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## **'John McGahern's "Oldfashioned" and Anglo-Irish Culture'**

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In John McGahern's 1985 short story 'Oldfashioned', he ably demonstrates why a sensitive, bookish, Catholic young man raised in the repressive, anti-intellectual Irish Free State might be attracted to the way of life being led by the country's dwindling Church of Ireland population. Throughout 'Oldfashioned', McGahern suggests that Catholics in the young state are, in the main, overly fixated on money-making, gossip, and a prosaic practicality, and that they are suspicious of anything that smacks of foreign influence. By contrast, he implies that those from Anglo-Irish Protestant backgrounds are often more open to learning and aesthetic beauty, and take a much wider view of the world. McGahern also contends in the story, however, that Catholics cannot cross over to an Anglo-Irish cultural milieu without gravely compromising their ties to their own people. As the story demonstrates, the gulf that exists between the two communities is caused primarily by the fact that Anglo-Irish Protestants are frequently open to the cultural and economic ties that Ireland has to Britain, whereas most Irish Catholics are wilfully blind to the significant influence that the neighbouring island has on their lives. By examining frequently-ignored 'British' aspects of Irish life and by paying homage to the Anglo-Irish literary tradition throughout the story, McGahern reveals that his perspective on Anglo-Irish Protestants is quite unlike that of other Irish Catholic short story writers publishing during his lifetime; indeed, McGahern's 'Oldfashioned' can be more easily compared to stories by writers from Church of Ireland backgrounds in which they reflect on the long, slow decline of their own community. Also, McGahern's openness to the British aspects of Ireland's past and present – as demonstrated by this story and by his writings more generally – indicate that his view of Irish history is influenced by Irish historical revisionism; McGahern differs from many revisionists, however, in that he does not attempt to downplay the trauma and injustice endured by many Irish people under English (later, British) rule.<sup>1</sup>

In 'Oldfashioned', an Anglo-Irishman called Col. Sinclair and his English wife move to the parsonage where the colonel grew up in Ardcarne, Co. Roscommon, after the marriage

of their daughter and the death of their son in World War II. Together, the couple restore the dilapidated house to its former, picturesque beauty. Col. Sinclair and his wife are eventually embraced by the locals, but always considered ‘Other’ for their unusual habits. For example, every evening at 9pm, the colonel drinks in Charlie’s Bar while his wife is brought gin and tonics in their car. On cold winter nights, their automobile is left running – to the shock of the locals who consider such extravagance ‘wasteful’.<sup>2</sup> One of the story’s Catholic characters – Guard Casey – speaks for the wider community when he asserts that the Sinclairs are ‘strange’ and ‘different’, because, being Protestant, they were ‘not brought up like the rest of us’ and because they ‘spent a lot of their life in India’ (Casey explains that the ‘hot climates’ that British Army personnel and their families ‘get sent to does things to people’).<sup>3</sup> In the eyes of the locals, the Sinclairs have been ‘corrupted’ by time in India and through their maintenance of ties with Britain (they spend two months of each year with their daughter in Durham, listen to the BBC World Service, wear Burberry, and retain the Colonel’s British Army contacts); by contrast, the local Catholics are saved from ‘corrupting foreign influence’<sup>4</sup> by the Catholic Church, which warns them against ‘alien’ customs and ideas and which encourages the study of the Irish language as an effective barrier against the sullyng effects of transnational Anglophone culture.<sup>5</sup>

By chance, the culturally isolated Sinclairs meet Johnny, the son of the boorish, local Garda sergeant, and they note his intelligence and (for the area) his unusually refined manners. The couple engage Johnny to help them with their garden on Saturdays. The sensitive, bookish teenager quickly becomes a surrogate son for the couple, who are still mourning the loss of their own son (they even give Johnny one of their son’s old books). Johnny finds that he is ‘drawn’<sup>6</sup> to the Sinclairs, because they are so different from the other people in his life. In particular, their cultural values and their manners contrast sharply with those of the people in his own world.

For example, whereas Johnny’s father mocks him for his tendency to read late into the night, calling it ‘a woeful waste of fire and light’,<sup>7</sup> the Sinclairs give him the aforementioned book as a gift. (Such a contrast between Anglo-Irish learning and Catholic anti-intellectualism is set up again in the McGahern story, ‘The Conversion of William Kirkwood’ (1985), in which the Anglo-Irish Kirkwood – whose house boasts a fine library – internally notes the lack of books in the Catholic schoolmaster’s house.) Similarly, the Sinclair’s house and garden are aesthetically attractive, and Mrs Sinclair arranges the fruit and vegetables that

she gives to neighbours in a way that is ‘very beautiful’ to behold. The local Catholic church, on the other hand, possesses a ‘stark’ and ‘astonishing ugliness’, and the Catholic Guard Casey is completely insensitive to the beauty of Mrs Sinclair’s fruit arrangements: he says, ‘no matter what way they’re arranged they’ll be all the same by the time they get to your belly.’<sup>8</sup>

With regards to manners, the Sinclairs are quite stately in their bearing and very respectful, and they are often silent, never indulging in ‘idle speech’.<sup>9</sup> This is something the boy greatly appreciates, because the smallest incident among his own community is ‘enough to start an endless flow of conjecture and criticism’.<sup>10</sup> The contrasting manners are also manifest in the fact that the Sinclairs are (like Johnny) extremely punctual and disciplined, whereas the Catholic locals who work for the Colonel at McAinish’s Mill are frequently late for their shifts. At first, the Colonel is ‘unpopular’ for his ‘strict timekeeping’ (he fines them for such tardiness), but, eventually, they come to respect his ‘fair[ness]’, and – in time – a great ‘unspoken loyalty’ builds up between Sinclair and his employees.<sup>11</sup>

