

# The Peculiar Opinions of an Irish Platonist: The Life and Thought of Thomas Maguire

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In the opening paragraphs of *The Veil of Isis*, his undeservedly forgotten history of modern idealist philosophies, Thomas Ebenezer Webb makes the following observation about Irish philosophy:

Ireland may claim the distinction of having produced three philosophers, each of whom formed an epoch in the history of thought. Johannes Scotus Erigena, the founder of the Scholastic System – Hutcheson, the father of the modern School of Speculative Philosophy in Scotland – and Berkeley, the first who explicitly maintained a Theory of Absolute Idealism – were all men of Irish birth, and were marked, in a greater or less degree, by the peculiar characteristics of Irish genius.<sup>1</sup>

Webb elaborates only a little on what he means by 'the peculiar characteristics of Irish genius', merely adding that 'the genius of the Irish People is naturally borne to dialectics'.<sup>2</sup> He is content to put on record the views of various commentators who have regarded the Irish 'as renowned for able logicians and metaphysicians', known in all the continental universities for their 'proficiency in the scholastic logic'.<sup>3</sup> He concludes that the Irish logician was as ubiquitous as the Irish soldier of fortune, and that 'like the philosophic vagabond in the Vicar of Wakefield, he disputed his way through the Universities of Europe'.<sup>4</sup> He goes on to note that the University of Dublin had from the beginning accommodated itself to the national bent by giving a prominent place in its curriculum to mental science. Nor, he adds, have the graduates of the Irish University been undistinguished in pursuit of the favourite study. He mentions that Dodwell, Browne, and, of course, Berkeley, were all Fellows of Trinity College, and that a number of others, including Edmund Burke, were Scholars of the House.

Webb's remarks signal a touching anxiety about the identity and status of Irish philosophy, such as it appeared in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This anxiety is revealed in Webb's attempt to represent Berkeley as nothing

1 Thomas Ebenezer Webb, *The Veil of Isis* (Dublin, 1885), p. 1.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

less than the founder of modern philosophy. Without Berkeley we would not have had Hume; without Hume we would not have had Kant; without Kant we would not have had Hegel. And, one supposes, without Hegel we would not have had the great divisions of thought that have marked the twentieth century. We might not have had Marxism, most notably. And so, if we ourselves are in any way inclined towards dialectics, we ought to conclude that it was Berkeley's theistic idealism which ultimately gave rise to the atheistic materialism of the Marxists and to the left-right polarities of twentieth-century political thought.

While the post-modern commentator will not wish to trace the grand dialectical trajectory that Webb did, she would be justified in arguing that the anxiety expressed by Webb concerning the identity and status of Irish philosophy ought to be making its presence felt again – and for precisely post-modernist reasons. We are living in an age of re-discovery, an age which is characterised by a determination to bring to light the work of artists, writers, and others who have been ignored for (arguably) ideological reasons. It is typical of contemporary multi-cultural thinking to encourage recuperative raids on archival materials hitherto ignored. While this has been a familiar enterprise in feminist and ethnic studies for some time, especially in areas such as literature and art, the history of philosophical studies in Ireland, especially nineteenth-century philosophical studies, remains relatively neglected. Most of the recuperative work on Irish philosophy has been done on the lesser-known eighteenth-century philosophers, particularly John Toland.<sup>5</sup> The only substantial contribution to nineteenth-century philosophical studies in recent years has been Dolores Dooley's book on Anna Doyle Wheeler and William Thompson.<sup>6</sup>

In this paper I want to look at one nineteenth-century academic philosopher whose reputation in philosophy was a modest one, but whose life and work taken together should nonetheless prompt some useful reflection on the relationship between philosophy and ideology – a relationship that may obtain even in the case of idealist or metaphysical styles of philosophising which may seem very far removed from more bloody-minded political and ideological concerns.

