CANON PATRICK AUGUSTINE SHEEHAN: PRIEST AND NOVELIST*

by SHERIDAN GILLEY

'The primary object of a novelist is to please',[1] said Anthony Trollope, but he also wanted to show vice punished and virtue rewarded. More roundly, Somerset Maugham declared that pleasing is the sole purpose of art in general and of the novel in particular, although he granted that novels have been written for other reasons.[2] Indeed, good novels usually embody a worldview, even if only an anarchic or atheist one, and the religious novel is not the only kind to have a dogma at its heart. There is the further issue of literary merit, which certain modern Catholic novelists such as Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene have achieved, giving the lie to Newman's assertion that in an English Protestant culture, a Catholic literature is impossible.[3] But Newman[4] and his fellow cardinal Wiseman both wrote novels; Wiseman's novel, *Fabiola*,[5] with its many translations, had an enthusiastic readership in the College of Cardinals, and was described by the archbishop of Milan as 'a good book with the success of a bad one'.[6] Victorian Ireland was a predominantly anglophone Catholic country, and despite poor literacy rates into the modern era, the three thousand novels in 1940 in the Dublin Central Cath-

* This essay is dedicated to the memory of the recently deceased W. R. Ward, FBA, President of the Ecclesiastical History Society forty years ago, in 1970, when I became a member.

1 Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography* (London, 1946), 221.

2 W. Somerset Maugham, *Ten Novels and their Authors* (London, 1954), 6–7.

3 Ian Ker, *The Catholic Revival in English Literature, 1845–1961: Newman, Hopkins, Belloc, Chesterton, Greene, Waugh* (Leominster, 2000), 1.

4 J. H. Newman, *Loss and Gain: or, the Story of a Convert* (London, 1848); idem, *Callista: A Sketch of the Third Century* (London, 1855); Robert Lee Wolff, *Gains and Losses: Novels of Faith and Doubt in Victorian England* (London, 1977), 41–72; Sheridan Gilley, 'Newman as Novelist', *Chesterton Review* 33/1-2 (Spring/Summer 2007), 139–58.

5 N. Wiseman, *Fabiola or, The Church of the Catacombs* (London, 1854); Wolff, *Gains and Losses*, 161–5; Andrew Sanders, *The Victorian Historical Novel 1840–1880* (London, 1978), 132–7.

6 Wilfrid Ward, *The Life and Times of Cardinal Wiseman*, 2 vols (London, 1897), 2: 107.

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olic Library indicate a sizeable literary culture,[7] comparable to the cultures of other Churches.[8] The 'literary canons' who contributed to this literature around 1900 included the Irishman Canon Patrick Augustine Sheehan, the subject of this essay;[9] another Irishman, Canon Joseph Guinan, who wrote eight novels on Irish rural life;[10] Canon William Barry, the son of Irish immigrants in London, whose masterpiece was the best-selling feminist novel, *The New Antigone*;[11] Henry E. Dennehy, commended by Margaret Maison in her classic study of the Victorian religious novel;[12] and the prolific Monsignor Robert Hugh Benson, the convert son of an archbishop of Canterbury.[13] Catholic writers were often ignored by the makers of the contemporary Irish literary revival, non-Catholics anxious to separate nationalism from Catholicism (sometimes by appealing to the nation's pre-Christian past), but this Catholic subculture is now being studied. Despite the dismissive entries about Sheehan in various reference works,[14] a reflection of

7 Stephen J. Brown, *Novels and Tales by Catholic Writers: A Catalogue* (Dublin, 1940).

8 Margaret M. Maison, *Search your Soul, Eustace: A Survey of the Religious Novel in the Victorian Age* (London, 1961); Wolff, *Gains and Losses*; Andrew Sanders, 'Christianity and Literature in English', in Sheridan Gilley and Brian Stanley, eds, *CHC*, 9: *World Christianities c.1815 – c.1914* (Cambridge, 2006), 136–41.

9 There is a good standard biography using original material by Sheehan's American friend and patron Fr Herman J. Heuser, *Canon Sheehan of Doneraile: The Story of an Irish Parish Priest as told chiefly by himself in Books, Personal Memoirs and Letters* (London, 1918). The centenary edition of Sheehan's works was published in 1952, as was Michael P. Linehan, *Canon Sheehan of Doneraile* (Dublin, 1952).

10 Catherine Candy, *Priestly Fictions: Popular Irish Novels of the Early Twentieth Century* (Dublin, 1995), 94–113.

11 William Francis Barry, *The New Antigone: A Romance* (London, 1887); idem, *Memories and Opinions* (London, 1926); Sheridan Gilley, 'Father William Barry, Priest and Novelist', *Recusant History* 20 (1999), 523–51.

12 Maison, *Search Your Soul*, 153. The two listed novels by Dennehy are *Alethea, at the Parting of the Ways* (London, 1906); *A Flower of Asia: An Indian Story* (London, 1901).

13 C. C. Martindale, *The Life of Monsignor Robert Hugh Benson*, 2 vols (London, 1917); Janet Grayson, *Robert Hugh Benson: Life and Works* (Lanham, MD, 1998).

14 Thus Robert Hogan, ed., *The Macmillan Dictionary of Irish Literature* (London, 1980), 601: 'he had the conventional opinions one would expect in a Roman Catholic cleric of his day', though the writer thinks this a strength as well as a weakness. See also Patrick Maume, 'Sheehan, Canon Patrick Augustine', in Brian Lalor, ed., *The Encyclopaedia of Ireland* (Dublin, 2003), 984, though for Maume's considered view, see n. 15 below. Sheehan gets brief entries in works such as Henry Boylan, ed., *A Dictionary of Irish Biography* (Dublin, 1998), 396; Louis McRedmond, ed., *Modern Irish Lives: Dictionary of 20th-Century Irish Biography* (Dublin, 1996), 291.

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the new Irish anti-clerical mood, Sheehan himself is the subject of recent articles,[15] a lengthy study[16] and an excellent monograph.[17]

Like many historians, a novelist states and explores his themes by taking his characters through a plot or narrative: hence the attention to plot in this essay. Sheehan's stories declare his views on the strengths and weaknesses of Irish clerical training and of the Irish Catholic clergy, on the Church's role in Irish life, on the central role of women, on the Irish nationalist tradition in both its constitutional and revolutionary forms, on Irish poverty, capitalism, strikes and emigration to America, on the need for the regeneration of Irish culture through a Catholic literature, and on English landlordism and colonialism and their effects on Irish life. It is the aim of this essay to show how as a storyteller he is a many-sided commentator on his faith and fatherland.

