

Franková, Milada

## The anti-Irish stereotype in Molly Keane's black comedy

*Brno studies in English*. 1998, vol. 24, iss. 1, pp. [129]-140

ISBN 80-210-2013-X

ISSN 1211-1791

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104023>

Access Date: 27. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

MILADA FRANKOVÁ

## THE ANTI-IRISH STEREOTYPE IN MOLLY KEANE'S BLACK COMEDY

Stereotyping nations may be seen as a harmless enough activity and because it seems to have always existed, it tends to be laughed off as such. There are contexts, however, where the seemingly harmless national and less harmless racial stereotypes acquire a different status by being given a certain role to play which betrays a very definite bias.

The bleak comedy of class in Molly Keane's three 1980s novels<sup>1</sup> involves figures of Irish servants who are perceived by their Anglo-Irish employers through the prism of entrenched anti-Irish stereotypes. The servants' different backgrounds at class level are projected into cultural differences in religion, traditional lore, popular superstitions and habits which are felt as alien and associated with racial difference. In the following, an attempt is made to trace the trajectory of anti-Irish stereotyping in English writing and show that in Keane's novels the portrayal of the Irish servant as seen in its stereotypical version through the eyes of the Anglo-Irish gentry may be interpreted in the light of Keane's critical attitude to her upper-class protagonists.<sup>2</sup>

### The Irish stereotype

The process and effects of negative racial stereotyping have been described in studies using the post-colonial mode of enquiry which has brought to light the origin of the black caricature as well as the ways in which it is still reinforced, particularly through media reporting and entertainment in countries where black minorities are represented as a problem. The English-held stereotype of the Irish essentially followed the same pattern; in fact by having a longer history, it

---

<sup>1</sup> *Good Behaviour* (1981), *Time After Time* (1984), *Loving and Giving* (1988).

<sup>2</sup> The class aspects of the novels were discussed in my previous article "Molly Keane's Black Comedy – A Critique of a Class", *Brno Studies in English* 23, 1997, pp. 95–104.

became a prototype for caricaturing other people colonised by the English in later centuries.

Although post-colonial theory has been widely adopted for debating the Irish past and at least some of the present, this approach also has its detractors. Edna Longley rejects the colonial/post-colonial frame where 'strange collusions are taking place: intellectual holiday romances in post-colonial never-never land.'<sup>3</sup> This, in her opinion, is what happens when models of analysis like those elaborated by Fanon or Said are used as 'one-size-fits-all', in this case disregarding the European context and the lack of homogeneity of Irish people. She challenges any resulting idealised 'vision of a pure island Eden', which she finds recycled in Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) or hidden in the 'occluded practises' of David Lloyd's (1993) 'subversives, subalterns and hybridised street-ballads'.<sup>4</sup> Longley is also strongly at odds with Seamus Deane's policy in editing *The Field Day Anthology* (1991), which favours the post-colonial frame of reference, while she believes that 'internal European colonialism might constitute an apter model' for Ireland.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, a great deal about the working of Anglo-Irish relations has been revealed by the colonial parallel and what is more, there is no need to exclude one model of analysis for the benefit of another. As Sabina Sharkey shows in her study of the iconography of rape and its Irish application, the European rhetoric, imagery and actual experience of conquest and submission bear close similarities to, and inextricable ties with what European conquerors later exported to other parts of the world. Sharkey traces the links between textual accounts of rape, feminisation of territory and territorial expansion from Greek mythology to English colonisation in the early modern period

to indicate how within legal, theological, historico-fictional and poetic discourse feminine allegorical figures, and in particular an account of the sexual abduction/violation of such figures, provided the forms through which transitions in the State were communicated, rationalised and occasionally legitimised.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, a negative portrayal of the vanquished, whether in European or extra-European territories, had the same rationalising and legitimising purpose.

The origin of the unflattering picture of the Irish in England goes back to medieval historiography, particularly to Giraldus Cambrensis' twelfth-century texts, which followed in the wake of the Norman invasion of Ireland. His description of the Irish as people of barbarous rites and 'innate fickleness' was still being recounted and added to centuries later. These characteristics also ap-

---

<sup>3</sup> Edna Longley, *The Living Stream. Literature and Revisionism in Ireland*. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books 1994, p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 30, 31.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 30.

