

Eighteenth-century European scholarship and nineteenth-century Irish literature: Synge's *Tinker's Wedding* and the orientalizing of 'Irish gypsies'

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An anthropologist of Irish Traveller life has written that Synge 'participated in the lives and activities of the people he observed [...]'.¹ However, Synge's *Tinker's Wedding* is not a realistic nor unproblematically sympathetic portrayal of Travellers he encountered. Furthermore, his prose does not uncover an ostensible chasm between 'tinker' and island minorities and a homogenous majority, as sometimes claimed. According to the dramatist's nephew, *The Tinker's Wedding* was derived from 'country lore', rather than 'any direct association with the tinkers themselves'.² The phrase 'country lore' is too vague: Synge's imaginative engagement with the so-called 'Irish Gypsy' emanates from centuries-long exoticizations of peripheral groups by Irish commentators. The late nineteenth-century 'Irish tinker' fad among writers of the British Isles, from which the drama simultaneously emerges, was the late and localized flowering of an eighteenth-century European academic craze centred on the investigation of Gypsy origins. Since this fad was perpetuated by a number of Irish writers, Synge's drama may be said to be the Revival-era culmination of over one hundred years of Irish construction and negotiation of the European fantasy of 'the Gypsy'.

A German study of 1783 that purported to expose the Indian origins of European Gypsies, Heinrich Grellmann's *Dissertation on the Gypsies*,³ consolidated the exemplar of the heathenish, wild, asocial Gypsy, whose appetites and customs were an inverse of, or in monstrous excess of, sedentary norms – a construct that Synge's text rarely subverts. Grellmann was not the first European scholar to publish a text devoted entirely to Gypsies, or to suggest that 'exotic' origin was discernible in the Gypsies' language. However, he wrote the earliest and best-known

1 George Gmelch (ed.), 'J.M. Synge: observer of Irish peasant life', in *In Wicklow, West Kerry and Connemara* (Dublin: O'Brien, 1980), pp 11–12. 2 Andrew Carpenter (ed), *My Uncle John: Edward Stephens's life of J.M. Synge*, (London: Oxford UP, 1974), p. 157. The play's source is found in J.M. Synge, 'At a Wicklow fair', in Robin Skelton (gen. ed.), *J.M. Synge: collected works* (London: Oxford UP, 1962–8), vol. 2, p. 228–9. 3 Heinrich Grellmann, *Dissertation on the Gypsies / Historischer versuch über die Zigeuner* (1783), trans. Matthew Raper (London: Printed for the editor by G. Biggs, 1787).

'standard work', the significance of which lies in its crystallization of disparate stereotypes gleaned from earlier commentaries.⁴ Unsurprisingly, he was accused by certain contemporary reviewers of having had no personal contact with the subjects of his study.⁵ The *Dissertation* set the parameters of the subject, and studies in subsequent centuries often unashamedly paraphrased it. Grellmann was an ethnographer and historian based for most of his career at Göttingen University, the German enlightenment powerhouse, and he was academically active in an era in which the discipline of history was being institutionalized. He invented the category of 'Gypsy' as has been understood since then; his work brought various itinerant groups 'moving through different countries together under a single name, [...] and provided them with a collective history'.⁶

Grellmann refined the previously obscure oriental origin theory by suggesting that language proved that Gypsies were descendants of an Indian pariah group, with all the negative associations the analogy implied: Gypsies were filthy eaters, addictive, vulgar in dress, animalistic, lacking in willpower, instinctive, lazy, lustful (especially the women) and dishonest. According to the German scholar, since the 'hideous trait' of cannibalism was an Indian custom, Gypsies might still practise it. He ascribed their tendency to cling to barbaric habits, unless encouraged to reform, to their unenlightened oriental origins. Most interestingly, in light of the discursive derivation of Synge's 'tinkers', Gypsies hypocritically professed the religion of whatever region they happened to be in and married merely to emulate their social betters. 'There is not, perhaps', Grellmann wrote, 'any other people, among whom marriages are contracted with so little consideration, or solemnized with so little ceremony, as among these Gypsies.' The marriages often being irregular, 'one of their people act the priest.'⁷ The traces of such Europe-wide beliefs about peripatetic peoples are detectable in folklore collected in Ireland over one hundred years later. One informant explains to Synge that tinker men casually swapped wives,⁸ and Lady Gregory is told that tinkers 'never go to Mass; and, [...] it's [...] likely they have no marriage at all'.⁹ Mary, the tinker matriarch of Synge's play, derides her son's common-law wife for wishing to regularize the union, and Michael himself finds Sarah's desire to marry 'a mad thing'. (Similarly, in Yeats's near-contemporaneous *Where There Is Nothing* (1902), in which a tinker weds a country gentleman, the ostensibly slapdash and outlandish nature of tinker marriage ritual is noted.)

