually liberates the Big House lady (although he does that); he is, rather, the upper middle-class son of a prosperous German chemical manufacturer with a cultivated Viennese wife, who plays Schubert and Mozart. Growing up in prosperity in Bavaria, Otto is sent to an English boarding-school. The misleading social position imposed on him by his bohemian existence and Imogen's Big House snobbery and fear of indiscretion is reversed by his intellectual subjugation of her. Finally he dominates her, not simply by the force of his sexual presence, but by his mental ascendancy.

He established his intellectual superiority. Namely that she accept the role that had been given her: that of being unable to contribute anything. He indicated pretty plainly enough that her accomplishments were inadequate. He put questions to her that he knew she could not answer. Then his intolerable sharp pedagoguing. What? What?, as though she were a hopelessly

backward student. In that reasoning she began to feel no better than a whore; all that she was good for was to be made love to. (231)

By using his intellect to brutalize Imogen, Otto achieves an absolute reversal of the social roles she has imposed on their relationship. Finally the Big House lady is subjugated by the sadistic poacher who bewilders her with his facts and exposes her ignorance of her own Anglo-Irish history:

--The Pale, Otto said. The English Pale. The Plantagenets. We're lying in the middle of their bloody fields. This is Pale ground...
 --Dublin, Meath, Kildare, where else? four counties. Offaly, isn't it? he said, wiping his eyes.
 Yes, it would be Offaly.
 --No, not Offaly-- Louth, Dublin, Kildare, Meath, Louth. You are an ignoramus, dear.
 --It's true, she admitted. I am an ignoramus. (175)

Otto's information about Ireland provides, on one level, the lost history of their country that Helen Langrishe seeks and Imogen is shamed into acknowledging that she lacks. But finally his facts, his anecdotes about historical events, his etymologies of Irish words, his knowledge of Celtic mythology and folklore are merely recondite data, the mechanical overflow of his scholarship. In her moments of self assertion, when Imogen reacts with fury to his intellectual domination, she responds most accurately to him. Otto uses knowledge to obscure or to dominate, not to illuminate:

His fondness for explaining the unknown by the still less known, ignotum per ignotius, he says, what's that but a cloud of words, self-indulgence and nothing more? (230)

History as living tradition does not exist in Langrishe, Go Down. Joseph Feeney's limited personal reminiscences, Helen Langrishe's poorly recalled images of dead Anglo-Irish documents and monuments, Otto Beck's scholarship, all suggest various modes of individual isolation from the past in Higgins' vision of modern Ireland.

What consolation does Otto leave the Big House lady freed from her sterile

virginity? Although a recent critic argues that if Imogen is dominated, "she is also awoken from an inertia which is more destructive" (Baneham 274), Imogen's "awakening" is achieved at great cost. Her final attempt to regain her self respect as Otto bicycles off to his next mistress is neither "liberating" rage nor effective self assertion. Shooting at her lover with her father's gun, the gun Otto appropriated for his poaching on the Langrishe demesne, she not only misses him, but is struck by terror and guilt. Soon after, she begins to drink heavily. The product of their affair is a stillborn child who exists in her mind as a prehistoric monster, a deformed thing with the head and shoulders of a man, like a cement mold dug up out of the ground by Otto's spade --"Its blank eye sockets, heavy presence, dismembered body." Her body fails to hold its burden--"The stitches undone...whole thing came away...flood of dead matter" (248). The Big House is truly undone.

John Banville

Although strongly influenced by the techniques and themes of literary modernism, Aidan Higgins creates a Big House novel which retains the conventions of the traditional realistic form. Like other Anglo-Irish novelists, he exposes the shabby realities which lie behind illusions about Ascendancy life. Only an outsider, the Catholic modernist John Banville, has explored the process by which historical mythologies are created and sustained. Like Langrishe, Go Down, Banville's two novels exploring Big House conventions -- Birchwood and The Newton Letter-- are preoccupied with the burden of Anglo-Irish history and the assumptions it engenders. But while Higgins' novel is written within the realistic conventions of the Big House form, Banville plays with the central archetype of Ascendancy literature in order to dissolve it. For Banville, the stereotypes engendered by Big House conventions become metaphors for

human misperception and for a distortion of a reality which can, in fact, never be known. In Birchwood and The Newton Letter, this self-professed international writer, uses a parochial Irish literary form to insist, as he does in all of his works, that "truth in fact does not exist, that there are only workable versions of the truth we contract to believe in" ("My Readers..." 8).

Birchwood

In speaking of his most popular novel, John Banville notes with evident derision that Americans bought 10,000 copies of Birchwood because Irish-Americans "mistook it for a novel about the Big House" ("Novelists on the Novel" 414). Sophisticated readers of modernist literature understand, or so they tell themselves, that Birchwood is not really about a Big House at all-- that it is, rather, about subjectivity and despair, about ways of knowing and remembering, about form rather than content, and thus about the writing of fiction. In the best tradition of literary modernism, Birchwood is presented by a self-reflecting narrator whose remarks about his memories of the events he recounts turn our attention from the content of the book to the process of creating it. Its various critics have described it an essentially unIrish (i.e. international), stylistically brilliant, experimental piece of metafiction --and a parody of the Big House novel (Deane, "Be Assured I Am Inventing"; Imhof, "John Banville's Supreme Fiction"; Molloy).

In writing about his own work, Banville repudiates the concepts of personal, national, or realistic fiction. He sees himself as testing the relationship between author and reader established by the realistic nineteenth-century novel, challenging his audience to accept the fictionality of plot and the primacy of form over content: "Content, I would maintain, is an aspect of form, no more" (" My Readers, That Small Band..." 5). Just as he rejects an art of self-expression-- "Forgive me--but when I hear the term self expression applied to art, I reach for

my revolver" ("A Talk" 15)--Banville subverts the premises of traditional realistic fiction which assume that a subjective narration can actually reveal the world, the thing in itself. "To me, this kind of art is truly subversive, truly destructive"(A "Talk" 16). Finally Banville's rejects a national literature in favor of an international one: "I never really thought about Irish literature as such. I don't really think that specifically 'national' literatures are of terribly great significance" ("Novelists On The Novel" 408).

With his repudiations of so many premises of the traditional Anglo-Irish Big House novel (realism, national literature, literature emerging from personal situations), the Catholic writer's stated choice to echo the conventions of an Anglo-Irish tradition but to create a literary parody of it becomes clearer. In Birchwood Banville plays with Big House conventions, the decaying house, the disputed inheritance, the irresponsible and improvident landlord, and the threatening intruders, but tosses in, he tells us, stock characters and literary strands from other traditions --" The quest, the lost child, the doppelganger" ("My Readers, That Small Band..."11) as well as the theme of the Bildungsroman-- as if to emphasize the metaliterary enterprise he sees himself engaged in. But if in writing Birchwood Banville turns to conventional literary forms in order to dissolve and then reinvent them, he is strikingly aware of the implications of the forms he recalls. His version of the Big House novel is, in a significant way, a fulfillment of these implications as well as a parody of the tradition itself.

All Anglo-Irish Big House novels emerging from the form established by Maria Edgeworth's Castle Rackrent revolve around a paradox which Banville's modernist reinvention faces more directly than other works in the tradition. Central to the tradition is the notion of a meaningful and ordered past receding ever further into the distance, but acquiring from that very distance the aura of dignity, glamor, and purposefulness which the disordered present can never achieve. The past, as it is represented by mythology of Anglo-Irish country house

culture, is purportedly a harmonious and hierarchical society of civilized consciousness embodied in the neo-classical architecture of Georgian England. However the tradition of the Anglo-Irish Big House novel depicts cultural decay and collapse, for beginning with Castle Rackrent this fiction traces the breakdown of the Ascendancy class. In virtually all nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Big House novels, the idealized notion of a feudal harmony between tenant and landlord accompanies the narrative absence of such harmony. Only in the most recent fiction in the tradition, in Molly Keane's Time After Time, for example, does a novelist begin directly to question the myths of the past--the Anglo-Irish myth of a civilized Big House culture--which the narrative action depicts in various stages of collapse.

