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Author: Stephen Dornan

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Irish and American Frontiers in the Novels of James McHenry

Stephen Dornan

In 1823, James McHenry published a novel entitled *The Wilderness; or Braddock's Times*, set during the expansion of the North American colonies in the mid-eighteenth century.[1] The action of this recondite novel gravitates around the patriotic Irishman and Scots-speaking Ulster Presbyterian, Gilbert Frazier who, along with his wife, is abducted during an Indian raid and carried far into the western wilderness of the continent. The intrepid and stoic Fraziers proceed to build an oasis of order and industry, and to raise their family in harmony with nature and in peace with the indigenous tribes, until they become embroiled in the encroaching colonial conflicts between Britain and France. Frazier's national identity is complex; he favours the British side in the colonial dispute and is also a patriotic Irishman. Furthermore, his identity is explicitly composite as his Irishness is tinctured by his Scottish inheritance which is tangible in his character, religion and dialect. His status as an emigrant and his long sojourn in a wilderness where the European concept of nationality is largely irrelevant further ensures that his national identity defies easy categorisation.

In some senses Frazier's composite identity reflects that of his creator. McHenry was born in Larne, County Antrim, in 1785 and died and was buried in the same town in 1845. But this symmetry belies the numerous geographical frontiers that he crossed during his life. He studied medicine in Glasgow, then practised as a doctor in Belfast for some years. He emigrated to America in 1817 and settled in Philadelphia where an Irish community was already well established.[2] He published most of his literary work there, including all of his novels, although he eventually returned to Ireland in 1842 to serve as the American consul at Londonderry. McHenry was, therefore, an Ulster-born writer with a Presbyterian background, who became an American citizen, and published mostly in America whilst drawing on both Irish and American subject matter.

[1] James McHenry, *The Wilderness; or Braddock's Times. A Tale of the West* (2 vols, Philadelphia, 1823).

[2] For background see Maurice J. Bric, *Ireland, Philadelphia and the Re-invention of America* (Dublin, 2008).

This essay will begin by giving an overview of the limited critical attention that McHenry's work has received and demonstrate that this lack of recognition is largely due to the inability of prevailing paradigms in the study of literature to assimilate his work. The main body of this essay will argue that McHenry's oeuvre problematises national frontiers in two major ways. First, because of the Irish, Scottish and American influences that forged his writing, it sits uneasily within any given national canon; his literary output reflects his transatlantic life and international outlook. Second, in his novels set in Ireland, there is a strong focus on Ulster, which is depicted as being different to the rest of the island. By arguing for the cultural diversity of Ireland, and insisting on the particularity of Ulster, McHenry's work acts as a conscious challenge to essentialist representations of Irish national character and identity in Irish fiction of the early nineteenth century.

I

James McHenry produced a substantial body of work that ranged from poetry, novels and drama to literary criticism and journalism and yet he is largely forgotten. In the nineteenth century he attained a fair degree of popularity on both sides of the Atlantic. His most famous novel, *O'Halloran* (1824), is the story of a young Dublin loyalist called Edward Barrymore, who finds himself amongst radical Ulster Presbyterians during the 1798 rebellion and who falls in love with the granddaughter of O'Halloran, the leader of the insurgents. This novel and McHenry's long poem *The Pleasures of Friendship* (1822) went through numerous editions in America, the British Archipelago and continental Europe.[3] Despite this degree of popularity in the nineteenth century, however, he was and is seldom mentioned in twentieth- and twenty-first century criticism. In a sense McHenry has been unfortunate in ending up on the wrong side of a number of important histories. His republicanism was perhaps unpalatable to the British and Irish establishment and to later potential readerships in Presbyterian Ulster. Equally, his championing of Presbyterianism may have proved irksome to nationalist Irish and Irish-American audiences, who increasingly identified with Catholicism. But the most surprising aspect of his neglect is his marginalisation from studies and surveys of nineteenth-century Irish fiction.

[3] See Rolf Loeber and Magda Loeber, *A Guide to Irish Fiction, 1650–1900* (Dublin, 2006), 824–5.

Critics who do mention McHenry are often quick to point out perceived artistic shortcomings usually pertaining to his reliance on stock novelistic devices;[4] however, such criticism could equally be levelled at much better known Irish and non-Irish novelists of the early nineteenth century. McHenry's neglect is as much to do with difficulties of categorisation as with artistic shortcomings, as his work has tended to fall between national literary traditions. Liam McIlvanney's argument that the neglect of Ulster poet James Orr 'has less to do with purported artistic shortcomings than with the tendency to organise the study of poetry along rigidly national lines' equally applies to McHenry's novels.[5]

The one extended piece of writing on McHenry's work derives from a thesis written in America in the 1930s by Robert Blanc. It is useful on a factual and biographical level, though it is scant on literary analysis and intellectual context. Indeed, Blanc's work also plays down McHenry's importance. He hardly inspires the prospective student of McHenry with enthusiasm as he bestows only the faintest of praise on his subject when he concludes that McHenry 'is not altogether a negligible figure'.[6]