The Irish orientalist, William Marsden,¹⁰ proposed a 'Hindostanic' link to the Gypsy language in a letter read before the Society of Antiquaries of London in

⁴ Wim Willems and Leo Lucassen, 'The church of knowledge: representation of Gypsies in Dutch encyclopedias and their sources (1724–1984)', in Matt T. Salo (ed.), *100 years of Gypsy studies* (Cheverly, MD: Gypsy Lore Society, 1990), p. 42. ⁵ Willems, *In search of the true Gypsy*, trans. Don Bloch (London: Cass, 1997), pp 70–83. ⁶ Willems, *True Gypsy*, p. 17. ⁷ Grellmann, *Dissertation*, p. 45–6. ⁸ Synge, 'The vagrants of Wicklow', in *CW*, vol. 2, p. 204. ⁹ Lady Gregory, 'The wandering tribe', in *Poets and dreamers* (1903), (New York: Oxford UP, 1974), p. 94. ¹⁰ William Marsden

February 1785, two years after Grellmann's German-language publication, but two years before the English-language translation of the *Dissertation* appeared. Marsden makes no reference to Grellmann and stresses that he made his discovery 'in the latter end of the year 1783'; Grellmann's preface is dated 4 September 1783, and the first review appeared that December. Grellmann cites Marsden in the list of sources of his second German edition and his 1787 English-language translation. A clue as to one reason that both Marsden and Grellmann arrived at the same conclusion may lie in the fact that the Irishman and Grellmann's English-language translator both acknowledge the help of Royal Society president, Sir Joseph Banks. Marsden's claim that 'the resemblance to the Hindostanic is the predominant feature in the Gypsy dialect' was a theory 'perfectly new to the world',¹¹ was swiftly disputed by the Mosaic ethnologist, Jacob Bryant, in a paper read before the Society two months later. Bryant implies that Marsden, a reputable scholar, disingenuously stole the thunder of earlier authorities, and the ethnologist claims for himself and William Coxe¹² the honour of having noted 'the affinity' of the Gypsies' vocabulary to 'the languages of ancient and distant nations' several years previously. Embarrassingly, Bryant's refutation was published immediately after Marsden's paper in volume seven of *Archaeologia*. The cachet of the supposed link of the 'Gypsy' language to oriental cultures led to an unseemly scholastic scramble for the credit of the 'discovery'.

The feeding frenzy for Gypsies impacted outside self-regarding scholarly circles: the *Belfast News-Letter* published a piece entitled 'The Gypsies' in its issue of 6–9 December 1785. The poem was not attributed to its author, William Cowper, and is an excerpt from *The Task*, a fact also unexplicated. *The Task* was written from late 1783–4, the period when Grellmann's study was making waves, and the excerpt given is permeated by common assumptions about the Gypsy lifestyle: Gypsies are a 'vagabond and useless tribe' of 'tawny skin' who eat 'flesh obscene' and demonstrate 'great skill' in palmistry, begging and stealing. Cowper's poem expresses bewilderment, characteristic of the enlightenment, that

a creature rational and cast
in human mould shou'd brutalize by choice
His nature!

Though the contents of the poem are entirely consistent with its date of composition, its location in a provincial four-page establishment publication concerned with trade, agriculture and politics is unexpected, and indicates how

(1754–1836), orientalist, linguist and numismatist. Born 16 Nov. 1754 at Verval, Co. Wicklow. Elected FRS 1783; original member RIA, 1785. **11** Marsden, 'Observations on the language of the people commonly called Gypsies', *Archaeologia*, 7 (1785), p. 384. **12** Willima Coxe was a traveller who had obtained 'specimens of [Gypsy] language' in Hungary. Jacob Bryant, 'Collections on the Zingara, or Gypsey language', *Archaeologia*, 7 (1785), p. 387.

widely and quickly the discourse of the Gypsy percolated from the major European centres of scholarship. However, it is difficult to argue that the poem implies a contemporary perception of a local 'Gypsy' presence, given that it is one of a number of poems and songs emanating from the metropolitan literary scene to be published in the *News-letter* throughout 1785. The excerpt does, however, indicate that the European craze for Gypsies did not escape notice in Belfast's editorial circles.

