Conclusion

Land of the Dead

That’s quite a collection of stiffs you have down there.¹

The canonical texts of the Irish Gothic were produced in the white heat of Irish history, and they are marked by an ambivalent dialogue between Catholophobia and Catholophilia, ‘progressivism’ and nostalgia, the future and the past, English rationalism and Irish atavism. The works of three of the most important Irish Gothic writers, Regina Maria Roche, Maria Edgeworth and Sydney Owenson (later Lady Morgan), were written in the tumultuous period leading up to the 1798 Rising and in its aftermath. The completely confused and ultimately compromised anti-Catholicism of Maturin’s Gothic was forged at the beginning of ‘Second Reformation’ Protestantism and the strengthening campaign for Catholic Emancipation. Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s intellectual outlook was shaped to a certain extent by his family’s isolation during the Tithe War (1831–6) and also by his strident opposition to Daniel O’Connell. Bram Stoker’s work can be read as part of a response to the spectre of republican terrorism that was usually configured in the British press as atavistic and monstrous – finding brilliant realisation in the feudal Catholic Count Dracula effecting a reverse invasion of England. The twentieth-century novelist Elizabeth Bowen wrote in the wake of the consolidation of the power of the Catholic middle class in post-revolution Ireland, and her Big Houses are more haunted by the remnants of the Anglo-Irish than inhabited by them. In all of them a dialectic between atavism and open-mindedness, bigotry and toleration, conservatism and liberalism, marks the Irish Gothic tradition as a crucial one for charting the political and social views of the Anglican elite on its journey towards marginalisation after the War of Independence (1919–21). The tradition expresses the worst of this elite, but also its best, emerging as it did from a small section of the enclave genuinely attempting to find ways to reconcile with the Catholic majority, and with Ireland herself.
With the rise of the Catholic middle class, the rationalisation of Catholicism through the Devotional Revolution (or Evolution), and the gaining of independence in 1921, power passed out of the hands of Irish Anglicans to the Catholics who had for so long been the representatives of the Other found in Gothic fiction. Cultural hesitancy passed to them too, a hesitancy between what came to be called ‘traditional Ireland’, the Ireland of the countryside, the church, the hearth (or some stereotyped version of this Ireland), and ‘modern Ireland’ defined by full engagement with the technological future. Irish Catholics also took to writing fiction characterised by an uneasiness about cultural identity, and this psychological hesitancy has facilitated the proliferation of Catholic Gothic narratives in which the cottage, the castle and the church merge as spaces blocking the nation’s progress towards the rational, cosmopolitan future. In recent years Gothic imagery has been used to characterise the post-Independence decades until the 1980s, and its industrial schools and Magdalene laundries have all been imbued with an aura more common to the horror film than the history book. The figures of the Irish Catholic past, like Eamon de Valera and Archbishop John Charles McQuaid, have also been transformed into stock villains, with all the sexual perversions, hang-ups and unmerciful authoritarianism which was associated with the Catholic powers of Maturin’s novels. However, despite this Gothicisation of the traditional, there remained a sense of attachment to this recent past, and a fear that in rejecting it something of the sublime might be lost and Ireland could find itself in trapped in rather than liberated by cosmopolitan banality. This hesitancy kept the Irish Gothic alive and well in the twentieth century.

The coming of the Celtic Tiger in the 1990s, with its promise of a bright future in which shadows had been completely banished and all ghosts exorcised, seemed, to some at least, to herald the end of Gothic Ireland (if not Irish Gothic). Given Ireland’s reinvention as a technological hub, a site for the cutting-edge rather than the atavistic, a gateway into a free trade European Union rather than a backwater with bad roads but exotic scenery and haunted houses, it looked for a while as if the country’s proverbial weirdness was being overcome and relegated to an embarrasssing aspect of history. With the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, too, the murderous violence of sectarian conflict was displaced and replaced by Troubles Tourism. The inhabitants of Celtic Tiger Ireland appeared to have stopped hesitating, like paragons of Todorov’s readers of the uncanny, and to have finally made a choice, rejecting the hyphenated mind of the past. For a while in the late twentieth century, it looked as though Gothic Ireland would exist only as a tourist virtual reality.
This is not to say that Irish Gothic went away, as Irish writers continued to churn out narratives of darkness and despair, but these tended to address an Ireland of the 1950s rather than the 1990s. Indeed, it looked like the last great Irish figure who could seriously be considered a Gothic ‘hero’ was Taoiseach Charles J. Haughey, a monumental cultural hesitator in the best sense of the term. A political and social modernizer and innovator (as seen in his judicial reforms, especially the Succession Act 1965, his development of Temple Bar, his handling of the presidency of the European Commission in 1990), he was nonetheless reviled by his fellow cosmopolitans because he spoke in the language of what they considered atavistic tribal nationalism (despite his importance to the Peace Process), and, in the eyes of the high priests of modernity he was seen as a monster needing a stake through his heart. To those who had to live in it, the Ireland of the 1980s and early 1990s often appeared to resemble a very clichéd Gothic novel, Garret (Fitzgerald) the Good chasing down Charlie the Bad across an increasingly improbable plot, a battle won when Brian Lenihan – closely associated with the Haughey element in Irish politics – lost the 1990 Presidential election to the liberal Mary Robinson, a woman associated with the ‘right’ side of recent ideological battles between stereotyped traditionalists and modernisers. The truth was, as usual, more complex. Haughey, like the Irish Gothic writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, had his feet in two camps and pointed in two directions: towards an unreal and weird landscape he called (in a now notorious 1986 Channel Four documentary) *Charles Haughey’s Ireland* and towards the virtual reality future of the Irish Financial Services Centre. Perpetually hesitating between these two spaces, Haughey effectively instantiated a schizophrenic Ireland unable to decide whether its future lay in the past or the present. In the end, as Ivana Bacik has put it, Ireland was dragged ‘kicking and screaming’ into postmodernity through three abortion referenda, two divorce referenda, and a host of other, bitterly divisive, changes. When Haughey died in June 2006, the Gothic Ireland recognised by Maturin, a place where all manner of things were possible, a GUBU land of the imagination, also seemed to have passed on, or put out of its misery. While some popped unseemly corks of celebration at Haughey’s death – the death, so it seemed to them, of an Ireland they despised, a dark Ireland of the deep past – others reflected, like Lord Glenthorn in Edgeworth’s *Ennui*, that perhaps with the coming about of this new modern Ireland something frightening, fractious, dangerous, but exciting and stimulating had been lost.

