



Ireland in Ruins: The Figure of Ruin in Nineteenth-Century Irish Poetry

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Chapter Four

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Ruined abbeys and castles are stock elements of topographical poetry in the early nineteenth century. An important part of their function was to provide an interpretation of national history, both in England and Ireland. Of course, in doing so, Irish and English poems tended to reflect the diverging histories of the two nations. Anne Janowitz has argued that in English poetry a ruined castle tended to represent the naturalization of the post-1688 political dispensation in England, and was used to justify the positive achievements of 'British' imperial nationhood.¹ If this is so, then the Irish ruined castle served to illustrate the opposite: the failure to arrive at a similar political settlement in Ireland, and the destructive legacy of English and British rule. In the English ruin poem the dust of national history has settled, while in the Irish ruin poem national history is very much unfinished business.

These political meanings are registered in the relationship between the ruins and the natural landscape that surrounds them. The more 'naturalized' the ruin appears, the less politically radical its meaning tends to be. Luke Gibbons has argued that in mainstream romanticism 'ruins represented the triumph of natural forces over human endeavour, and if at one level this was a process of destruction and decay, at another level it was redeemed at a higher totalizing, in the form of a trans-historical communion with nature'.² Janowitz links this totalizing process with nation-building, remarking that in English ruin poems of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century:

The ruin serves as the visible guarantor of the antiquity of the nation, but as ivy climbs up and claims the stonework, it also binds culture to nature, presenting the nation under the aspect of nature, and so suggesting national permanence ... One can interpret the growing taste for the picturesque as part of the literal groundwork of building a nationalist consciousness which paradoxically presents itself as being natural, not cultural.³

¹ Anne Janowitz, *England's Ruins: Poetic Purpose and the National Landscape* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

² Luke Gibbons, 'Race Against Time: Racial Discourse and Irish History', *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), p. 159.

³ Janowitz, *England's Ruins*, p. 55.

Janowitz links this taste for picturesque representations of ruin with the political developments of the eighteenth century, specifically the Acts of Union with Scotland (1707) and with Ireland (1801). The creation of a British national identity 'demanded images of a coherent British polity'.⁴ In this process, the genre of the 'chronicle history poem' of earlier times, which detailed the distinct events and personalities associated with a ruin's past, was superseded by the genre of the 'ruin poem', whose 'focus was the ideological homogenization of the nation, prompting a coincident mythologization of the past'. In these latter poems ruins tend to be evacuated of their specific historical meanings, especially the political causes and consequences of their destruction. The violent and divisive upheavals that accompanied the Reformation and the Civil War, and which led directly to physical ruin of many abbeys, houses and castles, are seldom mentioned. Ruins become objects of aesthetic appreciation rather than historical memory, with the result that the unsettling record of internecine violence is suppressed. Also suppressed are the ideological debates and conflicts that led to such wars, and the vista of alternative political paths that English history might have taken. When the political causes and consequences of real events associated with the building disappear, the ruin becomes merely a source of aesthetic and sentimental pleasure. As Rose Macauley remarks, ruined castles only become 'beautiful' when they have ceased to serve their original purposes of defence and intimidation.⁵ It is a process that parallels the aestheticization of ruins in eighteenth-century painting, and indeed the aestheticization of the English landscape itself in the same period. For the ruling classes, the manufactured ruins, architectural follies and pastiches of eighteenth-century landscape gardening supplied ruins as they 'ought to be'; that is, pleasing to the eye, domesticated and detached from the messy and disturbing actualities of historical record. All of this proved useful in supporting the newly minted ideology of British nationhood based on peace, national unity and the sanction of 'nature'.

The case in Ireland is somewhat different. Luke Gibbons has noted that the figure of ruin became a significant trope in Irish nationalist iconography, just as it had in England, but the representation of Irish ruins was characterized less by a sense of order and stability than by a sense of unresolved disjunction and conflict.⁶ Irish history could not so easily be converted into a narrative of past wounds being healed by a new dispensation. The political, economic, cultural and religious divisions in Ireland were still raw, and the meaning of the nation itself and its relation to a larger British state was still in contention. For many Irish poets and artists of the early

⁴ Janowitz, *England's Ruins*, p. 59.