<sup>6</sup> Sabina Sharkey, "Ireland and the Iconography of Rape. Colonisation, Constraint and Gender". London: University of North London Press 1994, p. 8.

pear to be a sufficient justification why 'this most unreliable people, whose physical agility is equalled by their unstable temperament, should be subdued.'<sup>7</sup> God's displeasure at their sins is also offered as legitimation of their punishment, although Giraldus does not condemn the Irish beyond improvement: 'when they have been pacified and punishment which fits the crime has been exacted ... let them forthwith enjoy the same protection and respect from us as before, as long as they remain loyal.' Giraldus' view of the Irish, recorded in elegant and witty Latin, later translated into English and published in the Elizabethan era, proved to be an influential text due to its wide currency, thanks to its accessibility and joking though authoritative readability. It set the standard for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writing about Ireland and laid the foundation for constructing a tenacious picture of the Irish identity from outside, defining the Irish as the inferior other. Like Gerald of Wales, Edmund Campion's history of Ireland, written in 1571, describes the Irish as careless and bestial, eaters of raw flesh and blood. Campion also retells Gerald's account of an allegedly old rite of crowning the King of Ulster emphasising its outlandish barbarity. The germ of another important element of the Irish stereotype may be inferred from his description of the office of a tale-teller to be found in the houses of great men 'who bringeth his Lord on sleepe, with tales vaine and frivolous, whe-reunto the number give sooth and credence.'<sup>8</sup> Campion's reference to the large numbers of prostitutes in the country and the glory men high and low derive from consorting with as many of them as possible is meant to testify to Irish immorality.<sup>9</sup> Edmund Spenser's recently much quoted *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596) adds a good many pieces to the jigsaw of the stereotype. His Eudoxus and Irenius, discoursing about Ireland in Spenser's time, always speak about its 'evills', in particular in relation to the laws, customs and religion. According to Irenius, the common law, although working so well in England, does not work in Ireland, because the Irish are 'a people altogether stubborn and untamed'.<sup>10</sup> Their customs are 'offensyve and repugnante to the good government of that realme'<sup>11</sup>, obviously derived from their Scythian origins, which Irenius rates very low: 'for yt is the manner of all barbarous nacions to be verie superstitious and deligent observers of ould Customes and antiquities which they receave by contynewall tradicion, from their parents, by recordinge of their bardes and Cronicles.'<sup>12</sup> Spenser's disparagement of Irish chronicles had one practical consequence – that of a deliberate separation of the two tradi-

---

7 Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1962, p. 102.

8 Edmund Campion, *Two booke of the histories of Ireland*. Assen: Van Gorcum 1963, p. 23.

9 Ibid. p. 25.

10 Edmund Spenser, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*. London: The Scholartis Press, p. 6.

11 Ibid. p. 49.

12 Ibid. p. 78.

tions: the Irish chronicles did not count, they were forged; the authority to rely on had to be from outside. Another unforgivable difference between the English and the Irish in Spenser's time is that 'they are all papistes by their profession, but in the same so blindelie and brutishelie enformed' that all they can do with their faith is to say their prayers in Latin without understanding them.<sup>13</sup> What seems unchristian, even heathenish, to Irenius are 'their lamentacions at their burials, with disparefull outcries, and ymoderate waylinges.'<sup>14</sup>

Cairns and Richards, starting from Foucault's argument that 'acquisition of knowledge within the classical episteme was based upon difference', explain that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries 'writing by Englishmen about Ireland and the Irish may not only have served to broaden English knowledge of the neighbouring island and its inhabitants, but also to define the qualities of "Englishness", by simultaneously defining "not-Englishness" or "otherness".'<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, what the process at the same time firmly established was a negative difference.

In the first half of the seventeenth century Geoffrey Keating was one of those who undertook to counter the negative picture of Ireland and the Irish produced by the English historians: he emphasised the country's long history of learning by listing its numerous books of historical records. He attacks Spenser for 'being ignorant, unless that, on the score of being a poet, he allowed himself licence of invention ... to deceive the reader', and says of Cambrensis that 'he took no interest in investigating the antiquity of Ireland, but that the reason why he set about writing of Ireland is to give false testimony concerning her people during his own time.'<sup>16</sup> But as Keating's history was written in Irish, it did not reach those to whom the defence was addressed.

