Late Nineteenth-Century Ireland’s Political and Religious Controversies in the Fiction of May Laffan Hartley

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Class and Politics in *Hogan MP*

“A seat in Parliament must be obtained—by any means.”

Mary Laffan’s first and most successful novel, *Hogan MP*, was published by Richard Bentley in London in the spring of 1876, when its author was twenty-seven. A satirical novel, it may be fairly compared with two other much better known novels also dating from the last quarter of the nineteenth century: Anthony Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now* (1875) and George Moore’s *A Drama in Muslin* (1887). Comparison between *Hogan MP* and the work of other contemporary female writers has not proved possible, since the main theme in *Hogan MP*—social and political dishonesty—apparently lacked appeal to women writers of the time. Possibly for that reason, *Hogan MP*’s anonymous author was at first assumed, as in this *Spectator* review, to be a man:

> We have seldom read through a modern novel which left a worse taste behind it than this. At the same time, we cannot but admit that the author shows considerable power in handling his materials. His canvas, indeed, is crowded to such an extent that the sketches are of the slightest; but each character stands on its own feet, and is not merely a lay figure, and the story, such as it is, never flags. Our objection is not to the handling of them, but to the materials themselves.1

*Hogan MP* is a complex novel with several overlapping themes—the “materials” referred to above. Here we will concentrate mainly on two of these, class and politics—on which the perspective offered by Laffan is valuable because unique. Few Irish Victorians wrote satirical novels, and so far as can be ascertained no other woman from an urban middle-class background did so in the 1870s. Moreover, the working knowledge of French and German which Laffan apparently possessed, and her consequent familiarity with European literature, give a realistic and unsentimental

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1 *Spectator*.
quality to her writing not generally found in the novels of her contemporaries.

Because copies of *Hogan MP* are difficult to find it seems useful to give an outline of the story here. The action takes place between the summer of 1872 and the winter of 1874 in Dublin, London, Paris and “Peatstown” (probably Tipperary town). The plot is based on Goethe’s *Dr. Faustus*, a work with which Laffan was familiar as her use of chapter-heading quotations in the original German would indicate. Like Dr. Faustus, the barrister John O’Rooney Hogan is a poor and ambitious man on his own in the world. He wants wealth, power and eighteen-year-old Nellie Davoren. She is the child of a mixed marriage, and for Hogan, who believes Protestants to be his superiors, this is an added attraction. Nellie’s Catholic father, a civil servant, is selfish and remote; her Protestant mother is an invalid. Nellie lovingly cares for her with help from her mother’s cousin Dorothy O’Hegarty, who although bigoted is genuinely fond of Nellie and of her brother Dicky, a Trinity College student. Through Dorothy’s generosity, they experience what Dublin society of the time has to offer.

Cosmo Saltasche, a neighbour of the Davorens, appears in the story as the Mephistopheles to Hogan’s Faust, offering him wish fulfillment—at a price. (Saltasche, a mysterious figure, has features of Trollope’s villainous character Melmotte.) Like the latter, he seems to be personally wealthy, but has a craving over the lives of others. Claiming to be the grandson of a French émigré, Saltasche is widely travelled, speaks several languages and has, unlike Melmotte, a large circle of friends and acquaintances.

Hogan is not very discerning and accepts readily when Saltasche offers to help him to a seat in Parliament. We can date the time of the event closely. The by-election which gives Hogan his chance takes place in either North Cork or South Tipperary, after the Secret Ballot Act of 1872 and before dissolution of Parliament in 1873, prior to the General Election of 1874. There are only two candidates—John Hogan, Liberal Home Ruler, and Theodore Wyldeoates, Conservative. Neither comes from the district, though Wyldeoates’s uncle Lord Kilboggan is the local absentee landlord, and Hogan makes full use of Nellie Davoren’s local connections.

Once elected, Hogan finds himself under pressure to promote fraudulent investment schemes. Saltasche, who loves to control other people’s lives, introduces him to Diana Bursford, a fading beauty from the Protestant Ascendancy who is looking for a husband. Separated from Nellie and his familiar Dublin surroundings, Hogan soon begins to feel lonely and out of
his element. Diana knows how to flatter his personal vanity and social aspirations. Saltasche meanwhile falls passionately in love with Adelaide Poignarde, the South American wife of one of his debtor clients, who does not love him but uses him to get away from her abusive husband. Inspired by passion, Saltasche executes a series of swindles robbing half of Dublin, his London brokers and incidentally John Hogan. The only way in which Hogan can avoid financial and professional ruin is to borrow from Diana, who exacts engagement to marry as the price of her help.

Saltasche and Adelaide flee to the Continent, one jump ahead of the law. They live luxuriously on ill-gotten gains until Adelaide, following an episode in which she unwittingly attracted police attention to them both, admits to her lover that she has never really cared for him. On his way back to England in custody, Saltasche, realising that prison life would be insupportable without the hope of rejoining his love, gives his guards the slip and drowns himself in the Channel. Conscience-stricken, Adelaide returns the stolen money to Saltasche’s victims.

With a general election in prospect, the English Prime Minister Gladstone resigns over his failure to carry through a University Bill for Ireland. Hogan has been neglecting his duties as an MP, all his time being taken up by the tasks exacted by Saltasche. Now the Peatstown electors make plain they will not have him again as their Parliamentary representative, preferring Dinny “The Hare” Houlihan, a reputed informer but a more forceful character. The financial journal Hogan was editing changes hands, and he loses his job. Hogan then tries—unsuccessfully—to break off his engagement to Diana. On a flying visit to Dublin he sees Nellie, assures her of his love, and tells her to disregard rumours about him. But they are interrupted and so she is unable to ask him any questions.