The final (and perhaps biggest) contrast between the Sinclairs and Johnny’s Catholic community is their divergent views regarding Great Britain. The Catholic characters are happy to ignore and even obliterate Ireland’s British past. For example, the local school and monastery were once the British Army barracks, and the locals have dressed up the buildings and grounds with Catholic ecclesiastical features. Similarly, the locals engrave the name of Ardcarne’s new town commissioner on the memorial stone beneath the town clock. The new name sits alongside the names of the Big House residents who held power in the town for centuries. Col. Sinclair notes that these deceased Anglo-Irish grandees (mainly Staffords and King-Harmons) would be affronted to see the new name on the stone. Interestingly, the offending ‘low-born’ name on the memorial stone is ‘Gerald Dodd’<sup>12</sup> – a name with links to two Irish Protestants associated with McGahern. The first is the Ulster-born Oxford professor, E.R. Dodds, whose 1951 study *The Greeks and the Irrational* was greatly admired by McGahern.<sup>13</sup> The second is Luke Dodd, the curator of Strokestown Park House (formerly the Roscommon Big House belonging to the Pakenham Mahons – a family familiar to McGahern from his youth); as McGahern once noted with approval, the ‘young and able’ Dodd set up a Famine Museum alongside Strokestown Park House, ‘as if to correct any rush toward Anglo-Irish sentiment.’<sup>14</sup> By choosing to name a (presumably) Catholic town commissioner after two men with ties to Protestant Ireland, McGahern is emphasising the

abundant connections – ethnic and cultural – between Irish Catholics and Protestants. At the same time, the story’s account of a failed attempt at cross-cultural connection (combined with the reference to the Famine in the quote about Luke Dodd) indicate that McGahern is fully aware that significant cultural differences and painful historical wounds may prevent or at least delay full reconciliation between the Anglo-Irish and the Catholic Irish.

Irish Catholic antipathy to Ireland’s British past is also present in the story in Johnny’s father’s campaign to prove that the fire in the local King-Harmon Big House was part of an insurance scam. (The narrator tells us that the Sergeant’s mission is fired by ‘old caste hostility’.)<sup>15</sup> When the Sergeant is warned off the case due to the King-Harmons’ political connections, he retires and buys up land once belonging to their estate – presumably as a defiant statement that Catholics are ascending and Protestants in decline in the new Catholic-dominated state. In keeping with the story’s association of the Anglo-Irish with ‘civility’, McGahern suggests that, from a cultural point of view, the ascension of arriviste Catholics like the Sergeant is not necessarily a good thing. The house that the retired Sergeant buys traditionally belonged to the estate gardener, and the land attached to it contains ‘surprisingly exotic plants from as far away as China and India’; these plants, we are told, ‘meant nothing to the Sergeant’.<sup>16</sup>

McGahern also makes links to Ireland’s British past through the story’s repeated references to Scotland – a country which, like Ireland, has a dual Gaelic and British heritage. As Denis Sampson has pointed out, Col. Sinclair’s assertion that he ‘never discuss[es] religion because its base is faith – not reason’ is an unattributed quote from the Scottish philosopher, David Hume.<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere in the story, when the narrator lists some of the subjects that the children study in school, he mentions ‘George Gordon’<sup>18</sup> – a multifarious reference deliberately chosen by McGahern. The name does not just allude to the famous English general killed at Khartoum. It also interestingly refers to two other important figures: Lord Byron and Lord George Gordon, both of whom had (like the Irish Ascendancy) an uneasy relationship with England and with the Gaelic country which provided them with their wealth and social position. Byron – despite being regarded as a quintessentially ‘English’ poet – was actually known as ‘George Noël Gordon’ while being raised for ten years of his childhood in his mother’s native Aberdeenshire. Lord George Gordon was a Scottish noble who, as the head of the Protestant Association, led the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots of 1780 in

London.<sup>19</sup> This, of course, links directly to the Catholic-Protestant tensions explored in ‘Oldfashioned’.

Another link to Scotland is the narrator’s reference to the fact that Guard Casey was once given a trial by Glasgow Celtic.<sup>20</sup> The story’s Nationalist Catholic characters feel an understandable antipathy towards Ireland’s British past, but the reference to Glasgow Celtic is part of McGahern’s attempt to show that their overly-blinkered political vision leads them to wilfully ignore the profound influence that Britain continues to have on their *present*. Guard Casey would have had to move to Britain, had his trial with Celtic been successful, and, in fact, most of the town’s young people (including Johnny in later years) have to cross the Irish Sea in order to find work. The reference to Celtic also reminds readers that Scottish and English professional football leagues are extremely popular with most Irish football fans, right up to today. And the Catholic Church is worried, with good reason, about the attractions of British popular culture for the town’s youth. The relative openness of the younger generation to Britain is seen most clearly in Johnny’s openness to the Sinclairs’ suggestion that he go to Sandhurst and become a British Army officer. Clearly, Johnny is not burdened by the anti-British prejudice of his father, who, during the Irish War of Independence, commanded a small company of rebels.