However, as Declan Kiberd has reminded us, Irish traditions are at their most vital when they have been proclaimed about to die. Indeed,
in Dracula, Bram Stoker warned that far from having been banished to the past, the Gothic was as up-to-date as the phonograph and the train timetable, and that the contemporary could be as haunted as the past. At the time of Haughey’s death, Ireland had as Taoiseach the incomparable Bertie Ahern, the most popular Irish Prime Minister ever to be elected, and apparently seen by many as a representative of the glossy Teflon future in which the Irish would forever be sipping lattes in their local cosmopolitan café bar. Ahern, though, turned out to be as duplicitous a figure as his ‘boss’, which, given that he had been groomed by Haughey for office, should never have surprised anyone. Ahern’s constituency office of St Luke’s in Drumcondra turned out to be as full of dark and upsetting secrets as any Castle of Otranto. His fall from grace coincided with the collapse of the Celtic Tiger, which, it turned out, was based less on sound economics than on a new inflection of a collective fairy tale the Irish had been telling each other for centuries. The haunted quality of the present now became all too obvious. The housing boom upon which so many Irish fortunes were based now threw up ‘ghost estates’; the financial wizardry admired all over the world now magicked up ‘toxic banks’. Property developers, who for a decade had been lauded as engineers of a cosmopolitan future, were revealed as new versions of the Rackrent family. Eerily empty houses, malevolent patriarchs, abused innocents, all seem to be with us once more. In other words, we have re-entered Gothic Ireland (or perhaps we never really left it).

The challenge for contemporary Irish Gothic is to move away from a now tired attack on the mid-twentieth century as a site of horror and repression, a view which suggests a contrast with the supposedly liberal and progressive Celtic Tiger of the new millennium, and to find a way to deal with the new realities through a Gothic story set firmly in the present. This is a challenge not unlike that presented to the Irish Anglican Patriots who wrote the first Irish Gothic novels. They had to work out how best to mitigate the religious chauvinism of the proto-Gothic past, to forge a tradition which would incorporate rather than simply exorcise previously reviled Others. Early Irish Gothic fiction might, perhaps, serve as a useful example for meeting the challenges that face twenty-first-century Irish horror.

Notes

1. Uncle Les, after surveying his nephew Lionel’s basement in Braindead, film, dir. Peter Jackson, 1992. Screenplay by Stephen Sinclair, Frances Walsh and Peter Jackson. Following an outbreak of some kind of zombie-making virus, initially transmitted to his mother through the bite of a Sumatran monkey,
Lionel has gathered a host of zombified friends, relatives and neighbours in his house to try to protect the general population. He eventually has to destroy them all in a memorable scene involving a lawnmower.

2. In a previous article, ‘Irish Gothic: A Theoretical Introduction’, my phrasing suggested I thought that Irish Gothic was at an end, rather than Gothic Ireland. It turns out that I would have been no more right in thinking the one than I was in thinking the other.


4. This acronym was coined by the historian, critic and sometime politician Conor Cruise O’Brien, to describe the kind of strange events that characterised Irish political life during the premiership of Charles Haughey. It came out of an incident in August 1982 when the double murderer Malcolm MacArthur was found in the house of the then Attorney General Patrick Connolly. Haughey, who was Taoiseach at the time, responded by describing the discovery as ‘a bizarre happening, an unprecedented situation, a grotesque situation, an almost unbelievable mischance’.