Although McHenry has terse entries in dictionaries and encyclopaedias of Irish writing, his work is generally overlooked by literary historians and critics working on early nineteenth-century Irish fiction.[7] In the 1980s James Cahalan complained of a general critical neglect of Irish fiction writers of the nineteenth century who 'have traditionally been surveyed briefly and compared unfavourably to the great eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English novelists', but despite this a fairly settled canon had already been constructed by nationalist critics.[8] The foundational text in this respect was Thomas Flanagan's *The Irish Novelists, 1800–1850* (1959) which constructs a tradition that originates with Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800), and which includes the work of Sydney Owenson, John and Michael Banim, Gerald Griffin and William Carleton.[9] Subsequent critics have tended largely to accept this delineation. John Cronin's *The Anglo-Irish Novel* (1980) features the

[4] See Charles Fanning, *The Irish Voice in America: Irish-American Fiction from the 1760s to the 1980s* (Lexington, KY, 1990), 46.

[5] Liam McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical: Poetry and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (East Linton, 2002), 228.

[6] Robert E. Blanc, *James McHenry: Playwright and Novelist* (Philadelphia, 1939), 113.

[7] See for example Robert Welch (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (Oxford, 1996), 339.

[8] James M. Cahalan, *The Irish Novel: A Critical History* (Dublin, 1988), 4.

[9] Thomas Flanagan, *The Irish Novelists, 1800–1850* (New York, 1959).

same authors, with the exception of Owenson who he excludes on aesthetic grounds.[10] James Cahalan and Barry Sloan discuss a greater array of novels and broaden the scope of the debate in their respective studies, although the general shape of the canon has remained largely unaltered by their work.[11]

That the predominance of Edgeworth, Owenson, Banim, Griffin and Carleton still has some currency is demonstrated by Kersti Tarien Powell's recent introduction to Irish fiction, which closely replicates Flanagan's construction of the tradition.[12] This narrative of Irish fiction adeptly reflects political developments in Ireland as Catholic voices came increasingly to the fore towards the middle of the nineteenth century culminating in the rise of Daniel O'Connell. It has fundamental problems, however, in terms of accommodating McHenry, as he disrupts the proposed trajectory of the novel from the Ascendancy big houses of Edgeworth and Owenson, through the Catholic middle orders, represented by the Banims and Griffin, to the Irish peasantry represented by William Carleton. McHenry was a strong cultural nationalist, but his Ulster Presbyterian culture sits awkwardly with a narrative that sees Irish society as characterised by struggles between Big House Protestantism and Catholic populism. The category of 'Anglo-Irish' novel is inherently not conducive to McHenry's American, Scoto-Irish novels and indeed by some standards, though certainly not his own, his status as an 'Irish' novelist is questionable because of the transatlantic nature of his work and because of his focus on Presbyterian, Scots-influenced Ulster. Furthermore, his inclusive vision of Ireland clashed with twentieth-century Irish nationalist configurations of Irish identity which tended to be based on ethnicity and inclined towards Catholicism.

So, even though the study of Irish fiction has been revitalised and to a degree reconfigured by a resurgence of interest in the genre of the Irish national tale in recent decades, McHenry's work has remained neglected. Katie Trumpener's influential *Bardic Nationalism* (1997) is a key text, but she mentions McHenry only in a footnote.[13] Again McHenry has been sidelined due to unfavourable critical paradigms. Much of the work of Trumpener, Ina Ferris and others has been informed by post-colonial studies, which tends to construct binaries between Ireland and England, the colonised and the

[10] John Cronin, *The Anglo-Irish Novel,* vol. 1 (Belfast, 1980).

[11] Barry Sloan, *Pioneers of Anglo-Irish Fiction, 1800–1850* (Gerrard's Cross, 1986); Cahalan, *The Irish Novel.*

[12] Kersti Tarien Powell, *Irish Fiction: An Introduction* (London, 2004).

[13] Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton, 1997), 327.

coloniser.[14] The binaries constructed in many national tales between Saxon and Gael, Anglo-Irish Protestant and Milesian Catholic, lend themselves to analysis from a post-colonial perspective. But such paradigms leave little space for the complicating Scottish Presbyterian dimension so prominent in the work of McHenry.