⁵ Rose Macauley, *Pleasure of Ruins* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1953), p. 441.

⁶ See Luke Gibbons's two articles, 'Between Captain Rock and a Hard Place: Art and Agrarian Insurgency', in T. Foley and S. Ryder, eds, *Ideology and Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Dublin: Four Courts, 1998), p. 31, and 'Romanticism in Ruins: Developments in Recent Irish Cinema', *Irish Review*, 2 (1987), p. 62.

nineteenth century, ruins bore witness not only to struggles and losses in the past, but to continuing trauma and an obvious lack of closure in the present.

As a consequence, the Irish ruin was not simply an aesthetic feature, integrated into the landscape as a tranquil sign of natural process and order. Instead it tended to serve as a site of continuing historical and ideological activity. Sometimes, as we shall see, that activity might be of a supernatural rather than a historical kind – it might have its source in the ghosts of the previous inhabitants, for instance – but in either case, the ruin was remarkable in its refusal to stay quiet. It is interesting to consider the paintings of nineteenth-century Irish artists like Daniel Maclise, Joseph Peacock and Henry MacManus in this regard, since they similarly depict Irish antiquities or ruins as locations for intense and vibrant social and political activity. Maclise's famous canvas *Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife* (1851) depicts the cataclysmic consequences of the twelfth-century Norman-Gaelic conflict in terms of both architectural ruin and the ruin of human bodies. Works purporting to represent the actualities of nineteenth-century Irish life such as Maclise's *Installation of Captain Rock* (1834), Joseph Peacock's *Glendalough* (1828) or even Henry MacManus's *Reading the Nation* (1849) show contemporary social and political activities taking place within, or alongside, ancient ruins. This style of representing ruins is a strong contrast to the English and Irish topographical paintings of the same period that focus on the ruin as an object-in-itself, reducing any human presence to the lone figure of a detached observer with no organic or historical connection with the building or its past. In populating their ruins with communities living and dead, the narrative Irish paintings of Maclise and the others refuse to create the controlled and tranquillizing relationships upon which the ideological work of the English ruin depends.

The persistence of historical consciousness and the belief in the necessity of preserving exact historical records are prominent features of cultural nationalism generally. Historiography and antiquarian research become means of countering the alleged ignorance, errors and myths promulgated by imperialist versions of native history: 'In other countries the past is the neutral ground of the scholar and antiquary; with us it is a battlefield', as one writer in the *Nation* newspaper put it.⁷ In a contrary motion to the English ruin poem, the Irish nationalist text sought to recover history in its material exactness and specificity, and to make historical detail vivid to contemporary readers. Historical knowledge was a crucial part of the assertion of unique cultural identity for the Irish, which was itself to be a necessary base for the establishment of a unique and independent political state. Thomas Davis, the principal nationalist ideologue of the 1840s, argued that such historical material ought to be presented to the people in a literary or artistic form, in order to ensure its efficacy as an instrument of cultural consciousness-raising. The nationalist ballad, for instance, should 'make Irish history familiar to the minds, pleasant to the

⁷ Cited in Gibbons, 'Race Against Time', p. 159.

ears, dear to the passions, and powerful over the taste and conduct of the Irish people in times to come'.⁸ History was to be understood as a renewable resource rather than a vague or redundant past. For nationalism, even ancient history exists in a living and powerful continuum with the present and the future.

To illustrate some of these arguments, it is instructive to contrast two roughly contemporaneous poems from the Irish and English traditions: William Drennan's 'Glendaloch' (1802) and the anonymous English poem 'Conway Castle' (1809). Both poems deal with the legacy of violent political conflict, but where the English poem uses the figure of the ruined castle to signify a phase of violent history that has been thankfully superseded, the Irish poem's ruined monastery acts as a reminder of political violence that cannot be easily forgotten. 'Glendaloch' is a poem written shortly after two significant blows to Irish independence: the unsuccessful Irish rebellion of 1798 and the 1800 Act of Union. In Drennan's poem the ruined monastery of Glendalough in Co. Wicklow, with its remarkable round tower, becomes not merely a reminder of the inexorable passage of time and the vanity of human pride, as it might in a conventional ruin poem. Instead, Drennan's ruin is a much more disturbing thing, a literal grave of national hopes and identity:

O COUNTRY, gain'd but to be lost! ...
 Where shall her sad remains be laid?
 Where invoke her solemn shade?
 HERE be the mausoleum plac'd,
 In this vast vault, this silent waste; –
 Yon mouldering pillar, midst the gloom,
 Finger of Time! Shall point the tomb;
 While silence of the ev'ning hour
 Hangs o'er Glendaloch's ruined tow'r.⁹

The ruin has not been quietly assimilated into nature, nor can it be a sign of the healing of political wounds. The mausoleum metaphor suggests a state of permanent national grief, with little likelihood that the 'silent waste' observable here will be aestheticized or made fruitful by natural overgrowth. The violence of history in this case leaves these ruins as a memorial to unrelieved trauma.

The poem 'Conway Castle' takes a very different approach in its meditation on the ruins of the great medieval castle built by the English monarchy to subdue the Welsh. Originally, like an Irish ruin, the castle was a sign of violent invasion and the suppression of one culture by another. Now, however, in its ruinous state it is used to

⁸ Thomas Davis, *Selections from his Prose and Poetry*, intro. T. W. Rolleston (Dublin: Talbot, n.d.), p. 96.

⁹ William Drennan, *Fugitive Pieces, in Verse and Prose* (Belfast: Finlay, 1815), pp. 114–15.

remind the reader that the historical conflict between the Welsh and English has been replaced by a new harmonious relationship under the unified British state:

... Conway! Then thy towers arose
 Mid thy bleeding country's woes!
 It was not pride, it was not state,
 That raised thee high and made thee great;
 But fell ambition, to control
 Cambria's brave and stubborn Soul!...
 Britain, now with freedom crown'd
 Leaves these proud turrets to decay;
 She wants no castle's strength, or high-rai'd mound,
 To check the battle's stern array,
 Secure in his benignant sway,
 Whose scepter'd virtues guard the throne,
 Who feels his people's happiness his own;
 And, when for war she doth prepare,
 Looks in each British heart, and sees a fortress there.¹⁰

This is a striking representation of the ideological manoeuvres through which the establishment of empire was made to seem natural and emancipatory. The military coercion necessary in the period of the castle's construction has been replaced in the present day by the even more effective ideological control in which the subject rationalizes and accepts his or her own coercion. Here the newly formed British subject has apparently internalized the rationale for Welsh subjugation which previously had to be militarily enforced. The acceptance of this situation can only be successful, however, if certain ideological contradictions pass unnoticed. One basic contradiction is the fact that the 'British' freedom celebrated by the poem has been achieved through the violent suppression of the freedom of the Welsh. This contradiction is masked, or made acceptable, by the poem's definition of the English violence as 'fell ambition', which appears to acknowledge the negative aspects of that imperial violence, while at the same time maintaining that the long-term result of violence has been the establishment of a 'benignant sway'. The decay of the ruins is thus not presented primarily as a sign of the loss of Welsh power and identity. Instead the decay ultimately appears to confirm the naturalness and validity of the political process that subsumed Wales into Britain. The sense of grief and loss that suffuses Drennan's Irish poem is entirely absent.

Irish ruins are usually haunted places, unable and unwilling to shake off the ghosts and memories that a poem like Conway Castle has apparently laid to rest. Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies*, for instance, are full of ruins: ruined palaces, unstrung harps, broken hearts – all signs of destruction whose causes are identified as ultimately political, not natural. At the end of the famous lyric 'The Harp That

¹⁰ Janowitz, *England's Ruins*, p. 74.