Predictably, when the Sinclairs speak to Johnny’s father about the Sandhurst proposition, telling him that they would be happy to use their connections to make this dream a reality, the Sergeant is enraged. The Sinclairs realise afterwards that they should have known that the Sergeant would be hostile to the suggestion; what’s more, they recognise that Johnny might not even have gotten into Sandhurst and that his lower-middle-class, rural Irish background (including his strong accent) would have made life in the officer training school extremely difficult. The Sergeant, meanwhile, roars at his son, mocking him for desiring to be a ‘Sassenach’ and ‘an officer and a gentlemen’, adding – with his ever-present disrespect for the boy’s considerable gifts – that he ‘doubt[s] if the Empire is that hard up’ that they would want him for an officer.<sup>21</sup> When discussing the situation with Guard Casey later, Johnny protests that ‘many go from here to England for work’.<sup>22</sup> Casey rightly points out that, for Johnny’s Republican father, it was the fact that the ‘job’ was joining the British Army that was the obstacle. Casey also points out the class issue that separates Johnny from well-to-do Anglo-Irish Protestants like the Sinclairs: ‘You really have to be born into that class of people. You don’t ever find robins feeding with the sparrows.’<sup>23</sup>

Guard Casey's reference to two different types of birds is telling; it indicates the subconscious belief that Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants belong to two different 'species'. This is an idea that McGahern challenges throughout the story (and not just in his use of the surname Dodd for a Catholic town commissioner, as cited above). While it is true that McGahern admits and superbly demonstrates that Irish Catholics and Anglo-Irish Protestants possess somewhat different manners and belong to two relatively separate cultural traditions, he also indicates that both of these cultures are not as different as people suggest and that both of them are – without a doubt – Irish.

In the story, McGahern emphasises the Irishness of Anglo-Irish Protestants in two ways. First, he repeatedly emphasises how much the Sinclairs love the village and their home in it, and demonstrates through these characters (especially the Irish-born Colonel) that, when barriers are broken down, the Catholics and Protestants of Ireland can get along quite well. This was something that McGahern was well aware of from his own upbringing and adulthood in Leitrim and Roscommon; in his essays and autobiographical writings, he repeatedly notes the way that the Catholic locals came to love, appreciate, and respect local Protestants like Andy and Willie Moroney and Willie Booth.<sup>24</sup>

McGahern also emphasises the Irishness of Anglo-Irish Protestants by making frequent and subtle references to works by writers from Church of Ireland backgrounds. These references reveal that McGahern believed that Anglo-Irish Protestants have often drawn accurate pictures of their Catholic neighbours; these references also show McGahern's profound appreciation for the Anglo-Irish literary tradition – a tradition that McGahern clearly cherishes, even if many from his own Catholic community would dismiss it as 'tainted' by a degree of Britishness.

In order to make his socio-political agenda clear from the start, three of McGahern's pointed allusions to works by Protestant writers occur within the first six paragraphs of the story. As McGahern's narrator sets the scene and describes various aspects of life in Ardcarne, he notes:

Everywhere there was the craving for news. News, any news, passing like flame from mouth to eager mouth, slowly savoured in the eyes.<sup>25</sup>

This strongly recalls Lady Gregory's 1904 play *Spreading the News*, and verifies her picture of the rural Irish hunger for gossip. In Gregory's play, the news that Bartley Fallon has followed Jack Smith with a hayfork in his hand is passed excitedly from mouth to mouth until the game of 'Chinese whispers' results in the general belief among those at the fair that Bartley has actually murdered Jack. And six of the play's characters refer to the townspeople's love of 'news', 'talk', and gossiping about other people's 'business'.<sup>26</sup> By confirming Lady Gregory's picture of Irish country people, McGahern affirms that she was not, as has sometimes been implied, a naïve, out-of-touch Big House aristocrat.<sup>27</sup>

Also towards the start of 'Oldfashioned', McGahern references the 'race memories of hedge schools and the poor scholar',<sup>28</sup> which linger in the minds of the locals. This is a clear allusion to the work of William Carleton. Carleton was raised Catholic in Co. Tyrone, where he was educated in a hedge school and where he was once a highly-touted student who hoped to study as a 'poor scholar' at one of the informal Catholic centres of learning in Munster. After becoming convinced of the claims of Protestantism, however, Carleton converted to the reformed faith and even contributed to proselytizing publications produced by Church of Ireland ministers. From the start of his writing career, Carleton's rural Irish childhood was one of his preferred subjects, and he returned repeatedly to accounts of his early scholastic career. Works that touch upon his education (and that are being alluded to by McGahern) include 'The Hedge School' (1830), 'The Poor Scholar' (1832), 'Going to Maynooth' (1832), and Carleton's posthumously published *Autobiography* (1896).

W.B. Yeats is another Anglo-Irish Protestant writer referenced in the story, and not simply at the beginning. As Denis Sampson has shown, Yeats helped inspire McGahern's artistic awakening as a teenager.<sup>29</sup> And McGahern himself always emphasised in essays and interviews that he believed that Yeats was 'a very great poet', and once even claimed that Yeats was the one Irish writer that he was 'particularly' interested in.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the title of McGahern's second novel, *The Dark* (1965), takes its title from the Yeats poem 'The Choice' (1933),<sup>31</sup> and various critics have discussed the poet's profound influence on McGahern's views on art and on the role of the artist.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the biggest indication of Yeats's influence on McGahern is one highlighted by Denis Sampson and Belinda McKeown: that McGahern uses images or paraphrased quotes from Yeats's poems and essays in several of his works of fiction, including *The Barracks* (1963), *The Dark*, 'Christmas' (1970), 'Swallows' (1971), *The Leavetaking* (1974), *The Pornographer* (1979), 'The Conversion of William Kirkwood',

and 'Parachutes' (1985), and *Amongst Women* (1990).<sup>33</sup> He similarly alludes to three different Yeats poems in 'Oldfashioned'.