Nellie had agreed to keep their engagement secret, but grows uneasy at hearing too seldom from Hogan, and too often from Anglo-Irish friends about Hogan’s involvement with Diana. Nellie’s mother becomes acutely ill following the sudden disappearance of Dicky, who has run away to escape creditors. Mr. Davoren reacts to the news with a temper outburst which terrifies his wife, hastening her death.

Shortly after Hogan’s visit Nellie reads in the paper an account of his wedding to Diana Bursford. Dermot Blake, a Protestant cousin returned from the colonies, observes Nellie’s reaction, guesses the reason and tries to comfort her. Some time later, he succeeds in persuading her to marry him.
Dermot is an unconvincing character who seems introduced solely to provide the obligatory happy ending.

Diana, through her contacts, quickly finds a colonial job for Hogan and the pair departs for Honolulu. But already Hogan is showing signs of depression, and taking to drink as a comforter. There is no salvation in sight for this Irish Faust.

Such are the bones of the novel. It may be inferred that John O’Rooney Hogan, the nominal hero, is attractive and talented but also weak and insincere, whereas Cosmo Saltasche, the villain, is unscrupulous and devious but has a humour and passion about him which make him likeable. Characterization was one of Laffan’s gifts, and the empathy she seems to have had with people at the margins of society is demonstrated here.

We see John Hogan to begin with mainly through Nellie’s uncritical eyes. When with her, he appears most sincere and at his best. When away from her, as on his political campaign in Munster or during his brief London career, he lies, he pretends, he prevaricates and temporizes. The rural voters are not fooled, but they prefer him to the landlord’s nominee, and accordingly vote for him. En route to Westminster, Hogan does have one moment of insight when he is tempted to give up politics, try to make a career in the law, and ask Mr. Davoren for Nellie’s hand. But the world and the devil, represented by Saltasche, alternately threaten and tempt him, so that finally Hogan goes off to Westminster with the addresses of Saltasche’s friends in his pocket. We are left with the suspicion that he has taken on too much.

Laffan analyses John Hogan in one of her rare asides:

Hardship of any kind was antipathetic to Hogan’s nature. That which was soft and easy in life he clung to. He could work hard; but if he did, it was not as men do who work for the love of working and for the love of their calling. He worked hard that he might the sooner play. There was a strong tinge of the peasant nature underlying all his polish: the ingrained hatred of work, the fatalistic indifference engendered by a social and religious system of long and complicated standing, the curious reverence and love of power and authority peculiar to those who have been oppressed. All this old leaven worked under the super-imposed layer of training and culture. . . . He had his cleverness from his mother; and as often happens when such is the case, his mind ran in rather a feminine mould. There were some parts of his character, at all events, which were not what the world calls manly.
Laffan here shows awareness of the over-respectful attitudes to authority often found in people living under colonial rule, and this awareness is unusual for the time. She reveals the high value set by Anglo-Irish society on the “manly” image and Protestant work ethic by suggesting how poorly her hero can measure up to them. Consciously or not, she gives him a history which suggests some reasons why he fails. John O’Rooney Hogan was the only child of shopkeepers in a midland town. Educated at a junior seminary, he proved not to be suitable for the priesthood and so reluctantly joined his father in the shop. Both his parents died early, and by the age of nineteen Hogan was his own master, with a legacy in prospect from the sale of the shop. After consultation with his maternal uncle, Bishop O’Rooney, the latter agreed to help educate Hogan for a legal career. Hogan, a Trinity graduate, has now the manners and appearance of a gentleman, but lacks the self-assurance which marks the genuine member of the ruling caste. He is out of touch with his origins, and he survives by imitating his social superiors, almost to the extent of playing a part. His mistakes show failure of confidence and social skill; these shortcomings are assumed by Laffan to be due to his Catholic upbringing but could equally be due to his keen sense of his own inferiority as member of a subject race. The reference above to Hogan’s “peasant nature” is not meant to be complimentary either to him or to peasants. It implies that Hogan shows traits of laziness, ignorance, passivity and subservience to authority, altogether an Ascendancy stereotype of Irish Catholic characteristics, linked to class and religious prejudice.

Nineteenth-century scientific discoveries regarding evolution and genetics unfortunately were used in some instances to support an electionist view of human society. Not only were certain races thought to be intrinsically superior to others in terms of reasoning power and devotion to the work ethic, the Anglo-Saxon race in particular was believed to be naturally selected for the task of governing other races. The “others,” in order to justify their suppression, were told that they were incapable of self-government. John Hogan, though an intelligent and presentable young man, is therefore seen by the ruling caste as an inferior, and he inwardly believes this to be true. Perhaps the greater part of the attraction Nellie Davoren has for him is her connection to the Protestant Ascendancy from which the ruling caste in Ireland of the time was drawn. She, at any rate, is not an inferior, and marriage to her would mean social advancement.
John Hogan’s great disadvantage, as he sees it, is the fact that he is not a Protestant. This circumstance alone, in the Ireland of that time, places him in an inferior social caste, as the Hogan MP characters strolling on Kingstown Pier are well aware:

“The Pier is really crowded with very common people this summer. Every year it gets worse,” said Miss Braginton, “now, just look at these costumes. R.C.’s, my dear, of course.”

“These costumes” were the Raffertys’ and the Malowneys’, who looked like a walking flower-garden as they passed.

“R.C.’s—what’s that for, eh?” asked Mr. Blake.

“Roman Catholic,” explained Dorothy; “common people—trade, you know.”

Discrimination and lack of formal education having kept Catholics from the professions, they were over-represented in occupations involving buying and selling, and thus became identified with “trade,” that is, became inferior in Irish Victorian terms.