Banville's preoccupation with the ways in which memory fails to recreate reality and instead reinvents subjective versions of the past suggests how Birchwood, that intensely modernist reinvention of the Big House novel, comes closer than any other work in the tradition to exposing the myths of Ascendancy culture. "We imagine that we remember things as they were, while in fact all we carry into the future are fragments which reconstruct a wholly ilusionary past" (12). In Birchwood the Big House becomes the object of contemplation, the focus for the act of memory, the prized possession from which the possessor is perpetually threatened with dispossession--to some extent by family intrigue and by political turmoil, but primarily by memory itself. Banville's radical reworking of the Big House form transforms a literary symbol of political and economic loss into a haunting image of the failure of memory and the inaccessibility of the past. Birchwood charts the incapacity of the mind to grasp anything more tangible than the relentlessly subjective response to an elusive reality.

Often now, late at night, or working in the house on rainy days, I feel something soft and persistent pressing in on me, and with sadness and joy I welcome back this scene, or others like it suffused with summer and silence, another world. Forgetting all I know, I try to

describe these things, and only then do I realize, yet again, that the
past is incommunicable. (20)

The burden of the past on consciousness is Banville's obsessive theme. The ultimate inaccessibility of the past, its haunting control of the present and the subjectivity (and distortion) with which its images are transmitted become central concerns in Birchwood. Such epistemological issues about the possibility of knowing and remembering, which reveal Banville's preoccupations with major philosophical questions of modernist fiction, are fully developed in his later novels, Doctor Copernicus and Kepler. These topics, however, are not just modernist literary themes; they are also concerns central to Irish culture. For all of Banville's repudiations of a national literature in favor of an international one, Birchwood is a strikingly Irish novel, not just because it is set amidst the Gothic mythologies of Irish history, but also because it describes--even takes as its thematic center-- the process by which personal and historical mythologies are themselves created.

While every society generates and acts upon its particular national myths, the controlling power of such images to transmit the past into the present is particularly evident in Irish culture. The tradition of Mother Ireland and the myth of sacrificial martyrdom for Ireland (most recently evoked during the hunger strikes at Long Kesh Prison) represent traditional beliefs of a Celtic and Catholic Ireland (Kearney 11). Similarly, for Anglo-Ireland, the vision of a Big House aristocracy and of a feudal bond between landlord and tenant embodies the historical aspirations of a cultural mythology rather than, necessarily, historical actualities. To demythologize cultural history is to subject the pieties of particular groups to scrutiny--as Sean O'Casey does to nationalist ideologies of blood sacrifice in The Plough and the Stars and as countless Big House novelists do to pretensions of aristocratic life in the Irish countryside. But while other novelists such as Edgeworth, Lever, Le Fanu, and Somerville expose the content of Anglo-Irish mythology, only Banville considers the very process by which such perceptions of

history are created.

In Banville's fiction the physical solidarity of the symbolic decaying Big House, so carefully presented in the previous novels of this Anglo-Irish mimetic tradition from Maria Edgeworth to Molly Keane, dissolves into a pattern of personal evocation. In Birchwood the house is seldom described, but it is obsessively recalled and lamented--with the focus always on the self-consciously literary angle of vision of the act of recollection, rather than on the object which is lost. The "second silent world" which exists outside subjectivity is unattainable, for there is, finally, no difference between seeing and imagining.

Such scenes as this I see, or imagine I see, no difference, through a glass sharply. The light is lucid, steady, and does not glance in spike or stars from bright things, but shines in cool cubes, planes and violent lines and lines within planes, as light trapped in polished crystal will shine. Indeed, now that I think of it, I feel it is not a glass through which I see, but rather a gathering of perfect prisms. There is hardly any sound, except for now and then a faint ringing chime, or a distant twittering strange, unsettling. Outside my memories this silence and harmony, this brilliance I find again in that second silent world which exists, independent, ordered by unknown laws, in the depths of mirrors. This is how I remember such scenes. If I provide something otherwise than this, be assured that I am inventing. (21)

Banville's narrator obsessively searches for a certainty about the past which eludes him, but reconstructing the past is a necessary task, "since all thinking is in a sense remembering" (11). Again and again, Banville reminds us of his narrator's reactions to his discoveries. The subjectivity of the book intrudes so powerfully that it floods and finally dominates the things remembered. "I had dreamed of the house so often on my travels that now it refused to be real, even while I stood among its ruins. It was not Birchwood of which I had dreamed, but a dream of Birchwood, woven out of bits and scraps" (12).

This retrospective novel about a self-consciously Proustian search for

identity through memory takes as its structure a quest theme, for the protagonist, Gabriel Godkin, is convinced through much of the book of the existence of a lost twin sister. His search for this sister becomes a metaphor for his search for his own identity and an image of his incompleteness.

But a sister! Half of me, somewhere, stolen by the circus, or spirited away by an evil aunt, or kidnapped by a jealous cousin--and why? A part of me stolen, yes, that was a thrilling notion. I was incomplete and would remain so until I found her. (83)

Instead of his longed for sister, Gabriel discovers that he is the incestuous child of his father and his aunt, and that his twin is no distant forsaken sister--an elusive dream child-- but his sly, brutal "cousin" Michael who seeks to dispossess him of the family estate. Often through grotesque comedy, Michael's presence evokes that horror which lies beneath the illusionary peace of Big House life. As Gabriel stands enthralled by a vision of harmony induced by his cousin's masterly juggling--"translucent planes of pale blue glass in space gliding through illusory, gleaming and perfect combinations" (43)--Michael drops his ball, stands on his hands, and, like a "grotesque thing" advances down the steps toward his frightened mother. Again and again, the fantasies of love, of beauty, or of fulfillment --the lost sister, the lost childhood, the lost idyll of Big House life--dissolve into that horror of dispossession and violence which is the heritage of both Anglo-Irish and Catholic Irish history.

Birchwood begins, appropriately, with a section called "The Book of the Dead"; in this first section of the novel Gabriel recalls his childhood among the mad or eccentric members of his family and reconstructs the "new mythologies" which his childhood perceptions created. The past is dominated by the spectres of relatives who have met death violently-- through fire, explosion, madness or murder. The image of a dignified, patriarchal gentry family life implied by the Georgian architecture of Ascendancy culture dissolves into a vision alternating between Gothic horror and comic excess. "Ruin and slaughter and blood, brick

dust, a million blades of shattered glass, the roof-tree splintering--the poppies! Suddenly I see them, like a field of blood!" (24). While the narrator once refers to the "magnificent" house amidst its "quiet grandeur" (70), Birchwood is no object of longing to his family; the house is a "baroque madhouse" to his father, and a "kind of desert, bleak, magnificent, alien" to his gentle mother who is finally driven to caged madness by her life there.