Patrick Augustine Sheehan was born in 1852, at Mallow in County Cork. Of his two brothers, one died in childhood. His two sisters, to whom he was devoted, joined the Sisters of Mercy and died when young. Sheehan and his siblings had been orphaned as children, and as the ward of their parish priest, Dr John McCarthy, later bishop of Cloyne, Sheehan was trained for the priesthood first at St Colman's College, Fermoy, and then at the national seminary of St Patrick's College, Maynooth. He thought that his Maynooth education had rested too much on fear and not on idealistic faith, a fear which was an inadequate safeguard against a later lapse into selfish worldliness.[18] He described the philosophical and theolog-

[15] Catherine Candy, 'Canon Sheehan: The Conflicts of the Priest-Author', in R. V. Comerford et al., eds, *Religion, Conflict and Coexistence in Ireland: Essays Presented to Monsignor Patrick J. Corish* (Dublin, 1990), 252–77; Lawrence W. McBride, 'A Literary Life of a Socially and Politically Engaged Priest: Canon Patrick Augustine Sheehan (1852–1913)', in Gerard Moran, ed., *Radical Irish Priests 1660–1970* (Dublin, 1998), 131–48. There is no *DNB* entry on Sheehan as he died in 1913; the volume for that decade appeared in 1927 after partition. The recent sympathetic entry in *ODNB* is by Lawrence McBride. See also Patrick Maume, 'Sheehan, (Canon) Patrick Augustine', in James McGuire and James Quinn, eds, *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, 9 vols (Cambridge, 2009), 8: 882–4.

[16] Candy, *Priestly Fictions*, esp. 21–93; on the reception of Sheehan's works, ibid. 129–54.

[17] Ruth Fleischmann, *Catholic Nationalism in the Irish Revival: A Study of Canon Sheehan, 1852–1913* (Basingstoke, 1997). Her work, though very critical, seems to me the best in its field, and its bibliography is the most complete that I have seen about Sheehan.

[18] Heuser, *Canon Sheehan*, 39.

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ical teaching as dry. 'Relentless logic, with its formidable *chevaux-de-frise* of syllogisms, propositions, scholia; metaphysics, sublime, but hardened into slabs of theories, congealed in mediaeval Latin ... The Graces were nowhere!'[19] He found solace in the literature class, in Carlyle, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Browning and George Eliot,[20] sometimes hidden inside a theological tome, and in reading in foreign languages. One comfort was Shakespeare, whom he called, with reference to that 'terrible "Timon of Athens," [and] that still more terrible "Lear"', 'the greatest interpreter of humanity the world has ever seen'.[21] His youthful enthusiasm for Carlyle[22] led him into a love of Germany – there are only good Germans in his novels – and a highly critical interest in the German philosophies of Kant, Fichte and Schelling, 'that most poetical of German philosophers',[23] who is prominent in his learned musings in *Under the Cedars and the Stars* on his 'two constant, never varying loves – my philosophers and my poets'.[24] This went, however, with a passionate revulsion against the secular modern mind and its terrible power against religious faith:

> Literature has usurped the place of religion, as the guide and teacher of mankind; and religious persons have not been wise enough to retaliate and carry the war in to the enemy's country ... Goethe had a gospel; so had George Eliot; so had Carlyle; so had Tennyson; so had Browning.[25]

His early essays, according to Chesterton, 'constitute a consistent and incessant appeal to Ireland, his country, to stand up as the champion of the things which the modern world so largely mocks, positive virginity, abstract chivalry, and, above all, the firm feet of humility that are planted on the ancient earth and take hold of

[19] Cited in Fleischmann, *Catholic Nationalism*, 20–1. However Sheehan, in *Under the Cedars & the Stars* (Dublin, 1940; first publ. 1903), 33, states: 'In our own colleges, there can be no great change from the rigid, logical method, because such method is preparatory and fundamental'.

[20] All are discussed in Sheehan, *Under the Cedars.*

[21] P. A. Sheehan, *Lisheen: or, The Test of the Spirits* (London, 1914; first publ. 1907), 132.

[22] Heuser, *Canon Sheehan*, 30–1.

[23] Sheehan, *Under the Cedars*, 10.

[24] Ibid. 119; on Kant and Fichte, see ibid. 104–5; on Hegelianism, ibid. 197–8; on Hegel and Schelling, ibid. 56–7, 77–9; on Schelling, ibid. 240.

[25] Ibid. 223.

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it'.[26] His novels discuss philosophy and metaphysics, but he thought that access to the popular imagination lay in the literary presentation of philosophical ideas, and that the German philosophers who so fascinated him could be answered by the practical experience of ordinary people. As one of his young intellectuals puts it, contemplating the happiness of a family redeemed from disorder and drink, 'Schopenhauer takes a back seat here.'[27]

There was a positive side to his view of Maynooth. He admired as pastors the priests who had succeeded their more timid continentally trained successors: 'the strongest, fiercest, most fearless army of priests that ever fought for the spiritual and temporal interests of the people – men of large physique and iron constitutions, who spent ten hours a day on horseback, despised French claret, loved their people and chastised them like fathers',[28] and then, the new generation of 'clean-cut, small of stature, keen-faced, bicycle-riding, coffee-drinking, encyclopaedic young fellows', regarded by their elders with 'tolerant contempt'.[29] He was of another type, as one of nature's ascetics, who disliked the prosperity of many of the clergy, and looked on the material success of his own Church with a distrustful eye, as one fearful for its future.

On his first pastorate, in the English diocese of Plymouth, his mind was sharpened by the contrast between Ireland and England, where he claimed to have learned more theology than in his whole Irish training, but after a disastrous disarrangement of the bishop's *cappa magna* he suspected that the 'English people, clergy, Bishop and all' were 'conceited and formal as well as individualistic',[30] preoccupied with respectability and better versed in rule keeping and rubrics than in religion. Yet on his return to Ireland, first as a curate to Mallow, and then to the cathedral at Queenstown (now Cobh), with something of an English accent, he tried to introduce his flocks to English standards of punctuality, cleanli-

[26] G. K. Chesterton, 'The Variety of Essays' [review of P. A. Sheehan, *Early Essays and Lectures* (London, 1906)], *Daily News*, 31 October 1906; I owe this reference to Dr Julia Stapleton. See Heuser, *Canon Sheehan*, 88–95.

[27] P. A. Sheehan, *The Triumph of Failure: A Sequel to Geoffrey Austin, Student* (London, 1904; first publ. 1899), 263.

[28] P. A. Sheehan, *My New Curate: A Story Gathered from the Stray Leaves of an Old Diary* (London, 1928; first publ. 1899), 165.

[29] Ibid. 166.

[30] Heuser, *Canon Sheehan*, 61.

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ness and efficiency, and to inspire Irish education with a literary idealism which would raise Ireland in the intellectual world while confirming the country's religious and national character. In this he rejected English materialism, yet his view of Ireland was critical and remained so. 'It is an unhappy and distracted country', he wrote in 1911 to his friend, the American jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes, of his own attempt at a cross-denominational debate, *The Intellectuals*,[31] 'and the one thing which hitherto saved it – a certain kind of Celtic idealism – has now given way before the advance of materialism.'[32] Progress was necessary, but progress could mean materialism, and the loss of a precious and heroic history.

As an educational reformer, writing in the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, he deplored the worldly values of the new system of success by public examinations, especially for the civil service, which he regarded as an enemy to the faith, and which Patrick Pearse was to denounce as a 'murder machine'.[33] The lack of positive reaction helped make him a novelist. Here he could also voice his feelings about the paganism of literary culture and the shortcomings of the Catholic Church in Ireland, its failure to rise to the intellectual and spiritual challenges of the society around it, especially as presented by the literary movements of the time. He saw the novel as the best contemporary way of teaching science and history as well as morality. His larger aim was '"to create our own civilization" ... founded on simplicity, self-surrender; and as alien as possible to all our modern ideas of progress'.[34] The difficulty was that of diminishing poverty without collapsing into materialism, chiefly represented by the 'American fever'[35] of the mass emigration by the young to the New World, on which he wrote a deterrent comic

[31] P. A. Sheehan, *The Intellectuals: An Experiment in Irish Club-Life* (London, 1911).