As indicated by Bryant's reference to Coxe, eighteenth-century ethnography's reliance on travel writers ensured that they were credited with 'uncovering' the links of exotic minorities abroad to the Gypsies of home:¹³ unflattering travel accounts of the Indian pariah caste quoted by Grellmann approximated with his pre-existent image of the Gypsy.¹⁴ To this day, historians of the Gypsy refer to two travel writers with Irish connections as seminal commentators on 'the tribe'. The Irish bishop, Richard Pococke,¹⁵ suggested in an account of a tour of Egypt, Ethiopia and the Middle East from the 1740s, that the Chingani of Syria, a nomadic people who 'pass for Mahometans', were 'relations' of the 'gypsies in England'.¹⁶ The *Travels through Portugal and Spain, in 1772 and 1773* (1775) of Richard Twiss (1747–1821), the wealthy elder son of an Anglo-Dutch merchant family descended from 'the family of Twiss resident about 1660 at Killintiernan, Co. Kerry',¹⁷ contains one of the earliest discussions of Spanish Gypsies in English-language travel writing. Commercially and critically successful on publication, it provided Grellmann with information on *Gitanos*, and set the template for the 'description of Gypsies' scene common to later travel works on Spain.¹⁸ Twiss refutes the claim by a French authority¹⁹ that the Spanish Gypsy men 'are all thieves, and the women libertines', as being 'too general; I have lodged many times in their houses, and never missed the most trifling thing'.²⁰ The textual method by which the 'Gypsy' archetype is transmitted is

¹³ Willems, *True Gypsy*, p. 39. ¹⁴ Willems and Lucassen, 'The church of knowledge', p. 33. ¹⁵ Bishop Richard Pococke (1704–1765), extensive traveller. Appointed archdeacon of Dublin in 1745. Translated to the bishopric of Meath in 1765. ¹⁶ Pococke, *A description of the East* (2 vols) (London: Printed for the author by W. Bowyer, 1743–5), vol. 2, p. 207. ¹⁷ Burke's *landed gentry*, quoted in the *Dictionary of national biography* (1899) entry for Richard's brother, Francis Twiss (1760–1827). ¹⁸ George Borrow's semi-autobiographical writings on Gypsies in the nineteenth century consolidated Spain as a significant setting for fantasies of the Gypsy. Both Walter Starkie, author of studies of Spanish Gypsies and Abbey Board member, and Frank Carney, the Abbey dramatist whose *The righteous are bold* (1946) utilizes a 'Gypsy' song from Borrow, might be said to continue the Irish exploration of the *Gitano* construct initiated by Twiss. ¹⁹ Abbé Delaporte, *Le voyageur françois, ou La connaissance de l'ancien et du nouveau monde* (26 vols) (Paris: Cellot, 1768–95). ²⁰ Richard Twiss, *Travels through Portugal and Spain, in 1772 and 1773* (London: Printed for the author, 1775), pp 179–80. Such apparent subversion of stereotypes must be contextualized within the utilization of Spain as a site for 'contention between England and France' by French or English-language commentators playing to home audiences. (Joan K Stemmler, 'An Anglo-Irish view of Spain', *Dieciocho*, 23:2 (2000), pp 271, 274.) Twiss was not necessarily even-handed: his somewhat disparaging *Tour in Ireland in 1775*

observable when Grellmann cites this stereotype of female Gypsy behaviour paraphrased in Twiss's text as being Twiss's *own* opinion.²¹

Significantly, neither Twiss nor Poccocke referred to Gypsies in their accounts of Ireland, though Twiss alluded to beggars.²² Edward Clarke gave an account of Russian Gypsies in 1800, and seemed versed in the Indian-origin theory.²³ His account of Dublin makes no note of Gypsies but only, again, of undifferentiated beggars.²⁴ Neither Grellmann, Marsden, nor any of the eighteenth-century commentators mentioned refer to *Irish* 'Gypsies' *per se*. According to Sharon Gmelch, the *ethnic* category of 'tinker', as subsequently recognized in Ireland, emerged textually through government monitoring of marginalized social groups: The Commission on the Condition of the Poorer Classes (a body created in response to anxiety about widespread indigence and which reported in 1835), was informed that, in contrast to other itinerants, 'wives and families accompany the tinker while he strolls about in search of work, and always beg. They intermarry with one another, and form a distinct class.'²⁵ Unlike European and British Gypsies, Irish tinkers were generally understood to be indigenous.

It was left to late-nineteenth-century commentators to 'discover' that an element of the exotic 'Gypsy' was present all along in Irish tinkers. Post-Grellmann, a wave of English-language writings obsessed over the definition, record, reform and 'character' of British Gypsies, who were represented either as an undesirable itinerant group or as a Romany race in possession of a rich, mysterious culture intrinsically opposed to sedentary norms.²⁶ The literary fad for romanticized Gypsies exploded with George Borrow's mid-century picaresque writings. Borrow, later somewhat undeservedly considered an expert in the Romani language, whetted his linguistic appetite by learning Gaelic when he lived in Ireland as a child. Synges was obviously familiar with the author's work: in *People and Places* the dramatist refers to Borrow in his discussion of the superiority of the wandering lifestyle.²⁷ Yet another 'Gypsyologist' with Irish connections, Henry Thomas Crofton,²⁸ consolidated Romani as a subject of scholarly interest with *Dialect of the English Gypsies* (1875),²⁹ a principal branch on the 'genealogical tree of ideas'

