

Doing good and being bad in Victorian Ireland: some literary and evolutionary perspectives

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SOME CULTURAL ORIGINS OF PHILANTHROPY

The Ireland of the Victorian English and Anglo-Irish novel bears unsurprising traces of the Ireland of previous literature, be that fiction or the literature of colonial exploration and survey, commercial advertisement and 'civilizing' mission. These two broad kinds of literature, fictional and nonfictional, were not always distinct. To interest prospective undertakers, developers and investors, Ireland was cried up to the edge of romance, in order to peddle beauty and abundance of woodland and wildlife (an exploitable abundance, of course). Like the New World, Ireland through Elizabethan and Jacobean eyes was often depicted as pristine and inviting. At the same time, and from the opposing perspective, its dense, tory-sheltering forests and 'infamous' bogs could also suggest a Nature sullied and unregenerate, like the native inhabitants themselves.¹ Against these natives, stern measures must be taken if this fallen and wasted, even if bountiful, land were to be redeemed, reclaimed and radically improved in obedience to a biblical as well as colonial imperative. Happily for the English, the 'civilizing' mission (an oblique and harsh philanthropy of a kind) was at the same time profitable, with forests felled for shipbuilding, minerals sought, land cleared for English elbow room.

As familiar natural resources were depleted, or ways of exploiting them grew ineffectual, new natural resources or new methods of exploitation of the familiar were sought. Over time, the colonial Irish economic structure grew complex enough to sustain an examination of how priorities should be rearranged. To the English, however, it must have seemed from the beginning that all was not right with Ireland or the Irish. All of these – the evident natural resources, methods of accessing, developing and utilizing them, negotiating the unease in this sometimes unsafe land, and to which can be added military considerations – were the motivations behind the innumerable modern surveys and reports that in part were descendants of such

¹ William King (later archbishop of Dublin) called Irish bogs 'infamous' and equated them with barbarity: 'Of the bogs and loughs of Ireland', *Philosophical transactions* (1685). I discuss early English readings of the Irish and Irish landscape in 'Encountering traditions' in J.W. Foster and Helen Chesney (eds), *Nature in Ireland: a scientific and cultural history* (Dublin, 1997), pp 25–30.

colonial texts as Spenser's *A view of the present state of Ireland* (1596) and Sir John Davies' *A discovery of the true causes why Ireland was never entirely subdued* (1612). But in part, the surveys and reports were reflections of a new source of concern: how to remedy or at least improve rather than how merely to exploit, and how to advocate or teach improvement on the basis of information gathered in the field in a more comprehensive way than hitherto, the itinerary being one obvious form of comprehensiveness. I am thinking of such notable works as Arthur Young's *A tour in Ireland: with general observations on the present state of that kingdom* (1780) and Henry Inglis' *Ireland in 1834: a journey throughout Ireland* (1835) in which the investigator replaces the explorer or planter, suggestion supplants recrimination, warning or polemic, and practicality (an oblique but more benign philanthropy) supplants moralism.

Of course, apparently clear-eyed (if not truly scientific) surveys could falter and relapse when the Irish themselves are in vision, when the surveyor yields to impatience, contempt or Irish-directed misanthropy. From the beginning, the *difference* of the Irish (a difference of inferiority) was deplored, a difference in custom and appearance sometimes recorded as so sharp as to cause the natives to seem bizarre, terrible, otherworldly. (To this I will return.) While the difference was often held to be endemic and chronic (a matter for anthropology or even zoology even before the words were coined), at times the circumstances of poverty, starvation and ill-health were seen as causing an estranging transformation in the people. I am thinking of the native Irish Spenser saw in post-war Munster and described as 'anatomies of death', and the descriptions of Dublin's appalling daily poverty in Richard Head's novel, *The English rogue described in the life of Meriton Latroon* (1665), which are Swiftian before the fact of Swift's own early eighteenth-century magnifying glass held up to the disfigurement caused by disease.

But the difference, albeit on fewer occasions, could also be celebrated. Sir Philip Sidney was enviously approving in his *Apology for poetry* (1595) of the high Irish regard for the poet. (The literary appreciation of the Irish by the English has remained as a thin but important countervailing strand in Anglo-Irish cultural relations.) Then, to enlarge the canvas, there was the early nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish novelists' rosier perception of select (or wholly imagined) Irish as embodiments of ancient Gaelic culture in fictions which at once promoted a romantic and distinctive Irishness and the desirability of English-Irish understanding, even union (indeed, an undeclared political union, some contemporary literary critics would say), pre-enacted in the romantic marriages between the English visitor and the Irish native, or between the native Irish and the Anglo-Irish. *The wild Irish girl* (1806) by Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan), the subtitle of which gave a subgenre its name, the 'National Tale', is in some respects the fictionalized or narrativized version of those contemporary and often print-illustrated books of travel to Irish picturesque places in the later eighteenth century and after. The wilder and more natively Irish those places were the better, in which the picturesque, even sublime, landscape (always improved by ancient Irish ruins) induced a more favourable impression of the Irish (at least of the ancient Irish) whereas the dark forests and bogs had cast grim shadows

over their fugitive or impoverished inhabitants from the perspective of the Elizabethan and Jacobean Pale.