By the eighteenth century the negative definition of the Irish had become entrenched, augmented by publications of cartoons and anti-Irish jokes. One such collection of 'Irish bulls', the Joe Miller book of 'Teagueland Jestes and Bog Witticisms', published in 1749, blatantly spoke of the 'natural stupidity' of the Irish in the preface.<sup>17</sup> Maria Edgeworth's attempt in *Essays on Irish Bulls* (1802) to expose the false assumptions of the jokes did little to dispel their ubiquity. Moreover, the Irishman had been a popular figure of fun on the stage from Shakespeare onwards, portrayed by English and Anglo-Irish playwrights as lazy, cunning, often drunk, or a braggart.<sup>18</sup> The Irish caricature which emerged would take a more sinister slant whenever political expediency required it. Thus

---

13 Ibid. p. 109.

14 Ibid. p. 72.

15 David Cairns and Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland. Colonialism, nationalism and culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press 1988, p. 2.

16 Geoffrey Keating, *History of Ireland* (1630). London: 1902–13, pp. I, IX.

17 Liz Curtis, *Nothing But the Same Old Story. The Roots of Anti-Irish Racism*. London: Information on Ireland 1984, p. 34.

18 Ibid. p. 35.

the rebellion of the United Irishmen in 1798, savagely crushed by the English, was accompanied in England by cartoons of the Irish depicted as cannibals feasting on human limbs,<sup>19</sup> clearly recycling the earlier descriptions of Irish bestiality. Although by that time the Irish were fighting back by producing drawings of English atrocities in Ireland and by writing well-researched books of Irish history from an Irish point of view, a series of similar cartoons bestialising the Irish appeared during the Great Famine four decades later. It was then, Hazel Waters tells us, that the stereotypes of the Irish, 'girded by economic orthodoxy and justified by Divine Providence – and, with the impact of the Famine, emerged as fully-fledged racism.'<sup>20</sup> With the vicious cartoons in *Punch*, even the potato was racialised: in comparison with bread and meat, it was connected with idleness and barbarism and described as inferior food. The widespread stereotype of Irish inferiority was thus given fresh currency. Once again Irish idleness, fecklessness and irresponsibility was contrasted with English industriousness and superior abilities nurtured by the imperial myth of the English as natural rulers. In political rhetoric the stereotype served as a useful tool to drive the lesson home that the Irish needed the rule of the British and that the Famine had taught them that lesson. According to Waters, the already existing anti-Irish prejudice, now stirred by the media handling of the stereotype, 'crystallised into racial hostility, often with overtones of class and religion, with one or other of these factors becoming dominant at different times or in different circumstances.'<sup>21</sup>

R.F. Foster, too, describes *Punch* as anti-Irish, particularly after the emergence of radical nationalism with Young Ireland in the mid-1840s and during the Famine years, when starving Irish emigrants flooded British cities. But he would not condemn *Punch* for being anti-Irish before or after the mid 19th century although he agrees that from its foundation in 1841 *Punch* added much to the Irish caricature with its Irish jokes. Foster blames W.M. Thackeray for some of it, not only because of his writing for *Punch*, but also on account of the Irish characters in his novels and his opinions about 'middle-class lace-curtain Irishness and the Irish snob.'<sup>22</sup> Foster however disputes the thesis of English racial prejudice against the Irish and claims that it was more class and religion that were targeted and *Punch's* caricature of the various Irish types was in no way different from English caricatures although '*Punch* had, certainly, helped establish the image of the bestial Irish extremist.'<sup>23</sup>

Besides the politically expedient, periodically recurring images of Irish bestiality, the nineteenth century produced another, seemingly counter-image of the

---

19 Ibid. p. 38.

20 Hazel Waters, "The Great Famine and the rise of anti-Irish racism". *Race and Class*. 37. 1, 1995, pp. 95–108, p. 95.

21 Ibid. p. 107.

22 R.F. Foster, *Paddy and Mr. Punch*. London: Allen Lane 1993, p. 172.

23 Ibid. 191.

Celt which soon turned out to add just one more feature to the already existing stereotype – that of emotionality. What the new nineteenth-century histories of Ireland written from within did not achieve in England, Matthew Arnold's *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1866) did. However, he created a Celt whose genius, stemming entirely from his emotions, was also his main shortcoming. Arnold's influential thought not only augmented the stereotypical Irish character with another permanent trait, but it also helped to construct the doctrine of Celticism which shifted the definition of the Irish character one essential step further – from emotionality to emotional instability. This in turn again served political ends, as Cairns points out: 'for the Anglo-Irish, Celticism offered the position of Ireland's resident Teutons, mentors who could safeguard the Celts from the unfettered play of their own nature.'<sup>24</sup>