A society with but two main social groups—a small Protestant upper class consisting of landowners, civil servants and professional men, and a much bigger inferior class consisting overwhelmingly of Catholics in less skilled occupations—is the Ireland depicted in the works of most nineteenth-century novelists. The eighteenth-century term “Ascendancy” originally referred to the political and material advantages of being a member of the Established Church of Ireland. In fiction Protestants are shown in a relatively good light as reasonable, industrious and intellectually honest people; Catholic characters are depicted as volatile and amusing, but also intellectually dishonest, easily dominated and unreliable. Clearly the latter do not function in an “Ascendancy mode,” and this prevents them aspiring to Ascendancy heights.

Religion more than nationality is the indicator of social class in Irish fiction as well as in fact, although some romantics in the Walter Scott tradition bring in characters drawn from the remnants of Catholic Gaelic nobility, and some later Victorian writers conscientiously try to endow upper-class Catholic characters with middle-class Victorian values. This practice, intended to counteract negative stereotyping that “Catholics are not respectable and civilised” by nature, accurately reflected changes in the urban society of Ireland; for there was by the 1870s a Catholic middle class, and even a Catholic upper or professional class, although relative to
the whole of Irish society the latter group was small. Laffan, as can be seen from her writing, took the view that Irish Catholics, however able, however prosperous, were rough diamonds needing the social polish to be gained by contact with Irish Protestants.

To the English, Irish Protestants did not differ greatly from the Irish Catholics they despised, which possibly explains a tendency, noted by Laffan, for Irish Protestants, who were already critical of the English, to emphasise their own separate status and identity. The Church of Ireland, as from 1870 the Irish Anglican church came to be called, was naturally based in Dublin, as the centre of population. Within the Protestant community, there were various subdivisions, some of which are mentioned in Hogan MP. People “of good blood,” that is, belonging to a family with a traceable history, took social precedence followed by members of the learned professions, seen as more altruistic than those who made their living by trade. Landowners, unless titled, were regarded by the educated middle classes as somewhat boorish and unsophisticated; and Dissenters, apart perhaps from Presbyterians, were seen as socially inferior to members of the Church of Ireland. It is clear from contemporary accounts that in spite of legislation (the Church Act of 1869) aimed at altering the special position conferred by its Establishment on the Irish Anglican Church, Irish Protestants continued for some time afterwards to be a privileged and powerful minority, although at the period in which Hogan MP is set they were increasingly if indirectly aware that their days of unshared power were coming to an end.

It has to be remembered that the public which Laffan hoped would buy her books was not Irish, but in the main evangelical Protestant, English and middle class, for it was this prosperous social group above others which bought and read novels. Stories involving political and religious questions were very fashionable, as they helped people to explore in a gradual manner new ideas of the day. Fiction with an Irish setting had a certain exotic charm for those who knew little of countries other than their own. Expectations as to the form and content of Irish novels, however, were likely to be founded on the works of Maria Edgeworth, or the humorous stories of Charles Lever and Samuel Lover. These did not generally contain much of history, overt politics or nationalist propaganda, being written from a broadly Unionist standpoint and therefore on the whole uncritical of English relations with Ireland.
But to please the readers, certain fixed ethical values must always be maintained; and these were derived from evangelical Protestant not Roman Catholic tradition. For instance, the civil law was viewed as virtually identical to the moral law—therefore the possibility of some laws being unjust was not acceptable. Authority, however exercised and set up, in every case must be respected and obeyed without question. Racial prejudice was endemic and was not seen as wrong; indeed, its existence was taken for granted as justified—it being a “known fact” that some races were superior to others. 

Cleanliness, orderliness and thrift were regarded as virtues almost on a level with faith, hope and charity. Sinners must meet with visible punishment and virtue must be materially rewarded, even to the extent of going against the genuine beliefs of the writer or their perception of psychological truth. Sin itself was rather narrowly defined in terms of sexual misconduct, overtly violent behaviour, and theft.

Not only avant-garde writers like George Moore had difficulty with negotiating this moral code; the devout and high-minded Irish writer Rosa Mulholland (Lady Gilbert) collided with it as well in one of her novels. The chief offence of both writers was to suggest that a woman who gave birth to a child outside wedlock was not beyond redemption on that account, and so there was no real reason to kill her off in the course of a novel as punishment. This seems to have been seen as a shockingly over-lenient approach, acceptable to Catholics, perhaps, but not at all to strict evangelical Protestants. There is no doubt that London publishers were aware of this difficulty, and it dictated the terms on which they accepted an author’s work.

In the 1870s when Laffan’s writing career began, deliberate realism in the manner of Balzac or of Zola had scarcely yet appeared in novels written in English, where characters and situations still tended to the stereotypical and conventional. George Moore, as a critic of the English literary scene, declared that too many nineteenth-century English novels appeared to be written solely for young girls to read. Moore himself, writing A Drama in Muslin a decade later than Hogan MP, found it necessary to devise a traditional love affair for his heroine in order to make the story end in a way acceptable to readers. Another convention of the Victorian novel in English was that most leading characters should resemble the readers, that is, should be Anglo-Saxon, white and Protestant; but preferably not too High Church, or they might be suspected of leaning towards Rome. There were
of course some departures from this rule, but they seem to have been very few.\textsuperscript{18}

It is a measure of the originality of Hogan MP that it scarcely follows the conventions referred to above. Within the limits set by any satirical treatment it is a surprisingly realistic novel, and in general a witty one (this cannot be said to have been usual either). The deviant behaviour of a group of college students is gleefully as well as accurately described in alternating chapters of Hogan MP, probably to provide the story with lighter contrast. An example of this is the following passage which shows at an early stage the progress of Dicky Davoren and his friends down the slope of insolvency. Here the group is meeting in “Botany Bay,” a part of the residential student quarter of Trinity College:

Mahony Quain stooped his great back over the table, and in company with his friends perused the enticing bill of fare set forth in the columns of one of the most largely circulated and influential papers in Dublin.