The pervading pro-Irish benevolence of the National Tales seems to me to be almost a literary form of passive philanthropy. And I see it too in the National Tales' diverse progeny: popular romances that are also problem novels, the chief problem being English-Irish relations (later, the decline of the Big House). These progeny survived through the nineteenth century and into the first few decades of the twentieth, and they were mostly from the pens of women novelists. They offered a reading of Anglo-Irish relations that was its own kind of relief from hostile English perceptions. (Presumably a survey of English reviews of the novels could measure the success of these relief efforts carried out in the realm of the literary imagination.) Relief in its more literal sense of benign practical intervention in the real world was often an acute necessity in Ireland, and often thwarted. In Inglis' experience, for example in Kilkenny, relief was often resisted by middle-men in control of the land. As for the landlords themselves, only resident landlords who practised philanthropy would cure the malady of absenteeism, he claimed.² But some of the biggest landlords themselves opposed philanthropic projects. In Callan, a town of between 4,000 and 5,000, 1,000 were without regular employment, 600 or 700 were destitute, upwards of 200 were mendicants. 'An attempt was made by some philanthropic persons to have the common enclosed and cultivated, which would have given some employment', Inglis tells us, 'but the project was unsuccessful. The great resisted it ...'³

And some eminent social philosophers, too, resisted the recommendation of organized relief at the expense of the state. Having found 1,800 starving inhabitants in Mitchelstown, a town of around 5,000 people, as well as 1,200 unemployed, and in one side of one street 570 people requiring relief, Inglis sniffs: 'I should like to know how Dr Chalmers' "*sympathies*" would have permanently provided for the six hundred aged and infirm'.⁴ This is an unexplained reference to the influential Thomas Chalmers, Scottish mathematician and leader of the Free Church of Scotland, who, Robert M. Young tells us, saw his life's work as the unification of religious doctrine and laissez-faire economic theory. 'Since at least 1808 he had been arguing in particular against state charity on Malthusian grounds.'⁵ As an idea and a philosophy, relief was for some an alternative to, and for others a makeshift precursor of, serious practical improvement and reform of the kinds advocated or implied by Young, Inglis, Thomas Carlyle (who sprinted round Ireland in July 1849) through other investigators until, much later, Young's namesake, Filson Young (Antrim-born

² Henry Inglis, *Ireland in 1834: a journey throughout Ireland* (London, 1835), vol. 1, pp 84-5.

³ *Ibid.*, pp 98-100. Inglis angrily held Lord Clifden and Lord Dysart to account. He generalizes: 'As a body, the landlords of Ireland have not been towards their tenantry what they ought to have been ... the condition of the Irish poor is immeasurably worse than that of the West India slave', pp 101-2. ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 143. ⁵ Robert M. Young, *Darwin's metaphor: nature's place in Victorian culture* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 33. See also Thomas Chalmers, Wikipedia entry.

and London-domiciled) in his book, *Ireland at the cross roads*, the product of a two-months' tour in 1903.

One problem for the improvers and reformers was that their prescriptions often involved them in an attack, from English or Protestant perspectives, on indigenous Irish institutions and customs that aroused the hostility and resistance of the Irish themselves. Moreover, reform (be it in agriculture, technology, economics or politics) was often too late, inadequate or non-existent when it was needed. It could not prevent a fatal collective resignation in the case of the Great Famine, or rebellion (or at least agitation) in the case of the land issue in the late nineteenth century, or revolution in the case of Easter 1916. During these failures, the mechanisms of relief were either started up or, if they were already in function, were diverted to the calamity at hand. Amidst the criminal dereliction of authority during the Famine, relief *was* given to the Famine sufferers but not enough to prevent scenes of human misery that Edmund Spenser, Richard Head and Jonathan Swift would have been at home in describing. Nor did relief rock the edifice. I assume (and it *is* only an untested assumption) that the catastrophe of the Great Famine provided an impetus to the culture of philanthropy that was already in place and which, as well as providing delivery systems of relief, also provided (since it *was* a culture) a way of seeing and representing Ireland, not only in fact (in reports and statistics), but also in Irish imaginative literature, particularly novels.

A CASE FOR PHILANTHROPY

After all, to the charitably inclined, and as soon as the charitably inclined appeared, Ireland was a clear and present case for both improvised and schematic philanthropy. Certainly after 1838, when the Irish poor law was introduced (the first national system of poor relief on the island),⁶ the state (or its local subsets) was a philanthropist of sorts, but before that the churches were in the business of benefaction. (I use the word 'business' to suggest the seriousness of the clerical agenda that included attempts at the retrieval of backsliders and the conversion of those beyond the faith.) One early Victorian example among many can suffice: Sean Farrell has recently shown the breadth of philanthropic endeavour in south and west Belfast between 1833 and 1852 by one Anglican church facing foursquare the challenges mounted by the almost pituitary growth of an industrial city – the acute problems of poverty, drunkenness, domestic violence, homelessness and illiteracy amidst overcrowding –

⁶ Olwen Purdue, "A den of drunkenness, immorality and vice": public representation of the workhouse and the poor in late nineteenth-century Belfast', a paper delivered to the Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University Belfast, 22 Feb. 2010. The novelist Thackeray in 1842 reported that the Irish poor law report identified 1,200,000 Irish as having no means of livelihood but charity 'and whom the State, or individual members of it, must maintain. How *can* the State support such an enormous burden?', William Makepeace Thackeray, *An Irish sketch-book* (1843; London, 1857), p. 40.

and doing so through the information gathered in its own census of its huge parochial hinterland. Christ Church in Durham Street brought charity of various kinds to working-class families; it provided loans and alms to the needy, it engaged in home missions (Farrell refers to a 'visitation culture'), and created outreach centres for the poor, including 'prayer houses' and Sunday schools, all adding up to what another historian (Mark Smith) calls a 'pragmatic evangelicalism'.⁷ This is a reminder that philanthropy could and can take many forms, including donating, organizing relief in hard times, employing, fund-raising, financially assisting, founding trusts and charitable schemes, ministering materially or spiritually.