Of the few recent literary critics to acknowledge McHenry, two have been scholars whose work delineates hyphenated or composite traditions. Charles Fanning affords McHenry a pioneering position in the tradition of Irish-American writing as his was 'the first significant body of Irish American fiction by an individual'.[15] Despite this, Fanning is critical of McHenry's artistic shortcomings and is overly zealous in finding instances of Protestant prejudice and Unionist sentiment in his writing. The other major work in which McHenry has featured recently is Frank Ferguson's canon-building anthology of Ulster-Scots writing.[16] McHenry and his Irish novels certainly epitomise and celebrate the intimate historical, cultural, religious and linguistic connections between parts of Ireland and Scotland. The increased attention that such links have received through the rise of Irish and Scottish Studies means that a more sympathetic critical framework now exists for the study of McHenry and writers like him. The general trend towards archipelagic thinking may also provide a space for the work of culturally-hybrid writers such as McHenry who have been caught between the binaries of the prevailing critical paradigms in Irish Studies.[17]

II

We turn now to an examination of those aspects of his work that have proved most problematic in terms of McHenry's inclusion in the Irish literary canon. The first is the extent to which McHenry's novels refuse to fit neatly into a national mould and are instead coloured by a transatlantic political consciousness.

An enthusiasm for politics and an ability to cultivate controversy are tangible in his writings; for example, McHenry enthusiastically participated

[14] Ina Ferris, *The Romantic National Tale and the Question of Ireland* (Cambridge, 2002).

[15] Fanning, *The Irish Voice in America*, 44.

[16] Frank Ferguson (ed.), *Ulster-Scots Writing: An Anthology* (Dublin, 2008), 166–171.

[17] The foundational piece on archipelagic thinking is J.G.A. Pocock, 'British History: A Plea for a New Subject', *Journal of Modern History*, 4 (1975), 601–28. A recent example of literary criticism using this model is John Kerrigan, *Archipelagic English: Literature, History and Politics 1603–1707* (Oxford, 2008).

in inclement literary debates regarding the Lake poets and their American followers, who he regularly lambasted in the pages of his journal, the *American Monthly Magazine*. He also found that his literary endeavours sat uncomfortably with conservative religious authorities within the Presbyterian Church. When his Irish tragedy, *The Usurper*, was performed in Philadelphia in 1827, the kirk session of his local Presbyterian Church reacted angrily, although not atypically for the period. As the minutes of its meetings (unearthed by Robert Blanc) reveal, the church elders took the view that theatre was 'ruinously opposed to Christian Faith, Hope and Charity' and 'an unlawful species of revelling', and concluded that those who countenanced the stage were deserving of 'ecclesiastical censure'. Consequently the session resolved that Dr James McHenry be 'suspended from the Communion of the Church until he give satisfactory evidence of repentance', an outcome that would not have been taken lightly by a man of McHenry's religious convictions.[18] This willingness to challenge authority is reflected in his fiction, which often depicts favourable characters in conflict with unreasonable or tyrannical forces.

His opinions on Ireland were also controversial. McHenry was active in Irish patriotic circles in Philadelphia and his enthusiastic cultural nationalism and political activism would have been regarded with suspicion by the British and Irish establishment had he remained in Ireland. He became involved in a number of groups and committees that engaged with Irish political matters; for example, he was an active member of the Association of Friends of Ireland and served as chairman of a committee set up to arrange celebrations for the achievement of Catholic Emancipation in 1829, on which occasion he wrote a celebratory poem entitled 'The Champion of Erin has Broken her Chains'.[19] In 1827 he had been appointed to another committee, formed to draft a letter of condolence to Thomas Addis Emmett's family after his death. This connection with a former United Irishman was fitting, as his fiction – particularly *O'Halloran* – showed an understanding of the motivations of the insurgents of 1798 and sympathy for their cause. Indeed, back in Ireland this novel was deemed to be so politically sensitive that a dramatisation of it was reportedly suppressed by a magistrate in Belfast 'owing to its local and political interest … and to the fact that some of the characters were still alive and resident in the vicinity.'[20]

[18] Blanc, *James McHenry*, 19–20.
[19] See Blanc, *James McHenry*, 109, 121.
[20] Ibid., 30.

McHenry's political opinions were republican and liberal, and at times radical. Blanc observes that in the 'political retrospect' sections of the *American Monthly Magazine*, McHenry always took 'the liberal side' and was noted for supporting such things as 'the Monroe doctrine, [and] the Greek struggle for independence' while 'attacking monarchism and the holy alliance'.[21] He was keen, therefore, to link political struggles in Ireland with events in America and around the globe. His transatlantic, and at times international, political outlook was reflected in his consistent interest in the theme of governance, and the relationship between those who rule and those who are ruled. These themes recur in his novels set during the American Revolution as well as those set in Ulster, and the similarities between the novels suggest that McHenry was deliberately drawing parallels between the political cultures of the two places.