[32] Heuser, *Canon Sheehan*, 237. This correspondence has been published: David H. Burton, ed., *The Letters of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes and Canon Sheehan* (Washington, DC, 1976).

[33] See Ruth Dudley Edwards, *Patrick Pearse: The Triumph of Failure* (London, 1977), 206: 'What Pearse was railing against ... was the repressive spirit of Irish education, which squeezed out pupils' individuality and made them slaves to examinations and unsympathetic teachers, who had themselves been rendered impotent by the rigid imposition of narrow curricula.'

[34] Heuser, *Canon Sheehan*, 178.

[35] P. A. Sheehan, *Glenanaar: A Story of Irish Life* (London, 1918; first publ. 1905), 274.

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song.[36] Two of the characters in his novel *Miriam Lucas*[37] become prostitutes in New York and represent his view of its moral danger. He feared the loss of native virtue in the decline of traditional folklore and local superstition, in which he took a scholar's delight. He vainly upheld the cleanliness and culture of the German Catholic peasantry, even to the extent of advocating the removal of the middens from near Irish cabin doors. His Ireland was a tragic country, of falling population and material decay, which he largely attributed to the landlord system of increasing the rent for any improvement that a tenant might make. His heart was in the revolutionary tradition, though his head opposed it.

As parish priest of Doneraile, in County Cork, he was kept out of controversy by his personal mildness and good relations with local landowners, especially by his friendship with Lord Castletown of Doneraile Court, a Gaelic League enthusiast, whom Sheehan advised on the setting up of the Irish National University. Sheehan secured for Doneraile a water supply, electric lighting and street paving. He gave lectures and formed literary societies, though in his novel *The Blindness of Dr Gray* the performance of *Hamlet*, brought to the village by its cultivated curate, is greeted by the audience when the ghost appears with choruses of 'Finigan's Wake', their apology being that 'The timtation was too great!'[38] Sheehan assiduously supervised the seven schools of his parish, and more controversially negotiated the local arrangements under George Wyndham's Land Act of 1903 by which the Catholic tenantry became peasant proprietors, though he later voiced the fear that some had 'degenerated into public house loafers'.[39] In his communal role, Sheehan was like many other Irish clergy, but he was estranged from the mainstream Home Rule movement, supporting in 1910 the Cork-based All-for-Ireland League of his childhood friend, the Nationalist MP William O'Brien, who (like Sheehan) had been born in Mallow in 1852 and who had been in gaol for his politics.[40] A few days before his death, Sheehan destroyed the manuscript of his memoirs lest they should cause

[36] Heuser, *Canon Sheehan*, 355–9.
[37] P. A. Sheehan, *Miriam Lucas* (London, 1912).
[38] P. A. Sheehan, *The Blindness of Dr Gray: or, The Final Law* (London, 1909), 246.
[39] Sheehan, *The Intellectuals*, 61. This may be only the speaker's view.
[40] Joseph V. O'Brien, *William O'Brien and the Course of Irish Politics 1881–1918* (Berkeley, CA, 1976), 185–212.

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offence. His people were proud of him, and gave him a royal funeral. He had already passed his literary income to the diocese for the benefit of sick and aged clergy. He was buried under a Celtic cross with the inscription, '"Where dwellest thou, Rabbi?" And Jesus said "Come and see."'[41]

Sheehan's ten completed novels[42] are written with pace and excitement, but have the disadvantage for the modern reader of indulging in the Victorian taste for detailed description, an elaborate narrative and an intricate plot spun over five hundred closely printed pages or more, for the enjoyment of long winter evenings.[43] They are relieved from tedium by their author's agreeable vice of letting social realism succumb to sensationalism, a combination recommended by Trollope himself.[44] Their humour is largely reportage of the rug-pulling wit of the Irish peasantry.

Sheehan's first novel, *Geoffrey Austin: Student*, anonymously published in 1895 and affectionately dedicated to the Catholic youth of Ireland, fell stillborn from the press. Its hero, the orphaned ward of a kindly priest, like Sheehan himself, attends Mayfield, a 'Grinding School', in order to pass a civil service exam for the Control Department in the Army. The name refers to Gayfield School, founded to cram Irish Catholic boys for the civil service exams and attended by Sheehan's brother. There is a blight on Mayfield from its more brutish students and its presiding pedagogue 'the Grinder', Hugh Bellamy, with his harshly utilitarian view of education as a way of getting on, his abuse of his brother and sister, and his mysterious past disgrace. The more virtuous

[41] Heuser, *Canon Sheehan*, 391.

[42] Sheehan left incomplete *Tristram Lloyd: The Romance of a Journalist*, about an embittered young man brought to better spirits by faith. His anger at the plight of the poor is contrasted with the rage of an anti-Semitic Russian revolutionary who marries and then murders Lloyd's sister. The work was finished by his literary executor Henry Gaffney OP (Dublin, 1928). Sheehan also wrote stories for children (Heuser, *Canon Sheehan*, 99), and a melodrama, *'Lost Angel of a Ruined Paradise': A Drama of Modern Life* (London, 1904), for the benefit of a convalescent home for sick children, about three girls whose future is foretold as a wife, a nurse and a nun. It was not performed. The sensationalist plot involves a malicious suitor, the bankruptcy of the father of one girl by the father of another, and the death of one girl. I have not studied Sheehan's poetry.

[43] For the full critical bibliography of his fictional works, see Rolf Loeber and Magda Loeber, *A Guide to Irish Fiction 1650–1900* (Dublin, 2006), 1185–9.

[44] On being realistic and sensational: 'A good novel should be both, and both in the highest degree': Trollope, *Autobiography*, 204.

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boys include Austin's friend Charlie Travers, who has crushed the school bully but is now sick from overstudying. Austin blocks the flue to a stove, filling the school hall with smoke and so inadvertently spoiling the social evening at which Bellamy tries to butter up some men of influence. The tale is broken by the storytelling among the boys around the winter fire, including a bizarre fantasy about a leper prince in the Pacific whose riches cannot cure him, and a young Frenchman's anecdote of escaping a firing squad after the Paris Commune when he crosses himself and so proves that he is not a Communard. This points, in a self-interested manner, to the need to show one's faith, and condemns Irish Catholics for not doing so. Austin and the Frenchman establish their valour when they save the sickly Travers from the resurgent bully. There is a rural interlude with the tragic story of a young man who has gone to an Irish Queen's College, loses his faith, shoots at his saintly parish priest and dies impenitent. The Grinder's character is softened; his secrets are exposed: another marriage after deserting his first wife, the madness of his second, and a secret son at the school. The school closes, but Bellamy is reconciled to his abused siblings.

The teachers interest Austin in classics and foreign languages but not in mathematics, the examination that Austin fails. His friend Travers also fails, but in a religious experience, Travers condemns their classical literary education as more pagan than Christian. With its epigraph from Newman, on the tragic necessity of 'unlearning the world's poetry, and attaining to its prose', and its chapter headings from non-Catholics (George Eliot, Schiller, Ruskin, William Blake and Coleridge), Sheehan exalts the authors and philosophers with the saints above any more practical or worldly form of educational training or success, while condemning a pagan philosophy based on literature alone.