The intensely religious, Kilkenny-born novelist Deborah Alcock, author of, among other historical fictions, *The Spanish brothers* (1870), *Crushed yet conquering* (1894) and *By far Euphrates* (1897), the daughter of a Church of Ireland curate, claimed that 'the early Evangelicals were the pioneers of all the great philanthropic movements of the nineteenth century, and we in Ireland were not far behind them ...'⁸ The late Victorian period was indeed characterized by a plethora of charitable projects in Britain and Ireland, carried out at home and abroad. Indeed, a wealthy and exasperated rack-renting landlord in London's East End tells the heroine of the Cork novelist L.T. Meade's slum novel, *A princess of the gutter* (1896), that 'The craze for colleges for women, and all that sort of nonsense, is just as objectionable as the philanthropic craze of the age'.⁹

As well as the state and the churches, the universities had philanthropic urges and they established so-called 'Settlements' among the poor (there was one in Belfast), both denominational and non-denominational. There were also voluntary philanthropic associations, such as the Charity Organization Society, all displaying a variety of approaches and philosophies. And there was even scope for charity as private enterprise, as the heroine of *A princess of the gutter* demonstrates. According to one of the tireless Victorian philanthropic organizers in the United Kingdom, Baroness Burdett-Coutts, the English manor-house was, after the Napoleonic wars, the original source of organized philanthropy.¹⁰ (She disagrees, therefore, with Alcock.) In Ireland, obviously, the Big House was a different animal, yet the Irish country house could be, fitfully, a hub with radiating spokes of concern and bred some women, at least, who often engaged in what we would call outreach work. (Lady Gregory was one of these before she met Yeats and became involved in the Irish literary revival.)¹¹

7 Sean Farrell, 'The sectarian dilemma: Christ Church and the making of Sandy Row', paper presented to the Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University, Belfast, 1 Mar. 2010. Farrell quotes Mark Smith on evangelicalism. 8 Elisabeth Boyd Bayly, *The author of 'The Spanish brothers' (Deborah Alcock): her life and works* (London, [1914]), p. 41. Martyrdom (the ultimate form of philanthropy) is Alcock's chief fictional theme. 9 L.T. Meade, *A princess of the gutter* (New York, 1896), p. 162. A lawyer in May Crommelin's novel, *A woman-derelict*, is sure that 'the philanthropic craze shows a mind slightly off its balance': *A woman-derelict* (London, 1901), p. 43. 10 Baroness Angela Burdett-Coutts (ed.), *Woman's mission: a series of congress papers on the philanthropic work of women by eminent writers* (London, 1893), p. xv. 11 Lady Gregory is praised by Mrs John T. Gilbert (see below) as an improver of the red

'Women' is the operative word. Victorian benefactors were as often women as men, indeed probably *more* often, perhaps because intelligent and energetic women, being through custom or law barred from the professions, found in organized charity an outlet for their energy and organizational ability.¹² Burdett-Coutts claimed in 1893 that 'The beautiful word "Philanthropy"' combines piety and charity and that 'women have always had a full, perhaps an unrecognized, share in maintaining and continuing works of mercy'.¹³ The claim was made in her Introduction to *Woman's mission: a series of congress papers on the philanthropic work of women by eminent writers* (1893) which has an epigraph by Mrs Cecil Alexander, celebrated hymnist, wife of the archbishop of Armagh and mother of Eleanor Alexander the Irish novelist. One Congress paper is 'On philanthropic work of women in Ireland' by Mrs John T. Gilbert, later Lady Gilbert. The author can serve to remind us of the overarching non-sectarian philosophy of philanthropy in Ireland (even if the delivery was often denominational) and the extent to which novelists (particularly women novelists) were either involved as citizens in it and/or wrote novels with philanthropic themes. Lady Gilbert, for example, was also Rosa Mulholland, an upper-middle-class Catholic from Belfast whose novels are often set among the poor, including *Father Tim*, a 1910 novel whose quite graphic depictions of Dublin slum life off Cuffe Street predate those in James Stephens' *The charwoman's daughter* (1912), the slum scenes in which were once thought to be ground-breaking.