The American Revolution was clearly a key moment in history for McHenry. His first major novel, *The Wilderness* (1823), features a young George Washington as a character. McHenry uses Washington's journal as an intertext and describes the adventures and frustrations of the future champion of liberty in the wilderness to the west of the American colonies. The young Washington is presented in awed and reverential tones, and at the conclusion of the novel a tangible link is forged between Ulster and revolutionary America when Paddy Frazier – the son of the Ulster Presbyterian frontiersman Gilbert Frazier – becomes Washington's right hand man. In the introduction to one of his later novels, entitled *Meredith* (1831), McHenry invokes the America Revolution with unbounded enthusiasm. In the opening passage, apparently speaking in his own voice, he is transported by his reflections on its achievement:

> The American Revolution !---What a world of glorious ideas are comprehended in that phrase!
>
> The history of nations affords no other great commotion among mankind, so singularly impressive and satisfactory in all respects. It is not the example of successful resistance to arbitrary taxation; it is not the signal defeat given to a powerful and haughty faction, exercising despotic authority, and attempting tyrannical measures; nor is it even the establishment of a pure and equitable system of government in an extensive and flourishing country, that chiefly excites our enthusiasm and challenges admiration … But the American Revolution did more. It

[21] Ibid., 54.

> sent abroad the voice of freedom and of truth; it proclaimed to all men that they were equal---that tyrant and slave were anomalies in nature, inconsistent with the dictates of reason and the ordinances of God.

He concludes that:

> Disenthralled millions have moved in their might, and shaken the foundations of arbitrary rule. A moral earthquake, proceeding from the elements engendered in this country, by the spirit of liberty which animated the patriots of 1776, is in action; and it will not cease until the thrones of despots, together with their authority and their doctrines, be overthrown, and banished for ever from the precincts of emancipated humanity.[22]

In celebrating the American Revolution McHenry intimated that its significance was not merely national, but that it had universal repercussions that were still being played out in the 1820s. The impact of this conflict, according to McHenry, was felt far beyond Britain and America, with the victory for liberty that it represented serving as an inspiration for a universal movement against tyranny and despotism. This American political language of liberty and equality, and the rhetorical defiance of tyranny and despotism, reverberated in the radical political culture of Ulster in the 1790s with which McHenry was familiar.[23]

The issue of oppressive or despotic governance recurs throughout McHenry's work. Collectively his American and Irish novels imply that the American Revolution and the 1798 rebellion in Ireland were comparable reactions to misgovernment. Indeed, his enthusiasm for the ideals of the Irish insurgents is articulated in the preface to *O'Halloran*. Regarding the rising of 1798 and the United Irishmen, McHenry boldly opines that 'had it succeeded, and the designs they had formed for the advantage of their country been realised, what epithets of praise would have been considered too high for their deserts. Their cause would have been called holy, and their efforts glorious'.[24] Throughout *O'Halloran*, McHenry's narrator and characters repeatedly draw

[22] James McHenry, *Meredith; or the Mystery of the Meschianza. A Tale of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia, 1831), 3.

[23] See Kevin Whelan, 'Introduction to Section One' in Thomas Bartlett et al. (eds), *1798: A Bicentenary Perspective* (Dublin, 2003), 11.

[24] James McHenry, *O'Halloran, or The Insurgent Chief. An Irish Historical Tale of 1798* (2 vols, Philadelphia, 1824), I, iii.

attention to the oppressive and unjust measures adopted by the government and the role these played in engendering the 1798 rebellion. They criticise the coercive measures used against the United Irishmen during Lord Camden's viceroyalty from 1795 to 1798, and allude to numerous instances of 'oppression' or 'tyranny'—including the destruction of the *Northern Star* newspaper offices in 1797, the execution of four militia men at Blarismoor in 1797, and the execution of William Orr under the Insurrection Act in 1797.[25]

In the opening chapter of the novel, the hero, Edward Barrymore, who is convalescing after an accident, overhears the elderly couple that are nursing him in conversation. The man, named William Caldwell, tells his wife that he has donated money to a subscription for the benefit of Orr's family, and relates how he was initiated into the United Irish Society at the behest of its leader, O'Halloran. Caldwell responds to his wife's concern about him becoming a United Irishman by telling her how, when O'Halloran mentioned the government's treatment of Orr and the Blarismoor militia men, 'I felt my blood get warm, and I tauld him I would tak' the oath, let what like come o't.'[26] This passage and others like it are designed to demonstrate the extent of popular grievance and the degree to which unjust government can provoke resistance from reasonable and decent people.

This is something that Edward Barrymore, a young ascendancy Dubliner from a powerful loyalist and establishment family, comes to understand over the course of the novel. Early in the narrative his inherent antipathy towards the United Irishmen is problematised by the Recluse, a mysterious character renowned for his wisdom and who is, it later emerges, the heroine's father in disguise. He informs Barrymore of the political turmoil in Ulster and explains that the people have been petitioning the government for several reforms: 'namely, a reform in the representation of the commons, emancipation of the catholics, and a melioration of the tythe system'. He adds that 'these are just and constitutional demands for the people to make; and had the government granted them to the solicitations of the volunteers, we should

[25] Orr was a County Antrim farmer who was accused of administering illegal oaths. His fortitude under these tribulations, and a widely held belief that his trial was corrupt, ensured that his execution aroused popular indignation and was a factor in provoking the Ulster rising of 1798. The cry 'Remember Orr' was used by the insurgents in 1798, and during the rising in Antrim, its leader, Henry Joy McCracken, is reputed to have worn a ring engraved with this slogan. See A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Summer Soldiers: the 1798 Rebellion in Antrim and Down* (Belfast, 1995), 50.