Sheehan resumed Austin's history in *The Triumph of Failure*, published in 1899. His hero's semi-pagan education has damaged his faith, and he lives in abject poverty and increasing mental distress in his quest for a truth to live by. His suffering is partly relieved by his friendships with the few Catholics who have the serenity he lacks, such as the Bellamy household of Hugh's brother and sister and his old German tutor, Herr Messing, whose idealism is contrasted with the materialism of much of the Dublin Catholic middle class, its half-apologetic shame for being Catholic, the

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formalism of its religious practice, its indifference to the disease, poverty and suffering around it and its casual attitude (especially among young men) to religion. Typical is the determination of a Catholic mother to marry her daughter to a rich, depraved, alcoholic Protestant. The Grinder, Hugh Bellamy, dies a penitent Catholic. The message of the work is profoundly other-worldly, though this is lightened by portraits of a group of good if care-free and careless medical students. Sheehan's own hope for a lay Catholic revival is voiced in the passionate preaching of humility and holy poverty by Austin's old friend from Mayfield, Charlie Travers. Travers is committed to gaol, the victim of a plot by publicans and others hurt by his crusades to convert the poor and to establish a Magdalen asylum, and dies after his release, while Austin, after years of intellectual struggle, becomes a Carmelite friar. Even while rehearsing the Church's cultural achievements, Sheehan hardly thinks them the point, for the heart of Christianity lies not in any such cultural triumph but in the triumph of failure on Calvary. *The Triumph of Failure* is the subtitle of Ruth Dudley Edwards's biography of Patrick Pearse,[45] the leader of the 1916 Rising, whose personality looks like an attempt to embody the character of Geoffrey Austin. The precise nature of Travers's crusade to create a devout and effective laity is unclear, and Austin in his quest for holiness ends up not as a layman but a friar.

The literary historian John Wilson Foster has described *The Triumph of Failure* as 'essential reading for anyone who seeks the entire picture of Irish fiction in the 1890s',[46] and as sharing with Yeats 'the *fin-de-siècle* theme of spiritual brinkmanship', of fascination with 'debauchery, dreams, and dark nights of the soul as necessary preludes to salvation'.[47] Its author had little sympathy from his fellow clergy, apart from the Jesuit Matthew Russell. But *Geoffrey Austin* attracted the attention and encouragement of Fr Herman Heuser, the Jesuit editor of the *American Ecclesiastical Review*, which published Sheehan's next book, *My New Curate*. This appeared as a separate work in 1900.[48] Its background is

[45] Dudley Edwards, *Patrick Pearse*.

[46] John Wilson Foster, *Fictions of the Irish Literary Revival: A Changeling Art* (Syracuse, NY, 1987), xiii–xiv.

[47] Ibid. 179.

[48] Loeber and Loeber, *A Guide*, lists a Boston edition of 1899.

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rural Ireland, which Sheehan knew better than Geoffrey Austin's Dublin. Fr Daniel Hanrahan, known as Daddy Dan, has annoyed his bishop, who decides to send him a curate who will break his heart in six weeks. After thirty years in the impoverished seaside village of Kilronan, Fr Dan has settled into comfortable old age, having lost his ambitions to express his classical learning in print or to improve the living conditions of the parish with a new fishing station and factory, defeated by the remoteness of the landlord, the indifference of his agent and the government, and the stubborn conservatism of his people. 'Nothing on earth can cure the inertia of Ireland. It weighs down like the weeping clouds on the damp heavy earth'.[49] The new curate, Fr Letheby, a vigorous young man with years of service in Manchester, shares a love of the classics with the parish priest, whose Latinity was part of presbytery culture, but Letheby is appalled by the inconsistencies of his devout but rough-hewn flock, with their admirable 'fervid Celtic imagination'[50] and a character which he cannot pierce, and by their 'ancient Irish customs'[51] of fairy folklore. Sheehan describes the Celtic temperament: generous, open-hearted and witty, but superstitious, irascible, irresponsible and irrational, with a hair-trigger temper unless restrained by the clergy, to whom the peasants are devoted. This is what three hundred years of English landlord oppression have made them.

Fr Letheby exposes the local revolutionary organizer as a British spy – there is only contempt here for the Fenians and their rising in Ireland in 1867 – and the priest quells the rabble by alleging the hidden influence among them of Jews and Freemasons, who even manufacture Catholic articles of devotion; Fr Dan later suggests that they are financing pornography. The reader is not prepared to meet in Ireland these demons of the nineteenth-century clerical mind, which were then dividing France,[52] though Irish anti-Semitism was not uncommon,[53] and there was to be a persecution

49 Sheehan, *My New Curate*, 13.

50 Ibid. 152.

51 Ibid. 155.

52 Ruth Harris, *The Man on Devil's Ireland: Alfred Dreyfus and the Affair that Divided France* (London, 2010).

53 R. F. Foster, *Paddy and Mr Punch: Connections in Irish and English History* (London, 1993), 32. There is a good Jew, Levi, in *Tristram Lloyd*, and some favourable comparison with Jews, but these may be the work of Sheehan's continuator, Fr Gaffney.

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in 1904 of the Jews in Limerick. Letheby converts the violent and faithless Catholic landlord to better ways by showing his courage on the landlord's yacht in a storm, and more importantly he helps to convert the young gentleman Protestant who is engaged to the landlord's daughter; but the prime agents of religious conversion are (as elsewhere in Sheehan's work) the holy women, both the young lady herself and the village saint (the former village belle), who is apparently dying of a dreadful skin disease but then recovers, though by natural means. Irish Catholicism is shown as a conspiracy between the womenfolk and the clergy. Letheby greatly improves the ardour and musical quality of the new order of religious observance produced by the Irish 'Devotional Revolution',[54] with confraternities and sodalities. He establishes a shirt-making factory, and commissions a new fishing boat. But the factory closes with debts because of the wayward behaviour of its girl workers, whom public opinion exiles to America, and the boat is sunk, it seems at first without proper insurance. Letheby is only saved by the generosity of a fellow priest who has a nice nest-egg from his mission in Australia, and whom the curate has rescued from the heresies of Modernist biblical scholarship. Letheby becomes administrator of the cathedral, while Daddy Dan declines a canonry, leaving the proffered rochet, mozzetta and biretta of a canon at his death to his departed protégé. The book begins with an act of episcopal tyranny and concludes with one of episcopal generosity, which seems to show that all is right in the Church at the end.

The book is pervaded by the priest's respect for the suffering and poverty of the poor, which gives them an inherent spiritual power. But the priest is, if benevolent, also all-powerful over them. To lighten the message, there are many excellent touches of conversational wit and of description, as of an old curate's cart on exit from his parish, with

> three loads of black turf, carefully piled and roped; then two loads of hay; a cow with a yearling calf; and lastly, the house furniture, mostly of rough deal ... hardly good enough for one of our new labourers' cottages, ... a kitchen table, its four legs pointing steadily to the firmament, like an untrussed fowl's,

54 Emmet Larkin, 'The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850–75', *AHR* 77 (1972), 625–52.

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> and ... the plague and the pet of the village, Nanny the goat, with her little kid beside her ...[55]

The traditional Irish marriage, usually the result of hard-headed haggling and barter, is sentimentally observed, and contrasted with the wickedness of foreign customs and with the incoming rage among the young for romantic attachments. Another omission is of the notorious 'gombeen' men, the shopkeeper moneylenders of Irish life, who preyed upon the hard-pressed farmers. In short, though partly inspired by the Fenian Charles Kickham's novel *Knocknagow*,[56] *My New Curate* has some of the characteristics of the contemporary 'Kailyard School' of J. M. Barrie and 'Ian Maclaren' in their delightful but sentimental depictions of Scottish village life. *My New Curate* was Sheehan's most popular work, was translated into many languages (including Italian), and won him a doctorate from Rome.