Mulholland as Lady Gilbert moved in upper-class philanthropic circles in Dublin in which her friend and co-religionist, the novelist and poet, Katharine Tynan, also moved. Mulholland wrote the fascinating memoir which prefaces the *Essays* (1896) of the formidable Dubliner, Sarah Atkinson (1823–93), the Catholic philanthropist, critic, historian, traveller and translator who supervised the Children's Hospital in Upper Temple Street, managed the Sodality of the Children of Mary in Gardiner Street and patronized the Hospice for the Dying, as well as being active in social science, including the Social Science Congress in Dublin in 1861, championing the Catholic Truth Society, and writing a biography of the foundress of the Irish Sisters of Charity, Mary Aikenhead.¹⁴

flannel made by the local people in her Galway neighbourhood. **12** One woman who perhaps embodies the truth of my speculation is Lady Pirrie, wife of Lord Pirrie, the eminent Belfast shipbuilder (Chairman of Harland & Wolff and begetter of *Titanic* and other giant liners) who carried out effective charitable work in Belfast (including the financing through donation and fund-raising of the Royal Victoria Hospital at the end of the nineteenth century) and then, when her husband died in 1924, became president of Harland & Wolff in what seems not to have been an honorary position since it was well-known that she had assisted Lord Pirrie as a shipbuilder in a very practical and knowledgeable way. See Herbert Jefferson, *Viscount Pirrie of Belfast* (Belfast, [1947]), pp 84–97. **13** Burdett-Coutts, Introduction to *Woman's mission*, p. xx. **14** I discuss Atkinson, Mulholland, Alcock and Meade in *Irish novels, 1890–1940: new bearings in culture and fiction* (Oxford, 2008). Atkinson and Aikenhead are huge figures in the landscape of nineteenth-century Irish philanthropy. They are joined by Vere Foster (1819–1900), philanthropist and educator (a reminder that education had its philanthropic impulses and patterns); he had a special interest in assisting

Mulholland herself was hardly idle, publishing forty-three volumes of novels and stories.¹⁵ The image of Dublin in *Father Tim* is one that would tax both the charity-worker and the 'problem-novelist': among the social ills the novel diagnoses are illegitimacy, emigration (and the plight of exploited Irish workers abroad, especially in Brazil), suicide, wife-beating, unwise financial speculation, poverty, unhealthy living conditions, the decline in marriage, and, of course, the 'drink plague' (on which Mulholland is enlightened). Mulholland's solutions to these terrible problems that she has taken pains to recite are *piety* and *ministration*. The philanthropist will do what she can, going down among the destitute with spiritual and material provisions (though never apportioning blame to the government, the Church, or the Big House, and rarely betraying anger) but while she does, the Irish poor should embrace their poverty and pain as evidence of their spiritual superiority and wealth. In a sermon, the activist priest Father Tim tells his flock that 'it might be God's special loving intention to keep Ireland always poor',¹⁶ and there is no textual reason to believe Rosa Mulholland thought differently. It is a reminder that this kind of organized philanthropy could be an underlying conservative instinct and top-down programme that supported the status quo and tacitly opposed serious systemic reform. For example, the poverty in the County Cork of the 1880s in Mulholland's novel *Norah of Waterford* (1915) is the fault of gombeenism (the polar opposite of philanthropy) and perhaps of 'The Organization' (the Land League or the National League in disguise), but not of the government, nor of the gentry bar the latter's asking rent that is a little too high.

Still, it would be a mistake to underestimate the kind of women Father Tim calls for to work in the slums: intensely pious but vigorous, independent, 'not bound by the rules of the convent' (nuns were apparently displacing lay women in charitable institutions), witness to the daily struggle for existence, demonstrating organizational power and energetic adaptability and initiative – yet withal, accepting of an incorrigible Church-orchestrated social containment. A similar case for what was then called 'slumming' is made in the novel, *Her Irish heritage* (1917), by Annie M.P. Smithson (like Atkinson, a convert to Rome), in which an English cousin of the heroine is initiated into Irish culture, including destitution in the Coombe neighbourhood of Dublin. The victims of this neighbourhood serve to impress the visitor with their patience and piety and whose Catholic faith is depicted as one of the three

female emigration to the United States. There are convenient summaries of Foster's large and diverse achievements by Desmond McCabe (*Dictionary of Irish biography*) and Peter Gray (*Oxford dictionary of national biography*), both available online. ¹⁵ A literature on Irish women's philanthropy of the nineteenth century has recently sprung up, which includes Alison Jordan's *Who cared? Charity in Victorian and Edwardian Belfast* (Belfast, 1992), Maria Luddy's *Women and philanthropy in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Cambridge, 1995) and Margaret Preston's *Charitable words: women, philanthropy and the language of charity in nineteenth-century Dublin* (Westport CT, 2004). My own modest contribution (in *Irish novels, 1890–1940*, *passim*), has been to show the role of philanthropy in late Victorian and Edwardian novels written by Irish women. ¹⁶ Rosa Mulholland, *Father Tim* (London, 1910), p. 160.

pillars of Irish nationhood, the others being Gaelicism and republicanism. The dynamic is an interesting one, whereby the novelist, on behalf of the poor, makes poverty (and indeed, its companion, philanthropy) a fourth pillar, making a virtue out of what was seen as a necessity (not a remediable ill) and one that the novelist (or philanthropist) could accede to in some virtual or vicarious way. Incidentally, the young Catholic historian Mary Hayden also 'slummed' in the Coombe and in her diary mentions the various societies that took part in this philanthropic enterprise.¹⁷