When 'Oldfashioned's' narrator describes the boys tossing 'coins' behind Jimmy Shivnan's forge, he notes that they were tossed from 'greasy pocket combs'.<sup>34</sup> This juxtaposition of 'coins' and 'greasy' is an allusion to Yeats's condemnation of Catholic middle-class greed in the poem 'September 1913' (written in 1913 and published in 1914). It famously describes Catholic shopkeepers 'fumb[ing] in the greasy till / And adding the halfpence to the pence / And prayer to shivering prayer'.<sup>35</sup> This relates to the negative reflections on Irish Catholic materialism in 'Oldfashioned'.

Later in the story, when Johnny wants to secretly visit the Sinclairs, he pretends to go fishing. This facilitates another reference to Yeats, as Johnny brings along a 'hazel fishing rod'.<sup>36</sup> This is a reference to the first verse of Yeats's 'The Song of Wandering Aengus' (1899):

I went out to the hazel wood,  
Because a fire was in my head,  
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,  
And hooked a berry to a thread;  
And when white moths were on the wing,  
And moth-like stars were flickering out,  
I dropped the berry in a stream  
And caught a little silver trout.<sup>37</sup>

The final reference to Yeats is related to Guard Casey. We discover halfway through the story that he comes from Rosses Point in Co. Sligo, a place associated with Yeats and prominently featured in one of his most famous poems, 'The Stolen Child' (1889).<sup>38</sup> McGahern is suggesting that this area – like all of Ireland – is cherished by those from both a Catholic background, such as Guard Casey (a proud Irish-speaker who retires back to Sligo towards the end of the story) and a Protestant like Yeats (who never learned Irish and who,

while very proud of his Irish identity, claimed he ‘owe[d] his soul’ to the English literary tradition and the English language).<sup>39</sup>

Another reference to the writings of an Anglo-Irish Protestant occurs when Col. Sinclair asserts that: ‘The best wars are the wars that are never fought ... Actual war is a sordid business ... a bad business no matter what civilian nonsense is talked about heroism.’<sup>40</sup> This mirrors the views of the Irish-born Duke of Wellington, as expressed in his published parliamentary speeches. Wellington once averred:

I am one of those who consider that the greatest political interest of this country is to remain at peace and amity with all nations of the world. I am for avoiding even the cause of war, and of giving offence to anyone ...<sup>41</sup>

This was the conclusion that Wellington reached after all that he had witnessed on the battlefield, and he was disgusted to hear politicians referring to waging a ‘little war’.<sup>42</sup> Bernard Shaw – another writer from a Church of Ireland background – frequently applauded Wellington for the fact that he had a ‘moral horror of war and ... freedom from its illusions’.<sup>43</sup>

Johnny’s failed attempt towards the end of the story to convince his volatile, unmannerly father that refined rules of conduct are important to a society facilitates the final allusion to an Anglo-Irish Protestant writer. Johnny says: ‘There must be rules if there’s to be any fairness or freedom.’<sup>44</sup> As Stanley Van Der Ziel has noted, this statement is clearly informed by the ideas in Edmund Burke’s *The Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) – a book which was ‘on the curriculum at University College Dublin when McGahern was an undergraduate there in the late 1950s.’<sup>45</sup> In Burke’s classic treatise, he contends that: ‘There ought to be a system of manners in every nation which a well-formed mind would be disposed to relish. To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely.’<sup>46</sup> As has already been stressed, Johnny found the ‘manners’ of his own Catholic community to be far from ‘lovely’. Reflecting back on what he learned from observing the Sinclairs, Johnny wants the Catholic populace in the young Irish state to develop a code of ‘civil’ and ‘decorous manners’ (to quote Burke),<sup>47</sup> which will result in greater equality and personal freedom for all citizens.

Given McGahern's respect for the Anglo-Irish cultural tradition, it is tempting to suggest that he deliberately included another trope from its literary canon in the story: that is, an Anglo-Irish husband married to an imported English wife. This set-up is featured in Somerville & Ross's *Irish R.M.* stories (1898-1915), Bernard Shaw's play *O'Flaherty, V.C.* (1917), and three of Elizabeth Bowen's Irish novels: *The House in Paris* (1935), *The Heat of the Day* (1948), and *A World of Love* (1958). However, it is much more likely that McGahern features this set-up because it mirrors the real-life models for the Sinclairs: Charles and Ivy Kirkwood, the couple who, during McGahern's childhood, presided over a local Roscommon Big House called Woodbrook. Major Charles Kirkwood, who was raised at Woodbrook, met his English-born wife while serving in the British Army in India. (Ivy was living there with her father – a colonel in the British Army – after the death of her mother in England.) Although critics have suggested that the Sinclairs are based on the Moroneys,<sup>48</sup> the similarities between Charles and Ivy Kirkwood and the fictional Sinclairs are striking: both couples lived in India due to their ties to the British Army, both had two children, and both retired to live in the childhood home of the male spouse in Co. Roscommon.