(1776) was scorned by Irish readers. ²¹ Grellmann, *Dissertation*, p. 33. ²² Poccocke, *Tour in Ireland in 1752*, George Stokes (ed.), (Dublin: Hodges & Figgis; London: Simpkin, Marshall et al., 1891); Twiss, *A tour in Ireland in 1775* (London: Printed for the author, 1776), p. 73. ²³ See Dr Edward Daniel Clarke, *Travels in Russia, Tartary and Turkey* (1810) (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1839). ²⁴ Clarke, *A tour through the south of England, Wales, and part of Ireland* (London: Minerva, 1793), p. 312. ²⁵ *Report of the commissioners on the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland* (London, 1835), vol. 32, part 1, p. 495, quoted in Sharon Gmelch, *Tinkers and Travellers* (Dublin: O'Brien, 1975), p. 10. ²⁶ David Mayall, *Gypsy-Travellers in nineteenth-century society* (Cambridge UP, 1988), pp 71–2. ²⁷ Synges, 'People and places', in *CW*, vol. 2, p. 196. ²⁸ Henry Thomas Crofton, born in 1848 at Preston. Gypsylorist, author of seminal papers on Shelta, and a member of an extensive Irish family descended from Queen Elizabeth's escheator-general of Ireland. ²⁹ Crofton and Bath Charles Smart, *The dialect of the English Gypsies* (2nd ed.) (London: Ascher, 1875). (The first edition was privately circulated.)

of English-language Gypsy studies.³⁰ Throughout the nineteenth century, itinerant subcultures in the British Isles became increasingly subject to a process of orientalization: one commentator found the 'strange Oriental chaunt' of the Irish *bacach* (tramp) similar to 'the chaunting of a Fakeer',³¹ and Synge noted that West Kerry beggars prayed with 'almost Oriental volubility.'³² Contemporary race theory underpinned the obsession of the late nineteenth-century *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* (1888-) with cataloguing the 'disappearing' culture of 'pure-blooded' British Romanies of Indian origin. Although usually noting that Irish tinkers were of indigenous origin and occasionally constructing them as inferior to 'pure' Romanies, the journal nevertheless pseudo-anthropologically orientalized tinkers with accounts of sexually outlandish 'Gypsy' behaviour, such as wife-swapping and irregular weddings, similar to those Gregory later collected.³³

The *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* informed readers that tinkers 'intermarry among themselves, often with but slight regard for the rites of the Church.'³⁴ *The Tinker's Wedding's* much-lauded subversiveness, which supposedly inheres in the 'pagan' tinker clan's general indifference to the social pressure to formalize sexual relationships, is hardly convincing when it is considered that their amorality mirrors centuries-old stereotypes of Gypsy heathenism. To Jeanne Flood, Synge's 'lusty, hard-drinking, and violent' tinkers:

live at ease in nature, neither having nor needing a shelter. The drunken, genial Mary Byrne, in the fullness of her experience, embodies the rich humanity of such a life.[...] Placed against Mary is the Priest, the guardian and representative of the religious and social order, thus of the forces of culture which separate man from nature [...].³⁵

The 'pagan' amorality of Mary, as much a socio-historical construct as the Christianity the play dismisses as the antithesis of the 'natural', contradicts the purported moral objectivity of the drama. Synge's preface situates the play within a putatively neutral and disinterested pseudo-anthropological framework: 'The drama, like the symphony, does not teach or prove anything.'³⁶ Mary describes prayer as 'queer noise', and in what amounts to incantation, is called a 'heathen' five times in Act 1 alone. Flood wilfully ignores the unorthodox behaviour of the drunkard priest in presenting him as the antithesis of the 'natural' tinkers who want to kill him: 'The Tinkers, perfectly integrated into the natural world,

³⁰ Willems and Lucassen, 'The church of knowledge', p. 31. ³¹ William Hackett, 'The Irish *bacach*, or professional beggar, viewed archaeologically', *Ulster Journal of Archeology*, 9 (1861-2), p. 261. ³² Synge, 'In West Kerry', in *CW*, vol. 2, p. 265. ³³ David MacRitchie, 'Irish tinkers and their language', *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, 1:6 (1889), pp 351-2. ³⁴ John Sampson, 'Tinkers and their talk', *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, 2:4 (1891), p. 204. ³⁵ Jeanne A. Flood, 'Thematic variation in Synge's early peasant plays', *Éire-Ireland*, 7:3 (1972), p. 75. ³⁶ *The Tinker's Wedding* (Dublin: Maunsell, 1907), preface.

are thus appropriately presented in anarchic and violent act.' Man is 'an animal', Flood continues, and the 'wild Tinkers' are 'more humane' than the 'domesticated variety'.³⁷ Another critic represents the dramatist's depiction of a 'natural' tinker aversion to marriage as social realism.³⁸ Such liberal humanist endorsements of stereotypes of the tinker as anarchic, wild, 'natural', animalistic and intrinsically opposed to organised religion have been somewhat common in critical discussions of the play.