The stylistic elegance of Banville's prose, his frequent evocations of other literary texts in the course of the novel (for example, of Descartes, Dante, Proust in the first few pages), his creation of scenes which reverberate as set pieces in the novel remind us of the primacy of imagination in the act of recollection; in Birchwood, to remember is to create fiction. Through a kaleidoscope of Gothic scenes, Gabriel recalls (creates) characters from his childhood who are, like the doomed protagonists of Maturin's Melmoth the Wanderer or Le Fanu's Uncle Silas, larger-than-life grotesque monsters. Family life at Birchwood alternates between comedy and terror. Gabriel evokes his sneering, tiger-eyed, drunken father who wastes and mortgages off his land and his grandmother whose jealousy and rage kills her in a Dickensian scene of spontaneous combustion: "...the ashes on the wall, that rendered purplish mass on the chair, Granny Godkin's two feet, all that was left of her, in their scorched button boots..." (77). The equally surreal death of the wizened and demented Granda Godkin is precipitated by his collision with a fleeing peasant carrying the dead fowl he has poached. Granda's "mind was forever frozen in that moment of collision and clatter, feathers and blood, when that furious winged great creature had flung itself upon him in the dawning garden" (55). "Aunt" Martha, Gabriel's unacknowledged mother, who schemes to disinherit him in favor of his twin, her acknowledged son, dies in an unforgettable moment of stylized gesture, attempting to save Michael from a fire: "Her dress burst into flames, and she trotted on through the door. Her wild, ululating cry was the perfect counterpart

of her rippling figure as it drifted, so it seemed, slowly, dreamily, wrapped in an aureole of light, into the furnace"(97). In such scenes memory and imagination are inseparable. To study the historiography of Gabriel's mind is to be reminded of the subjectivity of all texts, of all visions of the past.

Banville plays with many conventions of the Big House form, always, as Francis Malloy notes, with a careful attention to the verifiability of the historical details of Irish life (42). The history of Birchwood includes the dispossession of the improvident Lawless family during the nineteenth-century famine, and the seizure of the house through marriage by a brutal but efficient Godkin landlord. In Gabriel's youth during the twentieth-century Civil War, new intruders threaten the Godkins, who have by then evolved into eccentric gentry landlords, involuntarily selling off their land to their old enemies, the Lawlesses. Thus the struggle to retain possession of the land, the major conflict of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century Big House novel, is central to Birchwood. (Banville's punning names for his landlords-- Lawless and Godkin--again insist on the self-conscious artifice of this fiction.)

In his evocation of the decaying estate, Banville often echoes, but always with a parodic intent, descriptions from earlier novels in the genre. The Godkins' "genteel slide toward penury" is evident everywhere: "...in the cracked paint and the missing tiles, the dry rot that ate its way unchecked across the floors and up the stairs"(49). Through carefully presented descriptions which undercut any possibility of an elegiac response to the demise of a house and a civilization, Banville turns in his novel to a macabre parody which undermines the Gothic horror of the book. When the schoolroom ceiling collapses, Gabriel and Michael discover "...up in the rotten cavity, a decayed hanging forest of rank green growths stirring like seaweed in the swell of the crossdraughts."

We locked away that horrible aquarium, and in the morning Papa's headache would allow no mention of catastrophe. Two boards in the

lavatory floor crumbled to dust under him on a silent Sunday morning, leaving him perched on the bowl, instantly constipated, his feet and crumpled trousers dangling above an abyss. (69)

As in other Anglo-Irish novels, the world of Catholic Ireland hovers at the borders of the demesne, covetously eyeing the fading spoils of a decaying culture. Gabriel's dispassionate assessment of relations between the Big House and the tenantry undercuts any sentimental evocation of feudal bonds. The wonderfully mocking tone of the following passage again becomes a warning against any elegizing of the Big House and an effective rebuttal to Anglo-Ireland's preoccupations with loyal feudal retainers like Thady Quirk.

The final proof, the clincher, as they say, that the Godkins were going the way of all the gentry, that is down, was the newfound boldness of the peasants. As my people knew, and lucky they did, there is nothing that will keep the Irish in their place like a well-appointed mansion. They may despise and hate you, only put a fine big house with plenty of windows in it up on a hill and bejapers you have them be the balls, stunned into a cringing, cap-touching coma. But beware. It is a fragile thralldom. The first unmended fence will mean the first snigger behind your back outside the chapel yard, an overrun garden will bring them grinning to the gate, and a roof left in visible disrepair will see them poaching your land in daylight... (49-50)

With neither the snobbish condescension nor the guilt with which his Anglo-Irish predecessors conceive of Catholic Ireland, Banville presents the intruders at Birchwood as ominous and distant forces. Representing threats too fearful to be acknowledged by the Big House, these mysterious and purposeful men and women maintain their aloofness as they invade the demesne. In Banville's fiction the forces of dispossession are not vulgar moneygrubbing parvenus, like Edgeworth's Jason Rackrent or Somerville's Dr. Mangan, but nameless hordes. Like Elizabeth Bowen's young man in a trenchcoat striding through the Danielstown demesne, these intruders are indifferent, impersonal in their hostility, and thus relentless, fearless, and implacable.

Poachers were one thing, but more sinister by far were those other

intruders who began to appear, mysterious wanton creatures glimpsed across the lake, or trailing down the fields toward the beach. The curious thing is that no one spoke of them, although we all must have seen them unless we were subject to visions. It was as if their presence were an embarrassment. They might have been ghosts had they not been indifferent to the sombre duties of ghosthood, for these visitants laughed and chattered, they were almost boisterous, but also, when I think of it, there was a certain distant quality about them, an aloofness, which had nothing to do with either ghostliness or the fact that they were seen only from a distance. They were like people at the far end of a room bent in unheard laughter whose private joke invests them with an impenetrable self-possession. It seemed impossible that they feared god or man, and perhaps it was their lack of fear which frightened us, for indeed we were afraid of them. (52)

In spite of Banville's attention to the authenticity of his details of Irish history, political Ireland exists here less as a historical reality, more as another metaphor of violence, instability, and loss. Banville telescopes time and space in the second section of the novel, as if to remind his reader once more of the imagination's freedom to invent its own mythologies and to choose, from among the brutal images of Irish history, those moments which best suit his fictional purposes. In search of his lost sister, Gabriel joins a mysterious Magic Circus and moves from the early twentieth-century Civil War period at Birchwood to the horrors of starvation and violence during the nineteenth-century Great Famine in the Irish countryside. Finally, as if unconscious of secret purpose or direction, he returns to the ravaged family estate. There, in a wildly melodramatic convergence of a multitude of chronologically impossible plot strands, the invading Lawless family is slaughtered by the members of the circus, in collusion with Gabriel's brother and the early nineteenth-century Irish revolutionary group, the Molly Maguires. Banville's commentary on the ending of the novel is instructive, for it reveals his subversion of the notion of a well made plot: "I like the end of Birchwood, where everything is wrapped up and nothing is wrapped up" ("My readers that Small Band..."11).

Violence in one world parallels that of another; the decaying Big House and

the sinister circus are oddly similar, one presided over by Gabriel's charming, duplicitous father, another by the manipulative ringmaster, Silas, genially ruling his "collapsible kingdom." Life offers Gabriel no sanctuary, for disappointments and betrayals pursue him. The magnificent Big House is crumbling with internal rot and infiltrated by the schemes of his secret brother and mother; the circus's well publicized wild animals consist of a "melancholy tubercular grey monkey in a birdcage" and a glassy-eyed stuffed tiger. Victimized and savage women exist in both worlds: Gabriel's gentle mother and his scheming "Aunt" Martha at Birchwood, the brutally raped and murdered Ida, and the vicious Sybil at the circus. The grotesque end of Granny Godkin by spontaneous combustion at Birchwood is matched by the swollen death of the old circus woman Angel, whose wounded body expands until it balloons up and "poured itself into every nook in the caravan"(164). Through such parallels Banville comes closer than any Anglo-Irish writer considered in this study to perceiving the ways in which two histories -- that of Protestant and Catholic Ireland-- both embody experiences of isolation, dispossession, and violence .