Charles and Ivy Kirkwood were made famous by the publication of Scottish author David Thomson's best-selling memoir, *Woodbrook* (1974), in which he tells of his time serving as a tutor to the Kirkwood's two children in the Roscommon Big House.<sup>49</sup> As Denis Sampson has suggested, it is possible that, during the mid-1980s, McGahern was inspired to start focussing on the Anglo-Irish in his work after reading *Woodbrook*.<sup>50</sup> (McGahern mentions the book repeatedly in his non-fiction after this point, sometimes praising it and sometimes correcting Thomson's factual errors.)<sup>51</sup> Whether or not *Woodbrook* was the inspiration, we do know that, between 1985 and 1987, McGahern produced four significant works about Anglo-Irish people living on the Leitrim/Roscommon border: three short stories from the 1985 collection *The High Ground* ('Old Fashioned' and the linked stories 'Eddie Mac' and 'The Conversion of William Kirkwood'), and a teleplay broadcast by the BBC in 1987 called *The Rockingham Shoot*.<sup>52</sup> Confusingly, while the real-life Kirkwoods provided a model for the Sinclairs from 'Oldfashioned', the fictional Kirkwoods from 'Eddie Mac' and 'The Conversion of William Kirkwood' were based on McGahern's Moroney neighbours.<sup>53</sup> *The Rockingham Shoot*, as the title indicates, was inspired by the discrimination that the children from the Rockingham estate suffered at the hands of McGahern's childhood schoolmaster, Master Kelly, as detailed in *Memoir*.<sup>54</sup>

In all of these Big House works, McGahern shows a degree of sympathy for the ‘unbought grace of life’<sup>55</sup> demonstrated by ‘downstart’ Ascendancy families: a sympathy clearly engendered in him by his warm relationship with the Moroneys as a youth and with people like Willie Booth as an adult. This sympathy is noteworthy, because, when comparing the Sinclairs in ‘Oldfashioned’ to portraits of Irish Protestants in the work of other masters of the Irish short story from the mid-to-late-twentieth-century, it becomes clear that McGahern’s work is closer in spirit to that of writers from Church of Ireland backgrounds such as Elizabeth Bowen and William Trevor than it is to that of fellow Catholics like Frank O’Connor and Mary Lavin.

While Frank O’Connor features a sympathetic portrait of an Irish Protestant in the 1953 story, ‘Adventure’ (the jilted lover, Doris Beirne), in two of his other stories – ‘My First Protestant’ (1951) and ‘A Minority’ (1957) – the Protestant characters either long to or actually do convert to Roman Catholicism. And in O’Connor’s classic story ‘Ghosts’ (first published posthumously in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1972), it is darkly hinted that the charming local Big House owner, Major Hopkins, is not that dissimilar to his ancestors, who – we are told – were ‘cruel bad landlords’.<sup>56</sup> O’Connor was personally close to a number of Irish Protestants, including AE (George Russell), W.B. Yeats, and Geoffrey Phibbs, and he feuded with Daniel Corkery over the latter’s sectarian, ‘Irish-Ireland’ views; however, O’Connor’s personal regard for Irish Protestants does not seem to have made a significant impact on his art.

As regards Mary Lavin, in one of her most powerful stories, ‘The Becker Wives’ (1946), the Anglo-Irish character, Flora, is depicted as highly cultured when compared to the nouveau-riche Roman Catholic characters. However, when it is revealed that she struggles with mental illness, the Catholic women who have endeavoured to imitate her throughout the story retreat into their comfortable, bourgeois, ‘pre-Flora’ existence. This comes across as an endorsement of ‘sensible’ middle-class living over the sophisticated but eccentric Big House freedom personified by Flora. Likewise, in Lavin’s ‘Scylla and Charybdis’ (1956), it is suggested that the members of the former Ascendancy will never accept an Irish Catholic as a social equal, and that no amount of education will enable Catholics to fully participate in the elegant, otherworldly life of the Big House. While Lavin was growing up, her father served as estate manager for the Birds, a Big House family in Co. Meath, and her negative experiences at the time seem to have coloured her depictions of this Irish subculture.

By contrast, as has been noted, McGahern's favourable childhood experiences with the Moroneys (who gave him the run of their library) and his interest in local Big House families such as the Kirkwoods and the King-Harmons gave him a sympathy for the Anglo-Irish and their declining status that is more commonly found in the work of short story writers from Anglo-Irish Protestant backgrounds. For example, McGahern's 'nostalgic' and (arguably) 'idealised vision'<sup>57</sup> of the Anglo-Irish in 'Oldfashioned' recalls Elizabeth Bowen's nostalgic depictions of life under the Ascendancy in the short stories 'The Happy Autumn Fields' (1945) and 'The Good Earl' (1946). Likewise, the cultural isolation of the Sinclairs is comparable to that of the characters in Bowen's stories who have lost their Big Houses and/or lost the social status they once enjoyed under British rule: figures such as the Barran family from 'The Back Drawing-Room' (1926), Aunt Fran from 'Summer Night' (1941), Miss Banderry from 'A Day in the Dark' (1965), and the 'forgotten Protestant ladies',<sup>58</sup> now languishing in south County Dublin, in 'An Unwelcome Idea' (1941).

McGahern's sympathy for the isolated Sinclairs can also be compared to the sympathy expressed by William Trevor – another important short story writer from a Church of Ireland background – in 'The Distant Past' (1975). In this story, elderly, isolated Big House siblings are treated with cruel indifference by their formerly friendly Catholic neighbours after the Troubles break out in Northern Ireland. Although the locals once regarded the cultural Britishness of these siblings as colourfully and harmlessly eccentric, they slowly come to regard it as menacing and politically offensive, even though they must know that these mild, old people pose no threat to the town.