The apparent contrasts that often emerge in biography between the high-mindedness of the thought and the compromises of the empirical life are magnified to a salutary degree in the case of the Irish academic philosopher,

5 See, for example, Robert E. Sullivan, *John Toland and the Deist Controversy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982); David Berman, 'The Irish Counter-Enlightenment,' in Richard Kearney (ed.), *The Irish Mind* (Dublin, 1985), pp. 119-40; Alan Harrison, *John Toland 1670-1722* (Dublin, 1994); Pierre Lurbe, 'John Toland, Cosmopolitanism, and the Concept of Nation,' in Michael O'Dea and Kevin Whelan (eds), *Nations and Nationalisms: France, Britain, Ireland and the Eighteenth-Century Context* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 251-9; and Desmond M. Clarke, 'Locke and Toland on Toleration,' in O'Dea and Whelan (eds), *Nations and Nationalisms*, pp. 261-71.

6 See Dolores Dooley, *Equality in Community: Sexual Equality in the Writings of William Thompson and Anna Doyle Wheeler* (Cork, 1996).

Thomas Maguire (1831-89). The compromises in question are not necessarily the result of a moral flaw in the character of an individual but the result rather of the pressure that historical developments can place on individuals who happen to occupy particularly sensitive ideological positions at a crucial moment, including even the sorts of positions that individuals may occupy within academic institutions. What is most poignantly salutary about Maguire's case is the nature of his failure to resolve what may be called 'the problem of disengagement'. This is a problem faced by the members of the intelligentsia in any society complex enough to have such a group or class in its midst. It is the problem of how to be sufficiently disengaged from the local culture to warrant being considered a member of the intelligentsia in the first place, while at the same time remaining sufficiently engaged with, or involved in, that culture to warrant being supported or at least tolerated by it. Members of the academic community, insofar as they may be regarded as intellectuals, cannot easily avoid this problem. Academics, in their capacity as paid-up, pensionable members of a professional intelligentsia, are supposed to be (at least according to the standard account) the overviews and critiquers of the local culture, like the Socratic gadfly whose job it was to keep stinging and thereby rousing the lazy thoroughbred that was Athenian society. Or, to use a more contemporary and more business-like image, they are supposed to function like quality controllers whose job it is to identify and assess the various forces at work on and in the local culture, determining which forces are for the culture and which are against it. To perform this role effectively they have to be disengaged enough to adopt a critical, reflective stance on the culture in question; yet, they have to be close enough to the culture to understand it from within and care about the direction in which it is moving. They have to become, in Wallace Stevens's words, 'insiders and outsiders at once'.<sup>7</sup> The conscientious academic, in short, finds himself or herself always at the centre of a systematic dilemma about degrees of engagement and disengagement. The life and thought of Thomas Maguire presents us with a dramatic example of the tragic consequences that can ensue for the provincial academic who is duly responsive to local ideological pressures but who is less than canny about the quality of his relationship with the local culture at a critical moment in its history.

Maguire was born in Dublin in 1831 into a Catholic merchant family.<sup>8</sup> He attended Trinity College in 1851, graduating in 1855 as a senior moderator in Classics and Philosophy. When the Professorship of Latin became vacant in

7 Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumus* (New York, 1966), p. 261, quoted in Kevin Whelan, 'The Region and the Intellectuals,' in Liam O'Dowd (ed.), *On Intellectuals and Intellectual Life in Ireland* (Belfast, 1996), p. 116.

8 For biographical information on Maguire I have drawn heavily on Timothy P. Foley's 'Thomas Maguire and the Parnell Forgeries' in *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, lxvi (1994), pp. 173-96.

Queen's College, Galway, in 1869 Maguire was appointed. He did not, however, remain in Queen's College, Galway, for very long. Indeed, his time at the Galway college does not appear to have been a happy or productive one. An editorial in the *Weekly Freeman* (2 March 1889) would conclude that during the

earlier portion of his stay at the seat of learning in the Citie of the Tribes he did not distinguish himself by any assiduous attention to his duties, and rather gained a reputation as a learned man who had eschewed the midnight oil. He lived close by the town in a true bachelor's residence, and soon became remarkable for peculiar opinions.<sup>9</sup>

It seems that Maguire was less than regretful about leaving Queen's College, Galway, in 1880 to take up a fellowship at Trinity College, Dublin. He had the distinction of being the first Catholic to be elected to such a fellowship since 'Fawcett's Act' of 1873 had removed religious disabilities at Trinity. From 1880 to 1882 he held a lectureship in Greek and Latin at Trinity until he was appointed to the Professorship of Moral Philosophy in 1882. This would be the position that he would hold until his death, in unhappy circumstances, in 1889.