“Ten pounds realise four hundred. Augh!” grunted he derisively, “the lowest thing they notice is five pounds.”

“Five hundred it might as well be!” cried Dicky scornfully.

“What do you think of a joint stock concern?” asked Mr. Orpen, “Quain, you’re in cash; Davoren, couldn’t you manage twenty-five shillings, —hey? . . .”

“I shan’t,” said Mr. Gagan; “I’m cleaned out. You did it, Billy Orpen, so put down for me, else I won’t.”

“Have you your Ulster coat?” suggested Mr. Quain, who was credited with a perfect genius for raising money.

“No, I haven’t my Ulster coat,” returned Mr. Gagan savagely, “it’s pawned two days ago.”

A silence fell on the quartette. It seemed as if their scheme was to fall through, but Orpen, inspired by a sudden thought, cried, —

“Day after tomorrow we give in our fees, don’t we? Suppose you—ah—just postpone paying yours for a week, Gagan. I have done that: it works beautifully. They never mind a few days delay; and something’s always sure to turn up in a week.”

Mr. Gagan looked a little frightened; he had not tried this expedient yet; embezzling the fees was looked on in college as a rather go-ahead practice.
“And what if your new financial dodge turns out to be a bilk?” asked Mahony Quain, stretching himself lazily against the opposite wall of the little grimy room.

Orpen shook his head. “Perfectly safe, my boy; take thirty, forty, whatever is given against their selection or your own, I bet you we’ll win.”

By the end of the story, Gagan has pawned his mother’s cashmere shawl and his father’s law books, Quain has eloped to Australia with the housemaid, and Dicky has run away to sea. Laffan seems to have possessed a thorough knowledge of different forms of gambling and the practices of Dublin moneylenders, as well as of adolescent male attitudes towards life—and towards girls not of their own social class. Nellie and her brother Dicky, going out for the day, have the following encounter:

They came upon a tawdrily dressed nurse carrying a baby, and followed by a number of little children. These belonged to an acquaintance of the Davorens, and Nellie stopped to enquire for their mother from the nurse.

Dicky, who was a little in advance, turned round with such an angry face that she hastily quickened her steps to overtake him. He stood quite still until she came up, and then said in an angry and serious tone, “Did I possibly see you speak to that girl of the Wildings?”

“Yes; I asked for her mistress.”

“Don’t you ever dare to speak to her again: never notice her on any account. You hear me, Nellie?”

“I do. Why not speak to her. What can you mean?”

“I mean this, then, since you must have meanings and reasons,—she’s not a person fit for you to speak to. I know what she is very well.”

So he did, for the “person” in question was a companion and associate of several of his college friends.

Nellie made him no rejoinder. She felt shocked and mortified.

Nellie has been made suddenly aware of another social convention concealed from the world with which she is familiar—a convention which treats servant girls as destined for sexual exploitation by middle-class young men like Dicky. These girls incurred social blame for their situation as if they had a choice in the matter—which often they had not. This inci-
dent can be seen as a foretaste of James Joyce’s short story “Two Gallants,” written on the same “double standard” theme nearly thirty years later.  

The pervasive low-life element is more subtly and convincingly dealt with in Hogan MP than in The Way We Live Now, where Trollope’s Felix Carbury, the dissolute young socialite who “tries it on” with various girls and is finally badly beaten up by the sweetheart of one of them, is difficult to credit. Trollope seems to have intended him as comic relief to set off the darker chapters of the novel, but somehow he is not funny enough, and even rather pathetic.

A sharper and closer comparison with Dicky and his friends is the “broken down swell” Fred Scully in Moore’s A Drama in Muslin. Fred, in fact, represents a further stage in the rake’s progress—he is what the students in Laffan’s story are likely to become:

After having been in London, where he spent some years in certain vague employments, and having contracted as much debt as his creditors would permit, and more than his father would pay, he had gone through the Bankruptcy Court and returned home to wearily drag through life. . . . Fred was about thirty years of age. His legs were long, his hands were bony, and stable yard was written in capital letters on his face. . . . Such was the physiology of this being, from it the psychology is easy to surmise: a complete powerlessness to understand that there was anything in life worth seeking except pleasure—and pleasure to Fred meant horses, women, eating—beyond these three gratifications he neither thought, felt nor saw.

Fred Scully is indeed motivated only by desire for instant pleasure, and a wish to escape consequences. In this he strongly resembles Dicky Davoren and his friends; their desire is consistent with what they do—and say, in the case of Laffan’s characters only, as Moore gives almost no dialogue to Fred. With Trollope’s Felix Carbury, even the motivation is not gone into. All that we are shown are his actions, which are comical but not consistent with each other—a state which has the effect of depriving the character of depth.

The points in common between characters in the two Irish novels mentioned above underline the differences between nineteenth-century Irish society and that of Middle England as portrayed by Trollope. Tension appears in Trollope’s novel The Way We Live Now between the comfortable, predictable English world and the deviant people who upset it. Like Jane Austen, Trollope chose to start from the baseline of a peaceful and ordered society, disrupted by unexpected happenings which he would then proceed
to describe. Irish writers could not use this approach, as they were unable to count on peace or stability as a norm, living as they did in a milieu where life was far less predictable. However, the solution found by all three writers to dispose of their troublesome characters was the same: emigration to foreign parts, ranging from Germany to South America, and guaranteed to produce eventual reformation.

The progress of Cosmo Saltasche’s infatuation with a South American and the gradual fading of his dream once attained are realistic enough to make one consider a possible origin in real life. Certainly louche international power brokers like Saltasche made regular appearances in the daily news as well as in American, English and French novels of the period. Expansion in the transport and mining industries, particularly during the second half of the nineteenth century, led to a general increase in speculation which opened possibilities for financiers prepared to venture beyond the limits of the law. As fictional characters, these could be menacing, like Vautrin in Balzac’s *Pere Goriot* and Melmotte in *The Way We Live Now*; or they could appear benign, like Sidonia in Disraeli’s *Coningsby*, and occasionally just furtive, like Merdle in Dickens’s *Little Dorrit*. But there is no doubt that they were modelled upon real people, usually self-made men on the margins of society, men who had narrowly escaped from poverty and obscurity.