Intended for inclusion in the work was the story 'The Monks of Trabolgan', to figure as a tale by Fr Letheby, in which an Irish abbey is seized by the government after a young monk makes enemies for the community with a political pamphlet defending the Church against the secular power – a warning against rash publication, however justified – and then brings disaster when in innocence he guides a German warship into a nearby harbour.[57] The tale foreshadows the expulsion of the religious orders from France, the tension between the Church and the Irish MPs, and the British fear of a German invasion of Ireland. Sheehan's other short stories include 'A Spoiled Priest' (a phrase which he strongly deprecates), about a Maynooth seminarian mysteriously denied ordination who discovers his vocation as a Carthusian in a kindly word from a younger priest who had hero-worshipped him.[58] In 'Rita, the Street-Singer', a variant on 'Hansel and Gretel', a Neapolitan girl with a beautiful voice loses through death her beloved sister and her hostile stepmother, and is reunited by song with the father who had abandoned her.[59] The bloodcurdling supernatural tale, 'Remanded', is based on the Doneraile story of Thomas Duan,

55 Sheehan, *My New Curate*, 2.
56 Charles P. Kickham, *Knocknagow: or, the Cabins of Tipperary* (London, 1879).
57 P. A. Sheehan, *A Spoiled Priest and other Stories* (London, 1905), 43–85.
58 Ibid. 1–26.
59 Ibid. 86–135.

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a priest charged with a political crime by a woman who then commits suicide. The priest overrules his parishioners to give her a Christian burial, and her corrupting corpse returns to frighten to suicide the magistrate who had bribed her for her testimony.[60] 'How the Angel became Happy' is a gruesome vignette, like one of Monsignor Benson's,[61] of an angel who pleads for the death of a child to ensure her salvation.[62] 'Frank Forrest's Mince-Pie' is a Dickensian Christmas yarn of a boy who gives food, including his mince pie, to a poor woman with two children who come to the door on a snowbound Christmas Eve. Frank is rewarded with dreams warning him of the dangers awaiting him in later life.[63]

In *Luke Delmege*, first serialized in the *American Ecclesiastical Review* and separately published in 1901, Sheehan retold his experience of England. A young priest, the hero of the title, returns to his native place in Ireland full of academic honours from Maynooth, to find them ignored by everyone, even his bishop, who sends him on the English mission. Before departing Luke dines with some of the homely native priests and then, in an appalling social ordeal, with his own parish priest, a canon who has a noble history of improving his people's lot but is proudly aloof, conservative and respectable. Luke is humiliated by the supercilious young nephew of the canon, and the canon is mortified when Luke shatters the stuffiness of the drawing room by singing a revolutionary ballad. In London and then in an English cathedral city, Luke is seduced by English gentility to substitute a gospel of spiritual and material progress and human perfectibility for Christianity through the worship of the God in man, though he is horrified by the barbarism of an English execution, disagreeing with both his superior and his intellectual English circle about capital punishment. But on his return home to celebrate his sister's wedding, he is also repelled by the vulgar merriment of the occasion and by Irish backwardness and begging. The canon's young nephew, a doctor in London, has become a drug addict, and has to be rescued from an opium den by his saintly sister. The brother dies, and the sister quixotically

[60] Ibid. 136–67; the outcome is a little unclear.

[61] Benson's story is especially distressing, as the protective angel pushes the boy beneath a cart: R. H. Benson, 'The Bridge over the Stream', in idem, *The Light Invisible* (London, 1911), 97–106.

[62] Sheehan, *A Spoiled Priest*, 168–90.

[63] Ibid. 191–203.

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expiates his sin incognito, affecting to be a repentant prostitute, in a convent of the Good Shepherd order. Luke is disgraced in England as the unwitting agent of the lapse from the faith of an English intellectual convert. Luke returns to Ireland, calling it 'Siberia',[64] 'a land of death and ruin',[65] 'of cast-iron conservatism'.[66] He rages at the landlord class, contrasting them with the down-bent, wind-burnt farmers who toil

> for the agent, that he might have his brandy and cigars; and for two old ladies in a Dublin Square, that they might give steaks to their lap-dogs; and for a solicitor again above them, that he might pay for his son in Trinity; and, on the highest pinnacle of the infamous system, for the lord, that he might have a racer at the Derby and St Cloud, and a set of brilliants for Sadie at the *Opéra Comique*.[67]

But Luke estranges his Irish parishioners by his English manner and his English attempts to improve them, and he outrages them by damning the unpunctuality, inconvenience and drink of an Irish funeral. Yet it is the poor, who insist on interment in a distant skull-and-bone-strewn ruined abbey graveyard, who are preserving the native tradition. On visiting England, Luke finds that it is the poor Irish and Italians at his old mission who welcome him. He has to be reconverted doubly, to Irish ways and to a life of absolute material renunciation. The agents of the change are his mother's funeral, attended in pouring rain by a vast congress of peasants and clergy, and the old soldiers at All Souls' Tide paying for masses for their fallen comrades. He wins his congregation with a sermon on the gallantry of the Irish Brigade at the battle of Cremona, and he is overcome by the holiness of the Good Shepherd penitent and the order's saintly chaplain, in a vignette which, in its high Victorian sentimentality, is not saved by Sheehan's usual redeeming touch of astringency. Then there is violence: the landlord demands back rent from his tenants for the increased profitability of the local farms effected by the worthy canon; Luke's aged father is evicted; and Luke is gaoled for snapping the sword of the evicting officer.

[64] P. A. Sheehan, *Luke Delmege* (London, 1932; first publ. 1901), 332.
[65] Ibid. 333.
[66] Ibid. 380.
[67] Ibid. 344.

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He dies in his humble mission as the servant of God and his people, having become again an Irishman. Sheehan recalls in Luke some of his English experiences, as in picking out 'of reviews and pamphlets more theological information than he had acquired in his four years' divinity course';[68] in being told to burn a sermon of which he had been proud; and in smothering the bishop in his *cappa magna*. His moral is that Irish prosperity must be found in an Irish way congruent with the gospel, and not in the manner of England.

Sheehan's examination of the pathos of the sacerdotal life earned him the dislike of Monsignor John Hogan of Maynooth, who in the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* described the book as full of 'stilted nonsense' while still being 'a clever, an instructive and a good one'.[69] Some priests feared that the demonstration of their humanity exposed the vulnerability of their calling. Sheehan therefore turned from the subject of the priesthood back to rural Ireland in *Glenanaar*, published in 1905; the story is recorded in his own persona as parish priest of Doneraile as he hears it from a 'Yank', a mysterious returned émigré from America who has intervened to great effect and injury to himself in a local hurling match. Sheehan had read up the court reports on the Doneraile informers, who in 1829, in the war to enforce the payment of Church of Ireland tithes, had falsely denounced twenty-one local men for conspiring to murder three brutal and unpopular landlords. Some of the 'conspirators' were defended at their trial by the Irish Liberator, Daniel O'Connell, but there could be no public forgiveness for the informers or their families, who were henceforth outcasts shunned by all. In Sheehan's story, one of their victims, a decent local farmer, at great risk to himself, takes into his house on a snowy Christmas Eve an informer's abandoned child, who is called Nodlag, the Irish word for Christmas. When she grows up she incurs the jealousy of the new wife of the household, her disgraceful origins become known, and she is turned out onto the roads, only to return nearly dead of starvation during the Famine. She is saved again by the local blacksmith, who has loved her and marries her. A growing delicacy about her tragedy protects her children from the knowledge of their informer grandfather, but a

[68] Ibid. 191.