McGahern's 'Oldfashioned' also parallels another of Trevor's Irish stories: 'Of the Cloth' from 2000. At the start of 'Oldfashioned', the Catholic clergy wield great power in Ardcarne, but the narrator asserts that, over the ensuing decades, the local politician has come to possess much more power than the parish priest and that the glow of TVs has replaced the glow of Sacred Hearts. Similarly, in Trevor's story, we are informed that, for decades, the two Catholic priests in Ennismolach – Father MacPartlan and Father Leahy – have wielded much more influence than the Church of Ireland minister, Rev. Grattan Fitzmaurice; however, towards the end of the story, Fitzmaurice and the priests recognise that postmodern Ireland now listens to no clergymen, which leads to a bond between the previously competing 'men of the cloth'. 'Of the Cloth' also mirrors 'Oldfashioned' in that Trevor pays tribute to a number of celebrated Irish Protestant figures in the story, including W.B. Yeats, Theobald

Wolfe Tone, Robert Emmet, Thomas Davis, Charles Stewart Parnell, and (of course, given the main character's Christian name) Henry Grattan.<sup>59</sup>

McGahern's positive childhood experiences with the unusual but lovely Moroneys not only gave him a sensitivity to people from Protestant backgrounds, as manifested in works like 'Oldfashioned'. It also seems to have given him a lifelong fascination with eccentric Anglo-Irish people: he writes about them repeatedly in his non-fiction.<sup>60</sup> McGahern's interest in Irish Protestants, combined with disillusionment over his father's narrow Republicanism,<sup>61</sup> is presumably what made him open to more revisionist views of Irish history in later life, including a willingness to admit the suppressed British aspects of Ireland's past and present.

This revisionist perspective, implicit in 'Oldfashioned', is made utterly explicit in an article that McGahern wrote for the *Irish Times* in 1991 entitled 'From a Glorious Dream to Nod and Wink'.<sup>62</sup> Denis Sampson has astutely related this article to the "'Anglo-Irish" stories' in *The High Ground*, writing that, in both the article and the stories, McGahern 'comment[s] on the Irish Republic's failure to live up to the ideal of openness to "all the people of Ireland" that had been stated in the 1916 Proclamation, and on its lack of respect for individual "rights and freedoms that were whittled away from the nation as a whole in favour of the dominant religion."' <sup>63</sup> McGahern's anger over the marginalisation of Protestants within the new Irish state is also evident in the essay 'Life as It Is and Life as it Ought to Be' (1993), in which he writes that 'the creation of a sectarian state for Catholic people' forced many Irish Protestants to leave the twenty-six counties, with many moving over the border into Northern Ireland, 'where a majority of Protestants were able to create their own equally sectarian state'.<sup>64</sup> McGahern actually alludes to this lamentable migration of Protestants towards the end of 'Oldfashioned', when he makes two seemingly casual – but obviously deliberate – references to 'the North', including one (pointedly) in the very last sentence.<sup>65</sup>

Despite the revisionist tendencies in McGahern's thinking and his positive portrayal of the Anglo-Irish in works like 'Oldfashioned', it must not be assumed that he was prepared to overlook the historical injustices perpetrated by Irish Protestants against his own Irish Catholic forebears. When reviewing Valerie Pakenham's *The Big House in Ireland* (2000), McGahern cannot resist quoting from a letter that Engels wrote to Marx in 1856 regarding the Anglo-Irish gentry:

Their country seats are surrounded by enormous, wonderfully beautiful parks, but all around is wasteland, and where the money is supposed to come from it is impossible to see. These fellows ought to be shot.<sup>66</sup>

Likewise, in another essay, he cites a quote from Tolstoy that has strong implications regarding Irish interfaith relations:

I think of the aged Tolstoy being driven past great Russian estates and asking, ‘Who owns these woods, that river, those fields, that walled estate?’ On being told the names of the landowners, he replied, ‘They don’t own them. God does.’<sup>67</sup>

Ultimately, in his work, McGahern expresses the hope that what he calls Ireland’s ‘two traditions’<sup>68</sup> will draw closer together over time. He hopes that his fellow Irish Catholics will appreciate the contribution of Protestants to the nation’s culture, as he does. As he suggests towards the end of ‘Oldfashioned’, he sees hope in the fact that the healing of old wounds and the increased prosperity of Catholics has meant that no one notices that the mail van is now orange (previously only seen as the colour of Loyalism) and that everyone – Catholic and Protestant alike – leave their cars running on cold days, and it is no longer considered ‘wasteful’<sup>69</sup> or a sign of Anglo-Irish privilege and eccentricity. As I mentioned above, however, McGahern also acknowledges – through the Sergeant’s ability to come between Johnny and the Sinclairs – that tribalistic cultural allegiances and historical grievances may delay or even jeopardise the unity that has been growing slowly in Ireland over time.

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## NOTES

I wish to gratefully acknowledge the support of the Irish Research Council, as well as the Moore Institute at the National University of Ireland, Galway.