In describing the power of Silas's tawdry circus over its audience, Banville reminds his readers of the collaboration between performer and spectator and thus between writer and reader. "People believed the shoddy dreams he sold them"(108)." Just as Silas's spectators collude with him in creating illusions, Gabriel feels he must maintain his fantasies to survive. Even as he recognizes the senselessness of his year-long travels with the circus through the famine-ridden countryside, he fails to abandon his quest, but merely activates a second fantasy -- of the mysterious, godlike magician Prospero, the invisible owner of the Magic Circus. Dreams, fantasies and new mythologies assuage the pain of memory and consciousness.

The story of my sister, the stolen child, had been laughed at. That laughter woke me from a dream, No, not a dream precisely, but a

waking, necessary fantasy. Necessary, yes. If I had not a solid reason to be there, travelling the roads with this preposterous band, than my world threatened to collapse, for I still believed then that life was at least reasonable. The future must have a locus! If not, what was the point? (138)

The picaresque quality of Gabriel's travels through Ireland evokes a love of place and land which parallels his longing evocation of the childhood world he has lost. In Birchwood the dream world is particularized and localized--transformed into the landscape of Ireland. As he travels through the beautiful land, Gabriel creates another image of possibility, another "mythical horizon" hovering before the eyes of the permanently dispossessed. In such passages the narrative voice expands to embrace, even if only in a fleeting evocation, a geography of Ireland which transcends class or sectarian alliances. Gabriel feels before him

... a sense of strange and infinite possibilities. There was something always ahead of us, a nameless promise never reached and yet always within reaching distance. Perhaps because of this, the fixing of my gaze on a luminous and mythical horizon, I remember best not the circus proper, its halts and performances, but the travelling, the grate of wheels on stony roads, the thick scent of the horses, the voices floating back from the forward caravans, and the land, revolving in great slow circles around our slowly moving center, the sad land, the lovely land. (125)

Finally though, when his circular journey of self discovery is complete, Gabriel is left stripped of his old illusions. The Bildungsroman form of the novel is aborted, and at Birchwood he is surrounded by the bodies of his father, the invading Lawlesses and the Molly Maguires, all slaughtered by the combined forces of his brother Michael and Silas. Alone on the battle ground of Birchwood, the empty "white landscape", Gabriel realizes that although his fantasies of a lost sister and a godlike Prospero are destroyed, his future is clear. Clinging to Birchwood, because "outside is destruction and decay," the author of new mythologies and new fictions is born. Birchwood itself is his creation.

There is no girl. There never was, I suppose I always knew that, in my heart. I believed in a sister in order not to believe in him, my cold mad brother. No Prospero either, there never is. O but I so wanted to keep that withered wizard, with his cloak and his black hat, stumping on ahead of me always with his stick and his claw and his piercing eyes, leading me slowly toward that rosy grail. Now the white landscape was empty. Perhaps it is better thus, I said and added, faintly, I might find other creatures to inhabit it. And I did, and so I became my own Prospero, and yours. (172)

The return to Birchwood represents the failure of purposeful action in the external world and the recognition that only through the creation of new fictions and new mythologies can Gabriel survive. Birchwood subverts the notion of political progress or action which will free its protagonist from the burden of the past. Journeys go nowhere, history is circular; only the land and the places of Ireland remain, scarred by the the recurring brutalities of the past. Recent critics of the twentieth-century Literary Revival novel complain about the persistence of a false imagery of the Ascendancy class in modern Ireland (Deane, "The Literary Myths of the Revival,"; Kiberd). In Birchwood, however, Banville's anatomizing of the Big House form suggests that mythologies persist, and that a culture survives by debunking and then recreating and reinventing its fictional imagery of the past in new texts.

The Newton Letter

In Birchwood Banville places his narrator Gabriel within the Big House, recording that sense of dispossession from an elusive past which is the spiritual history of nineteenth- and twentieth- century Anglo-Ireland. In The Newton Letter, another novel which explores and subverts the conventions of the Big House tradition, an unnamed contemporary narrator with a "post-peasant Catholic upbringing" (20) speaks from outside that culture, articulating, with great

self-consciousness, the outsider's fantasies about a remote and glamorous survival of Ascendancy life. This different choice of perspective on the Big House allows Banville to engage in yet another sort of parody of a literary convention.

The narrator of The Newton Letter is a biographer of Isaac Newton, a scientist presented as obsessed with a loss of certainty in his efforts to construct a map of the world which will in some ways be symbolic of the world of commonplace reality. A shared sense of uncertainty about the possibility of knowing reality between the narrator and his subject is central to the novel. As in his other novels evoking the scientific imagination, Banville points to the relationship between the world of the novelist and the scientist.

...in the novel, as in science, something has happened. There has been a loss of certainty, of coherence. What fiction writer in these post-modernist times would have the nerve to declare that he has created (created!) a world which will symbolize the real one in which we live? (Banville, "Physics and Fiction" 41)

In The Newton Letter the narrator impulsively rents a lodge on the demesne of Ferns, seemingly an Anglo-Irish Big House, occupied by Edward and Charlotte Lawless, their niece Otilie, and a child, Michael.

I had them spotted for patricians from the start. The big house, Edward's tweeds. Charlotte's fine-boned slender grace that the dowdiest of clothes could not mask, even Otilie's awkwardness, all this seemed the unmistakable stamp of their class. Protestants, of course, landed, the land gone now to gombeen men and compulsory purchase, the family fortune wasted by tax, death duties, inflation. But how bravely, how beautifully they bore their losses! Observing them, I understood that breeding such as theirs is a preparation not for squiredom itself, but for that distant day, which for the Lawlesses had arrived, when the trappings of glory are gone and only style remains.... Shorn of the dull encumbrances of wealth and power, they were free to be purely what they were. (20-21)

The Big House becomes the fulcrum for a virtual array of fantasies, an endlessly generated series of visions and revisions of an unstable reality, which

seemingly exists solely for the purpose of generating yet new fantasies, new versions of its shifting center. The narrator's misperceptions of the human scenery at Ferns provides a steady stream of tragi-comedy in the novel. The lodge becomes a sentry box, allowing him, like Aidan Higgins' Otto Beck, to gaze at the Big House with "remote prurience" as he watches the members of the household trudge to work or to school, all metamorphosized in his eyes into a literary genre piece: "It all had the air of a pastoral mime, with the shepherd's wife and the shepherd, and Cupid and the maid, and scribbling within a crystal cave, myself, a haggard-eyed Damon" (20). In both Higgins' and Banville's novels, the outsider of Big House convention occupies the demesne lodge and manifests his disruptive power through his insistent sexuality rather than through his hunger for property. The derelict Big House is no longer a financial prize, and thus the assaults on the gentry class are psychological rather than economic. But while Otto Beck perceives the vulnerability of Imogen's state only too clearly, and thus uses and manipulates her, Banville's equally egocentric narrator creates emotional havoc through his misperceptions.

In the Newton Letter the narrator is burdened by the multiplicity of texts he has read, texts which engender endless theories through which he seeks to understand --and thus control-- an elusive reality. His problem in the novel becomes a version of a larger critical enterprise-- is there a relationship between the texts he has known and the world itself? The epigraph of the book, a quotation from Isaac Newton, the subject of the biography the narrator is writing, serves to warn us against his initial assumption that he can interpret his experiences.

I seem to have been only as a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.