[26] McHenry, *O'Halloran*, I, 22.

never have heard of United Irishmen.'[27] The Recluse goes on to critique the government's response to these demands by pointing out that 'Instead of a redress of grievances being granted, oppression is increased, under the plea of suppressing treason, until numbers have actually been irritated into treason, who would otherwise have remained peaceable and loyal.'[28] In other words, the authorities have exacerbated rather than ameliorated political dissent in Ulster by using legitimate calls for reform as an excuse to curtail existing freedoms. Although McHenry did not explicitly advocate Irish separatism, and although he critiqued the extremism and impetuosity of some of the insurgents, he nevertheless had considerable sympathy for their cause. His attitude seems to chime with that of O'Halloran, his fictionalised leader of the Antrim rising, who reflects that 'it is hard to remain inactive, and see an unoffending populace becoming every day more and more the victims of a wanton and cruel tyranny.'[29]

At the end of the novel McHenry returns to the theme of governance. Recognising the benefits of responsible and clement rule in times of crisis, Edward Barrymore praises the leniency of Lord Cornwallis, Camden's successor as viceroy of Ireland, and summarises the novel's central message on the theme of effective government:

> [H]e was forcibly struck with this proof of conciliation over coercion in securing the tranquillity of a country. Here he saw men whom Camden's oppressive policy had rendered bitter enemies to the government, now, in consequence of Cornwallis's clemency, manifesting by every expression of sincerity, their resolution to live and die its friends and supporters.
>
> 'Ah!' thought he, 'how happy it would be for society, if governments would hearken to the lesson taught by such an example! But pride and passion too often blind them to their own and their people's interests.'[30]

In this passage, a reflection on the government's reaction to a specific political crisis in Ulster assumes a much wider significance and becomes emblematic of the consequences of irresponsible government. McHenry's novel acknowledges that a section of the populace has been guilty of treason,

[27] Ibid., I, 49.
[28] Ibid., I, 50.
[29] Ibid., I, 173.
[30] Ibid., II, 133.

but suggests that this is an understandable response to a government that has broken the contract between rulers and ruled by ignoring 'their people's interests'. As McHenry puts it in his introduction, the events described in *O'Halloran* should persuade the great 'not to be too rigid and harsh with those in subjection to them, but to treat them with kindness and good nature, and leniently overlook their faults.'[31]

In McHenry's other novel set in Ireland, *Hearts of Steel* (1825), similar themes appear.[32] The novel suggests that the establishment encouraged corrupt practices in the distribution of leases during the third quarter of the eighteenth century, and that this was instrumental in fermenting agrarian violence in Ulster. This interest in the relationship between the rulers and the ruled is, in one sense, a universal issue. But in another sense it is symptomatic of the Ulster Presbyterian tradition to which McHenry belonged, which was deeply concerned with issues of governance, the responsibilities of rulers, and the rights of the ruled. An important manifestation of this was Francis Hutcheson's political thought, which espoused a belief in a contractarian model of government and a firm conviction that the people have a right, and indeed a duty, to resist tyranny.[33] Such ideas informed the political culture of America in the 1770s and Ulster in the 1790s, and McHenry's work demonstrates that these issues retained currency for strands of Ulster Presbyterianism into the nineteenth century.

There are several reasons, therefore, why the novels of James McHenry do not fit easily into existing national canons, including the fact that his subject matter oscillates between Irish and American concerns, and his tendency to blur national boundaries by envisaging the struggle for liberty in universal terms. It can be argued, however, that McHenry's interest in universal issues was, paradoxically, typical of a strong regional tradition in Ulster Presbyterianism in the eighteenth century. His belief in the importance of transatlantic and international political forces certainly coexisted with a strong regionalism that undermined concepts of Irish identity that were being promoted in the Irish novels of the vast majority of his contemporaries. It is to the issue of regional identity in McHenry's work that we will now turn.

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[31] Ibid., I, xv.

[32] James McHenry, *The Hearts of Steel: An Irish Historical Tale of the Last Century* (Philadelphia, 1825).

[33] For background on Hutcheson see Michael Brown, *Francis Hutcheson in Dublin 1719–1730* (Dublin, 2002).