The Tinker's Wedding presents itself as transcending the romanticized or idealized tinker that, for instance, James Stephens' near-contemporaneous novel, *The Demi-Gods* (1914), might be accused of perpetuating. In his preface, Synge implies that the product of the 'neutral' dramatist is a force of 'nature', seeming to issue through, rather than from him: '[T]he best plays of Ben Jonson and Molière can no more go out of fashion than the blackberries on the hedges.' Lady Gregory commented that country people 'speak of a visit of the tinkers as of frost in spring or blight in harvest.'³⁹ Gregory's image of natural disaster to describe an unwelcome visit by tinkers is echoed in the play's preface, which constructs the tinker as a force of nature to whom the application of socially constructed moral values is irrelevant.

In *The Aran Islands*, Synge logocentrically privileges speech over doctrine: the religious beliefs of the islanders are ostensibly Catholic, but the authentic 'voice' of the people is 'pagan'.⁴⁰ Among the country people, tinkers had a reputation for 'unnatural powers',⁴¹ and Aran is a realm of witchcraft potent enough to create storms.⁴² The Catholic reform movement supposedly amended 'Patterns', the raucous celebration of feast days typical of pre-Famine cottier practice mentioned as occurring on Aran.⁴³ Synge's allusion to the practice is an attempt to reinscribe the islanders' Catholicism with the irregularity of an earlier era. He is a counter-missionary to the efforts of his uncle, the Revd Alexander Synge, who came to Aran in the previous generation to reform the islanders' religion. Galway was the location of the family estate that allowed Mrs Synge £400 a year⁴⁴ and Aran the site of Alexander's generally unsuccessful proselytizing. By stripping the prosaic Galway and Aran of his childhood and family history of its colonial, Protestant and familial associations, Synge refigures it as the pristine pre-Norman monoculture of Revival-era imagination.

Synge's nephew implied that the dialect utilized in Synge's drama was an appropriation of the language of Travellers: Hutchie wrote that 'it was the annual

³⁷ Flood, 'Thematic variation', 76. ³⁸ Through Sarah's 'superficial aspiration to marriage, Synge explores the folly and frustration of trying to fit one's experience into a social or intellectual frame unnatural to it.' Weldon Thornton, *J.M. Synge and the western mind* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1979), p. 157. ³⁹ Gregory, 'The wandering tribe', p. 94. ⁴⁰ Synge, *The Aran Islands*, in *CW*, vol. 2, p. 75. ⁴¹ Synge, 'The vagrants of Wicklow', in *CW*, vol. 2, p. 203. ⁴² Synge, *The Aran Islands*, in *CW*, vol. 2, p. 88. ⁴³ See Donal A. Kerr, *A nation of beggars* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994). ⁴⁴ *My Uncle John*, p. 22.

gathering of tinkers to the Wicklow [town] regatta at the beginning of August in 1902 which brought to Synge ... a form of English in which he could really express himself'.⁴⁵ Synge was responding to a passing fashion for the tinkers' language in the 1880s and 1890s, which must be situated within the context of post-Grellmann Gypsy studies. Prior to the rise of the Indian origin theory, the language of the itinerant classes of the British Isles was dismissed as a 'cant' of no scholarly interest: as late as 1728, the 'Gypsy' entry in *Chambers' Cyclopaedia* dismissed their 'unknown' canting tongue.⁴⁶ Indicating that the paradigm of the Gypsy language as furtive thieves' cant was shifting to the new model of 'Gypsy' as fascinating proof of exotic, ancient origin, Marsden expresses wonder:

that tribes wandering through the mountains of *Nubia*, or the plains of *Romania*, have been conversant for centuries in a dialect precisely familiar to that spoken at this day by the obscure, despised, and wretched people in England, whose language has been considered a fabricated gibberish and confounded with a cant in use amongst thieves and beggars, and whose persons have been (till within the period of a year) an object of the persecution, instead of the protection of our laws.⁴⁷

Most itinerant groups were subject to harsh if unevenly enforced statutes against mendicancy and nomadism from the medieval period until the end of the eighteenth century, and Marsden's comments indicate that the relaxing of laws against Gypsies (the 'counterfeit Egyptians' cited in Elizabethan statutes) coincided with the new Indian origin theory; a group previously criminalized was now ethnized, and delinquency became explicable in terms of oriental/pariah origin with its concomitant (and potentially fascinating) innate moral laxity. Despite late-eighteenth-century claims of the 'Gypsy' language's connection to Sanskrit, its speakers evolved as the negative image of the 'Aryans', who, in reductive nineteenth-century race discourse, arrived in Europe from India armed with a Protestant work ethic. By the nineteenth century, outlandish claims about Gypsy behaviour could be circuitously 'proved' by analogy with bizarre Indian custom.⁴⁸