Once through Tara's Halls' (1808), Moore describes a scene that begins as a conventional lament for the passing of a glorious moment of civilization:

No more to chiefs and ladies bright
 The harp of Tara swells;
 The chord alone, that breaks at night,
 Its tale of ruin tells.
 Thus Freedom now so seldom wakes,
 The only throb she gives,
 Is when some heart indignant breaks,
 To show that still she lives.¹¹

The scenario is one that at first seems to follow the conventions of the ruin poem as found in English writing since Anglo-Saxon times: a lament for the passing of the great and a wistful recognition of the effects of time and decay. In other words, it can be read as a meditation on the vanity of human pride and the transience of life. But the final lines of Moore's poem give this situation a political rather than just a moral or metaphysical meaning. The ruins are the home of a battered, but still living political spirit ('Freedom'). It is not just the loss of a past civilization that is being lamented by Moore; it is the unending assault on Irish freedom that moves him most.

A generation after Moore, haunted ruins continue to be found in nationalist verse. Like Moore's work, the poem 'The Old Castle' (1847), by 'Mary of the *Nation*', describes a ruin that has not yet collapsed into a state of nature. The 'soul in the ruin' – the spirit of freedom, again – has not died or disappeared, with the result that the castle is still in a sense inhabited. Because it has not died, the ruin remains a site of political possibility:

There is an old Castle hangs over the sea –
 'Tis living through ages, all wrecked though it be;
 There's a soul in the ruin that never shall die,
 And the ivy clings round it as fondly as I.
 [...]
 Right grand is the freedom that dwells on the spot,
 For the hand of the stranger can fetter it not;
 The strength of that Castle its day-spring has told,
 But the soul of the ruin looks out as of old;
 [...]
 How weird on those waters the shadows must seem,
 When the moonlight falls o'er them as still as a dream,
 And the star-beams awake at the close of the day,
 To gaze upon a river eternal as they!
 How the ghosts of dead ages must glide through the gloom,

¹¹ Thomas Moore, *Poetical Works* (New York: Appleton, 1854), p. 230.

And the forms of the mighty arise from the tomb,
 And the dream of the past through the wailing winds moan,
 For they twine round the ruin as if 'twere their own.

There is an old Castle hangs over the sea,
 And ages of glory yet, yet shall it see,
 And 'twill smile to the river, and smile to the sky,
 And smile to the free land when long years go by.¹²

As in Moore, restless spirits flit about this ruin, but what most distinguishes this from an English ruin poem is its association of the castle with a glorious future, in which the values of the past will be reconstituted; when the glories of the past, if not the castle itself, shall be restored. The spirits of the past cling tenaciously to the ruins and will not be dislodged by the arrival of a new dispensation, such as the new imperial British order that made Conway Castle redundant. Instead, the Irish future is imagined in terms of revival rather than linear progress. The relation between past and future is understood as a kind of repetition rather than a relegation of the past into redundancy.

The invocation of ghosts is interesting in this type of poem. In the mainstream gothic tradition, ghosts and spirits are associated with terror and mystery, as they are in nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish gothic fiction. In the Irish nationalist ruin poem, on the other hand, ghosts are usually noble victims with whom the reader is intended to feel sympathy and solidarity. They are metaphors for a 'virtual' community that once existed and now, as conditions become ripe, waits to be brought again to life. The occasions when Irish ruins do appear terrifying in nationalist writing are more often found in cases where the perceiver of the ruin is an outsider, such as an English visitor. For example, Thomas Moore's *Captain Rock* (1824) is prefaced by a narrative of the book's supposed 'editor', who is a stranger to the land he visits. In the preface, the 'editor' describes a nocturnal visit to a ruined abbey in Roscrea, where he has a terrifying encounter with an assembly of Rockite insurgents, all dressed in ghostly white.¹³ Once the narrator learns of the injustice that has driven Irish people to support the Whiteboys, however, and becomes sympathetic to their cause, the terror and mystery are dissipated. Ironically, in the conclusion of the memoir, it is the forces of the British state who appear as sources of terror in the landscape: they arrest Captain Rock while he is out for a romantic, nocturnal stroll and have him sentenced to transportation for the offence of 'being out by moonlight', unable to give a satisfactory account of himself.

The English ruin poem is more likely to avoid the issue of ghosts, spirits and other gothic residues altogether. The poem 'Lines, Written at Kenilworth Castle, Warwickshire' (1808) populates its ruin not with spirits of the past, but with living

¹² Edward Hayes, ed., *Ballads of Ireland* (Dublin: Duffy, 1855), vol.1, p. 6.