III

McHenry's passionate interest in Ulster Presbyterian culture and identity is evident in his novels. The use of Scots dialect is perhaps the most obvious technique that he used to distinguish his work from Irish predecessors and contemporaries. All of the most visible early nineteenth-century Irish fiction writers – Maria Edgeworth, Sydney Owenson, Gerald Griffin, the Banim brothers and William Carleton – overwhelmingly associate the Irish peasantry with a rural, and either southern or supra-regional variety of Hiberno-English. Maria and Richard Lovell Edgeworth remarked in their *Essay on Irish Bulls*, originally published in 1802, that:

> There are but a few variations of the brogue, such as the long and the short, the Thady brogue and Paddy brogue, which differ much in tone, and but little in phraseology; but in England, almost all of our fifty-two counties have peculiar vulgarisms, dialects and brogues, unintelligible to their neighbours.[34]

The implication is that in contrast to their counterparts in England, the Irish lower orders display a degree of linguistic homogeneity. Such attempts to elide difference were obviously anathema to McHenry, whose Scots-speaking characters represent a complicating, if neglected, voice in the Irish novel.

For McHenry, Scots was the linguistic manifestation of the regional specificity of a Presbyterian-dominated Ulster. In an introductory note to *The Wilderness* he insists that Ulster Presbyterians are 'a distinct people from the inhabitants of the other Provinces of the island', while also asserting that, when compared to the Scots, 'their manners, feelings, views of propriety, habits of industry, and their religious rites and opinions, are similar, or differ in only as slight a degree as their dialects'.[35] This impulse to enlighten non-Irish, and particularly American, readers as regards Ulster Presbyterian identity seems to stem from a frustration, articulated in the introduction to *The Wilderness*, that 'any picture of the Irish character, that has yet been given in a work of fancy' has been taken from the inhabitants of the island who are 'chiefly Catholics, accustomed to speak the vernacular language, and

[34] Maria and Richard Lovell Edgeworth, 'Essay on Irish Bulls' in Jane Desmarais, Tim McLoughlin and Marilyn Butler (eds), *The Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth* (12 vols, London, 1999), I, 125.

[35] McHenry, *The Wilderness*, I, ii.

are emphatically called the native Irish'.[36] McHenry's novels therefore resist what he, with some justification, perceived to be an homogenising impulse in the representation of Ireland and the Irish which was designed to elide and occlude regional variation. His assertion of the cultural, religious and linguistic distinctiveness of Ulster was a conscious subversion of this process. Indeed, the 1820s saw the birth of the Ulster novel in the work of McHenry and his equally neglected contemporary John Gamble.[37] Both McHenry and Gamble problematised their readers' expectations regarding Irish national character and identity by depicting Ulster as regionally distinct in terms of religion, culture and dialect. Furthermore, both were interested in the 1798 rebellion in Ulster as an expression of regional, Presbyterian identity.[38]

McHenry's dissatisfaction with literary depictions of Ulster was also expressed in the preface to *O'Halloran*, where he articulated the motivations that led him to write this novel. He claimed that an eccentric, bookish aunt, dissatisfied at existing representations of Ulster and its people, bequeathed him £150 per year on the condition that he write a narrative of the 1798 rising. McHenry describes his aunt as an avid reader of works on Irish history, antiquities and topography, who became irked as 'amidst the multitude of volumes which she had perused on these subjects, she was surprised to find none that gave anything like an accurate account of the people among whom she had spent her whole existence.'[39] He continues:

> she was much chagrined with the carelessness with which even professed travellers through Ireland have uniformly mentioned its northern province. Some, she would say, seem to treat the people of Ulster as altogether beneath their notice; others take delight in making them the objects of misrepresentation and slander; while none manifest for them that sympathy and respect, to which, from their spirit of enterprise and industry, they are assuredly entitled.[40]

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[36] Ibid.

[37] John Gamble (1770–1831) was a travel writer and novelist born in County Tyrone. Much of his writing was aimed at educating British audiences about the distinctiveness of the north of Ireland. See, for example, *Charlton, or, Scenes in the North of Ireland* (London, 1823).

[38] Both McHenry and Gamble distance events in Ulster from the Wexford rising in 1798. Indeed, both intimate that reports of sectarian atrocities from Wexford contributed to the failure of the Ulster rising.

[39] McHenry, *O'Halloran*, I, 13.

[40] Ibid.

McHenry makes his point by attacking Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806). One of Owenson's characters, a priest from the household of a dispossessed Gaelic family, describes Ulster as 'beyond the pale of Milesian hospitality' and a place where 'the *cead-mile falta* of Irish cordiality seldom lends its welcome home to the stranger's heart'.[41] In Owenson's text, the culturally Scots inhabitants of Ulster are depicted as cold and materialistic in contrast to the warmth and hospitality associated with Milesian culture, and her hero eagerly hastens back to Connaught. Although Owenson alludes to the regional specificity of Ulster, she depicts this difference in terms of deterioration from genuine Irish standards caused by the grafting of aspects of Scottish culture onto the Milesian. Indeed, in another of her novels, *O'Donnel* (1814), Owenson again draws unflattering attention to the northern province when she writes in a footnote that 'among the lower orders of the natives of all the other provinces, Ulster is always mentioned slightingly and generally called the "Black North".'[42] Reacting to Owenson's general representation of Ulster, McHenry tartly remarks in his preface to *O'Halloran* that Owenson 'ought not to have been so willfully and unjustly abusive of any portion of her countrymen, even if they did not happen to be descended from Milesian ancestors, and were unable to speak the original language of the country.'[43]