Novels like this, written as late as the second decade of the twentieth century, differed rarely *qua* novels from those of the 1880s and 1890s. Perhaps a little more open-endedness can be found in the novels of Protestant Irish women novelists than in Catholic women novelists. For both, philanthropy provides setting, certain kinds of characters and a framing philosophy, but it may be that the marginally more sceptical intelligence at work in the novels by Protestant women creates the illusion that philanthropy is constructive, even reformist.¹⁸ Also, Protestant women were more likely to set their novels in London than their Catholic fellow-writers. In the event, this serves to suggest certain differences between English and Irish societies at the levels of poverty and its attempted schematic alleviation (though the philanthropic culture clearly straddled the Irish Sea), yet also reminds us that London-set novels by Irish writers are contributions to the English as well as Irish novel: they include Ella MacMahon's *A pitiful passion* (1895, known in the United States as *A pitiless passion*), Mrs J.H. (Charlotte) Riddell's *A rich man's daughter* (1895), L.T. Meade's *A princess of the gutter* (1896), May Crommelin's *A woman-derelect* (1901), W.M. (Winifred) Letts' *The rough way* (1912). The novels by MacMahon, Meade and Letts are portrayals of Anglo-Catholicism, a problem-faith at the time, suspended between Catholicism and Protestantism; MacMahon was another convert to Rome. And in *The rough way* it is the Anglo-Catholic hero, not heroine, who is the slum-worker.

But what most of these share with the Catholic novels is a linkage between this kind of philanthropy and femininity, Christian piety, and self-sacrifice. Elinor Grey, the young middle-class amnesiac of Crommelin's title, for example, has become a vagrant or derelect, quite literally losing (or mislaying) herself, and after being taken in by a kindly doctor, she devotes herself through philanthropy to 'a life of renunci-

17 Conan Kennedy (ed.), *The diaries of Mary Hayden, 1878–1903* (Killala, Mayo, 2005), vol. 4, p. 2045; vol. 5, pp 2116, 2120, 2150, 2151, 2155, 2197. 18 As it often was when the goal of the philanthropy was improvement. Helen O'Connell has shown that nineteenth-century 'improvement' tracts and pamphlets fed into fiction proper and encouraged didacticism (Carleton's novels were influenced by them) while the novels in turn (for example, those of Maria Edgeworth) influenced the tracts and pamphlets and encouraged narrative and dialogue; some of these tracts composed what O'Connell calls 'fiction of improvement'. ('Improvement', she notes, emerged as schemes of agricultural reform.) This fiction-tract interaction mirrors that between fiction and exploration-survey-commercial advertisement that I mentioned earlier. See Helen O'Connell, 'Fiction of improvement' in Jacqueline Belanger (ed.), *The Irish novel in the nineteenth century: facts and fictions* (Dublin, 2005), pp 110–22.

ation and unselfishness', denying herself the sexual and romantic desire she briefly feels for her rescuer: she congratulates herself that she had 'truly forgotten Self for the sake of others'.¹⁹ In selflessness she paradoxically finds her true self.

There were women writers, of course, who demurred, qualified or bridled. Alcock was a powerhouse of active self-sacrifice but despised self-pity; she made self-sacrifice sound like the most muscular activity imaginable. May Crommelin was aware of the faddish element of charitable work, while a social worker in Smithson's *Her Irish heritage* asks the English visitor: 'Well! Are *you* suffering from the slumming craze too? . . . it's becoming so fashionable just now amongst the "quality" that really we poor workers may soon have to take a back seat'.²⁰ This was a token demurrer, but Sarah Grand's opposition to the priority of female philanthropy was the real thing. 'I see that the world is not a bit the better for centuries of self-sacrifice on the woman's part', says a character in Grand's novel, *The heavenly twins* (1893), 'and therefore I think it is time we tried a more effectual plan. And I propose now to sacrifice the man instead of the woman'.²¹ In Grand (born in Donaghadee, County Down), we have the aggressive instincts of the reformer and campaigner, not philanthropist.

In using the novel as her vehicle, Grand was confirming what the idealist philosopher T.H. Green had said in his valuable paper of 1862, *An estimate of the value and influence of works of fiction in modern times*: the novel, though inferior to epic and poetry by giving us only the real world, avoiding idealized passion and sentimentalizing the life around us, nonetheless by finding its material everywhere and discouraging us from seeing ourselves and our experiences as central, allows the novelist to be 'a great expander of sympathies', thereby aiding social reform. 'From Defoe to Kingsley [the novel's] history boasts of a noble army of social reformers'.²² We might wish, of course, to distinguish the over-sentimentalizing philanthropic Irish novel from the angrier reformist novel, but in Green's terms self-demotion in the cause of idealism could take reformist or philanthropic shape.

In Dubliner Ella MacMahon's novel about alcoholism, *A pitiless passion*, an elderly aristocratic lady complains that 'The world has gone crazy over this altruism, or whatever you call it . . . this mad, mawkish sentimentality over the happiness of *others*'. She finds tiresome 'Sensible persons who seem to feel it their duty to place their own good sense at the service of others' foolishness'.²³ Lady Halliday is holding the word 'altruism' at arm's length as though with tongs. According to Thomas Dixon, the word was coined as late as 1852 and the coinage seems to have stimulated even more philanthropic activity than there had been before it. Dixon defines altruism trebly as

19 Crommelin, *A woman-derelict*, pp 251, 187. 20 Annie M.P. Smithson, *Her Irish heritage* (1917; Cork, 1988), p. 63. 21 Madame Sarah Grand, *The heavenly twins* (New York, 1893), p. 80. 22 T.H. Green, *An estimate of the value and influence of works of fiction in modern times*, ed. Fred Newton Scott (Ann Arbor, 1911), pp 61–2. This book is available online at Project Gutenberg. 23 Ella MacMahon, *A pitiless passion* (New York, 1895), pp 316, 317. By 1917, H.G. Wells could observe that "'Philanthropist", like "respectable person", is, in English, a mere term of abuse. It implies a petting condescension . . .', letter to the *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 May 1917.

instinct or emotion; as action; and as doctrine or ideology; it was a kind of humanist religiosity inside or outside the churches. It was not until the 1890s that the word was fully accepted (though reluctantly by Lady Halliday) and according to Dixon the previous decade, the 1880s, was a pivotal one in Victorian moral thought, when a 'new wave of awareness of the plight of the urban poor was expressed in a range of both practical and intellectual activities'.²⁴ These activities included writing novels and it may be no coincidence that a case, I think, can be made for the emergence, in a critical mass, of the mainstream and popular Irish novel, dominated by women authors, in the 1880s and 1890s.

