

OPPONENT'S REPORT:

Ph.D DISSERTATION:

Ironic Myths and Broken Images: Reflections of the 1798 Rebellion in Twentieth-Century Irish Fiction and Drama

CANDIDATE: Radvan Markus

This is a very novel and interesting thesis that uses the ideas of Hayden White on the blurring of the border between historiography and fiction to interrogate fictional narratives of the 1798 Rebellion in Ireland. If White nearly reduces historiography to fiction, Radvan Markus balances this relativism with aspects of Paul Ricoeur's ethics, especially in his concern for the victims' side of the story. Markus finds that some of the literary works are in fact more balanced in their treatment of 1788 than the more polemical historiographical works, and he treats of certain devices such as symbols, literary and mythological allusions, and even meta-historical features that can be skilfully used by writers of fiction in their treatment of historical events. The opening chapter sets the scene for what is to follow. **My only comment is that Beverly Southgate's recent publication, *History meets Fiction (2009)*, could have enhanced the discussion.**

Chapter two deals with the 1798 rebellion in historiography from the earlier works of Musgrave, Madden and Kavanagh on to the revisionist and post-revisionist phases. Though this field has been covered by others, its inclusion is necessary here to show much a contested area the 1798 rebellion actually is and to provide a foil for the more balanced treatments of the rising that occur in the literary works that are discussed later in the thesis. The author notes that while the revisionist historians may well have been influenced by the troubles in Northern Ireland, those of the post-revisionist persuasion were writing under the aegis of the Peace Process and the years of the Celtic Tiger. If Whelan can be considered the doyen of the post-revisionist group, his critics were not slow to point his tendency to skirt the atrocities committed by the rebels and his marginalising the distinct contribution of Northern Presbyterians to the Rebellion. Dunne's critique, focusing on the Battle of New Ross, 5 June 1798, and the subsequent massacre of Protestant civilians at Scullabogue, is based on a post-colonial framework and on subaltern studies in particular. Markus finds Dunne's combination of personal and public, past and present, history and literature, highly intriguing, a novel approach that parallels some of the better attempts to treat of the rising in the fictional accounts to be discussed later in the thesis. Furthermore, Dunne's insistence on keeping the 'memory of the dead' and his desire to heal the traumas of the past, brings his approach close to Ricoeur's ethics of history.

I wonder whether Daniel Gahan's *The people's rising: Wexford 1798*, should not have been discussed in this chapter. As the title indicates, it too would fall under the heading of subaltern studies, and it is interesting to note that Gahan's work was praised by one reviewer for showing that it was possible to be empathetic without being partisan. In addition to Gahan, Beiner's work on folkore of the rebellion, though mentioned in

footnote 20 and discussed later in the thesis, could have merited further discussion in this chapter. I also felt that the chapter would have benefited from some discussion of Richard Hayes, *The last invasion of Ireland* (1937), since it is the only full-length treatment of 1798 in Connaught. Given that recent commentators such as Peter Lake, Steve Pincus and Adam Fox have criticised Habermas' concept of public space on the grounds that it is too rigidly confined to printed matter, without taking oral literature and manuscript material into consideration, this is another reason that Hayes' work, though dated, merits discussion.

The next two chapters provide an overview of the best literary works devoted to 1798, one dealing with those works written in the first sixteen years of the last century, the other dealing with works written mainly in the second half of the twentieth century. These two chapters pave the way for the three test pieces that comprise the major part of Markus' thesis. **As regards Irene, the heroine of William Buckley's novel, *Croppies Lie Down* (1903), Markus holds that she can easily be perceived as a female representation of Ireland, 'as her name indicates' (59). Could it not also derive from the Greek word for peace, adding another dimension to her role, despite her tragic death?**

Regarding the novels and plays on 1798 written in recent years, while difficult to classify, Markus notes a certain concentration on the northern dimension of the rising, and in particular on the Presbyterians' role in the dimension. The other discernible trend is the role of Irish language speakers in 1798, a trend that figures in both Irish and English language works .

Chapter five deals with Eoghan Ó Tuairisc's novel *L'Attaque* and it is the most comprehensive analysis of this very challenging work to appear in English. **I was impressed with the way Markus deals with the apparent anachronisms in this novel and would suggest that he consults Róisín Ní Ghairbhí's doctoral thesis on Ó Tuairisc and Hartnett (NUI, Galway) prior to publishing his work—they are both very much on the same wavelength. In a certain sense one could say that this is a meta-linguistic novel in the sense that that the Irish(Gaelic) literary tradition is as much the author as Ó Tuairisc himself. Possibly more attention could be devoted to the final chapter that deals with the rout of the English troops at Castlebar, given that the great diversity of the objects left in their wake on the battlefield anticipates and prophesies the breakup of the British Empire during the twentieth century, thus introducing a meta-literary as well as a meta-linguistic element to the debate. I noted one forgivable Freudian slip on p. 106 where Cooley appears instead of Collooney. (*Leaba dearg* (100 and 172) should be *leaba dhearg*; a principally comic figure (107, six lines from bottom) > principally a comic figure; which are (109, 5 lines from bottom) should read which belong to; critical to the tradition (109, footnote 39) should be critical of the tradition; who (last line p. 112) > whom.)**

Whereas *L'Attaque* only deals with the initial engagement of the 1798 rebellion in Connaught, *The Year of the French*, Markus' next test case covers the whole rebellion. While Ó Tuairisc's narration stems from the Gaelic world-view,