In an 1880 article entitled 'Shelta, the tinkers' talk', Charles Godfrey Leland claimed to have 'discovered' the language whilst conversing with a beggar, and the American writer may be considered the catalyst for the subsequent flood of material on the subject in the late nineteenth century.⁴⁹ Shelta was soon drawn into institutionalized orientalism: in 1886, Leland read a paper before the Orientalist congress in Vienna on the 'The original Gypsies and their language',

⁴⁵ Quoted in W.J. McCormack, *Fool of the family: a life of J.M. Synge* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000), p. 320. ⁴⁶ Angus Fraser, *Gypsies* (1992) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 188. ⁴⁷ Marsden, 'Observations', p. 385. ⁴⁸ See Walter Simson, *A history of the Gypsies* (London: Samson, Low and Marston; Edinburgh: Menzies, 1865), pp 268–69. ⁴⁹ Charles Godfrey Leland, 'Shelta, the tinkers' talk', *New Quarterly Magazine*, 3 (1880), pp 136–41.

in which he returned to the subject of 'pre-historic' Shelta. The German scholar of Irish, Kuno Meyer, became interested in Shelta in the 1890s on the basis of its 'antiquity' and link to 'old Irish',⁵⁰ and the language became, to an extent, a cultural treasure to be wrestled from its unappreciative possessors.⁵¹ Due to the rash of articles on the language that appeared in the exoticizing *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* following Leland's 'discovery', Shelta was briefly fashionable enough to be included in the 1893 edition of *Chambers' Encyclopedia* as 'a secret jargon of great antiquity spoken by Irish tinkers [...] descendants of the [...] bards' – an ironic contrast to the pre-'discovery' opprobrium heaped upon 'canting language' in the 1728 edition.

This exoticization readily mapped onto an obscure pre-existent Irish tradition that tinkers were extrinsic to a putatively homogenous 'Gaelic' population: Gregory was told that 'the tinkers are not the same as the rest of us; [...] they originated in themselves'.⁵² In an era when the terms 'Gael', 'Celt' and 'Irish' were increasingly conflated, Syngé's tinkers and islanders are inflected by the Irish mytho-historic and antiquarian tradition that exotic pre-Gaelic peoples from 'the East' were a long-lasting presence in Ireland.⁵³ Pseudo-histories, such as the canonical twelfth-century *Book of Invasions* (*Leabhar Gabhála Éireann*), detail a series of settlers entering ancient Ireland. The arrival of the Milesians (Gaels) from Scythia, via Egypt and Spain, was constructed as the culmination of the ancient plantations by *soi-disant* 'Milesian' annalists. In *Phases of Irish History* (1919), a study predicated upon the scaffold of mytho-history, Eoin MacNeill focuses on the Fir-bolg, a population group represented by annalists as former slaves whose dominion was overthrown by arrivals such as the Tuatha Dé Danaan and Milesians. MacNeill employs the diction of orientalism in suggesting evidence of 'something like the Hindu caste system' in the hierarchical organization of occupations 'among the descendants of the Pre-Celtic' peoples, and suggests that 'tinker clans of recent times in Ireland and Scotland may well be survivals of [...] ancient industrial communities [...] [who] remained in every part of Ireland after their conquest by the Gaels'.⁵⁴ In saying so, MacNeill frames within academic discourse the exoticizing folk tradition that Travellers were a 'remnant of the Firbolgs or degenerated Tuatha De Danaan' to be 'differentiate[d] [...] from the Irish people'.⁵⁵

Syngé's orientalizing of literally and politically marginal population groups partakes of such pseudo-historic and antiquarian theorising on the pre-Celtic

50 Kuno Meyer, 'On the Irish origin and the age of Shelta', *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, 2:5 (1891), p. 260. **51** See Mary Burke, "'Hidden like a religious arcanum": Irish writing and Shelta's secret history', in John Kirk and Dónall Ó Baoill (eds), *Travellers and their language* (Queen's University, Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, forthcoming). **52** Gregory, 'The wandering tribe', p. 95. **53** Burke, 'Phoenicianism and the construction of Irish Traveller origins', in *New voices in Irish criticism*, ed. Karen Vandeveld (Dublin: Four Courts, 2002), pp 9–16. **54** Eoin MacNeill, *Phases of Irish history* (Dublin: Gill, 1919), p. 82. **55** William Bulfin, *Rambles in Eirinn* (1907) (London: Sphere, 1981), vol. 2, p. 205.