Not surprisingly, the ubiquitous comic figure of the Irishman found its way from the joke and the cartoon into fiction, both the novel and the short story. In Irish literature at the turn of the century, Somerville and Ross made the differences between the Irish, Anglo-Irish and English the theme of much of their writing. After being accused of a pro-English bias and criticised for portraying the Irish without 'a gleam of their kindness, tenderness and loyalty' in T.P. O'Connor's review of their *The Real Charlotte* (1894),<sup>25</sup> they developed the theme again in *The Silver Fox* (1898), where the Irish, despite their superstitious beliefs being represented as their main racial characteristic, fare much better than the frivolous and insensitive English characters. The Anglo-Irish, typically in between, act their part as go-betweens promoting a harmonious happy ending. In spite of this, Somerville and Ross's portrayal of Irish characters remains controversial, particularly as regards the popular short stories *The Irish R.M.* (1889, 1908), which were written specifically for English middle-class readers and originally published in various magazines. The controversy polarises two views: the Irish are shown as a servant race; fun is poked at everybody equally. Nevertheless, the obvious stumbling block of the two incongruous arguments reasserts itself. We may be laughing more at the Anglo-Irish characters and the English narrator himself, because they are the prominent actors in the funny confusions of the plots, but the comedy based on contrasts between the classes is bound to leave a bitter aftertaste. And although the R.M.'s Irish servants may appear to be colourful individuals rather than types, much of their individuality in fact reverts back to the underlying embedded stereotype of outlandishness.

The English stereotype of the Irish, for several hundred years in the making, has changed surprisingly little in the course of history and is still alive, reinforced by drawing upon oscillation between the media, fiction and reality. As relations between Ireland and Britain have remained close, resulting from the geographical proximity, the fact of Northern Ireland and, not least, the large number of Irish people living in Britain, the stereotype has been nurtured as a handy tool

<sup>24</sup> David Cairns and Shaun Richards, p. 50.

<sup>25</sup> Hilary Robinson, *Somerville and Ross. A Critical Appreciation*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan 1980, p. 119.

of attack in times of friction at whatever level, public or private. A stereotype always entails evaluation. If the evaluation is negative, it serves suitably for political and economic victimisation as well as for boosting the feeling of superiority of the evaluating party.

### The Irish servant figure

National stereotypes tend to be undifferentiated and produce the idea of a nation as a homogeneous whole, or, as Maurice Halbwachs puts it, 'one particular class stands for the whole nation and national feeling finds expression primarily as a form of class feeling.'<sup>26</sup> The English stereotype of the Irish as a lesser race therefore often comes to be projected as a master – servant relationship in which the national/racial and economic aspects remain inextricably interlaced, always to be argued and reassessed. Roger Sawyer's view that in Ireland 'a social revolution was mistaken for a national revolution ... both sides, unionists and separatists, having mistaken a struggle for fundamental human rights for a conflict between races',<sup>27</sup> finds both supporters and contenders. The vantage point of view plays here as crucial a role as ever.

Patrick Raffroidi posits that the Anglo-Irish 'tended to view the natives as figures of comedy or noble savages'.<sup>28</sup> It is to Molly Keane's credit that she does neither. True to the stereotype, her Irish characters are servants and much in their characterisation corresponds to the accustomed image, but despite Keane's comic mode, they are not inherently funny. What is hinted at in her *The Rising Tide* (1937, written under the pseudonym M.J. Farrell), namely that in the exclusive world of shoots, parties and hunt balls the Irish had a special place, namely in funny stories, 'disasters recounted by cooks and grooms having a special vogue',<sup>29</sup> finds no space in the 1980s novels. Although few, the servant figures here assume a real enough presence, unlike the ghost-like shadows in the afore-mentioned novel, where Lady Charlotte's maid Spiller, though constantly indispensable to attend to dressing, carrying trays and hotwater-bottles, never materialises as a character with a body and a mind. On the other hand, considering the narrative perspective of the novel, the 'invisible' servants cannot be denied a certain realism. As Jessica Gerard tells us, 'convention demanded that the upper classes act as if staff attending them did not exist. Servants were depersonalized with uniforms and sometimes by standard names.'<sup>30</sup>

---

26 Maurice Halbwachs, *The Psychology of Social Class*. London: Heinemann 1958, p. 125.

27 Patrick Raffroidi and Maurice Harmon, eds, *The Irish Novel in Our Time*. Publications de l'Université de Lille III, 1975, p. 15.