[69] Candy, *Priestly Fictions*, 34. Hogan disliked Sheehan's fear of the pagan classics.

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son who has become a passionate Fenian and a champion hurler has his tainted ancestry thrown in his face as an insult when he smashes a boy's teeth during a hurling match. In his agony of hurt pride and shame over his unclean ancestry, he insults his mother, abandons his fiancée, goes to America, makes his fortune and returns as the 'Yank' twenty-five years later, hoping to marry his old flame, now a widow. Out of a pride as great as his, she refuses him, and instead he marries her daughter who resembles her as she was in her youth, in what Sheehan must have thought the best of outcomes. The book is the most neatly plotted of Sheehan's novels, and was written out of his experience of his negotiation of tenant purchase, urging the necessity to let the old agonizing hatreds die. He was to query this later on.

Sheehan was always fascinated by an idealism not his own. He opens *Lisheen*, published in 1907, by summarizing the well-to-do young men of Trinity College in three broad categories: those who work for their own advancement and end up defending the 'things that are'; the sowers of wild oats, who become equally defensive of the 'things that are'; and the wild young dreamers who are dangerous, with a vision of things 'as "they ought to be"'.[70] His hero, a young Irish landlord, Robert Maxwell, is in the third category. He reads Tolstoy, and abandons his class to work incognito as a farm labourer among the Irish peasantry, who are shown as suffering, kindly, devout and hardy, if occasionally idiotic as well as hotheaded, and greatly oppressed by landlord callousness. The village of Lisheen is in Kerry, one of the poorest counties of Ireland. The family which gives Maxwell refuge is evicted and their children are gaoled for resisting the bailiffs, but he ultimately saves the situation with the aid of a cynical, atheistic and socially enlightened English industrialist, who brings prosperity to his neighbourhood and is the foil to his friend, the simple unworldly priest who believes in the possibility of human virtue. Maxwell marries the Englishman's daughter and all ends happily, with the somewhat paradoxical implication that Ireland can be saved from landlordism by English wealth and industry, without reference to religion. There is a parallel tale of a tragic marriage between a society beauty and a dissipated ex-Indian army officer, who is pursued by his Indian mistress, turns out to be a leper

[70] Sheehan, *Lisheen*, 4.

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and drowns. The depiction of the poor parallels the scenes set in fashionable Dublin, but though the Irish virtues, such as their hospitality to strangers, are bound up with their poverty, Sheehan's narrative oddly implies that English-sponsored social and material improvement could be the salvation of Ireland.

Sheehan returned to the clergy with his third clerical failure in *The Blindness of Dr Gray*, published in 1909. Dr Gray is a savage old parish priest, whose blindness is not just his failing sight but his 'hard, proud, domineering disposition' hardened by 'a rigorous theological system, that approached as closely to Jansenism as orthodoxy might'. Intellectually, Dr Gray was bound five times over by the law: the 'Law of Nature, so unfeeling, so despotic, so revengeful; the Natural Law ...; the Law of the Realm ...; Canon Law ...; Ecclesiastical Law, national, provincial, diocesan', received as the perfect expression of the divine mind.[71] Dr Gray's people respect him for his learning and generosity to the poor and his rule by righteousness, but fear him for his lack of pity. His redemption from the religion of law begins with his niece, the daughter of a sister whom he has banished to America for a minor youthful frivolity. Here as elsewhere, America is the Botany Bay of the Irish sinner. Luckily the niece, taught by nuns, can read him his Latin authors. Dr Gray also has the help of a more humane curate, although he withers the lad for daring to play the piano and to love the works of Goethe, Heine and the gentle Lutheran Jean-Paul Richter. The old priest, for all his erudition, is a veritable Tertullian; he has never read a novel, and hates and despises worldly literature, which his curate wants to sanctify for Christianity. The curate agonizes over whether to burn his books, and denounces his superior's medievalism: '"The body – an open sewer; women – so many devils; poetry – the wine of demons; art – the handmaid of iniquity"; that kind of thing won't do now, sir!'[72] Dr Gray has the cunning to give Latin lessons to the sons of the Protestant doctor's family, warmly depicted, to spite his parishioners by showing his respect for good Protestants, but he

[71] Sheehan, *Dr Gray*, 8.

[72] Ibid. 288. This was Sheehan's view: 'I never could understand that mediaeval idea of the worthlessness and contemptibility of the body ... it seems almost a denial of that ineffable mystery [of the Incarnation] to speak of the body as a "sewer of filth"': *Under the Cedars*, 90–1. 'It seems incredible ...', he wrote, 'that the ordinary people ... do not know ... how their bodies are constructed': Heuser, *Canon Sheehan*, 336.

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denounces his niece, who has been repelled by the attentions of one of the doctor's sons and goes to Dublin to train as a nurse, when she gives scandal by accompanying another of these sons (who is dying of consumption) to South Africa. The girl marries yet another brother in Africa, converts him, and ultimately returns to receive her chastened uncle's blessing. There is a lively story about a so-called 'grabber', the purchaser of a farm whose tenants have been evicted, and who is saved from drunken ruin by the good offices of the curate; but the grabber's good fortune, especially in his marriage, provokes the jealousy of the neighbouring farmer and of a gypsy family who have occupied an old castle and have become involved with the doctor's eldest son in smuggling. The jealous farmer grumbles against the authority of the priest, who throws him bodily from the presbytery but then saves him from the gallows by his testimony when the man is charged with the murder of the 'grabber', a crime committed by one of the gypsies, which too neatly shifts the blame from the village to an outsider and non-believer. It is only in Dr Gray's final state, as he resigns his parish, blind and isolated, and is humiliated in court by confessing his violence towards his enemy, that he learns of the love of his people and that love is the whole law. The work reads as a tract for Sheehan's fellow clergy, insisting that spiritual despotism is not Christianity.

Here, as elsewhere in Sheehan's works, the heroine, the nursing niece from America, is the ultimate repository of Irish Catholic character and virtue, who marries and converts the doctor's surviving heir. The village saint is its washerwoman, who spends her time in work and prayer. The curate's sister becomes a contemplative nun, to the initial disgust of her friend, the more practically minded American heroine. The curate, under his sister's otherworldly influence, enters a monastery.