In contrast to Augustus Melmotte, Trollope’s impressive confidence trickster, Cosmo Saltasche is a genuine mixture of good and evil. He is shown to be charming, generous to the poor, sympathetic to women and a good listener. But he is also inquisitive, unscrupulous and controlling. When, at one point in the novel, Saltasche becomes aware that Hogan regrets their bargain, he turns on the latter with such ferocity that Hogan, shocked and frightened, gives way at once. This incident shows Hogan as the weaker man and, possibly to emphasize this, Laffan makes him less convincing and even less positive than Saltasche. The shady financiers of the time, on whom this character was modelled, probably really were deceivers of the public who began by deceiving themselves, got carried away by greed or ambition, and eventually destroyed the fantasy they had created, and along with it, the legitimate hopes of many other people.24

In fact, Cosmo Saltasche, self-styled intimate of international statesmen Metternich and Gortshakov, has been called the first known representative in Irish fiction of the cultivated international scoundrel.25 A likely Irish model for him would be the lawyer, banker and MP John Sadlier.
Saltasche resembled him in appearance—both men were dark-haired, brown-eyed, olive-skinned and short—and he resembled him also in being able to inspire confidence and liking in many people, including those he afterwards ruined financially. Sadlier, too, made a personal fortune as a speculator, and dramatically took his own life when faced with the loss of all he had striven for. Just before he took poison, he apparently visited the dancer Clara Morton, thought to be his mistress. The fact that she did not perceive his state of mind suggests that her attachment to Sadlier may have been like that of Adelaide to Saltasche—a matter of expediency rather than affection.

Details of the career of John Sadlier would have been well known to Laffan. Her father’s people came from the original scene of Sadlier’s operations, and at least one—Archdeacon Michael Laffan—was among those whom Sadlier deceived both into giving him political support, and later investing church money in his ill-fated Tipperary Joint Stock Bank, destined to crash resoundingly in 1856.

In class terms, Cosmo Saltasche and his predecessors both real and fictional are outsiders, not true participants in the official scheme of things upheld by the powerful English social system. Outsiders in English novels of this time are frequently foreigners, often Jews or Catholics originally, but anyway prone to conceal their true origins. Typically, Augustus Melmotte in Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now* says he is English, is assumed by all to be a Middle-European Jew, and is finally discovered to be an Irish American. To a conservative and xenophobic readership, financial speculation was a foreign invention and reinforced the bad name foreigners already had. Their “different,” presumably shady backgrounds were held to account for any lack of openness; their persuasive charm and social skills were seen as vanities deployed solely to deceive investors.

In the Ascendancy enclave of South Dublin, Saltasche ingratiates himself with poor people, and manifests sympathy with Irish Nationalism and Catholicism, the creeds of the underdog. The poor people like him; but he is less successful with people of his own station in life. Though he contributes lavishly to charities and organizes money-raising events, he is never ever invited to events at the Viceregal Court:

It was in his own immediate neighbourhood, precisely where he expended his best efforts and a vast income to attain the goodwill of everyone, that his enemies were keenest. There was a class of Protestants—not the best set, nor the second set, but still a very respectable and old-established faction—who stoutly
denied Saltasche’s supremacy and would have none of him, “a half-foreigner,” “a fellow come from God knows where,” “a mongrel,”: they even declared him to be a freethinker. And one gentleman, who, on the strength of an avowed atheism, had acquired a sort of reputation for general information, if not erudition, imparted under the seal of secrecy to his most particular friends his opinion that Saltasche was a Comtist.29

Cosmo Saltasche, unlike John Hogan, is able genuinely to fall in love. Adelaide Poignarde, an aloof girl apparently contemptuous of her surroundings, inspires in Saltasche an obsessive devotion from the first time he sees her:

She was looking, as it happened, straight in his direction, and he caught the very glance of her splendid liquid brown eyes in his. The pure oval of her face was well relieved against the braids of brown hair hanging low on her neck. White and scarlet camellia buds were set, in defiance of the mode of the day, right behind her left ear,—just where the Spanish beauties put them; the white above the scarlet, so that the one set off the ivory-white skin it caressed, and the other glowed in the setting of her luxuriant hair. Not a jewel did she wear, save a gold and diamond star, fixed in a black velvet ribbon on her neck; and her wrists, slender, round and supple, bore not a single bracelet.30

Saltasche, we are told, “revelled in the picture that she made”—evidently a picture after Ingres, as the description recalls the latter’s cold and voluptuous style.31 Saltasche is shown as a knowledgeable patron of art and music. Adelaide Poignarde is a gifted musician. Her skill, her style and her exotic appearance set her apart from the upper-class Dubliners who enjoy her playing but feel uneasy in her presence. Conscious of this unease, and unwilling to provoke it, she resists attempts made to get to know her. An alienation similar to hers is experienced by the wife and daughter of Melmotte in The Way We Live Now. They do not feel comfortable in the English upper-class world any more than Adelaide does in the world of the Ascendancy. Saltasche and Adelaide, the two aliens, should have enough in common to make a success of their relationship. The fact that they fail at this could have to do with the natural disposition of both of them to exploit others. Adelaide feigns a love for Saltasche which she does not feel; he conceals his dishonest financial transactions from her. Like most of the other characters in Hogan MP, they practice deception and are caught in their own trap.

