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Charles Kickham: current critical attitudes

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Unfortunately for his admirers, Charles Kickham's literary reputation is currently at a low ebb. The status of *Knocknagow* is now a long way from the appreciation which, for example, caused 34 impressions of the book to be issued between 1879 and my own copy of 1962. The Irish-American critic Thomas Flanagan is perhaps unique in offering a favourable appraisal of the novel, referring to it as "the representative and also the most popular Irish novel of the later nineteenth century".

He goes on to describe it as "a gentle and almost interminable book, sentimental, garrulous and clumsily written" which, he says, "lives through its rambling, meticulous accumulation of detail". "Its popularity", he states, was owed "to the fullness with which it served one of the primary functions of fiction: it offered readers a recognisable if idealised image of their own country". "Kickham", he concludes, "combined his Fenian beliefs with an intense social conservatism and a deep religious piety; the combination allowed him to work out the terms of the nineteenth century Irish pastoral, quiet in manner, bucolic and sweet-tempered".¹

Other critics regarded as sympathetic to Irish nationalism have been a good deal harsher in their criticisms of *Knocknagow*. Seamus Deane, for example, refers to Kickham's "debased fiction" and says that *Knocknagow* is "very much out of keeping" with the political conditions of 1878. However, Deane's citation of 1878 as the date on which the novel's action is set is hardly likely to create confidence in his judgement. After all, *Knocknagow* was published in 1873 and in its first popular edition in 1879. Undaunted, however, Deane refers to the plot of the novel as being "so ramshackle as to be beyond summary... The combination of political anger and kitsch sentiment is characteristic of Kickham and of the novel".³

Terry Eagleton, currently the Wharton Professor of English at Oxford, refers, without offering either evidence or argument, to several of "the leading IRB luminaries" as "bigoted, puritanical and loftily remote from social struggles". "Kickham", he says, "did not consider landlordism an evil in itself, denounced the Land League as communistic and, like some of the Young Irelanders, looked for support to a paternalistic upper class. His anxieties about the Land League, a movement which betrayed the labourers and small tenants to the interests of the graziers and strong farmers, were farcically unfounded".⁴

Not all of these arguments are without foundation. Seamus Deane's further claim that *Knocknagow* is a reworking of Gerald Griffin's 1829 novel *The Collegians*⁵ is exaggerated but does have some basis in fact, and anyone who has read both novels will, for example, note the obvious derivation of Barney Wattletoes from the two servants in *The Collegians*, Lowry Looby and Danny Mann. What, however, has caused most confusion in the assessment of Kickham's literary achievements is the assumption that every utterance by a character in *Knocknagow* represents Kickham's own point of view, which is not to deny that a view of politics (and of the land question in particular) can be extrapolated from the novel's text.

A reading of the novel will show that, far from being a single authorial voice, it is a multivalent work. In my view, one of the novel's most interesting characters is Phil Lahy, a relentless reader of political newspapers, who has become a predecessor of Arthur Griffith in advocating native industry in a protectionist economy – hardly the bucolic conservatism with

which, we are told, the novel is suffused: “ ‘Ireland will never do any good till we have trade and manufacturers of our own’, observed Phil Lahy... ‘but the people are too much given to farming. A beggarly shy farmer, that’s stuck in the mud from mornin’ to night... waitin’ till his honour condescended to talk to him – that beggar would despise the tradesman an’ look down on him... an’ the big farmer will make doctors and attorneys of his son, instead of setting ‘em up in business’ ”.

Similarly, the common belief that the novel uncritically celebrates the life of the Catholic tenant farmer is hardly likely to survive a close reading of the account given of Ned Brophy’s wedding. This, for all its music and dancing, is a tragedy dictated by the victory of farmer greed over love and natural instinct, and the bride’s father declares with apparent pride that “I gave my daughter to Ned Brophy because he had a good lase”. Ned is in a black mood throughout, because “he had an ould gra for Nancy Hogan”, but she is too poor for him to marry.