Like Birchwood, The Newton Letter is written retrospectively, not as a

memoir, but as a letter to Clio, who has been, as the narrator writes her, "too long" his teacher, friend, and inspiration (10). Banville's narrator protagonist in this novel is an obsessively literary author, trying with growing disinclination to write his historical study of Isaac Newton. The name of the narrator's correspondent, as well as her role, suggests her relationship to the muse of history-- a discipline whose legitimacy is subverted by the narrator's fictional treatment of Newton's life.

This unnamed narrator appropriately tells the retrospective story of his failure of love and sympathy from somewhere in the frigid tundra where he has retreated in disgrace to an academic post. He reveals that when at Ferns, he turned in his writing to a period of breakdown and despair--of near madness--in his subject's life. With his major discoveries behind him, the great Newton had found himself more and more obsessed with the meaninglessness of his life's work, and with his desire not to write scientific treatises, but to discover some new way of knowing the ordinariness of life. "The language in which I might be able not only to write but to think is neither Latin nor English, but a language none of whose words is known to me; a language in which commonplace things speak to me" (59). (Characteristically, Banville tells us, in a note, that this obsession of Newton's life, supposedly taken from a letter Newton wrote in 1693, is in fact fictitious, and based on yet another literary text, The Letter of Lord Chandos by the early twentieth-century romantic-symbolist poet and dramatist Hugo Von Hofmannsthal.) The narrator's incapacity to continue with his own study of Newton coincides with a similar personal crisis, one in which he begins to question his celebration of his subject as a heroic deliverer of reason and science to a medieval world, and turns instead to "another kind of truth" (30).

The purported "truth" he embraces, involved with the ordinary happenings of the world about him, leads him into a loveless affair with the passionate and awkward Otilie, an unconsummated infatuation with her aunt Charlotte, and his

series of misperceptions of reality. Abandoning the landscape of scientific and historical knowledge, he enters the territory of emotional need --and fails miserably to negotiate its terrain because of his own literary delusions. He constructs a complex fantasy about the inhabitants of Ferns, who are in actuality stained with the ordinary tribulations of humankind--cancer, depression, love--rather than the special and, for him, more interesting traits of alcoholism, aristocratic reserve, and incest--all the imagery of Anglo-Irish decadence and fine-tuned sensibility which he projects upon them. "I dreamed up a horrid drama, and failed to see the commonplace tragedy that was playing itself out in real life" (90).

Edward Lawless is misperceived alternatively as a drunken lout, a social climbing parvenu, an incestuous violator of his wife's niece (and thus the father of the child, Michael). However, he is merely a desperate man, dying of stomach cancer, drinking to assuage his lonely fears, whose attempts to communicate with the narrator are scornfully rejected. Charlotte, the object of a "passion of the mind" (53) appears as the remote unrequitable love, die ferne Geliebte (51), who is so ethereal that "her physical presence itself seemed overdone, a clumsy representation of the essential she" (52). Obsessively the narrator perceives her as a cultural artifact--as a Cranach painting or as Yeats's vision of the Gore-Booth sisters in "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Marckiewicz," a poem about the archetypal twentieth-century Big House, Lissadell: "I stopped to watch her, the dark glossy head, the pale neck, and those hands that now, instead of Otilie's seemed to be in mine. Light of evening, the tall windows--Oh, a gazelle!" (48) Charlotte's patrician manner seems so extreme to him, her face so "empty of all save a sense of something withheld" that he sees her as someone behind a glass barrier. The anticlimactic revelation at the end of the novel that Charlotte's aristocratic reserve is the product of a steady dose of tranquilizers brings a cold taste of ashes to the narrator's mouth. "Something had ended, with a vast soft

crash" (85).

Banville's allusions in his novel to Goethe's Elective Affinities (the characters in the novel, for example, have the same names as Goethe's) suggests how The Newton Letter, like Birchwood, calls attention to itself as a literary artifact, as a self-conscious creation rather than as a mimetic representation. In Goethe's novel about German early nineteenth-century gentry life, Charlotte's husband Eduard is fatally attracted to his wife's niece Ottilie. Only the deaths of Eduard and Ottilie resolve the pain of renounced passion which ravages the socially sanctioned loyalties of marriage. On virtually every level of plot and theme, Banville creates similarities between the two works to emphasize their differences. The world of Goethe's characters is one of patrician leisure and somewhat decadent refinement which The Newton Letter's narrator mistakenly thinks he finds at Ferns. Goethe's leisured protagonists spend vast sums of money to move mountains and reconstruct lakes to improve their views; the occupants of Ferns are, in reality, Catholics running a garden nursery business in the greenhouses behind the Big House. Their meals run to cold cuts and limp lettuce served on a plastic tablecloth in the kitchen, rather than the "gaunt diningroom, linen napkins with a faded initial, a bit of old silver..." (25) that the narrator expects.

When Goethe's Eduard sleeps with his wife Charlotte, "imagination at once asserted its rights over reality," and he holds Otillie in his arms (Goethe 106). Banville's narrator, on the other hand, makes vigorous love with his Otillie, but conjures up his beloved Charlotte in the very act of substituting herself for this reality. In one of the most effectively derivative scenes in the novel, Banville transforms Goethe's gentle vision of the imagination's capacity, at least temporarily, to satisfy unrequited physical longings, into a great comic portrayal of the over-literal workings out of such fantasy.

At first I had conjured Charlotte's presence to be only witness to the

gymnastics in my narrow bed, to lean over us, Otilie and me, with the puzzled attention of a pure spirit of the night, immune herself to the itch of the flesh yet full of tenderness for these sad mortals struggling among the sheets, but as time went on this ceased to be enough, the sprite had to fold her delicate wings, throw off her silken wisps, and, with a sigh of amused resignation, join us. Then in the moonlight, my human girl's blonde hair would turn black, her fingers pale, and she would become something new, neither herself nor the other, but a third-- Charlottilie!

(57)

For the careful reader, negotiating The Newton Letter becomes an act of literary detective work; in making such demands it is, of course, a quintessentially modernist production. On the surface, the novel appears as a straightforward narrative, but once its sources are integrated, it becomes a many layered puzzle. Each major source emphasizes the deluded narrator's quandry, for each undercuts and parodies his attempt to know and respond to what he hopelessly assumes is a stable reality. His biographical research on Newton unveils the great scientist's denial of the physical laws by which he has given form to reality, in favor of a visionary spiritual world. Goethe's Elective Affinities, the narrative of tragic passion and infatuation in a landed gentry class, underscores the triviality of the narrator's philandering and his misconception of the social world at Ferns. Traditional Big House fiction which lies behind his own assumptions misinforms and deludes him, for fantasizing about the Anglo-Irish experience, he misreads his world, and abandons the painful tragedies of ordinary humanity for a spurious and delusionary glamor. Even the false source in the novel, Newton's fictionalized second letter which is actually lifted from Hugo Von Hofmannsthal "Letter of Lord Chandos," conveys the twentieth century's radical scepticism about interpreting reality and suggests the inadequacy of language to convey deeper experiences. Finally the narrator of The Newton Letter faces the same Wittgensteinian despair about the possibility of arriving at any understanding of the world, the thing in itself, that Gabriel Godkin experiences at the end of Birchwood, a novel which concludes with a quote from Tractatus

Logico-philosophicus: "... and whereof I cannot speak, thereof I must be silent" (175).

Even more radically than Birchwood, The Newton Letter undermines the reliability of texts, historical and literary, as guides to experience. All of the narrator's expectations--nurtured by his reading in the literature of many disciplines-- are undermined by his experience at Ferns. The structures by which he has organized his life have collapsed before him. Feeling "ridiculous and melodramatic and comically exposed," he tells us that he "lost [his] faith in the primacy of text." Instead, "real people keep getting in the way now, objects, landscapes even" (9).