McHenry felt that Owenson was perpetuating a negative stereotype of the dour, inhospitable and cold Presbyterian, and it was precisely this type of representation that he sought to challenge in several of his novels. In *The Wilderness*, for example, Gilbert Frazier welcomes the son of a former acquaintance with great enthusiasm. When the polite and anglified Charles Adderley, who stumbles upon the Fraziers' abode in the wilderness, expresses a disinclination to 'obtrude' on Gilbert's hospitality, the word is seized upon by the zealously hospitable Ulsterman: '"Obtrude sir!" interrupted Gilbert. "Obtrude! I'm no' very muckle learned sir but I think that word means comin to whar yen's no' weelcome … Ye'll no think o' ganging hame this six months, at ony rate. The winter's sae near-han it wadna be possible".'[44] These protestations, articulated in Scots, are intended to illustrate the warmth and cordiality of the Ulsterman, in contrast to Owenson's less favourable characterisation. A similar point is made in *O'Halloran*, when

[41] Sydney Owenson, *The Wild Irish Girl* (Oxford, 1999), 197–8.
[42] Sydney Owenson, *O'Donnel: A National Tale* (London, 1814), 47.
[43] McHenry, *O'Halloran*, I, xii.
[44] McHenry, *The Wilderness*, I, 124.

Edward Barrymore, a Dubliner, comes to acknowledge the generosity of spirit of the northerners.[45]

In *The Wilderness* McHenry further highlights the distinctiveness of the northern Irish by drawing a contrast between the Ulster Presbyterian Gilbert Frazier and the Irish Catholic Peter McFall. Frazier is intrepid, industrious and canny, whereas McFall is courageous, loquacious, hot headed and blundering. Again, these differences are encoded linguistically as Frazier and his wife speak Scots, in contrast to McFall's southern Irish English. Also, McFall's Catholicism is evident through his frequent invocations of saints, whilst Frazier's Presbyterianism manifests itself through his knowledge of biblical stories, particularly those of the Old Testament. These contrasts might suggest Ulster's cultural affinity with Scotland; however, McHenry's Ulster characters are proudly Irish and often fiercely patriotic. The cultural autonomy of Ulster Presbyterians within the larger Irish context does not dilute their patriotism. McHenry instead implies that Irish national identity should not be associated with a particular religion, race or language, nor should it be seen as a binary dialectic between Gaelic and Anglo-Irish cultures. As Trumpener points out, McHenry circumvents the 'tendency to present Ireland as a society polarised between Anglo-Irish interests and Milesian claims'.[46] McHenry's version of Irishness is therefore one in which homogenisation and essentialism is resisted and in which national identity encompasses a variety of cultures and dialects.

Charles Fanning misreads McHenry's argument with Owenson as pertaining to the representation of Protestants generally.[47] McHenry's argument with Owenson is not, however, over the depiction of the Anglican ascendancy; instead, he is referring very specifically to Owenson's representation of Ulster Presbyterians. McHenry saw Irish society not in terms of a binary between Protestant and Catholic, but rather as divided in triangular terms between Anglicans, Roman Catholics and dissenters. He was annoyed at Owenson's wilful exclusion of the dissenting element from the moment of resolution in *The Wild Irish Girl*, in which Anglican ascendancy Ireland is symbolically united and reconciled to ancient Catholic Gaelic Ireland through the marriage of Horatio and Glorvina. The Anglican and Catholic traditions are symbolically reconciled, whilst the Presbyterian tradition is acknowledged by Owenson, but ultimately excluded.

[45] McHenry, *O'Halloran*, II, 267.

[46] Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism*, 327.

[47] Fanning, *The Irish Voice in America*, 47.

McHenry challenges this outcome by manipulating the conventions of the Irish national tale. The hero (sometimes also the narrator) of these tales is normally a stranger, usually an English traveller or Anglo-Irish absentee, whose unfavourable preconceptions concerning Ireland are challenged and exploded through first-hand exposure to the country. In crossing a geographical frontier, the hero begins a journey from ignorance and prejudice to knowledge and sympathy which leads to increased concord. Literary critic Joep Leerssen, for example, comments that:

> In [Sydney Owenson's] *The Wild Irish Girl* the first person narrator and sole focalizer of the story is English; he approaches Ireland as a strange, uncouth country in a direction that takes him from the familiarity of his domestic English background to the increasing exoticism of the West of Ireland.[48]

In McHenry's *O'Halloran*, however, the hero is not an Englishman, nor an absentee. Edward Barrymore is 'a young Dublin gentleman' and member of the Anglican ascendancy, who at the beginning of the novel is touring the coast of Antrim. It is not Ireland, therefore, that is the strange country that must be discovered and understood, but the island's northern fringes. Ulster is thus presented as an internal 'other' for Ireland; an alien space which must be discovered, understood and accepted by the hero. In this way, McHenry subverts the received formula of the genre of the national tale and the binary that it creates between England and Ireland.