<sup>1</sup> For a concise overview of the development of Irish historical revisionism since the 1930s (including an assessment of its positive and negative aspects), see Christine Kinealy, ‘Beyond

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Revisionism: Reassessing the Great Irish Famine’, *History Ireland* 4, no. 3 (Winter 1995): pp. 28-34. Kinealy applauds the revisionists for their attempt to place ‘the study of Irish history ... on a more professional and scientific basis in terms of research methods and source materials’ and for challenging and reassessing ‘received wisdoms or unquestioned assumptions’. However, Kinealy also notes that, ‘although revisionism claims to be objective and value-free (a philosophical impossibility), in reality it has had a covert political agenda. As republican violence intensified, so did the determination of revisionists historians to destroy nationalist interpretations of Irish history. This has sometimes resulted in an equally unbalanced view’ of Irish history.

<sup>2</sup> John McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Stories* (London: Faber & Faber, 2006), p. 240.

<sup>3</sup> McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, pp. 240; 240; 240; 244.

<sup>4</sup> McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, p. 239.

<sup>5</sup> For more on McGahern’s reflections on the Catholic Church in this story, see Eamon Maher, ‘*The Church and its Spire*’: *John McGahern and the Catholic Question* (Dublin: Columba, 2011), pp. 109-112; see also James Whyte, *History, Myth, and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern: Strategies of Transcendence* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2002), p. 99.

<sup>6</sup> McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, p. 245.

<sup>7</sup> McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, p. 245.

<sup>8</sup> McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, pp. 244; 237; 260; 244.

<sup>9</sup> McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, p. 246.

<sup>10</sup> McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, p. 246.

<sup>11</sup> McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, p. 256. For more on McGahern’s contrasting of the Sinclair’s ‘fading world of culture and manners’ with the ‘materialistic and utilitarian view of life’ of the ‘emerging classes of the new [Irish] state’, see Whyte, *History, Myth, and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern*, pp. 54-56, 219-220; see also Denis Sampson, *Outstaring*

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*Nature's Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic UP of America, 1993), pp. 190-197.

<sup>12</sup> McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, p. 256.

<sup>13</sup> See John McGahern, *Love of the World: Essays*, edited by Stanley Van Der Ziel (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), pp. 151, 268, 323.

<sup>14</sup> McGahern, *Love of the World*, p. 24.

<sup>15</sup> McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, p. 255.

<sup>16</sup> McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, p. 255.

<sup>17</sup> McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, p. 241; Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, p. 194.

<sup>18</sup> McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, p. 239.

<sup>19</sup> Intriguingly, Lord Gordon later converted to Judaism – perhaps after realising the error of his sectarian ways.

<sup>20</sup> McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, p. 242.

<sup>21</sup> McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, pp. 250; 250; 251. 'Sassenach' is 'a derogatory name for an English person', derived from the Irish for a Saxon, *sasanach*. (Robert Hendrickson, *World English: From Aloha to Zed* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2001), p. 226; see also Terence Patrick Dolan, *A Dictionary of Hiberno-English: The Irish Use of English* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2004), p. 197.)

<sup>22</sup> McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, p. 252.

<sup>23</sup> McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, p. 252.

<sup>24</sup> See especially John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), p. 171; McGahern, *Love of the World*, pp. 260-261.

<sup>25</sup> McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, p. 238.

<sup>26</sup> Lady Gregory, *Selected Writings*, edited by Lucy McDiarmid and Maureen Waters (London: Penguin, 1995), pp. 316, 317; 318, 319, 320, 325; 313.

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<sup>27</sup> As Belinda McKeown has shown, McGahern also alludes to Gregory in the short story ‘Christmas’ (1970). (See Belinda McKeown, “‘Robins Feeding with the Sparrows’: The Protestant “Big House” in the Fiction of John McGahern’, *Irish University Review* 35, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2005): p. 81.)

<sup>28</sup> McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, p. 239.

<sup>29</sup> Denis Sampson, *Young John McGahern: Becoming a Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), pp. 16-17.

<sup>30</sup> John McGahern, ‘The Solitary Reader’, *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 17, no. 1 (July 1991): p. 22; as quoted in Eamon Maher, *John McGahern: From the Local to the Universal* (Dublin: Liffey, 2003), p. 143.

<sup>31</sup> Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, p. 64; David Malcolm, *Understanding John McGahern* (Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 2007), p. 28.

<sup>32</sup> See especially, Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, pp. 4-5, 9, 64-66, 88, 172, 174, 220, 243, 245-248; Sampson, *Young John McGahern*, pp. 16-17, 68-74, 131, 137.

<sup>33</sup> Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, pp. 5, 55, 66, 115-116, 121, 122, 145, 174, 211, 213, 235-236; McKeown, “‘Robins Feeding with the Sparrows’”, pp. 79, 82-83, 85, 88.

<sup>34</sup> McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, p. 238. Emphasis mine.

<sup>35</sup> W.B. Yeats, *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Volume I: The Poems*, edited by Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1997), p. 107.

<sup>36</sup> McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, p. 252.

<sup>37</sup> Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 55.

<sup>38</sup> Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 16.

<sup>39</sup> W.B. Yeats, ‘A General Introduction for my Work’, in *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 518.

<sup>40</sup> McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, p. 246.

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<sup>41</sup> Arthur Wellesley (Duke of Wellington), *The Speeches of the Duke of Wellington in Parliament, Volume 2*, edited by John Gurwood (London: John Murray, 1854), p. 403.