The novel exists as a total subversion of Big House fiction, for each convention of that form is dangled seductively before the narrator's eyes only to be exposed as mere fantasy, mere delusion. The decaying house tells us nothing about the improvidence of Anglo-Ireland, but about the hardships of maintaining a home amidst the pressures of illness and mental depression. The daughter of the house seeking love from the Catholic intruder in the demesne lodge is not, as in Langrishe, Go Down, the masochistic descendant of a decadent Anglo-Irish line, but the awkwardly impetuous child of a Catholic truck farmer, a woman who ends up pregnant, working in a shop in Dublin. In ceasing to write his book on Newton, the narrator seems to abandon his literary pretensions, and his assumption (and ours) that texts can explicate reality. But even such resolutions, which lead him to contemplate a new life at Ferns with Otilie, her unborn child, and the soon to be widowed Charlotte, are perhaps only new theories, another "grand design " or set of fictions by which life must be negotiated. "Shall I awake in a few months, in a few years, broken and deceived, in the midst of new ruins" (92)? Although further Big House novels may well emerge in Ireland, Banville's undoing of the form provides a fitting conclusion to a tradition.

Chapter Ten
Conclusion

One characteristic of American society in the conservative 1980's is a wave of cultural Anglophilia which manifests itself, for example, in Ralph Lauren's campaign to dress upper middle-class women in the tweeds and cashmeres evocative of a country house aristocracy or in the long lines of citizens waiting at the National Gallery to view the art show "The Treasures from the Houses of Britain." Such contemporary American cultural preoccupations suggest a nostalgia for the hierarchical world of a real or pseudo-feudal lifestyle which is related to the forces of political reaction. A major intention of this study, however, has been to argue that the persistence of the Big House as subject, setting, theme, symbol, and motif in Anglo-Irish literature is not a reactionary throwback to a colonial mentality-- as the revisionist critics of Yeats and the Anglo-Irish leadership of the Literary Revival assume.

Big House fiction in Ireland reflects far more cultural ambivalence and self irony than the current American fascination with English country estate life. Big House novels themselves define the Anglo-Irish experience as doomed from the start; the novels fail to evoke that serene vision of elegance and well bred assurance of privilege so central to aristocratic life. With the exception of two works by Trevor and Bowen, all the Big House fiction I have discussed is written in a discordant relationship to those cultural values of English Protestant colonialism and secure elitism which the Anglo-Irish landed gentry class purported to represent. Edgeworth, Lever, and Somerville, although occasionally evoking a nostalgic ideal of a semi-feudal relationship between tenant and landlord, create their most powerful fiction when they turn to the decline of the Big House. In the lives of Big House proprietors, the Gothic writers Maturin and Le

Fanu find the sources of a terrible guilt; more recent novelists in the genre --Keane, Higgins, Johnston -- return to that same decaying house and declining culture which Maria Edgeworth evoked in Castle Rackrent.

While Big House novelists of the nineteen and early twentieth centuries are undoubtedly writing with a sense of alienation from and superiority to the world of Catholic Ireland, their fiction acknowledges that the collapse of their own culture is closely involved with its failure to overcome its isolation from a larger community. In Castle Rackrent, where Thady Quirk is presented as the quintessential house nigger, Edgeworth suggests how his loyalty to the Rackrent family is in direct opposition to his ties to his family and class. By showing that Thady is doomed, whether he allies himself with the improvident Rackrents or with his conniving son Jason, she demonstrates the intolerable choices of a colonial system which pits one set of loyalties against another. Through the figure of Shibby Pindy in The Big House of Inver or Nan O'Neill in Two Days in Aragon, two women who devote their lives to serving a patrimony which has victimized them, Edith Somerville and Molly Keane explore that false consciousness which is the product of colonialism.

In the most recent Big House fiction of Jennifer Johnston or Aidan Higgins, the snobbery of the dying Big House becomes a metaphor for larger issues of individual isolation or social malaise. Communication between the entombed inhabitants of the Big House and the Catholic outsider fails, aborted by social pressures in Johnston's novels or by the fearful inability to love which overcomes Big House inhabitants who have become prisoners of their own history in Higgins' Langrishe, Go Down.

The terrible discordancies and injustices of Irish history have created a social landscape with constantly shifting meanings. Prominent in this landscape is the splendid Georgian architecture of the eighteenth-century official government edifices of Dublin and the hundreds of gentry homes in the Irish

countryside. Such buildings can be interpreted as the useless relics of a dead society, the residue of an oppressive colonialism. Alternatively they represent the greatest artistic achievements of an impoverished country, symbolic of a moment in Irish history when the spirit of a few great men created an enduring aristocratic ideal of life based on a rejection of Locke's materialism and an acceptance of a world of imagination and poetry. This second reading of the architectural landscape of Anglo-Ireland-- of Lissadell and Coole Park, for example-- has created a Yeatsian vision --virtually a history of Anglo-Ireland-- which is not in fact the reading the Big House novelists have given to their culture.

What do they offer instead?

As writers of fiction they offer that circumstantial realism which is, since the eighteenth century, the great innovative contribution of the novel genre. The Big House as it is presented by Edgeworth, Lever, Somerville, and Keane, for example, is grounded in the minutiae of diurnal life. Decay or decline is not presented as the grand symbolic fall of a culture; it is inherent, rather, in the small cracks of the plaster, in the leaking roof, and in the endless self delusive strategisms by which a society wards off unpleasant truths. The hypocrisy, self-delusion, or drunken improvidence of Edgeworth's Rackrents, Lever's Martins, Somerville's Prendevilles and Keane's Swifts are presented to the reader in detailed account books, as it were, of physical decay and social irresponsibility. The Big House novelist accumulates evidence against his culture.

By examining the discrepancy between the ideals of a society and the shabby realities of actual Big House life, the novelists create those images of self delusion which are the sources of much great irony. Thus many Big House novels are complex structures of ironic plotting and characterization. Such irony emerges again and again, as in Thady Quirk's adoring praise of his drunken sot of a master whose death will strip him of his very identity; in Shibby Pindy's

enthralment to the family which denies her legitimacy; in Aroon St Charles's devotion to the memories of a girlhood of physical and emotional hunger. Out of such irony emerges that doubleness of vision which is so characteristic of the novelists in the Big House tradition. Seeing Anglo-Ireland with a lacerating clarity, they invoke a vision of a lost ideal and a failed cultural purpose -- of social responsibility, enlightened landlordism, or personal dignity--which their historical role as conquerors and exploiters of a native population has denied them. In the Big House novel the potential tragedy of Anglo-Ireland shifts easily thus to bitter comedy; the ironic contrast between personal illusion and historical circumstances is the lasting impression of this fiction.

Works Consulted

- Austen, Jane. Jane Austen's Letters to her Sister Cassandra and Others. Ed. R.W. Chapman. 2nd ed. London: Oxford University Press, 1952.
- Axton, William. Introduction. Uncle Silas. By Sheridan Le Fanu. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1961.
- Baneham, Sam. "Aidan Higgins: A Political Dimension." Review of Contemporary Fiction. 3.1 (Spring 1983): 168-74.
- Banville, John. Birchwood. 1973. London: Granada, 1984.
- . "Novelists on the Novel. Ronan Sheehan Talks to John Banville and Francis Stuart". The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies: 1977-82. Eds. Mark Patrick Hederman, Richard Kearney. Dublin: Blackwater, 1982, 408-416.
- . "'My Readers, that Small Band, Deserve a Rest.' An Interview with John Banville conducted by Rudiger Imhof." Irish University Review, xi. i (Spring, 1981): 5-12.
- . The Newton Letter. London: Grenada, 1984.
- . "Physics and Fiction: Order From Chaos." New York Times. 21 April 1985, sec.7: 1+.
- . "A Talk" Irish University Review, xi. i (Spring, 1981): 13-17.
- Beckett, J.C. The Anglo-Irish Tradition. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976.
- Barrington, Sir Jonah. The Ireland of Sir Jonah Barrington: Selections From His Personal Sketches. Ed. Hugh B. Staples. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1967.
- Bence-Jones, Mark. Burke's Guide to Country Houses Volume 1-Ireland. London: Burke's Peerage Ltd., 1978.
- Beja, Morris. "Felons of Ourselves: The Fiction of Aidan Higgins." Irish University Review. 3.2 (Autumn, 1973): 163-78.
- Blodgett, Harriet. Patterns of Reality: Elizabeth Bowen's Novels. The Hague: Mouton, 1975.