Mary Jean Corbett argues that the ultimate aim of the Irish national tale is to use the hero's changing opinions 'to offer English readers an affirmative version of their new partner in Union, the neighboring but distant island about which they had heard so much bad and so little good.'[49] In *O'Halloran*, the Dublin hero comes to a similar appreciation of the Ulster people. In the effusive style that is typical of the genre, Barrymore articulates his new understanding in the following terms:

> How much have I been deceived in the character of these people! Are these the cunning Scotchmen, the bigoted, ignorant, Presbyterians,

[48] Joep Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination: Patterns in the Historical and Literary Representation of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Cork, 1996), 35.

[49] Mary Jean Corbett, *Allegories of Union in Irish and English Writing 1790–1870* (Cambridge, 2000), 55.

> whose study is to cheat, and whose business is to grow rich, that have been said to inhabit Ulster. They deserve a character the very reverse … These people are indeed Scottish in their industry and intelligence; but they are altogether Irish in their manners and feelings. I am in reality proud to call them my countrymen.[50]

Barrymore's ignorance and misconceptions are challenged through his sojourn in the alien space of Ulster. The enthusiastic endorsement of Ulster Presbyterians from the mouth of a member of the Dublin ascendancy acts as a rebuff to Owenson's aspersions. The Ulster Presbyterians in McHenry's fiction are a favourable hybrid of stereotypical Scottish and Irish national traits, displaying Scottish industry and economic competence mixed with Irish warmth and cordiality.

McHenry also reworked another important convention of the Irish national tale: the culminating marriage which acts as a resolution and serves to symbolise unity between England and Ireland. In McHenry's novel, Edward Barrymore, the eldest son of a fiercely loyalist and establishment family, marries Ellen Hamilton, whose grandfather led the United Irish insurgents. This symbolises concord between the recently warring factions of Ireland, with Barrymore representing the Anglo-Irish tradition, whilst Ellen Hamilton's name suggests the Scots influence.[51] However, McHenry has already informed the reader in the opening chapter of the novel that Ellen goes by two surnames due to the influence of her guardian and grandfather, O'Halloran: 'she should be called Miss Hamilton, but her grandfather will let her be called nothing but Miss O'Halloran'.[52] This name evokes an Irish Gaelic dimension and Ellen, therefore, seems to embody a fusion of both Irish Gaelic and Lowland Scottish elements. Thus McHenry manufactures a curiously triangular marriage in contrast to Owenson's binary one.

The marriage motif is central to the resolution of national tales, but can carry overtones of power and subordination. Some critics have argued that the marriage of Horatio and Glorvina in *The Wild Irish Girl* subordinates the Gaelic element, which is feminised through the figure of Glorvina, who is rather passive during the resolution.[53] On the surface, the marriage between

[50] McHenry, *O'Halloran*, II, 267.

[51] The name 'Hamilton' has particular resonance as that family was amongst the first Scots settlers to plant Ulster in the reign of James I/VI.

[52] McHenry, *O'Halloran*, I, 25.

[53] See Corbett's discussion of the marriage in *Allegories of Union in Irish and English Writing*, 61–70.

Edward and Ellen in *O'Halloran*, with its feminisation of the Scottish and Gaelic dimension, similarly seems to indicate that the Scots and Irish element is subordinate. However, the emphasis that McHenry places on the marriage ceremony being conducted 'according to the form observed by the reverend ministers of the Synod of Ulster, being nearly the same as that prescribed by the Church of Scotland' suggests otherwise.[54] Barrymore is subsumed into Ellen Hamilton's religious community. Ulster Presbyterianism is the vehicle for reconciliation within Ireland and becomes central to the symbolic resolution of *O'Halloran*.

IV

As this evidence suggests, the novels of James McHenry challenged the frontiers of Irish fiction when they were published. They complicated the presentation of the religion, culture, language and character of the Irish peasantry in national tales by asserting the regional distinctiveness of Ulster, and by placing Ulster's recent political turmoil in the context of a universal struggle for liberty. In subverting and manipulating the conventions adhered to by most of his contemporaries, McHenry helped to create a distinct Ulster voice within the novel form; a voice which has been consistently overlooked by contemporary literary historians and literary critics working on early nineteenth-century Irish literature. Criticisms of McHenry's artistic shortcomings obfuscate the fact that McHenry's work poses a challenge for an Irish critical tradition that has been dominated by paradigms that are ill-equipped to deal with his work. Certainly his texts, rooted in both America and Ireland, and displaying not only a transatlantic and international political awareness, but also a stubborn Ulster regionalism, call into question the traditional national frontiers constructed in scholarship on nineteenth-century Irish fiction.

University of Aberdeen

[54] McHenry, *O'Halloran*, II, 324.