During his time as an academic philosopher, Maguire would lead a kind of double-life. As a philosopher, he was a metaphysician in the Platonic or idealist mode. All his academic publications were on idealism, transcendentalism, or Platonism. His first book, *The Platonic Idea*, was published in 1866, three years before he came to the professorship in Galway. His next substantial publication, *Essays on the Platonic Ethics*, appeared in 1870 during his stint in Galway, though it was written before he took up the professorship here. His next academic publication would not appear until 1882. This was *The Parmenides of Plato*, which is in fact an edition of the Greek text, introduced and annotated by Maguire, and intended, in Maguire's own words, 'chiefly for the Metaphysician'.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, all of Maguire's academic philosophical writing is intended chiefly for the metaphysician. He is not only an expositor and interpreter of the metaphysics of Plato but also writes defensively about idealism and transcendentalism in general. He is defensive, in other words, about the idea that there exists a reality which is superior to, and somehow more real or more substantial than,

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 174.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Maguire, *The Parmenides of Plato* (Dublin, 1882), p. [v]. Maguire's other published academic or philosophical work included *Reviews: i. Mr J.S. Mill's 'Utilitarianism.'* ii. *Rev. Mr Barlow's 'Eternal Punishment.'* iii. *Mr J.S. Mill's 'Hamilton.'* Reprinted from 'The Christian Examiner,' 1863-1865 (Dublin, 1867); *The External Worlds of Sir William Hamilton and Dr Thomas Brown: A Paper Read before the Dublin University Philosophical Society, 1857* (Dublin, 1868); *The Will in Reference to Dr Maudsley's 'Body and Will': An Opening Lecture, Michaelmas Term, 1883* (Dublin, 1883); *Agnosticism: Herbert Spencer & Frederick Harrison. A Lecture Delivered in Michaelmas Term, 1884* (Dublin, 1884); *Mr Balfour on Kant and Transcendentalism: A Lecture Delivered in Michaelmas Term, 1888* (Dublin, 1889).

the temporal, material world in which we conduct our practical lives. It is in fact this very idealism which makes it difficult, at first glance, to understand the other side of Maguire – the side which caused him to become ‘remarkable for peculiar opinions’ and to become involved in one of the most notorious conspiracies in Irish history. Maguire became remarkable for peculiar opinions in the first place because of his outspoken opposition to the Catholic hierarchy and to the Home Rule movement, and because of his explicit support for the Unionist position. He opposed Home Rule in a number of pamphlets on the grounds that it would have disastrous consequences for Irish education. In one of these pamphlets – ‘The Effects of Home Rule on the Higher Education’ – he argues that Home Rule would be fatal to all real education in Ireland simply because it would place education in the hands of the Bishops. Placing education in the hands of the Bishops would mean ‘crushing it for at least three generations, and perhaps forever’.<sup>11</sup> He accuses the Roman Catholic Church of obscurantism and anti-intellectualism, and maintains that a large section of the Roman Catholic Church is conscientiously opposed to the spread of education. He refers his Protestant readers in particular to an article in the *Dublin Review* in which the dangers of higher education are spelt out. The argument of the article is that by giving Catholic youth a higher education ‘you open a new and very large avenue by which the godless spirit of the times may gain admittance’.<sup>12</sup> The article expresses impatience with such commonplaces as ‘marching with the times’, ‘aiming at progress’, and ‘growing in largeness of thought’. Here is one of most telling paragraphs from the article, quoted by Maguire:

We are very far from meaning that ignorance is the Catholic youth’s *best* preservative against intellectual danger, but it is a very powerful one, nevertheless, and those who deny this are but inventing a theory in the very teeth of manifest facts. A Catholic destitute of intellectual tastes, whether in a higher or a lower rank, may be tempted to idleness, frivolity, gambling, sensuality; but in none but the very rarest cases will he be tempted to that which ... is an immeasurably greater calamity than any of these, or all put together, viz. deliberate doubt on the truth of his religion.<sup>13</sup>