EVOLUTION AND PHILANTHROPY

Philanthropy in all its guises would seem to have flown in the face, implicitly or explicitly, of the other great contemporary idea that challenged Victorian moral thought: organic evolution with its seemingly core, and morally neutral, components (and as seen as natural) of struggle, competition, supersession or extinction (with the organism's striving to adapt the only alternative to the latter two). While this is true, Dixon reminds us that altruism in action was compatible with Darwinism, that sympathy, love and cooperation were observable in nature, and that both Darwin and Herbert Spencer foresaw greater altruism among human beings.²⁵ Recently, the zoologist Matt Ridley has analysed in *The origins of virtue* (1996) the extent to which altruism, as effect rather than motivation, is a genetic and instinctual matter.²⁶ Clearly, in any case, philanthropy could have complicated human motivations, and apparent altruism might even have been in some cases disguised egotism. (Ridley uncovers the depth of the complexity.) The earnestness of philanthropists came in for some guying. That peculiar Belfast novelist, Herbert Moore Pim, has a character in his novel, *The pessimist: a confession* (1914) observe in Wildean fashion that 'Charity covers a multitude of sins! That's what makes philanthropists so contented as a class'.²⁷ I have already mentioned the possibility that philanthropic activists might have been seeking vicarious thrills; there might have been an element of the prurient and the self-

²⁴ Thomas Dixon, *The invention of altruism: making moral meanings in Victorian Britain* (Oxford, 2008), p. 8. ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7 and chapters 4 and 5. See also A.J. Lustig, 'Darwin's difficulties', *Cambridge companion to the 'Origin of species'* (Cambridge, 2009), pp 126–8. It is doubtful, however, that sociality, cooperation and sympathy were seen in late Victorian times as important Darwinian ideas. ²⁶ A recent study by Oren Harman, *The price of altruism: George Price and the search for the origins of kindness* (New York and London, 2010), recounts twentieth-century attempts by biologists and game theorists to square Darwinism with altruism, in part through the mechanisms of kin selection and intra-individual cooperation. In other words, Victorian philanthropy, often seen as sentimental and unscientific in motive and approach (Oscar Wilde saw it as such), can now be re-evaluated without the entirety of our previous condescension. ²⁷ Herbert Moore Pim, *The pessimist: a confession* (London, 1914), p. 212.

servicing. Seth Koven goes farther and sees slumming in Victorian London as sexual and class politics. One of his case-studies is L.T. Meade's *A princess of the gutter* whose heroine seeks 'happiness in self-denial' (p. 110) but whom Koven sees as following lesbian urges among poor but vital East End women.²⁸

I would question Koven's sexual interpretation of certain scenes in Meade's novel but accept his thesis that there was sometimes a sexual dimension to slumming to which we could attach socio-biological meanings. Certainly it seems that the most practical philanthropist, the slum-worker, could be responding to personal circumstances through what the behaviourist calls displacement. Mrs J.H. (Charlotte) Riddell (from Co. Antrim) depicted poverty, drunkenness and wife-beating in London's East End in *A rich man's daughter* (1895) but does so without real sympathy for the poor or a sense that a remedy must be advocated. Her heroine rejects one young man's overtures, telling him she wishes to become a 'Sister of Charity'. A worldly baron, when told of this, remarks: 'she is in love with somebody else. That is always the meaning of the Sister of Charity business'.²⁹ In her short story, 'A Friend of Little Sisters', in *Cousins and others* (1909), Katharine Tynan shows the tangled motives of her heroine, daughter of a peer, when offered the competing attractions of marriage, romantic love, the Little Sister convent in London's East End, and the Carmelite order of nuns.

It remains the case, however, that Irish poverty, like London's, could be seen quite deliberately in socio-biological terms, and we might hazard a guess that the author who did so was more likely to be a man. A colloquial anthropological vocabulary (in which certain peoples were 'savages' or 'primitives' and a colloquial zoological vocabulary (in which certain peoples resembled animals) were ready at hand. Swift used such language satirically but with such intensity that satire doesn't always redeem it. Early English travellers reached uncharitably for animal metaphors when describing the Irish. Edward Ward thought in his *A trip to Ireland* (1699) that the natives were 'lively Portraits of the Prodigal Lad in his most Swinish Condition'. They bred prolifically in part to keep together for warmth: 'they engender as thick as *Fly-blows*, each little *Hutt* being as full of *Children*, as a *Conney-Burrough* in a well-stock'd *Warren* is of *Rabbits*'. Of Irish women: '*Amorous* they are as *Doves*, but not altogether so chaste as *Turtles*'; 'meer *Scare-Crows*' whose '*Physiognomies*' are 'a refrigeratory against the flames of *Lust*', and so on.³⁰