It is noteworthy that Laffan, writing about two deviant characters (Adelaide the tough-minded woman who cares only to pursue her musical
career and readily agrees to jettison an alcoholic husband, and Saltasche the trickster of uncertain origins who becomes her accomplice and lover) describes their individual thought processes and motivation in an impressively realistic manner but without expressing judgment on them. She hardly even judges their actions. Such moral detachment is far commoner in French novels, such as those of Balzac, Zola and Flaubert, than in English fiction, to the detriment of the latter, as Henry James was later to argue. They acknowledge the complexity of human nature and the need for fiction to take into account that the truth about any individual’s behaviour is seldom simple or straightforward.

This does not mean that Laffan herself was not a moral novelist—on the contrary, standards of morality concerned her. She was, however, a compassionate writer, avoiding the tendency to see characters as perfectly good or totally evil, and accepting the reality that good people sometimes cause bad actions. She was quick to demonstrate that social class is not a measure of probity. John Hogan is dishonest in trying to use his status as an MP without doing anything to earn his position. Cosmo Saltasche uses written lies to exploit the financial greed of others. Their social superiors behave differently but no better. Lord Brayhead, for example, is uninterested in anything but proselytism and financial gain. As a leader of the evangelical community in Dublin, he attends a charity concert at which Adelaide makes her successful déb
t:

His Lordship . . . had serious doubts as to the becomingness of ladies excelling in anything. . . . He had a dim idea that these sort of things were marketable commodities, bought and paid for, and that it was infra dig. for a lady or gentleman to meddle with professional pursuits. . . . Then he was not sure who the musician was. She might have been a governess, or some “person” obliged to support herself. So he deemed it right to qualify his approval.

“Do you consider that music in itself repays or justifies the expenditure of so large a portion of our allotted time?”—and the long sheep’s face inclined sideways towards her. “Is it not open to question whether we are justified in encouraging trivialities that pass with time itself?”

Brayhead considers that it is legitimate for him to question the value of Adelaide’s performance, which he is unable to appreciate. He puts a puritanical gloss on his remarks by drawing a distinction between “valuable” and “worthless” activities and suggesting music to be worthless because there is no tangible end product. His reason for backing Hogan, a man from the class he despises, is typical—he needs an MP to introduce a private
Railway Bill which will open access to mineral deposits on his estate. And he cannot support the obvious candidate, Kilboggan’s nephew:

“With Lord Kilboggan I have nothing to say or to do in common, I thank the Lord. I trust I remember him in my prayers, but he is a godless man, who would not scruple to injure me in any way he could; and if he were aware that I had any interest in the election for Peatstown he would oppose me.”

Intolerant as he is towards “Romanists,” in his zeal to overcome an enemy and make a profit Brayhead lowers himself sufficiently to invite Hogan to dinner, which is delayed by an hour to accommodate the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Spencer. The latter is held up, according to Lord Brayhead, by the need to censor Meyerbeer’s opera *Les Huguenots*. Saltasche is highly amused, but pretends otherwise, except to Hogan:

“Did ever mortal man hear such foolery? His Excellency, I suppose, is holding a Privy Council to decide whether the Rata plan chorus is to be excised or not. He’ll send alarming dispatches to Downing Street over it, to show them what he is doing. Pooh! he must give a little value for his money, you know, or seem to do so.”

Laffan does not spare her ridicule of Brayhead, yet, social status being all-important, she makes it clear that he and his family are highly influential in the little Dublin world. They are integral parts of its Protestant upper-class, as also are Diana Bursford and her mother, Dorothy O’Hegarty, and her gossip-circle, Theodore Wyldeoates and his vacuous friends, Nellie’s mother Everilda Davoren and Dicky Davoren’s mentor the hypocritical Divinity student William Orpen. These all perceive themselves (and are perceived by others) to be superior people solely because they are upper-class Protestants. Others are expected to aspire to their heights, although never to actually reach them; and English society is seen as inferior to that of Dublin, because it is less narrow and socially exclusive.

John Hogan himself, Bishop O’Rooney, Rev. Mother Assumption and the nuns at St. Swithin’s Convent, Nellie’s father Mr. Davoren and his Tipperary cousins, the Lord Mayor and his entourage of aldermen with “overdressed and underbred” wives and daughters—all these are Catholics, and therefore lesser people. But Adelaide and Saltasche cannot be placed within this system; and Nellie and Dicky Davoren, children of both traditions like their creator, have a more complex and ambivalent relation to it.
Ambivalence is in fact one of the features of this book, and more so than in either *The Way We Live Now* or *A Drama in Muslin*. Laffan uniquely shows us both Irish communities in their natural colours, even if usually for the purpose of castigating both. In her books, Irish Protestants are depicted as far better educated than Catholics, more sophisticated and more cultured. The accuracy of this can be inferred from the relatively greater numbers of Protestants who in the Ireland of the period received higher education, joined the professions, or made successful business careers. But they are also depicted as complacent, arrogant, narrow-minded and insensitive. Irish Catholics by comparison are generous, imaginative and lively. Their responsiveness to religion, the arts, and the needs of others is consistent with this description. But they are also shown to be ignorant, careless, dishonest, and too deficient in self-esteem not to take offence at any suggestion of criticism. Some recognition is given to the idea that Catholics in other European countries do not seem to have the faults attributed to those in Ireland, but the implications of this are not discussed.

There is little scope for ambivalence in *The Way We Live Now*. Trollope wrote from the viewpoint of the middle-class nineteenth-century Englishman, but unlike most of them he had been educated at famous public schools. Little as he seems to have drawn from this experience at the time, he found in adult life that his school background had effectively ensured him a livelihood—made it possible for him to have a rewarding career in the civil service, with the time and opportunity to become a writer. Perhaps because the rest of his early life was lonely and hard, Trollope valued greatly the part of his history and identity connected with his famous schools, and their reputed standards of honesty, responsibility and “decent” behaviour became, for him, the level to which all good men should aspire.