The central character of the novel is not Mat the Thresher or any of the Kearneys or Mr Lowe, the exotic outsider, but rather the community of Knocknagow as it stands largely oblivious to its imminent disintegration. The word “community”, now much abused, had a specific resonance in Kickham’s day, particularly in the developing field of sociology, and it is interesting to note the extent to which he shared his understanding of community with contemporary thinking on the subject.

In this sociological discourse a sharp distinction was drawn between the term “society” and the term “community”. Society was large-scale and urban and resolved its difficulties by resort to law and the police. Community, by contrast, was local, small-scale and intimate and resolved its conflicts fact to face, eyeball to eyeball. Within a community trades passed from parent to child, and social and class relationships were inherited and unquestioned. Community was at once caring and repressive and it sanctioned or reprimanded individuals in the light of its own norms. As within the individual mind, conflict was unavoidable but modes of resolution were always available. Gossip and news were what bound the community, creating bonds, intimacy and collusion.

This sociological concept of community and the community of *Knocknagow* seem to me to be in parallel, and Terry Eagleton’s insinuation of bigotry seems to me to be out of line with the evidence of the text of *Knocknagow*. In *Knocknagow* the abiding insecurity of the community derives from the absence of leases, and Maurice Kearney’s “favourite theory” about the land question being resolved by “good Catholics” becoming landlords is proven to be baseless when the Catholic landlord, Mr. Cummins, emerges as the precise equivalent of his class peers.

If Kickham did not advocate the extermination of landlordism it was because of the vision which pervades *Knocknagow* of Ireland as one nation, consisting of all the people who choose to live there. The historian Paul Bew has argued that Parnell as leader of the Land League was seeking not the abolition of landlordism but a role for the landlord class in a Home Rule Ireland, and the text of *Knocknagow*, for all Kickham’s opposition to Parnellism, seems to entertain a similar position.⁶ Thus Wat Murphy says to Colonel French, who has lost an arm while on British army service and now returns to “find a stranger in your father’s halls”... “An’ his property sould for one-sixth of the value. The divil’s care to the landlords. An Irish Parliament wouldn’t thrate ‘em that way. And still they’re agin their country”.

Disraeli in his 1845 novel *Sybil* or *The Two Nations* had drawn attention to the existence side by side of the great wealth of Charles Egremont and the poverty exemplified by the novel’s heroine, Sybil, the daughter of a Chartist leader, with whom Charles Egremont is in love. Disraeli’s argument is for one nation rather than this two-nation Britain of wealth and poverty

in sharp relief. What Disraeli offers is a vision of community over society, of community and its values subduing the perceived evils of society. It seems to me that Kickham in *Knocknagow* offers essentially the same vision but translated into Irish terms, with the landlords, large tenants, labourers and tradesmen and their families co-existing in community – community, that is, as understood in Kickham’s own day.

Accordingly, I would argue that, while those who have pointed to George Eliot and Charles Dickens as exemplary precedents for Kickham are correct, a more profound comparison than is possible with these can be made between Kickham and Disraeli, and specifically between *Sybil* and *Knocknagow*. Thus England’s greatest conservative and Ireland’s great conservative Fenian stand each in the shadow of the other, both as novelists and as politicians.

FOOTNOTES

1. Flanagan, Thomas, ‘Literature in English. 1801-1891’, in Vaughan, W. ed., *A New History of Ireland*. vol. 5, (Oxford, 1985), p. 510.
2. Deane Seamus., *A Short History of Irish Literature*, (London, 1986), p. 103.
3. Deane,Seamus, ‘Knocknagow’ in Deane,S. ed.,*The Field Day Anthology*. vol 2, p. 248.
4. Eagleton, Terry, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (London, 1995), p. 290.
5. Deane S., *A Short History*, p. 103.
6. Bew, Paul, *Charles Stewart Parnell* (Dublin, 1980), pp 123-4.

(First delivered at the Kickham Country Weekend, August 1997. – Editor, THJ.)