<sup>42</sup> Wellesley, *The Speeches of the Duke of Wellington in Parliament, Vol. 2*, pp. 168, 181, 395.

<sup>43</sup> Bernard Shaw, Preface to *English Prisons Under Local Government*, by Sidney and Beatrice Webb (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1922), p. xvi. For other reflections by Shaw on Wellington, see, for example, Bernard Shaw, Preface to *John Bull's Other Island* (London: Penguin, 1984), pp. 12-13; Bernard Shaw, Preface to *Saint Joan* (London: Penguin, 1957), pp. 20-21.

<sup>44</sup> McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, p. 259.

<sup>45</sup> Stanley Van Der Ziel, 'McGahern, Austen, and the Aesthetics of Good Manners', *Essays in Criticism* 63, no. 2 (April 2013): p. 205.

<sup>46</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 172. Lord George Gordon is briefly discussed in Burke's polemical masterpiece, which is presumably another reason why McGahern included his name in the list of subjects being studied by the students of Ardcarne. (See Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, pp.179-180; McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, p. 239.)

<sup>47</sup> Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, p. 186; 253.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Whyte, *History, Myth, and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern*, p. 55; Maher, *John McGahern: From the Local to the Universal*, p. 82; McKeown, "'Robins Feeding with the Sparrows'", p. 74.

<sup>49</sup> See David Thomson, *Woodbrook* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1974).

<sup>50</sup> Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, p. 192.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, McGahern, *Memoir*, p. 172; McGahern, *Love of the World*, pp. 88, 416.

<sup>52</sup> The script to *The Rockingham Shoot* can be found among the John McGahern papers, housed in the Hardiman Library at the National University of Ireland, Galway.

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<sup>53</sup> There are numerous parallels between the real-life Moroneys (as described in McGahern's *Memoir*) and the fictional Kirkwoods. The homes of each feature a fine library. Both households include a widower father who is obsessed by beekeeping and a son who is interested in astronomy. The son, in each case, tries to breed pure-bred Cheviots, wins the respect of the local town through his involvement in the FCA (*Fórsa Cosanta Áitiúil*, Irish for 'Local Defense Force'), converts to Catholicism, and is set up with a local Catholic girl who previously worked as a nurse in a big city. The men in both families are mannerly and deemed impractical by the locals, and yet speak in clipped, commanding accents, thanks to the British Army training of their forebears. (See McGahern, *Memoir*, pp. 170-177; McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, pp. 263-300.)

<sup>54</sup> McGahern, *Memoir*, pp. 167-168.

<sup>55</sup> Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, p. 170.

<sup>56</sup> Frank O'Connor, *Collected Stories* (New York: Vintage, 1982), p. 701.

<sup>57</sup> Whyte, *History, Myth, and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern*, pp. 55; 220.

<sup>58</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, *Elizabeth Bowen's Irish Stories* (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1978), p. 56.

<sup>59</sup> The tribute to Yeats is the brief allusion to his late poem, 'Under Ben Bulbin' (1939). Yeats, referencing the decline of the Ascendancy, writes of 'the lords and ladies gay / That were beaten into the clay / Through seven heroic centuries', and Trevor describes the 'once impregnable estates' belonging to the Ascendancy as having 'fallen back to the clay'. (Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 335; William Trevor, *The Hill Bachelors* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 22.) For the story's references to various Irish Protestant patriots, see Trevor, *The Hill Bachelors*, p. 23.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, McGahern, *The Love of the World*, pp. 32-34, 152, 155-157, 226-227.

<sup>61</sup> It should be noted that McGahern's father, despite his fierce Republicanism and anti-Britishness, 'was greatly impressed by Protestants. He considered them superior in every way to the general run of his fellow Catholics, less devious, morally more correct, more honest, better mannered, and much more abstemious.' (McGahern, *Memoir*, p. 171.) This positive perception of Protestants arguably left its mark on McGahern (especially in light of the

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portrayal of the Sinclairs in ‘Oldfashioned’); it may even have contributed to McGahern’s lifelong fascination with the Anglo-Irish.

<sup>62</sup> John McGahern, ‘From a Glorious Dream to Nod and Wink’, *Irish Times*, 3 April 1991.

<sup>63</sup> Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, p. 190. Sampson is quoting from McGahern’s original newspaper article.

<sup>64</sup> McGahern, *Love of the World*, p. 162.

<sup>65</sup> McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, pp. 261, 262.

<sup>66</sup> McGahern, *Love of the World*, p. 417.

<sup>67</sup> McGahern, *Love of the World*, p. 273.

<sup>68</sup> McGahern, *Love of the World*, p. 36. In this quote from the 1991 essay “‘What Are You, Sir?’ Trinity College Dublin’, McGahern makes the common mistake of regarding the Irish Protestant tradition as monolithic. Ulster Scots Presbyterians (numerous on both sides of the border) have a linguistic, political, cultural, and religious tradition that is quite distinct from the Anglo-Irish Anglican one. What’s more, there are other Irish subcultures that often get overlooked in well-meaning discussions of the island’s ‘two traditions’. Marginal groups with their own subcultures include Irish Jews, Irish Travellers, and people from the smaller reformed sects (Methodists, Quakers, Unitarians, Evangelicals, etc.), not to mention the diverse ‘New Irish’ (the people who came to Ireland from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe in significant numbers during the Celtic Tiger). Of course, the Celtic Tiger boom did not occur until four years after McGahern composed this essay.

<sup>69</sup> McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth*, p. 261.