*The Way We Live Now*, the longest of Trollope’s works and the only one in a sustained satirical mode, was intended as an attack on changes in the value system of society, changes which he felt were hostile to his creed and denigrated it. In middle life he did not welcome social change, adopting the general if sub-acute distrust of the foreign and unfamiliar common to English writers of the time, and illustrated in *The Way We Live Now* by Trollope’s intense and obvious dislike of the Conservative Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, although he was at the same time a sincere supporter of the party Disraeli led. Trollope was no friend to ambivalence or ambiguity; he liked things to be straightforward, and often interpolated his own per-
sonal views in his novels to make clear to the reader what these were and why he held them. Trollope liked Ireland, where his first career as a civil servant had flourished and his second career as a successful novelist had begun, but his view of Irish politics was little different to that of any other English Conservative.

Most novels set in the Ireland of the last quarter of the nineteenth century were written either from the standpoint of the Anglo-Irish Protestant or from that of the Irish Catholic. Hogan MP is written from the two standpoints alternating, because its writer stands between both sides. She is therefore in an ideal position to shift the mocking light of ridicule from the pretence and snobbery of the Ascendancy ladies at Dorothy’s tea-party to the pretence and vulgarity on display at St. Swithin’s Convent prize-giving. And as is usual with satire, there is a general impression of underlying pain and a sense of disconnection, of half-hidden uncertainty as to what is right, or who is in the right, and a deep dissatisfaction with the way things are.

George Moore shared some of the views of May Laffan, but expressed them with a more conscious art. A Drama In Muslin, his first novel to be set in Ireland, was like Hogan MP successful in critical and financial terms. Like Hogan MP also it was written in a satirical vein; and it had in common with the earlier novel an opening scene in a convent school, and a conventionally happy ending in which we cannot quite believe. The aims of both writers differed though. Unlike Laffan, Moore wanted to shock the public into awareness of the “slave market” aspect of marriage in upper-class Irish circles, first commenting on this in the meditation of his clever heroine Alice Barton:

For this, and only this, the whole system of their education had been devised. They had been dressed out in a little French, a little music, a little water-colour painting—for this, and only this: to snigger, to cajole, to chatter to any man who would condescend to listen to them, and to gladly marry any man who would undertake to keep them.\textsuperscript{39}

Like Laffan, Moore considered the convent education of girls to be inferior; but though he was fascinated by girls, it is not certain that he ever valued their intellectual abilities. He intended A Drama in Muslin as an exposure of the humiliating lives of unmarried women in upper-class Irish society, where they apparently outnumbered men. He wrote about what he knew, drawing on his extensive personal experience and that of women friends. The Moore family had converted to Catholicism in the eighteenth century and to Home Rule in the nineteenth. Fulfilling as they did the unlikely role
of Catholic landlords, they nevertheless supported social change intended ultimately to eliminate their class. Moore, whose father had been a founder member of the Irish Party led by Isaac Butt, rejected both conversions, preferring ultimately for many reasons a nominal Protestantism and a British identity.

Moore saw little difference between Catholics and Protestants in regard to their attitudes to women and to marriage. The supply of marriageable men of their own class being limited, for many upper-class Irish girls the real choices lay between spinsterhood, the celibate religious life, and marriage to a man beneath one’s own social class. This third option—the one chosen by Diana in Hogan MP—is chosen also by Alice Barton, Moore’s heroine, when the dispensary doctor (regarded by her family as a sort of upper servant) wants to marry her. Alice, by her marriage, is enabled to escape from a society which, during the Land War, was under constant threat of violence to a scene which holds no painful memories and enables her to use her experience creatively as a writer of fiction.

Diana Bursford, on the other hand, by her marriage to Hogan the ex-MP apparently achieves nothing but married status. She, too, is assumed by everyone to have married beneath her; and because Hogan is a Catholic, his shortcomings are no surprise to anybody. But it seems as if the actual status of being a wife is all Diana needs—to liberate her:

The girl was in truth sick of her life; fourteen years was a long apprenticeship, and she wearied for the day when she might lay aside, literally as well as metaphorically, the war paint and feathers; when she might be natural and unaffected, and above all, independent of the mother bird, whose control, prolonged far beyond the natural limits, was now become distasteful and wearisome to her.

Moore castigated what he perceived as hypocrisy regarding sexual conduct; but Laffan wanted to ridicule pretension and its associated dishonesty in public and private life. She saw these faults as endemic in Ireland, and holds them up to ridicule. In Hogan MP she exhibits and characterises them. John Hogan pretends to culture when trying to impress Nellie Davoren, and not really understanding what she is talking about, he mis-pronounces the name of a famous German poet. Later, he deceives Nellie as to his relations with Diana. In his election campaign he feigns idealism and motivation which he knows are not really his own. Likewise Dicky Davoren and his friends cheat and deceive their families in order to mimic the lifestyle of their social superiors, the hard-living British Army officers.
stationed in Dublin. Mother Assumption and her nuns at St. Swithin’s Convent deceive as well, offering a false and expensive travesty of education to their pupils, who in their turn slavishly copy the attitudes and fashions of the Viceregal Court. Life in Dublin has therefore a meretricious and derivative quality, based as it is on insecure identity and lack of self-esteem. Even the gentle Nellie Davoren expresses this to Hogan:

“What would become of us all—of our energies and intellects—if we were not given to politics and patriotism? There isn’t any outlet for either, as things are.”

“How ‘as things are’ now?” asked he . . .

“Do I need to tell you that? . . . This country is so cut off from the other nations of Europe,—for it is a nation, in spite of geography, ethnology and all the rest of it. Thanks to our rulers, we have no manufactures to employ our time; and then, worst of all, these wretched castes of Protestant and Catholic hinder so—”

A look on her listener’s face warned the speaker to stop. She bit her lip, frightened lest she had said too much.