peoples. The tradition fascinated him, judging by his *Speaker* reviews of Geoffrey Keating, the seventeenth-century Hiberno-Norman who straddled antiquarianism and mytho-history. Synge attempted a verse play on the first inhabitants of Ireland based on a few lines in Keating's *History of Ireland*,⁵⁶ a work that, significantly, the dramatist first read while on Aran. Synge also read the more academically orthodox George Petrie and Whitley Stokes,⁵⁷ and the blind Gaelic tutor who had known Petrie, whom he encounters on his first embarkation, is a living link to that world. The dramatist's reference to the presence on the island of Fir-bolg implies that the islanders are descended from that mytho-historic people, thus allying them with tinkers as a people apart from the majority of mainlanders. Folkloric belief suggested that, once vanquished by the Tuatha Dé Danann, the Fir-bolg fled to the Aran Islands. Later, having been defeated by the Gaels, the Tuatha Dé Danann descended underground and became those afterwards referred to as fairies.⁵⁸ Having established that the island stones had been 'touched by the Fir-bolgs',⁵⁹ Synge subtly points to the association of pre-Celtic peoples with fairies in his account of a dream he later has on the islands in which he is made frenzied by mysterious music against his will, an incident that he suggests is a result of 'a psychic memory' attached to the neighbourhood.⁶⁰ This is an allusion to the tradition that 'the little people' enticed humans by their beautiful playing, or could be charmed by skilled human musicians, the latter being the basic plot of Douglas Hyde's *The Tinker and the Fairy* (1910). Aran is temporally mytho-historic: the description of 'the first invasion of Ireland before the Flood' in Keating's mytho-historic *History of Ireland* 'harmonize[d] fantastically with [Synge's] experiences of Aran' and his mother's early Old Testament lessons.⁶¹ To rephrase Corkery's description of the Synges, the Aran islanders are *in* contemporary Europe, but not *of* contemporary Europe, an assumption accepted by certain Synge critics.⁶² The south islanders 'represent some old type found on these few acres at the extreme border of Europe'.⁶³ Passing a tinker's camp, Synge muses that the 'precious' tinker children 'console us, one moment at least, for the manifold and beautiful life we have all missed who have been born in modern Europe ...'⁶⁴

The islander is patently framed within orientalist discourse: 'The red dresses of the women who cluster round the fire on their stools give a glow of almost Eastern richness'.⁶⁵ A pair of girls Synge meets 'spoke with a delicate exotic intonation' and told Synge 'with a sort of chant' of how they guided visitors.⁶⁶ Backbreaking toil is seen through the rose-tint of Eastern picturesqueness: 'In

⁵⁶ *Luasnad, Capa and Laine*, in *CW*, vol. 3, pp 194–205. ⁵⁷ *My Uncle John*, p. 48. ⁵⁸ Proinsias MacCana, *Celtic mythology* (London: Hamlyn, 1970), pp 63–5. ⁵⁹ Synge, *The Aran Islands*, in *CW*, vol. 2, p. 69. ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 99–100. ⁶¹ *My uncle John*, p. 137. ⁶² '[...] Celtic culture is characterized by attitudes not typical of the Western mind [...] Irish culture [...] has retained many features from [...] pre-history.' Thornton, *J.M. Synge and the western mind*, pp 50–1. ⁶³ Synge, *The Aran Islands*, in *CW*, vol. 2, p. 140. ⁶⁴ Synge, 'People and places', in *CW*, vol. 2, p. 199. ⁶⁵ Synge, *The Aran Islands*, in *CW*, vol. 2, p. 58. ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

Aran even manufacture is of interest. The low flame-edged kiln, sending out dense clouds of creamy smoke, with a band of red and grey clothed workers moving in the haze [...] forms a [...] picture from the East.⁶⁷ The 'eastern' nature of the *sean-nós* singing style of an islander is implied by its comparison with a 'chant' Synge 'once heard from a party of Orientals' he was travelling with 'in a third-class carriage from Paris to Dieppe'.⁶⁸

The occasionally-voiced belief that contemporary Travellers 'are the descendants of Phoenician tinsmiths'⁶⁹ and other supposed pre-Celtic peoples also imbricates the pre-Indo-European interlingual hypothesis (formulated in seventeenth-century France by Samuel Bochart) that suggested Phoenician was the mother tongue of all non-Romance languages of western Europe.⁷⁰ This orientalizing of Gaelic intrigued patriots, who wished to privilege the Celto-Phoenician linguistic paradigm over the competing claim that English culture derived from Graeco-Roman civilization.⁷¹ The French theory influenced Sir James Ware, and Ware's amanuensis, Duaid MacFirbis, versed as the latter was in Gaelic mytho-history, would have considered it a mere reiteration of established scholarship.⁷² General Charles Vallancey, remembered for his attempts to aggrandize his adopted country by linking the pre-historic Irish to an alarmingly vast range of 'eastern' peoples, imaginatively fused Bochartian theory and mytho-history; the General suggested that invader Phoenicians, who also settled Spain, gave their letters to the Gaels and were one of the pre-Milesian races recorded by MacFirbis and Keating.⁷³