The article identifies the absence of higher education as a powerful preservative against apostasy. Those who watch over souls are advised not to withdraw that preservative ‘until they are satisfied that some other very sufficient substitute is provided’.<sup>14</sup>

11 Thomas Maguire, *The Effects of Home Rule on the Higher Education* (Dublin, 1886), p. 10.

12 Quoted in Maguire, *The Effects of Home Rule*, p. 5, from ‘Catholic Higher Education in England’ in *Dublin Review*, xx, p. 192.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Having quoted passages like this from the *Dublin Review* article, Maguire then moves closer to home when he reports a revealing story about the Archbishop of Tuam, a story which he claims he heard during his stint at Galway. The Archbishop is said to have closed down a particular school, and when one of the local people asked him how and where he was to educate his children, the Archbishop is said to have replied, 'What do *they* want with school? Let them learn their Catechism'. Thus, concludes Maguire, salvation and enlightenment are perceived to be incompatible, 'and the Ultramontane logic is triumphant'.<sup>15</sup>

It was with such material that Maguire sustained his anti-clericalism. If his anti-clericalism had gone no further than this we could interpret his attitude to the hierarchy and even to Home Rule as evidence of a principled attempt by an Irish intellectual to disengage himself from the pressures, expectations, and demands of the local culture – as an attempt, in other words, to evaluate and even transcend the presumptions of that culture. One could even begin to see Maguire as a heroic practitioner of liberalism and pluralism in a society in which it was not politically expedient to be such. After all, we still expect our intellectuals to be critical of clericalism and also of a certain kind of patriotic or protectionist nationalism. Maguire made the mistake, however, of confusing disengagement with counter-engagement. Having rejected the demands of the local culture, he went uncritically over to a neighbouring counter-culture – that of the Protestant minority. Moreover, he became a spokesman for, and put himself at the disposal of, a Unionist association. In some of his pamphlets, most notoriously in 'England's Duty to Ireland', he expresses his admiration for the Protestant and Loyalist minority. He notes, for example, that 'the vast preponderance of intelligence and wealth is in the hands of the Protestants', while he describes the Parnellites as 'the most portentous gathering of knaves, dupes, swindlers, ... murderers and cowards, that the world has ever seen'.<sup>16</sup>

Ironically, Maguire himself would turn out to be the one who was to associate himself with, and become the dupe of, knaves and swindlers. What Maguire is most famous for among historians of nineteenth-century Ireland is not his treatises on Plato or even his pamphlets against Home Rule, but his involvement in the scandal of the Parnell (or Pigott) forgeries. The story of the forgeries began in 1887 when the *Times* of London published a series of articles entitled 'Parnellism and Crime', purporting to show that Parnell and members of the Irish Parliamentary Party had supported criminal conspiracy and violence during the Land War. In one article it was alleged that Parnell had

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Maguire, *England's Duty to Ireland, as Plain to a Loyal Irish Roman Catholic* (Dublin and London, 1886), p. 18. This pamphlet received a detailed response from James Pearse in his *Reply to Professor Maguire's Pamphlet 'England's Duty to Ireland' as It Appears to an Englishman* (Dublin, 1886). James Pearse was the father of Patrick Pearse.

expressed approval of the 'Phoenix Park Murders'. This article contained the text of a letter allegedly written by Parnell, in which his approval for the assassinations in Phoenix Park was indicated. A Special Commission was set up to investigate these charges, and it soon transpired that the incriminating letters were supplied by Edward Caulfield Houston, the secretary of the Irish Loyal and Patriotic Union, a unionist association which had been founded in 1885 to oppose Home Rule. It was also revealed that Houston had in turn received the letters from a journalist by the name of Richard Pigott, that Pigott had sought and been paid money for the letters – and that much of this money had been provided by Thomas Maguire.