¹³ [Thomas Moore], *Memoirs of Captain Rock*, 4th edn (London: Longman, 1824), p. xi.

flowers and children from the present. These denizens are free from the weight of history and care, are close to nature and are illuminated in sunlight. They have no connection at all to the historical past or political identity of the ruin:

Many a ruined tower
 Gives kindly shelter to the struggling flower,
 And many a child, escaped from school to play,
 Pursues its gambols in the sunny ray.¹⁴

This poem constructs a temporal and political distance between the human figures and the physical ruin which allows the ruin to become merely picturesque, a pretty backdrop to a romantic vision of childhood innocence.

The tendency to imagine the human and physical restoration of the ruin in Irish nationalist poetry was not new to the nineteenth century. An early example in the Irish language tradition is a seventeenth-century poem, rendered into English in 1846 as 'To the Ruins of Donegal Castle', by James Clarence Mangan. This elegiac poem addresses the castle of Red Hugh O'Donnell (d. 1602), chieftain of the territory of Tirconnell, one of the leaders of the rebellion against Elizabeth in the 1590s. O'Donnell in fact destroyed his own castle in Donegal town rather than allow it to fall into the hands of his enemies. The poem concludes with an imagined restoration that is both architectural and political:

By God's help, he who wrought thy fall
 Will reinstate thee yet in pride
 Thy variegated halls shall be rebuilt all,
 Thy lofty courts, thy chambers wide.

Yes! thou shalt live again, and see
 Thine youth renewed! Thou shalt outshine
 Thy former self by far, and Hugh shall reign in thee,
 The Tirconnellian's king and thine!¹⁵

The impulse to rebuild from the ruins of the past, rather than abandon those ruins, is characteristic of nineteenth-century nationalist discourse generally. In an essay entitled 'Irish Antiquities' (1843), Thomas Davis imagines a similar kind of process whereby the relics of the past may be made useful for the economic and cultural needs of the present. Expressing his horror at a proposal to demolish the prehistoric chamber tomb of Newgrange in Co. Meath in order to build a new road, Davis argues that Irish ruins should not merely be preserved but recycled:

It would be politic and a noble emulation of the sects, restoring the temples wherein our sires worshipped for their children to pray in ... Nor do we see why some of these

¹⁴ Cited in Janowitz, *England's Ruins*, p. 59.

¹⁵ Hayes, *Ballads of Ireland*, p. 159.

hundreds of half-spoiled buildings might not be used for civil purposes – as almshouses, schools, lecture-rooms, town-halls.¹⁶

To re-use the past in this way is in a sense to arrest the processes of natural decay, again in contrast to the English ruin, for which the gradual disintegration of the building can be a source of pleasure.

While in the examples so far the distinction has been made between an English tradition that tends towards de-historicization and an Irish tradition that insists on maintaining historical consciousness, it is also possible to find nationalist ruin poems that perform a certain de-historicizing of their own. Denis Florence McCarthy's 'The Pillar Towers of Ireland' (1845) gives a register of historic invasions of Ireland, but then contrasts the ephemeral nature of these events with the much more permanent pillar tower that is somehow elevated out of history and whose historical origins are themselves obscured:

Around these walls have wandered the Briton and the Dane –
The captives of Armorica, the cavaliers of Spain –
Phoenician and Milesian, and the plundering Norman Peers –
And the swordsmen of brave Brian, and the chiefs of later years!