- Bowen, Elizabeth. Afterthought: Pieces about Writing. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1962.
- . Bowen's Court. 1942. New York: Ecco Press, 1979.
- . Collected Impressions. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1950.
- . "Eire." The New Statesman and Nation. 12 August 1941: 382-3.
- . The Heat of the Day. 1949. New York: Penguin, 1962.
- . The Last September. 1929. New York: Penguin, 1942.
- . Seven Winters. Dublin: Cuala Press, 1942.
- Boyd, E.A. Ireland's Literary Renaissance. New York: Knopf, 1922.
- Brothers, Barbara. "Pattern and Void: Bowen's Irish Landscapes and The Heat of the Day." Mosaic 12 (1979): 129-38.
- Brown, Terence. Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-79. Glasgow: Fontana, 1981.
- Browne, Nelson. Sheridan Le Fanu. London: Barker, 1951.
- Burkland, Patrick. The Anglo-Irish and the New Ireland: 1885-1922. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1972.
- Butler, Marilyn. Maria Edgeworth: a Literary Biography. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972.
- Cahalan, James. Great Hatred, Little Room: the Irish Historical Novel. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1983.
- Carleton, William. [Anon.] "National Literature, The Dublin University Magazine and Mr Lever." The Nation, Oct. 7, 1843: 826-27.
- Christianson, Gale. "Landlords and Land Tenure in Ireland 1796-1830." Eire-Ireland. 9 (1974): 25-58.
- Colgan, Maurice. "After Rackrent: Ascendancy Nationalism in Maria Edgeworth's Later Irish Novels." Studies in Anglo-Irish Literature. Ed. Heinz Kosok.

Bonn: Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1982. 37-42.

---. "The Significant Silences of Thady Quirk." Social Roles For The Artist. Eds. Ann Thompson, Anthony Beck. Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 1979. 41-45.

Corkery, Daniel. Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature. 1931. New York: Russell and Russell, 1965.

Craig, Maurice. Classic Irish Houses of the Middle Size. London: Architectural Press, 1976.

---. Ireland Observed: A Guide to the Buildings and Antiquities of Ireland. Cork: Mercier Press, 1970.

Craig, Patricia. "Prying into odd corners." Rev. of The Christmas Tree. TLS. September 12, 1981: 1054.

---. "The passion and the glory." Rev. of How Many Miles to Babylon. TLS, March 1, 1974 : 201.

Cronin, John. The Anglo-Irish Novel: The Nineteenth Century. Vol. 1. Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1980.

---. "An Ideal of Art': The Assertion of Realities in the Fiction of Somerville and Ross." The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies. 11.1 (June, 1985): 54-78.

Cullen, L.M. An Economic History of Ireland Since 1660. London: Batsford, 1972.

Daly, Mary. Social and Economic History of Ireland since 1800. Dublin: The Educational Co., 1981.

Davenport, Gary. "Elizabeth Bowen and the Big House." Southern Humanities Review. viii.1 (Winter, 1974): 27-34.

Deane, Seamus. " 'Be Assured I Am Inventing' The Fiction of John Banville." The Irish Novel In Our Time. Eds. Patrick Raftery, Maurice Harmon. Lille: Publications De L'Universite De Lille, 1975-6. 329-39.

---. "The Literary Myths of the Revival: A Case For Their Abandonment." Celtic Revivals. London: Farber and Farber, 1985. 28-37.

- de Breffny, Brian and folliott, Rosemary. The Houses of Ireland. London: Thames and Hudson, 1984.
- Donnelly, Brian. "The Big House in the Recent Novel." Studies. 64 (1975): 133-42.
- Donoghue, Denis. "Yeats, Ancestral Houses and Anglo-Ireland." We Irish. New York: Knopf, 1986.
- Dunton, John. "MS Letters of John Dunton, 1659-1733." Appendix B. Irish Life in the Seventeenth Century. 2nd ed. By Edward MacLysaght. Cork: Cork University Press, 1950.
- Edgeworth, Maria. The Absentee. 1812. New York: Dent, 1910.
- . Castle Rackrent. 1800. New York: Oxford, 1980.
- . "Ennui." 1812. Tales and Novels by Maria Edgeworth. Vol iv. London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1857.
- . Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth Esq. Begun by Himself and Concluded by His Daughter. Maria Edgeworth. 2 vols. Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1821.
- . Tour In Connemara And The Martins of Ballinahinch. Ed. Harold Edgeworth Butler. London: Constable and Company, 1950.
- Farrell, M. J. [Molly Keane]. Conversation Pieces. London: Collins, 1932.
- . Full House. Boston: Little Brown, 1935.
- . Mad Puppetstown. 1932. London: Virago, 1985.
- . Taking Chances. London: Lippincott, 1930.
- . The Rising Tide. 1937. London: Virago, 1984.
- . Two Days in Aragon. 1941. London, Virago, 1985.
- Fitzgerald, Frances. "The Anglo-Irish Gentry; Guardians of a Vanished Empire." Geo. 1 (1979): 138-56.
- Flanagan, Thomas. "The Big House of Ross-Drishane." The Kenyon Review. 28.1 (Jan. 1966): 54-78.

- . The Irish Novelists, 1800-1850. New York: Columbia University Press, 1959.
- Gay, Peter. Weimar Culture: the Outsider as Insider. New York: Harper and Row, 1970.
- Gill, Richard. Happy Rural Seat: The English Country House and the Literary Imagination. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972.
- Glendinning, Victoria. Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer. London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1977.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang. Elective Affinities. 1809. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1971.
- Grene, Marjorie. "Heidegger, Martin." The Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 1967.
- Gwynn, Stephen. Irish literature and Drama in the English Language. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1936.
- Hall, Wayne. Shadowy Heroes: Irish Literature of the 1890's. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1980.
- Harden, Elizabeth. Maria Edgeworth's Art of Prose Fiction. The Hague: Mouton, 1971.
- Hardwick, Elizabeth. "Elizabeth Bowen's Fiction." Partisan Review. 16 (Nov. 1949), 1114-21.
- Harmon, Maurice. "By Memory Inspired: Themes and Forces in Recent Irish Writing." Eire-Ireland. 8 (1973): 3-19.
- Heath, William. Elizabeth Bowen: An Introduction to Her Novels. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1961.
- Henderson, Peter, Mills. A Nut Between Two Blades: The Novels of Charles Robert Maturin. New York: Arno Press, 1980.
- Henn, Thomas. "The Big House." Last Essays: Mainly on Anglo-Irish Literature. New York: Harper and Row, 1976. 207-220.
- Higgins, Aidan, "Imaginary Meadows." Review of Contemporary Fiction. 3.1 (Spring, 1983): 114-23.