When recreating a scene in Galway as late as 1841, J.A. Froude noted 'the rags insufficient to cover the children and boys of twelve running about absolutely naked ... The inhabitants, except where they had been taken in hand and metamorphosed into police, seemed more like tribes of squalid apes than human beings'.³¹ In his

²⁸ Seth Koven, *Slumming: sexual and social politics in Victorian London* (Princeton, 2004), pp 219, 295. ²⁹ *A rich man's daughter* (New York, 1895), p. 161. ³⁰ Edward Ward, *A trip to Ireland* (1699) in *five travel scripts commonly attributed to Edward Ward* (New York, 1933). Howard William Troyer in his Bibliographic Note does not believe Ward was the author of this travel script. ³¹ James Anthony Froude, *The English in Ireland in the eighteenth century* (1872-4), quoted (from Froude's biographer, Waldo Hilary Dunn) in A.N. Wilson, *The*

Reminiscences of my Irish journey in 1849, Carlyle draws time and again on a simple reflex anthropology and zoology. Even when embarking on his Thames steamer he notes 'Canaille of various kinds, Irish by look' and before long has identified 'five or six type-physiognomies' (Ward's word before him) of the Irish rabble, while before his tour is over he has imagined a nightmarish 'black howling Babel of superstitious savagery'. Scarecrow figures haunt Glendalough (this metaphor that Ward used before him is repeated often by Carlyle), and Youghal has a 'semi-savage population'. A swarm of beggars are like 'ravenous dogs round carrion'. One woman is a squirrel; a shopkeeper is 'ferrety'; an elderly traveller is 'horse-faced'; Isaac Butt displays a visible animalism: his 'big bison-head, black' is 'not quite unbrutal'.³² Carlyle didn't want to go to Ireland but felt obliged because he reckoned Ireland was 'the breaking point of the huge suppuration which all British and all European society now is' (p. v). He was also sleep-deprived during most of this travels which might explain some of, but of course not all of, his impatience and irritation with much of what he saw and who he met (Gavan Duffy was his fitful guide). He visited workhouses; the Killarney workhouse with 3,000 inmates he saw as a 'human swinery' (p. 133; the metaphor is extended on pp 191, 202, 211); in the Westport Union, with *thirty-thousand* paupers (the workhouse constructed to hold only three or four thousand), is reached 'the acme of human swinery' (p. 201). He is losing faith in philanthropy; 'Can it be a *charity* to keep men alive on these terms?' (p. 202) Yet Carlyle objected to the brutalism of the workhouses. One subsidiary workhouse had 'continents' of young women waiting to be fed when he arrived and his reaction is disgust not just with the scene but with the system and to some extent, of course, with the Irish as the human occasions for disgust. (But he had little time for the 'shamlords', as he called them.)

After Darwin, and despite the emergence of the term 'altruism' and its compatibility with evolutionism, epithets from these counter-philanthropic vocabularies suggested that certain peoples were unevolved and thus inferior in a way seemingly ratified by science; such peoples might be undeserving of charitable relief and methods of improvement because incorrigible. In 1860 (one year after publication of *The origin of species*), Charles Kingsley, the English naturalist and writer, stayed at Markree Castle, County Sligo, and having in a letter home complimented the castle and loveliness of its grounds, confessed:

Victorians (London, 2003), p. 79. ³² Thomas Carlyle, *Reminiscences of my Irish journey in 1849* (London, 1882), pp 3, 16, 160, 72, 111, 130, 73, 181, 68, 54. Froude provided a Preface to this edition. The instincts of Carlyle and Froude were hardly philanthropic; rather they derived culturally from a harsh (judgmental) Christianity and a (proto) Darwinianism that could lapse into misanthropy. Thackeray was not quite of their group. But it must be remembered that the exasperation or even despair caused by enormity and the apparently insoluble can sometimes translate itself into misanthropy as a self-protective psychological device.

But I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country. I don't believe they are our fault. I believe here are not only many more of them than of old, but that they are happier, better, more comfortably fed and lodged under our rule than they ever were. But to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours.³³

It is hard to believe from that passage but Kingsley was not ill-disposed towards the Irish and probably assumed he was being almost scientifically neutral with his references to apes, not as explicit metaphor but as something close to literalism. To this extent, I think his white chimpanzees are to be distinguished from the simian Irish of the later *Punch* caricatures during the agrarian 'outrages' and from the earlier Irish who were believed, like the Scythians, to turn into wolves once a year, a belief Spenser's character Ireenius recalls in *A view of the present state of Ireland* and that William Camden thought was a disease called 'lycanthropia'.³⁴

A view of animal and human life that saw the struggle for existence and survival of the fittest, and witnessed (or remembered) catastrophes such as the Great Famine, and calamities such as failed rebellions, was one that had to have influenced drama and novels. The widely promulgated ideas of Darwin's bulldogs, evolutionists T.H. Huxley and County Carlow-born John Tyndall, and of H.G. Wells in his fiction and nonfiction, helped create a mentality that affected imaginative writers. At the far edge of this mentality (yet hugely popular) were, for example, Oscar Wilde's *The picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). These novels depict a darker dimension of evolution: monstrosity and degeneration in human nature. Both are drenched in contemporary race-consciousness and fascinated by pathology and by the roles of heredity and environment. Lord Henry Wotton first hears Dorian Gray's name at his Aunt Agatha's house in London when she wishes Dorian to help her in her charitable efforts in the East End. Lord Henry is cynical about the kind of empathetic philanthropy fictionalized by the women novelists and preaches instead a new hedonism and a new individualism; he discourages the attempt to improve the hopeless failure and finds 'something terribly morbid in the modern sympathy with pain'.³⁵ Philanthropy is a useless attempt to interfere with scientific laws (he means Darwinism) and so it is for the scientist, not the philanthropist, to solve the problems of the East End.³⁶