There may it stand for ever, while that symbol doth impart
To the mind one glorious vision, or one proud thro' to the heart;
While the breast needeth rest may these gray old temples last,
Bright prophets of the future, as preachers of the past!¹⁷

Like the old castle of Mary's poem, and much more optimistically than the tomb-like ruins of Moore and Drennan, these ruins represent Irishness itself, which must be imagined as a spirit or quality that transcends material form and therefore exists outside historical change. MacCarthy's poem embodies the bourgeois nationalist desire to find an essential 'spirit of the nation' that will define in a permanent way Ireland's difference to other cultures, especially England. In some ways this desire to find an object or space that transcends historical change is similar to the process of naturalization found in an English ruin poem like 'Conway Castle'. Yet for nineteenth-century nationalism, as in other decolonizing movements, it was imperative to define Ireland in terms of its *cultural* distinctiveness, which meant that transcendence of history could never be complete. The result is the paradoxical situation whereby MacCarthy's pillar towers are supposed to be both beyond history (they transcend all the historical waves of Irish invaders and settlers) and historical objects themselves (they are distinctively products of an *Irish* civilization). The contradiction here is never fully resolved in nationalist writing.

¹⁶ Davis, *Selections*, p. 103.

¹⁷ Hayes, *Ballads of Ireland*, p. 5.

John de Jean Frazer's nationalist poem 'The Holy Wells' (1847) represents a structurally similar situation, though like many of Frazer's poems it also brings an interesting awareness of class politics to the analysis of Ireland's plight. The ruins of Irish castles and abbeys remind the poet of the way that the poor are continually exploited by their rulers:

... knowledge has abused its powers, an empire to erect
 For tyrants, on the rights the poor had given them to protect;
 Till now the simple elements of nature are their *all*,
 That from the cabin is not filched, and lavished in the hall –

The poem goes on to argue that there is one thing that cannot be stolen from the poor. It is a phenomenon of nature; the water from the spring:

And while night, noon, or morning meal no other plenty brings,
 No beverage than the water-draught from old, spontaneous springs;
 They, sure, may deem them holy wells, that yield from day to day,
 One blessing which no tyrant hand can taint, or take away.¹⁸

This might appear to challenge the idea that politics and culture can resist oppression. In some ways it is an invocation of the power of nature alone to sustain the poor. But Frazer insists on calling these springs 'holy wells', thus linking them to popular religious practice and making them cultural objects. In Frazer's Ireland, religion, politics and economics are inseparable, since political authority, the historical suppression of Catholicism and the control of the land are all by-products of English and later British rule. Holy wells are therefore not just places of spiritual sustenance; they are also sites of political resistance. The fact that holy wells are frequently found on ruined religious sites also links them to history and makes them symbolic of native Irish spirituality that is structurally cognate with Moore's and Mary's unquenched spirit of freedom.

Frazer was writing during the period of the Great Famine, an event which produced its own intense visions of ruin. One of the most famous nationalist poems to address the Famine was Aubrey de Vere's 'Ode: The Curse of Cromwell, or, The Desolation of the West' (1847). The poem opens with a vision of a deserted landscape that produces gothic effects of 'gloom and dread':

In trance I roamed that Land forlorn,
 By battle first, then famine worn;
 I walked in gloom and dread:
 The Land remained: the hills were there:
 The vales: but few remained to share
 That realm untenanted.

¹⁸ Hayes, *Ballads of Ireland*, p. 6.

Having described the bleak consequences of British misrule allied to natural misfortune, de Vere takes up the tomb metaphor already deployed by Moore and Drennan to symbolize Ireland under the Empire. But de Vere then diverts the metaphor away from the political towards the metaphysical, finding consolation in the possibility that such a tomb may in fact be a form of Christian altar. Instead of political or cultural resurrection, de Vere's ruin inspires visions of a spiritual one:

A Land became a Monument!
 Man works; but God's concealed intent
 Converts his worst to best:
 The first of Altars was a Tomb –
 Ireland! thy grave-stone shall become
 God's Altar in the West!¹⁹

Such religious interpretations of the causes and consequences of the famine were common in the 1840s and, in a structural sense, de Vere's devotional perspective closely replicates the qualified optimism of the other poems we have seen.