It is not clear whether Maguire was handing over his own money, or whether he was just a bearer for the Irish Loyal and Patriotic Union. But there is no doubt as to the degree of his involvement in the affair. One newspaper at the time – the *Pall Mall Gazette* (27 February 1889) – remarked that Maguire was 'a man who more than any other respectable person seems to have been up to his eyes in the conspiracy to ruin Mr Parnell'.<sup>17</sup> We know now that Maguire and the other members of the ILPU were duped by Pigott. During the investigation by the Special Commission, Pigott confessed that the incriminating letters were forgeries. Shortly after making this confession he fled to Paris. He was due to appear before the Commission on 26 February 1889, but by then he had already fled to Paris and would go from there to Madrid. On 1 March, in Madrid, just as he was about to be confronted by British policemen, Pigott shot and killed himself. By this date also, as by some kind of fateful coincidence, Thomas Maguire himself was already dead. In fact, on the day that Pigott fled to Paris, Maguire was found dead in his rooms in London. The suddenness of his death just before he was to be called as a witness led to rumours that he had either been murdered or had committed suicide. These rumours were never substantiated, and all the evidence, including evidence provided by a doctor who was treating Maguire during the trial, indicate that he did in fact die of natural causes.<sup>18</sup>

And so ended, in ill-starred circumstances, the life of an Irish idealist, Platonist, and transcendentalist. Newspaper reports at the time of his death often made a point of signalling or hinting at the contrast between Maguire's academic profession and his involvement in the Pigott scandal. 'Tis a thousand pities', declared an editorial in the *County Gentleman*, 'that this most eminent of English Platonists should have been drawn into the toils'.<sup>19</sup> The *Cork Examiner* (27 February), just days before Pigott shot himself, adopted a somewhat more judgemental stance:

17 Quoted in Foley, 'Thomas Maguire and the Parnell Forgeries,' p. 187.

18 For detailed discussion of the rumours about Maguire's death, see Foley, 'Thomas Maguire and the Parnell Forgeries,' pp. 186–92.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 188.

There is not in the Ministry nor in the Times management, nor in the Irish Government, nor in the ranks of the Divisional Magistrates ... a man who will not feel in his inmost soul that yesterday a terrible and most memorable blow was struck at the Government of Coercion and Corruption. Pigott fled; Maguire, of Trinity College, mysteriously dead.<sup>20</sup>

As these comments suggest, there is perhaps something especially scandalous about the involvement of a Professor of Moral Philosophy in a conspiracy such as the conspiracy against Parnell, especially when this same person is also a metaphysician, an idealist, even a Platonist. But perhaps this should not surprise us too much. After all, the idealist or transcendentalist could be described as someone who is more attracted to the reality of what is otherly, to the reality of the Other, than to the reality of the local, empirical world in which he finds himself. This point connects suggestively with the problem of disengagement discussed earlier. While most academics or intellectuals accept that some measure of disengagement is necessary to earn the name of intellectual, there is often the assumption that counter-engagement, or engagement with an alternative culture, is a brave and effective demonstration of this act of distancing or transcendence. Going over to the other side, away from what is local and provincial, might even be assumed to be the most significant act of disengagement that you can manage. This is a questionable assumption, however. Academics who commit themselves to otherly traditions are not simply reneging on the native or local culture – they are reneging on the very principle of critical disengagement itself. This is perhaps a particular danger here for Irish intellectuals. The inadequacies of a marginalised culture still coming to terms with the after-effects of colonisation can precipitate the local or provincial intellectual towards the Other – towards some powerfully attractive Other who speaks an ‘other’ language, who speaks with an ‘other’ accent, who practises an ‘other’ religion, who has had an altogether ‘other’ history.

We are perhaps too accustomed these days to talking about ‘the Other’, as if this Other is always marginal, always to be pitied, always worthy of our love, always in need of special pleading. But a redeeming feature of the life of Thomas Maguire is to suggest to us that the Other may also be powerful and central, and all the more attractive for that. Intellectuals in historically marginal or post-colonial cultures should perhaps be prepared to perform a double act of disengagement – relative disengagement from the local culture, the better to reflect on it, and at the same time continued disengagement from powerfully attractive neighbouring cultures, the better also to reflect on them.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 191.