The premise of the struggle for existence is one shared by Wilde and Stoker with the fiction of philanthropy but in the latter, relief and assuagement through fellow-feeling and charitable provision are sufficient if the human objects of charity retain their spirituality. In the absence of the spiritual compensation, the evolutionary

33 Charles Kingsley: *his letters and memories of his life*, ed. Mrs Kingsley (London, 1877), vol. 2, p. 107. Kingsley stayed with Froude on his visit to Ireland in the summer of 1860.

34 See my chapter, 'Encountering traditions' in *Nature in Ireland*, p. 26. **35** Oscar Wilde, *The picture of Dorian Gray* (London, 1985), pp 36, 46, 64. **36** *Ibid.*, p. 65.

perspective could encourage a laissez-faire approach to social ills which could contemplate individuals and groups going under, perhaps in hopes of the better human qualities among the survivors being inherited. Or it could encourage scientifically-based interventions, of the kind socialists of the time considered – perhaps even root-and-branch reform that would alleviate and then eradicate poverty and inequality. Lord Henry implies the former yet gestures, as Wilde (the author of *The soul of man under socialism*) did too, towards the latter. Meanwhile, Lord Henry's concern for himself was the mirror-image of the disguised self-gratification of the philanthropic who when doing good *felt* good. Perhaps the poor can afford only self-denial, but for the rest of us, Lord Henry says, self-development is the goal, 'to realize one's nature perfectly'.³⁷ When Dorian does descend into the social abyss of the East End, it is as a drug-addict, a degenerate habitué. He is slumming for ill, not for good. Dorian ends badly, of course, which seems to throw doubt on Lord Henry's anti-philanthropy, but Dorian's end does not validate the Aunt Agathas of the world. Wilde's Darwinism – which he learned as a student at Oxford – remains pervasive and enduring and he is able to derive individuality, self-realization and creative imagination from its principles, not only in *The picture of Dorian Gray* but throughout his works, notably including 'The critic as artist'.³⁸

Like *The picture of Dorian Gray*, *Dracula* takes the base material (the settings, the characters, the social exchanges) of philanthropic fiction and turns human degeneration into something truly horrifying and all but intractable, with its origins in poisonous heredity that long predates industrialization and urbanization. The Count's pursuer, Van Helsing, is convinced that the medieval Dracula Voivode and the present Count Dracula are one and the same creature. Here the ancientness of aristocracy, whose seat, Castle Dracula, is the ultimate, degenerated Big House, is terrifying rather than reassuring, and it inverts the venerable *noblesse oblige* that sometimes could inspire philanthropy. Dracula *takes*, indeed *sucks and drains*, rather than gives. He is a selfishness so pure he casts no reflection: he is almost abstract. Yet in a perverted way he *does* give: he offers the promise, even the guarantee, of life beyond the grave, of a quasi-immortality. He even loves in his own terrible way. Philanthropy often professed to draw its inspiration from Christ, and Dracula for his part is a perverse or reverse Christ, drinking the blood of others instead of shedding his blood for others, though it still remains a blood transaction.

Dracula's horror is deepened by the guise of the English gentleman he assumes, the better to infiltrate and poison British society. He resembles outwardly those who went among the poor, not as social workers but as those socially slumming, dispensing relief and assurance. Yet he is, underneath, bestial, just as under the civilized surface of the city (Dublin or London) lay the abyss, the underclass, the so-called submerged tenth who posed an insuperable problem for philanthropy. In another

37 Ibid., p. 41. 38 See my article, 'Against nature? Science and Oscar Wilde', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 63 (1993/4), 328–46, reprinted in John Wilson Foster, *Between shadows: modern Irish writing and culture* (Dublin, 2009).

sense, Dracula swings between the cultivated and the animal, according to the sun and moon indeed, by turns embodying the retrogression and progression of evolutionary movement. In doing so, he resembles his near contemporaries, Robert Louis Stevenson's Dr Jekyll, Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray, Wells' Dr Moreau. A distant implication might be that the cultivated (not the ragged trousered) philanthropist might actually harbor within murderous misanthropic instincts.³⁹

We might say fancifully that in *Dracula* and *The picture of Dorian Gray*, Victorian philanthropy makes its last stand. (Count Dracula is beaten, but by business and applied science, not by philanthropy, by anyone's being good or doing good.) Ahead in the new century lay forces and events that would reshape, redirect and shrink the culture of philanthropy – the rise of organized labour, the rise of state welfarism, and, in independent, Catholic Ireland, the rise to predominance of a Church that took social custody of its adherents and succeeded for decades in minimizing and over-seeing state welfarism while practising its own virtually monopolistic 'philanthropy'.

39 Lord Henry tells Dorian Gray about a philanthropist who, having attained his life's goal of redressing some social grievance, was thereafter plunged into disappointment and became a misanthropist, Wilde, *The picture of Dorian Gray*, pp 139–40.