28 Ibid.

29 Molly Keane (as M.J. Farrell), *The Rising Tide*. London: Collins 1937; Virago 1984, p. 80.

30 Jessica Gerard, *Country House Life*. Oxford: Blackwell 1994, p. 19.



The narrators in Keane's 1980s novels, whether the first person narrator in *Good Behaviour* (1981) or the omniscient ones of *Time After Time* (1983) and *Loving and Giving* (1988), make no pretention at objectivity or insights into the servants' minds. The servants are always represented either through the relationship with the master or, more often, the mistress, or through the eyes of the upper-class characters. The unreliability of the perception and judgement of such figures emerges from Keane's critical attitude to them. Being themselves rather less than pleasant characters and exposed to ridicule, their biased perception of their servants coloured by the ingrained Irish stereotype cannot but be viewed within the same critical frame.

In Aroon's account in *Good Behaviour*, Rose came to service at Temple Alice when she was a very young girl and at the end of the novel, she is still with Aroon and her mother, now an old woman and the only servant in a small household. In retrospect, we are afforded glimpses of Rose's gradual advancement in the staff hierarchy of Temple Alice, hierarchy being a fact which made positions in Big Houses more desirable and led to them being considered the elite sector in domestic service.<sup>31</sup> Although female servants were predominantly life-cycle servants who left service on marriage, Rose, with her marriage chances shattered by the First World War, stayed on with the St Charles family, eventually to come down in the world with them and become a maid-of-all work. However, Rose's devotion goes to the crippled Major and her loyalty to his wife, while with their daughter Aroon there is a clash of wills. For Aroon, besides being a class apart, they are also a race apart and she needs the knowledge of this difference to reassure herself of her superiority. She grants Rose her good looks and her abilities and strength, but this is all the more reason, in addition to Rose's close relationship with Aroon's father, of which she is jealous, why Rose must always be put in her place. Aroon's protests when she discovers that Rose has been giving the paralysed Major whisky can be traced back to the rooted disapproval of Irish drinking habits rather than concern for her father's health. Lurking in the background is the 'corrupting influence' of the Irish on the Old English (i.e. the Anglo-Norman conquerors) discussed by Irenius and Eudoxus in Spenser's *View*. Rose's collapsing 'like a dead frog' and 'her howling and screaming [which] made all the glasses ring out'<sup>32</sup> when she learned that her boyfriend Ollie Reilly had been killed in France seem as alien to Aroon and her mother as the 'ymoderate waylinges' of the Irish at burials seemed outlandish to Spenser's Irenius. It is not merely class difference and class contempt that make Aroon believe that 'they revel in death ... keep the Last Rites going' (p. 7). 'They' must be an altogether different species, with their strange superstitions like opening the window when somebody dies for the spirit to go freely. Usually, the urge to brand the Irish as superstitious appears more significant than the little superstitions themselves. (The servant girl Kate in *Loving and Giving*

---

31 Ibid. p. 141.

32 Molly Keane, *Good Behaviour*. London: Andre Deutsch 1981; Abacus 1982. p. 66.

would not wave people good-bye: 'She knew it was unlucky, to see the last of a leaving.'<sup>33</sup>) Superstitions of this kind and the bad behaviour of crying in public suffice for Aroon to rate Rose as ignorant. Aroon, who never seems to understand much of what goes on around her, has here a constant, albeit illusory, reassurance of her natural right to power.

Religion provides another easy target to fit the stereotype. The Catholicism of the Irish, always at hand, always visible, never fails to provoke Aroon's scorn: the house 'murmuring with prayer' when Mrs. Brock went missing; all the Irish always crossing themselves and praying in 'that loose easy way Roman Catholics do'. It troubles Aroon that Rose 'seems so close to Mummie with that peasant gabbling prayer' (p.6). She observes all this with distaste, as if some outlandish, indecent ritual was taking place.