Yet belief in the possibilities of revival, resistance or salvation are not found in all Irish ruin poems from the nationalist tradition. A poem like James Clarence Mangan's well-known translation 'Lament over the Ruins of the Abbey of Teach Mologa' (1846) challenges the positive conclusions of both British poems of imperial pride and Irish poems of revivalist optimism. The abbey of Timoleague referred to in Mangan's poem had been suppressed, like all Irish and English monasteries, by Henry VIII, and was finally burned by English forces in 1642. Mangan's poem is a rough translation of a late eighteenth-century Gaelic poem by Seághan Ó Coileáin, in which the speaker is moved by the sight of the abbey ruins to contemplate both the persecution of Catholicism and the transience of his own life. The original poem concludes with the poet comparing the decline of the monastery to his own physical decline. Ó Coileáin's poem was first translated (very loosely) by Thomas Furlong for Hardiman's bilingual anthology *Irish Minstrelsy* in 1831. Samuel Ferguson published a more literal translation of the poem in 1834. Mangan's translation, published 12 years later, follows the general spirit of the original elegy, but relies on Furlong's English phrasing in many places and makes some significant changes in vocabulary. It also makes the political implications of the poem much more explicit than Ferguson had done, or indeed than the original Gaelic poem had done.²⁰ Imagining the destruction of the monastery, Mangan's poet asks:

Where wert thou, Justice, in that hour?
 Where was thy smiting sword? What had those good men done,

¹⁹ Aubrey de Vere, *The Poetical Works of Aubrey De Vere* (London: Kegan Paul, 1884), pp. 108–10.

²⁰ See James Hardiman, *Irish Minstrelsy, or Bardic Remains of Ireland*, 2 vols (London: Joseph Robins, 1831), vol. 2, pp. 234–42.

That thou shouldst tamely see them trampled on
By brutal England's Power?²¹

These lines had been translated by Ferguson as:

Oh! the hardship, oh! the hatred,
Tyranny, and cruel war,
Persecution and oppression,
That have left you as you are!²²

It is Mangan who introduces the very specific reference to 'brutal England', thus ensuring that the reader is in no doubt as to the political causes of the abbey's ruin. He does not leave the poem at this point of political critique, however. The poem is steered back to the theme of individual ageing and personal decay:

... If Change is here,
Is it not o'er the land? Is it not too in me?
Yes! I am changed even more than what I see.
Now is my last goal near!

and Mangan adds a concluding stanza entirely of his own invention:

I turned away, as toward my grave,
And, all my dark way homeward by the Atlantic's verge,
Resounded in mine ears like to a dirge
The roaring of the wave.

In this poem, the ruins offer no possibility of renewal or restoration. The devastation visited upon the abbey is not healed by nature or time. Most importantly, its prospect of desolation and death have been internalized by the speaker, so that the political and religious ruin of Teach Molaga becomes a metaphor for his own personal fate. Much like the speaker in Mangan's famous short lyric 'Siberia', published in the same year, the speaker here is not merely an observer, but a sufferer whose own psychological condition reflects or is reflected by the physical landscape. The poem is deeply pessimistic, since the speaker, the national subject, sees no chance of revival, literal or metaphorical. There is no spirit of freedom still flitting about these ruins, nor is hope to be found in the heart of the speaker. Nor is there a Wordsworthian sublime – a 'spirit that rolls through all things' – to mitigate the speaker's apprehension of loss.

²¹ James Clarence Mangan, 'Lament over the Ruins of the Abbey of Teach Molaga', *Nation* (8 August 1846), p. 681.

²² Samuel Ferguson, *Lays of the Western Gael, and Other Poems* (Dublin: Sealy, Bryers & Walker, 1888), p. 146.

Nature, in the form of the sea, provides only the sound of a dirge. In a way Mangan provides a more complex version of Drennan's mausoleum from a generation before, unable to see a way forward from the ruined past to a bright future. Mangan's note of despair is somewhat atypical in the nationalist verse of the 1840s, and in fact draws attention to the fragility of his contemporaries' more optimistic visions. In Mangan, the figure of ruin is internalized without being depoliticized, in a way that reflects the colonized condition even more dramatically than depictions of the physical ruins in the landscape. Mangan gives us a bleak version of the Romantic psychological landscape, an inverted 'Tintern Abbey', where instead of a naturalized ruin associated with uplifting thoughts, we have a traumatized landscape that reflects colonial paralysis. And like the less complicated work of his contemporaries, Mangan's work still refuses to allow history to slip under the forgetful ivy cladding of nature.