The same theme of female virtue triumphant occurs in *Miriam Lucas*, published in 1912, about a young woman who lives in isolation in an Irish seaside village in County Cork. Miriam's father is an infirm recluse, living in the large and desolate Glendarragh House, which is haunted by a legend of a family curse. Miriam's only friends are the local kindly and unworldly Church of Ireland rector and his benevolent but strong-minded wife, who has an aristocratic self-confidence impervious to convention. Miriam herself is worshipped by the humble Catholic villagers for her

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gentleness and good works. There is a mystery about Miriam's lost mother which exposes Miriam herself to insult and disgrace when she enters fashionable Dublin society, ruthlessly depicted as snobbish and heartless. Miriam's weak-minded father, before his disappearance somewhat sensationally in a Gothic thunderstorm, leaves her and her property in the power of a corrupt and wealthy railway director and lawyer, Holthsworth, who wants to marry her. He forces Miriam to live with him in Dublin, where in her social isolation she embraces Marxist socialism and becomes the inspiration of a strike with revolutionary intent among the city's railwaymen, a strike which is being secretly financed by a rival English company. The strikers' leader is an idealistic consumptive student at Trinity College, Ian Albrecht, a friend of a medical student, Hugh Ireton, who loves Miriam but because of her murky origins is forbidden by his mother to have anything to do with her. Albrecht, a figure described with great sympathy, dies after his confrontation with a foreign friar, Father Hugo, whose Confraternity of the Holy Family is disputing with the revolutionary movement the leadership of the Dublin workers, by teaching the value of suffering and self-sacrifice. Such confraternities with their massive memberships were the great popular institutions in late Victorian Dublin[73] – the novel is set in the 1880s – and Sheehan has anticipated the industrial unrest led by Jim Larkin in the city in 1913. The strikers' plans are betrayed to Holthsworth, who plans a police ambush to shoot them down, a plot which Miriam averts, though not before Father Hugo is accidentally killed.

The arch-villain here is the capitalist, and Sheehan puts the revolutionary case with all his sympathy for the poor and for secular utopian idealism even while denouncing it as the enemy of the faith. Miriam flees to New York and finds her mother, who is dying after years as a prostitute and gaolbird, having been thrown out of the family for becoming a Catholic, the faith in which she has baptized Miriam. She leaves a will and the deeds which reveal Miriam's ownership of the Glendarragh property, restored to her in a melodrama climaxing in the violent death of Holthsworth, which lifts the local curse. Miriam returns to the village as the

[73] Though their high point was between the World Wars; see Maurice Hartigan, 'The Religious Life of the Catholic Laity of Dublin, 1920–40', in James Kelly and Dáire Keogh, eds, *History of the Catholic Diocese of Dublin* (Dublin, 2000), 331–48.

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idol of the villagers, having wed Ireton, now the local doctor, and embraced the faith of her baptism. Sheehan makes a positive point of this religiously mixed marriage, and his religious portraits vary: Holthsworth is a hypocrite though outwardly a strict Calvinist Nonconformist; Ireton's mother is a bigoted anti-Catholic; and Albrecht's mother is a still more bigoted member of the Plymouth Brethren, intoxicated with the Book of Revelation and bitterly hating Catholics and socialists. On the other hand, the Church of Ireland rector and his wife are admirable people, and the rector, in his charming, learned and affectionate other-worldliness, and his common-sense spouse, who is his perfect complement and foil, suggest a model of holiness lightly drawn from life.

The theme of insurrection also occurs in *The Queen's Fillet*, published in 1911, in which Sheehan tried his hand at a narrative of the French Revolution, probably inspired by Carlyle's history, within the framework of the conventional view: the people of France were starving and oppressed by a mostly dissolute and unbelieving aristocracy, who in their pride were contemptuous of the monarchy itself and who reaped the whirlwind at the hands of the equally depraved Parisian mob. The hero, Maurice de Brignon,[74] disowned by his father and forced into the Church, is a participant in events in Paris, while some of the scenes take place in the Catholic revolution in the Vendée, depicted as the home of a virtuous and united Catholic aristocracy and peasantry. Sheehan's preference here is for a traditional feudal society over both monarchical despotism and modern democracy. There are two fine portraits, of the renegade bishop Talleyrand, the very embodiment of sardonic brilliance, with a strand of benevolence – he employs de Brignon as a secretary – and of the revolutionary poet André Chénier, the essence of everything finest and most fearless in the revolutionary spirit, whom Sheehan loves for his wild freedom from calculation and self-interest. The heroine of the work is Marie Antoinette, converted through suffering from a coquette to a Catholic mother martyr. The fillet of the title is the headband which she wore at her execution, and which de Brignon acquires. The final chapters, set at the Restoration, are the story of de Brignon's daughter Adèle, who has been reared

[74] The name Sheehan uses elsewhere for a royalist: *Geoffrey Austin: Student* (Dublin, 1895), 10.

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by her revolutionary maternal grandfather. She becomes involved in a plot to restore Napoleon and has to be rescued from the police by the intercession of her father, who has now renounced the world and is a Carthusian abbot. This endpiece is interesting for Sheehan's enthusiasm for the Bonapartist General Ney and his loathing of the legitimist cause and of the restored Bourbons, who in their cruelty have forgotten nothing and learned nothing from the Revolution and are riding for another fall. The author avoids the difficult subject of their championship of the Church, indeed of its immersion in the *Ancien Régime*. The work is a tract against the resort to violence, however justified by tyranny, as a judgement on the revolutionary tradition in Ireland.

Sheehan's own ecumenical endeavour was *The Intellectuals*, a work published in 1911, in which a young priest brings together some middle-class Irish people calling themselves the '*Sunetoi*' ('The Select' in Greek) to read essays and poetry to one another and to discuss religion and literature. The author hopes that 'the barriers of racial and sectarian prejudices may be broken down, and the higher humanities accepted as an integral portion of social and domestic life'.[75] His characters represent the three nations, Ireland, England and Scotland, and the three churches, Catholic, Anglican and Presbyterian. There is some gentle humour. The snobbish musical wife of the Catholic doctor declares that '[t]here *must* be class-distinctions'[76] of a very refined type, extending even to the quality of the china; that 'Protestants are quite as nice, and sometimes much superior';[77] and that '[n]o lady or gentleman nowadays laughs'.[78] The young Catholic bluestocking graduate 'looks charming in her hood and gown',[79] and a young Church of England naval engineer falls in love with her. His Anglo-Saxonist sister insists that the Celtic imagination is a barrier to modern progress, encouraging the Irish in 'nursing with a kind of petulance your wrongs and rights, your impossible dreams and hopeless aspirations'.[80] She is nonetheless attracted to an elderly poet, who reads his verse and disputes the authorship of Shakespeare's plays.

[75] Sheehan, *The Intellectuals*, v.
[76] Ibid. 2.
[77] Ibid. 8.
[78] Ibid. 109.
[79] Ibid. 8.
[80] Ibid. 345.