Flanagan works from the English language literary tradition, even though his principal character, Owen McCarthy, is a Gaelic poet. While Ó Tuairisc uses mythical and literary allusions to structure his novel, Flanagan deliberately avoids any such structuring principle. Markus argues that Flanagan's novel simultaneously reflects all the four categories used by Ansgar Günning to categorise the British historical novel: documentary, realistic, revisionist and metahistorical. Though *The Year of the French* would initially seem to be revisionist in that it challenges the established nationalist version of Irish history, Flanagan is far from accepting the British official version of the rebellion. The author's use of multiple narrators not only defies a definitive narrative of the rebellion, but some of these individual narratives are actually destabilised within themselves. This applies particularly to the narratives of Major General Sir Harold Wyndham and Arthur Vincent Broome, the Protestant minister of Killala, two characters whose initial convictions in the superiority of British values are strongly shaken during the course of the rebellion. Flanagan's work thus becomes not only a historical novel about 1798, but also a novel about historians and history itself. If Broome initially saw himself as the Gibbon of Mayo, later on his reflections on Gibbon leads him to conclude that he was little more than a 'sorcerer of language'—a comment that comes close to Hayden White's theory of historiography. Unable to penetrate the world of the Mayo peasants, Broome sadly concludes that human knowledge consists only in 'shards of broken pottery'. Another would-be historian in Flanagan's novel, George Moore, comes to a similar conclusion. Flanagan's novel seems to imply the impossibility of writing history as an organised narrative but as a series of verbal images.

This search for images brings us to the chief character of the novel, the Gaelic poet Owen McCarthy, whose poetic craft is dominated both by his search for the ideal image and his realisation of its limitations. **Given that McCarthy is the principal character in *The Year of the French*, he merits more treatment than that accorded to him by Markus. It strikes me that McCarthy's character in this novel derives from the renowned 18th century Munster poet Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin (1748-84), though the biographical details that have come down to us may owe more to the typical folkloristic construct of 'the' poet than on exact details. (Cf RIA Dictionary of Irish Biography, Vol 7, 955). Ó Súilleabháin's famous *aisling* poems, of course, could provide much scope for anybody wishing to develop the Cathleen Ni Houlihan trope. Indeed if McCarthy's depiction in a work that makes so much good use of alleged 'documentary material' is based more on fancy than fact, then it is Flanagan himself who becomes the real 'sorcerer of language'.**

Markus concludes that Flanagan's novel is profoundly meta-historical novel. But because the author does not simply look at history from a neutral detached viewpoint, but takes on board the personal implications of the events of the rebellion and their subsequent interpretations, Flanagan succeeds in modifying the relative historicism of White's approach with the ethical stance of Ricoeur.

Markus' final test piece is Stewart Parker's drama *Northern Star* (1984). Ostensibly dealing with the last night of Henry Joy McCracken, one of the northern leaders of the United Irishmen, before his execution, Parker was also trying to dramatise the current troubles in Northern Ireland. Indeed, Parker is convinced of the potential of drama to be a catalyst for positive change. Rather than offering a future for Ireland, *Northern Star* can be seen as an exercise in putting the ghosts of the United Irishmen to rest. The word ghost is quite apt indeed in this context, given the important role of ghosts in Parker's play, and Markus makes interesting comparisons and contrasts between Ó Tuairisc and Parker in this regard, in particular concerning the use both authors make of the Cathleen Ni Houlihan trope. This is achieved neither following them blindly nor by forgetting them altogether, but by trying to understand their ambiguous legacy. In this regard Markus approvingly quotes from Parker in another context: *it is survival through comprehension that is healthy, not survival through amnesia*. While the post-revisionists tend to gloss over the atrocities of the past in an effort to forge an inclusive national identity, Markus argues that *Northern Star* can be seen as combining the epistemological relativism of White with the ethical concerns of Ricoeur. Positing a shared trauma of dispossession as the distinctive feature of all kinds of Irishmen and women, Parker's position approaches Ricoeur's theories on the history of victims.

Henry Joy's discussion with his lover Mary Bodle when she accuses him 'of being more in love with that rope than you are with me and the child' (151) provides an interesting contrast with *L'Attaque*, as the whole novel in Irish seems to turn on the irreconcilable opposition between the ideals of the United Irishman and domesticity, between Máirtín Caomhánach's love for Éire/Sadhbh and his young pregnant wife Saidhbhín. I think that this would have merited some comment.

I have certain reservations about the use of the word 'sectarian' throughout this work. Given a situation where government and landownership were in the hands of Protestants, while the dispossessed were Catholic, an uprising against the authorities inevitably pitted Protestants and Catholics against each other. Since there were other motives involved besides the religious element, is the word sectarian not too simplistic a label to categorise the combatants? I hasten to add that this question pertains not only to Radvan Markus, but to many commentators on Ireland's troubled history.

A similar difficulty arises with the word revisionism(t). While every historian by nature of his or her profession should constantly be prepared to revise his/her views in the light of new evidence, there has been an unhealthy development in recent Irish historiographical writings in which certain commentators tend to take an unseemly glee in deconstructing a simplistic nationalistic versions of contested events. It seems to me that Mr Markus is well aware of this tendency and is quite balanced in his discussion.

I endorse Radavan Markus' conclusion that 'while it probably would not be wise to study historical fiction and drama for verifying historical facts, to look

into literary works for valuable interpretations of history is more than legitimate, provided that the basic facts have been established.' It all depends what the basic facts are. Cf A. J. Youngson's work, *The Prince and the Pretender: a Study in the Writing of History* (1985) and the 1996 edition *The Prince and the Pretender: Two Views of the '45*.

In conclusion, I have not the least hesitation in recommending that this dissertation proceeds to the defence.

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