Vallancey's explicit response to Grellmann, 'On the Origin and Language of the Gypsies' (1804), hibernicizes Grellmann's theory of the oriental origin of the Gypsies by grafting their putative journey from the Orient onto his previously conceived theories of the 'eastern' genesis of the pre-Celtic settlers of Ireland. Vallancey does not refer to Marsden's theory,⁷⁴ though he approvingly paraphrases Pococke's hypothesis. The General suggests that the Gypsies are from the ancient Black Sea district of Colchis and asserts that from there a 'body of Scythians', a population he suggests peopled Ireland in earlier writings, invaded India. Therefore, he argues in a dismissal of the Indian-origin hypothesis, 'what few Hindoostanee words [Gypsies] have, are derived from our [...] Indo-Sythæ, who returned to [...] Colchis, after their emigration to India'.⁷⁵ The General grafts his previously-cited Phoenician-Irish hypothesis onto Grellmann's theory by arguing that a splinter of the group who originally left Colchis, and continued wandering 'under the

67 Ibid., p. 77. 68 Ibid., p. 141. 69 'An Irish tinker on the road', *Sphere*, 15 Dec. 1956, p. 462.

70 Joseph Leerssen, 'On the edge of Europe: Ireland in search of Oriental roots, 1650-1850', *Comparative criticism*, 8 (1986), p. 95. 71 Ibid. 72 See Nollaig Ó Muraíle, *The celebrated antiquary: Dubhaltach Mac Fhirbhisigh (c.1600-1671)* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1996). 73 Vallancey, 'An essay on the antiquity of the Irish language' (Dublin: Powell, 1772), p. 2. 74 This, despite the fact that Marsden's paper was published alongside one of Vallancey's own in volume seven of *Archaeologia*. 75 Vallancey, 'On the origin and language of the Gypsies', *Collectanea de Rebus Hibernicis* (1770-1804), vi (1804), p. 86.

name of *Phoinice*', eventually arrived in Ireland.⁷⁶ Vallancey agrees with a contributor to the seventh volume of *Asiatic Researches* that 'many of Grellman's (*sic*) words of the Hindoostanee are very incorrect', a view with which certain reputable linguists actually concurred.⁷⁷ Sir William Jones, founder, in 1784, of the Asiatic Society, which published the *Asiatic Researches* journal at Calcutta, wrote that the 'many Sanscrit words' contained in Grellmann's vocabulary list proved the Indian origin of the Gypsies.⁷⁸ Vallancey's references within his article to the Asiatic Society's journal and to Gilchrist's Hindustani dictionary⁷⁹ indicate that he eagerly ingested any British orientalist productions that seemed to be of service to the vindication of Ireland's neglected glory;⁸⁰ the Gypsy becomes a mere prop in the Vallancey theatre of Irish antiquity. Thus, echoes of centuries of Irish mytho-historic and antiquarian discourse resonate in Synge's belief that 'tinkers' were a 'semi-gypsy' class with 'curiously Mongolian features'.⁸¹

However, for many other commentators on Gypsy origins, the medieval scholarly belief that 'the tribe' originated in Egypt was decidedly superseded by the rise of the Indian origin hypothesis in the late eighteenth century. This paradigm shift was entwined with the coalescence of British political and cultural interest in India in the wake of the conquest of Bengal in 1757, and the resultant dissemination of 'scientific' knowledge about India by orientalists, missionaries and administrators working within or funded by institutional structures such as the Asiatic Society and the East India Company.⁸² By the 1780s, explorations of the relationship of Indian culture and language to that of Europe were laying the foundations of the nineteenth-century Indo-European interlingual paradigm.

Many of the commentators on Gypsy culture discussed were directly involved in administrating the empire or the crown in India and Ireland; Marsden, later a fellow of the Asiatic Society of Calcutta, joined the East India Company in Sumatra in 1771, and co-founded an East India agency business; Gilchrist's first medical post was with the East India Company in 1783; Vallancey was posted to Ireland as a military engineer, and the English-born Pococke held various high ecclesiastical offices in Ireland. Among nineteenth-century commentators on Gypsy culture, the families of Synge and Crofton had long traditions of service to crown and church. Far from being an unmediated portrayal of a 'colourful' Irish minority, the multi-layered construct known as *The Tinker's Wedding* emerges from centuries of Irish, British and European dominant-class scholarship and lore about marginal or 'vanquished' population groups.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 64–5. ⁷⁷ Willems, *True Gypsy*, pp 78–9. ⁷⁸ *The works of Sir William Jones* (1807), vol. 3, pp 170–1, quoted in Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (University of California, 1997), p. 49. ⁷⁹ J.B. Gilchrist (1759–1841), British orientalist. Posted to India as a physician by the East India Company in 1783. Produced dictionaries and studies of Hindustani from the 1880s onwards. ⁸⁰ Trautmann, p. 95. ⁸¹ Synge, 'People and places', in *CW*, vol. 2, p. 198. ⁸² For a thorough discussion of the context of late-eighteenth-century British orientalism, see Trautmann.