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He may have proposed to the lady, but dies, having inherited an earldom. A young Presbyterian lady insists on the supreme value of heroism. A Catholic banker quotes Nietzsche on the worship of Mammon, and excuses the enormities of Napoleon until he is told that the great man had robbed a bank.[81] A Protestant professor of philology defends the classics as necessary to the refinement of a gentleman, who thereby becomes 'an idealist in daily life; in politics, a conservative; in philosophy, a subjectivist; in religion, a theist and a Christian',[82] while he damns the natural scientist as 'in philosophy a materialist; in politics, a socialist; in religion, an atheist'.[83] Closer to his subject, he derives the Welsh and Irish languages from their Aryan root. When the Catholic young lady comments on the mystic character of ancient Irish poetry, the young priest, in a hit at nationalist illusions, assures her that it is as 'as erotic and sensual as Catullus or Sappho'.[84] There is chat about the shape of the earth and about Sheehan's own scientific interest, astronomy. The text only really catches fire when the Catholic doctor distresses the young priest by letting down the side in Protestant company, in denouncing the immaturity of the Irish electorate and the emptiness of Irish politicians. The doctor declares, 'Orators! ... Why, there is the curse and bane of our race. We are all orators – stump orators, platform orators, hustings orators, Parliamentary orators',[85] windbags who, whenever they rise to speak, clear the Commons in 'a general stampede to the library, to the tea-room, to the terrace'.[86]

The last of the thirty-seven gatherings is a picnic, where the young priest, kneeling awkwardly on the grass, insists that the point of their proceedings is not their views but that they are talking to one another at all. Having rather sententiously declared that '[s]ome of the most beautiful souls I have ever seen do not belong to the religion I profess', he hopes that:

> broader views and more generous and kindly thoughts may be spread abroad amongst our fellow country-men under the

[81] Ibid. 242.
[82] Ibid. 238.
[83] Ibid. 237.
[84] Ibid. 355.
[85] Ibid. 225.
[86] Ibid. 254.

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> benign influence of education; and that the more we read, and thus grow in sympathy with the master-minds of the world, the more we may grow in mental and moral stature, expanding our ideas until they become comprehensive enough to embrace a Universe, and our principles until they touch the widest human limits of gentle and comprehensive charity.[87]

The priest, the doctor and the banker then play a game on the beach, abandoning their solemn professional characters by throwing pebbles at a row of bottles. In retrospect, this seems a forlorn hope in a world about to plunge into half a century of bloody revolution and war.

The Irish difficulty was the sheer appeal of the violence of the nationalist tradition. In *The Blindness of Dr Gray*, the old priest remembers the tradesmen transfigured into glory as the revolutionary Fenians, and the loss of their spirit to contemporary commercialism. Sheehan here recalled his own burning memory of a dinner at St Colman's, when bishop, priests and students 'clapped and thundered' as a famous Fenian entered to receive the bishop's blessing.[88] Here Sheehan's view of revolution has changed since *My New Curate*: the Fenians, however mistaken, are the heroic enemies of modern materialism. *The Graves at Kilmorna*, published posthumously in 1915, was in this prophetic of the future. It opens with a picture of the drunkenness, debauchery and corruption of an Irish election, driven by fake nationalism and self-interested politicians, which Sheehan saw as a child in Mallow, and its hero, Myles Cogan, the well-to-do Catholic son of a self-made merchant, embraces the hopeless cause of the revolution of 1867 out of a combination of Irish patriotism and zeal for moral renewal which ends in his brutalization in prison, an incident inspired by Sheehan's own visit to Dartmoor as a curate in Plymouth, when he saw the land reformer Michael Davitt in chains attending mass in the prison chapel. After his release, Cogan is (unlike Davitt) repelled by the Land League, with its promise to free Irish tenant farmers, while the general growth in Irish prosperity seems to him a kind of gross materialism, 'the commercial immorality that we supposed belonged to clever Yankees or perfidious Englishmen',[89] and a

[87] Ibid. 377.
[88] Sheehan, *Dr Gray*, 234.
[89] P. A. Sheehan, *The Graves at Kilmorna: A Story of '67* (London, 1915), 337.

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betrayal of the patriotic spirit. Even the growth of the Church, in its splendid new churches and cathedrals and institutions and its multitude of devotional confraternities and sodalities, is for Cogan evidence of decline. Only the past, of the legendary Ireland of missionary saints and heroes and political martyrs, of learning and chivalry and self-sacrifice, is safe from this commercial contagion. Cogan contemplates becoming a Cistercian at Mount Melleray, while his fine-spirited sister becomes a nun. As elsewhere, the final refuge of holiness is a contemplative order. The novel is notable for its picture of the tightly drawn snobberies and class distinctions of Catholics in a small Irish town where 'twopence half-penny did not know twopence!',[90] which separate Cogan from the woman he loves. As the novel opens with a drunken election riot, so it concludes with one, in which Cogan is killed, a reluctant martyr to the grossness of Irish public life, from which he has withdrawn for forty years and which he thinks is 'wholly corrupted'[91] with no hope for the future. This, of course, is Cogan's view rather than the author's, but it reflects Sheehan's distaste for democracy as mob rule, and as a last word on Ireland it is singularly depressing.

This strikes at the heart of the ambiguity of Sheehan, which was also that of Patrick Pearse, who was to lead his revolt out of a passionate desire for a spiritually pure and Gaelic Catholic country rather than from the wish to see Ireland prosperous as well as free. Pearse, like Cogan, wanted not military victory over the British but the triumph of failure, of self-cleansing and salvation from selfishness through martyrdom at the oppressor's hands. Like Patrick Pearse and his Catholic socialist compatriot James Connolly, Cogan thinks that only blood sacrifice will save Ireland. This belief in blood sacrifice was a much wider sentiment during the First World War, exemplified by Rupert Brooke's warriors, 'as swimmers into cleanness leaping',[92] but it was to have a terrible legacy in 1916 in the eager spilling of Irish blood. This ambiguity haunted Ireland for much of the twentieth century, a holy Catholic country which laid claim to spiritual superiority amidst economic decline, and could only sustain that superiority by late marriages, emigration and a falling population which remains

[90] Ibid. 53.
[91] Ibid. 338.
[92] Rupert Brooke, 'Peace', *Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke* (London, 1930), 144.

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smaller than it was before the Famine. The novel also depicts the clergy's ambiguity over the revolutionary tradition: its opposition to rebellion to the point of excommunication, as if the rebellious Young Irelanders and Fenians were one with the Young Italian enemies of the pope, and an equally passionate and wholly contradictory clerical sympathy with the same revolutionaries as saints and heroes, converting the Church to the cause of the 1916 Easter Rising, which at first it had condemned.

In this, Sheehan's very contradictions are an image of the contradictions around him. He is a complex explorer of the condition of contemporary Ireland, intellectual, social and political, but he did not merely wish to ensure the cultural triumph of Catholic nationalism, though that was one of his aims, but of a world-renouncing Christianity. As a young Protestant says to an Irish Catholic missionary in Africa: 'Father, by all means, make Christians of these poor heathens; but, for God's sake, *don't civilize them*.'[93] Modern civilization was corruption. This meant Ireland also renouncing the world, creating the country's cultural isolation that prevailed for much of the twentieth century, an isolation which has only disappeared quite recently. Sheehan was in the difficult position of a critic in an institution and culture which felt that it was fighting for its life. When it was triumphant after 1916, he would no doubt have found his new holy Catholic nation too this-worldly and lacking his lofty literary ideal. His suspicion of capitalism, his hatred of landlordism, his sympathy with revolution, his fascination with and rejection of the avant-garde, even his love of English and foreign literature, belonged, nonetheless, to the mindset of one whose hope was not here but hereafter. In this, his critics ignore the central fact about him, that he was a quintessentially religious man. His were not merely the Victorian values of respectability or of contemporary Irish Catholic nationalism, as he tried to show, with realism, humour and sentiment, the role of religion in the sufferings and aspirations of a place, a period and a people.

Durham University

[93] Sheehan, *Dr Gray*, 452.

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