Similarly, the awareness of religious difference defines the relationship between Christy, the only employee at Durraghglass in the eighties, and his employer Baby June, a kind, once brilliant though illiterate horsewoman (*Time After Time*). Although Baby June's life had been shaped by the world of the stableyard and the friendliness and warmth of the stable lads, the qualities which she failed to find in her family, her utter incomprehension of the religious side to the Catholics' lives maintained the unbridgeable distance between her and them. Now, too, Baby June values Christy Lucey's usefulness and companionship, takes pride in what horsemanship she has taught him, but acknowledges with some unease that 'his unshakeable nerve – due to lack of imagination coupled with unquestioning trust in his favourite saints – was his own.'<sup>34</sup> Christy's frequent prayers (of thanks when the sow delivered safely) and his indisputable departure from the yard at the sound of the Angelus are tolerated but noted with dismay. The stereotype and the reality, only slightly shifted towards the farcical, collude in June's mind to provide a rationale for the disloyalty of Christy's unexpected notice largely in terms of his religious background.

The pervasive presence of the religious gulf between the Catholic Irish and the Protestant Anglo-Irish finds an apt though chilling image in funeral scenes, both in *Good Behaviour* and *Loving and Giving*, but also in Jennifer Johnston's *Fool's Sanctuary*, where Catholic employees and friends wait outside a Protestant church for the service to be over to pay their respects only at the grave. Edna Longley argues that the application of post-colonial theory in the Irish discourse obscures the role which is played in it by religion.<sup>35</sup> As far as the overall conflicting developments in the Anglo-Irish relations are concerned, religion does stand out more prominently than elsewhere in the British colonial past and, what is more, has outlasted colonial structures as an unresolved, complex problem. However, as regards the construction of the Irish stereotype, the religious element does not preclude comparison with the black stereotype, because Ca-

---

33 Molly Keane, *Loving and Giving*. London: Andre Deutsch 1988; Abacus 1989, p. 190.

34 Molly Keane, *Time After Time*. London: Andre Deutsch 1983; Abacus 1984, p. 42.

35 Edna Longley, p. 32.

tholicism within the Irish stereotype appears as alien as paganism or any religious practice other than Protestantism in the black stereotype.

For June's sister May the religious and class prejudice, which she so obviously feels and voices against Christy, takes on a definite racial bias when she approaches 'the untidy encampment of the people she preferred to call tramps and tinkers, avoiding the vulgarly respectable word: itinerant' (p. 234). Her judgement of them amounts to racism: 'thieves and pigs they all are, aren't they? And rich as Croesus ... idle, shiftless lot' (p. 64). When Frank Tuohy criticises Keane for having created at one point 'an unpleasantly racist picture of a Japanese'<sup>36</sup>, he has apparently overlooked the fact that it is again May, whose prejudices and weaknesses are already known to the reader, who says that she does not want 'to be treated by a yellow catamite as though she had come into a pawn shop with a piece of indifferent plate' (p. 219). Moreover, May is no exception among Keane's characters, many of whom are exposed for displaying attitudes of religious and racial intolerance. It is part and parcel of the polarised layout of the social scenery that when Christy is tempted away from Baby June's employment by the prospect of a house with electricity and an indoor lavatory, neither of which he could hope for in the derelict Durraghglass lodge, his defection is viewed not only as ungratefulness, harking back to the days when paternalism was essential to the relationship between the gentry and their employees, but also as fickleness and unreliability going back to an even older stereotype of Irish behaviour.

In *Loving and Giving* the deadly clash between Nicandra and Silly Willie could well be read as a crude allegory of the relations between the Anglo-Irish and the Irish as epitomised in Yeats's line 'Great hatred, little room', or as Foster puts it, 'the collision within a small and intimate island of seemingly irreconcilable cultures, unable to live together or to live apart.'<sup>37</sup> When they were children, little Miss Nicandra was retarded Willie's torturer, making him take off his pants to show her what boys looked like. Or she would taunt him from her freedom outside when he was locked up behind the barred window of the lodge, while Willie's mother turned a blind eye seeing that 'it was only Miss Nicandra having a bit of fun for herself' (p. 32). Years later, when Nicandra returns to the desolate ruin of Deer Forest, she finds Silly Willie, now called William and for a long time the only servant left, fully in charge of the Big House and devotedly looking after Nicandra's Aunt Tossie in her adjacent caravan. On the one hand, Keane's pitiless farce of Willie's newly acquired importance and the solemnity of his performance imitating both Twomey, the former butler, and the late Sir Dermot, links him with Lady Grizel's English nanny when she assumes her 'most fox-hunting voice' (*Good Behaviour*, p. 27) and thus ridicules the lower classes aping their 'betters'. On the other hand, Willie, like Keane's other Irish characters, has feeling, which transcends the stiff considerations of propriety

---

<sup>36</sup> In: Masuru Sekine, ed. *Irish Writers and Society at Large*. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe 1985, p. 206.