- . Langrishe, Go Down. London: Calder and Boyars, 1966.
- Howe, Irving. Politics and the Novel. Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1957.
- Hurst, Michael. Maria Edgeworth and the Public Scene. Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami, 1969.
- Imhof, Rudiger. "An Interview with John Banville 'My Reader's, That Small Band, Deserve a Rest'" Irish University Review. xi.i (Spring, 1981): 5-10.
- . "John Banville's Supreme Fiction." Irish University Review. xi.i (Spring, 1981): 52-86.
- . The Newton Letter by John Banville: An Exercise in Literary Derivation." Irish University Review. xiii.2 (Autumn 1983): 162-67.
- Jeffares, A. Norman. "Lever's 'Lord Kilgobbin'." Essays and Studies. Ed. Robert Ellrodt. London: Cox and Wyman, 1975. 47-57.
- . "Place, Space, Personality and the Irish Writer." Place, Personality and the Irish Writer. Ed. Andrew Carpenter. London: Colin Smythe, 1977. 11-40.
- Johnston, Jennifer. The Captains and The Kings. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1972.
- . The Gates. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1973.
- . How Many Miles to Babylon. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1974.
- . "Q and A with Jennifer Johnston." The Irish Literary Supplement. (Fall 1984): 26.
- Keane, Molly. Good Behavior. 1981. London: Abacus, 1982.
- . Time After Time. New York: Knopf, 1983.
- Kearney, Richard. Myth and Motherland. Derry: Field Day, 1984.
- Kenny, Virginia C., The Country House Ethos in English Literature 1688-1750. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984.
- Kiberd, Declan. "The Perils of Nostalgia: A Critique of the Revival." Literature and

the Changing Ireland. Ed. Peter Connolly, Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1-23.

Kiely, Benedict. "The Great Gazebo." Eire-Ireland 11 (Winter, 1967): 372-86.

Kierstead, Mary. "Profile (Molly Keane)." New Yorker. 12 Oct. 1986: 97-112.

Krans, Horatio. Irish Life in Irish Fiction. New York: Macmillan, 1903.

Lecky, W.E.H. A History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1892.

Lee, Hermione. Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1982.

Lee, Joseph. The Modernisation of Irish Society 1848-1918. London: Gil and Macmillan, 1973.

Le Fanu, Sheridan. "Passage in the Secret History of an Irish Countess." The Purcell Papers. London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1880. New York: Garland, 1979.

---. Uncle Silas. 1864. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

Lever, Charles. The Martins of Cro' Martin. 1847. 2 vols. Boston: Little, Brown, 1895.

Lewis, Gifford. Somerville and Ross: The World of the Irish R.M. New York: Viking, 1985.

Lougy, Robert. Charles Robert Maturin. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1975.

Lukacs, Georg. The Historical Novel. Trans. Hannah and Stanley Michell. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963.

Lyons, F.S.L. Culture and Anarchy in Ireland: 1890-1939. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.

---. Ireland Since the Famine. Rev. Ed. Bungay, Suffolk: Fontana, 1973.

MacCarthy, B.G. "E. OE. Somerville and Martin Ross." Studies. 34 (June, 1945):

183-94.

- MacDonagh, Oliver. The Nineteenth Century Novel and Irish Social History: Some Aspects. O'Donnell Lecture Series XIV. Cork: University College, 1970.
- Mark, David. "Tyrone House, Co. Galway." Quarterly Bulletin of the Irish Georgian Society. xix.3-4 (1976): 23-69.
- Martin, David, "The Castle Rackrent of Somerville and Ross: A Tragic 'Colonial Tale?'" Etudes Irlandaises 7 (1982): 43-53.
- Maturin, Charles. Melmoth The Wanderer. 1820. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1977.
- McCormack, W.J. Ascendancy and Tradition in Anglo-Irish Literary History from 1789 to 1939. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985.
- . Introduction. Uncle Silas. By Sheridan Le Fanu. New York: Oxford, 1981.
- . Sheridan Le Fanu and Victorian Ireland. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980.
- Mercier, Vivian. The Irish Comic Tradition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1969.
- Meredith, Robert. "Lever's St Patrick's Eve in Proper Perspective." Eire 19. 1 (1977): 75-79.
- Molloy, Francis. "The Search for Truth: The Fiction of John Banville." Irish University Review. xi.i (Spring,1981): 29-51.
- Mortimer, Anthony. "Castle Rackrent and Its Historical Context." Etudes Irlandaises. 9 (1984): 107-23.
- Moynahan, Julian. "The Politics of Anglo-Irish Gothic: 'The Return of the Repressed.'" Studies in Anglo-Irish Literature. Ed. Heinz Kosok. Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundman, 1982. 45-53.
- Newby, P.H. Maria Edgeworth. London: Arthur Barker, 1950.
- Newcomer, James. Maria Edgeworth the Novelist. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1967.

- O'Grady, Standish. Toryism and the Tory Democracy. London: Chapman and Hall, 1886.
- O'Keefe, Thomas. "Maria Edgeworth and Charles Lever: The Big House and the Garrison." Eire 19. 1(1966): 81-92.
- O Tuathaigh, Gearóid. Ireland Before the Famine 1798-1848. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1972.
- Partridge, Eric. A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English. 8th ed.
- Power, Ann. "The Big House of Somerville and Ross." The Dubliner. (Spring, 1964): 43-53.
- Rafroidi, Patrick. "A Question of Inheritance: The Anglo-Irish Tradition." The Irish Novel in Our Time. Villeneuve-Ascq: Publications De L'Universite De Lille, 1975. 11-29.
- Rix, Walter. "Charles James Lever: The Irish Dimension of a Cosmopolitan." Studies in Anglo-Irish literature. Ed. Heinz Kosok. Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1982. 54-64.
- Robinson, Hilary. Somerville and Ross: A Critical Appreciation. New York: St Martin's Press, 1980.
- Robinson, Lennox. Preface. Dr E. OE. Somerville. By Geraldine Cummins. London: Andrew Dakers Ltd., 1952.
- Scanlan, Elizabeth. "Rumors of War: Elizabeth Bowen's The Last September and J.G. Farrell's Troubles." Eire Ireland. XX.2 (1985): 70-89.
- Solow, B. The Land Question and the Irish Economy, 1870-1903. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1972.
- Somerville, E. OE, and Ross, Martin. 1925. The Big House of Inver. London: Quartet, 1978.
- . Experiences of an Irish R.M. 1899. London: Everyman, 1944.
- . Irish Memories. New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1918.
- . Mount Music. 1919. New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1920.

- . The Real Charlotte. 1894. London: Quartet, 1977.
- . Wheel-Tracks. New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1923.
- Thompson, David. Woodbrook. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1976.
- Tracy, Robert. "The Burning Roof And Tower' Literary and Sexual Politics in Elizabeth Bowen's The Last September". National Conference of American Committee of Irish Studies. Boston, 10 May 1986.
- Trevor, William. Fools of Fortune. 1983. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1984.
- . The News From Ireland. New York: Viking Penguin, 1986.
- . "Saints." Atlantic Monthly. (Jan. 1981): 29-36.
- . The Stories of William Trevor. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1983.
- Williams, Raymond. The Country and The City. New York: Oxford, 1973.
- White, Terence De Vere. The Anglo-Irish. London: Gollancz, 1972.
- Yeats, William, Butler. The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats. New York: Macmillan, 1956.
- . The Collected Plays of William Butler Yeats. New York: Macmillan, 1952.
- . Introduction. Representative Irish Tales. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1976. 25-35.
- Young, Arthur. Arthur Young's Tour in Ireland (1776-1779). 2 vols. Ed. Arthur Wollaston Hutton. London: George Bell and Sons, 1892.