<sup>37</sup> R.F. Foster, p. 22.

beyond which her Anglo-Irish protagonists are unable to go. In this respect Keane shows the Irish in her novels to be the kinder race. Nicandra's resolve to move Aunt Tossie from the unseemly comfort of her caravan back to the hardly habitable house and to throw out her beloved, moth-infested stuffed parrot clashes with Willie's equally strong protective sense of justice. His 'Don't do that, that's dirty' (p. 229) transports Nicandra unmistakably back to the shameful torture scene of their childhood, but the words do not manage to convey to her, despite the abandoned veneer of Willie's butler behaviour, the acute feeling behind them and the danger they contain. In Nicandra's eyes, Willie is a caricature and this image blinds her to the hints, which the reader can sense at both factual and metaphorical levels, that theirs is a kind of fratricidal battle. Both of them are blind to the fact that Deer Forest, the Big House which has become their battle ground, is the site of their old childish and class enmity turned into a power struggle over a house which none of them owns.

The clash of the two cultures in Ireland fragmented into religious, national, political, racial and class dichotomies and nurtured by persisting old stereotypes continues to be central to the Irish cultural discourse. It concerns inclusions into and exclusions from the notion of Irishness and what constitutes Irish culture. Where R.F. Foster champions plurality of Irishness and makes a strong plea for inclusive cultural nationalism,<sup>38</sup> Edna Longley calls for the abandoning of the very concept of Irishness.<sup>39</sup> Molly Keane's Anglo-Irish are ambivalent in their conception of Irishness: they feel more English than Irish in relation to the Irish, who they consider alien when it suits them, but more Irish than English when confronted with the English. On the whole Keane rather blends the Anglo-Irish and Irish worlds and the identification of her upper-class protagonists as Irish always means identification with the place, not with the people.

In *States of Mind* (1983),<sup>40</sup> Oliver MacDonagh speaks about the flexibility of the concept of place in the British-Irish relationship and how it changes in dependence on time, politics and the vantage point of the conceptualising voice. The Irish obsession with place has become another feature of the Irish stereotype, and one which could be shared rather than divide. Of Keane's novels, Jasper's dream (*Time After Time*) of a paradise garden which he wants to realise with the help of monks from the nearby monastery on what has remained of Durraghglass land comes closest to the theme. But even Jasper thinks his project somewhat utopian. In the background lurks the difference between the Celtic mythological landscape<sup>41</sup> and the Big House estate peopled by ghosts of only several generations of ancestors<sup>42</sup> with the shadow of forcible land appropriati-

---

38 Ibid. p. 38.

39 Edna Longley, p. 179.

40 Oliver MacDonagh, *States of Mind. A study of Anglo-Irish Conflict 1780-1980*. London: Allen and Unwin 1983, p. 30-3.

41 See e.g. Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations. Selected Prose 1960-1978*. London: Faber 1980, p. 132; or Patrick Raftery, p. 90.

42 This is tellingly depicted by Jennifer Johnston in her novel *Fool's Sanctuary* (1987).

on hanging over them. Thus the 'place' remains a battle ground, a disputed territory rather than a meeting place.

The nexus of such dichotomies seems to reach every nook and cranny of Irish culture. It has been noted that as a result of their unresolvedness, 'the insight into the anguish of disunity' should be accepted as Ireland's contribution to fiction writing.<sup>43</sup> With her detached comic perspective, Molly Keane makes a stab at the Irish experience of national divisions without making an emotional statement. Nevertheless her insight conveys that stereotypes, far from being merely benign means of comedy, generate enmity, perpetuate incomprehension and may easily turn into lethal weapons.

---

43 Norman Vance, *Irish Literature. A Social History*. Oxford: Blackwell 1990, p. 217.