It is significant, perhaps, that the harsh term “caste,” with its derivation from Hindu society, and not the gentler term “class” is used. Nellie has her own opinions, even if the convention of the time discouraged young women from expressing these, about issues of class and identity which also were uppermost in the mind of May Laffan.

Laffan seems to have felt very uncertain indeed as to where she really belonged, and she expressed this in the somewhat nebulous character of Nellie Davoren. It has been recently suggested that Laffan, mainly on the evidence presented in *Hogan MP*, chose like Moore to identify herself as Protestant, but taking into account her consistent strictures on Irish Protestant attitudes this seems rather unlikely. There were already a number of contemporary novels which touched on the “mixed marriage” theme, but the touch was very light and no difficulties were explored. Perhaps May Laffan felt that any attempt to look below the surface would take her novel in a direction she did not want. This could account for her failure to develop Nellie as a complex character; exploration would have gone altogether too near the bone for her.

How accurate were the descriptions given in these novels of life in Dublin for the middle and upper classes? In detail, they correspond closely to accounts both in memoirs of the period and in contemporary novels. Certainly, Moore’s scathing picture of the Viceregal Court in full swing is more accomplished and detailed than the parallel descriptions of “Castle”
events in *Hogan MP* and *Christy Carew*, the two “Dublin” Laffan novels—but Moore deliberately attended the Dublin “Season” for two successive years in order to describe it convincingly from within. It was possible for him to do this as a man, a landowner, and a comparatively wealthy person. Without such opportunities as he had, Laffan managed in her evocations of activities on the fringe of the Court to convey the self-same uneasy, frustrating and inhibiting atmosphere of colonial society in a state of decline.

This decline is shown in *Hogan MP* in a number of different ways, for instance, in descriptions of how Dublin social life at the middle- and upper-class level is obsessed with the doings of “their Excellencies,” the Viceregal pair Lord and Lady Spencer and their entourage. At the theatre, they attract more attention than whatever is happening on the stage. At the Royal Dublin Society’s Flower Show, no one looks at the exhibits once “their Excies” have arrived—and then everyone follows them about. Their horses, clothes, and banal sayings are reported on and copied to a disconcerting extent. As private individuals, Lord and Lady Spencer are not popular with the Ascendancy, which considers them too free in their encouragement of upwardly mobile Catholics; but they are important nevertheless as representing the Queen and English nobility, a focus of loyalty in fact. Beyond the “echoes and shadows” of Moore’s famous phrase describing Dublin lies genuine substance—the real seat of power existing in London, capital of the world’s richest and most powerful country.

In *Hogan MP* also, Dubliners with social pretensions fix their eyes firmly on London. During a lengthy tea-party given by Dorothy O’Hegarty to her women friends, all the conversation concerns not events in Ireland, or even Dublin, but the latest London scandals. Not a single one of the people so avidly discussed is known to Dorothy or her friends, but they pretend otherwise. They read London magazines, too—but only in order to copy the fashions displayed in the illustrations. Education is mentioned—but in terms of wealthy Irish people educating their children in England, so that they may be able to pass for English later.

The chief social events Laffan writes about in *Hogan MP* are private parties and dances, held with great ostentation in the large houses of Mountjoy Square and Gardiner Street, the territory of the upwardly mobile Catholic. Her set-pieces depict the social scene much as George Moore found it, but she adds another dimension. All of the girls present are Catholics, and this is because women from the Protestant Ascendancy do not ac-
cept invitations to these social occasions. They are therefore perceived as setting the social boundaries. Army officers and gentlemen of the Ascendancy readily accept invitations to Catholic houses to devour the over-lavish suppers where expensive wines (in which their hosts trade) are pressed on them. They come to see the girls, whom they usually perceive as inferiors, as they do most Irish Catholics including their hosts:

“I didn’t know a creature in the place, give you my word. What the deuce did the people mean by askin’ us to such a shop? Did you notice the Lord Mayor, old whiskey barrels, with his chain of office round his neck? Law!” continued the young gentleman, after an explosion of laughter, “why hadn’t the aldermen got on their gowns?”

But when a drunken guardsman gatecrashes one such party, Mr. Rafferty the ex-publican Lord Mayor comes into his own, removing the offender quickly and unobtrusively with an ease born of long practice. And the guests at these noisy, lively parties certainly enjoy themselves more than at the dismal entertainment to which Lord and Lady Brayhead invite Saltasche and Hogan. Thus do *nouveaux riches* Catholics imitate the customs of the socially dominant class, but their own different nature, barely restrained by deference, is shown as occasionally breaking through. This habit of deference towards social superiors was losing hold in the 1870s, and new ideas on the subject of identity beginning to appear. Bishop O’Rooney, advising his nephew John Hogan, had one way of putting it:

“No, John my boy, don’t let anyone hear you sneer at trade. You’re in a fair way enough, but a rash speech like that would be enough to tumble you over.

. . . Depend upon it, John, the only way to get on—and I know the world—the only chance of consideration or respect you can have from the Protestants, is to let them see—you being a Catholic—that you have the confidence and respect of the Catholics. The Government can’t do without the priests; and what use would you be without their back? And to make little of Catholics, and Catholic society, is not the way to go about getting that, I can tell you, sir.”

Associated with this robust consciousness-raising is the gradual appearance of a change of attitude towards the Celtic past. Although antiquaries and historians had always shown some interest in the Irish language and Gaelic society, it was certainly a minority interest. No one actually speaks Irish in *Hogan MP*, though in rural Munster episodes of the occasional Irish derivative is used. But the comment is made—and made fun of—that upwardly mobile people who tried very hard in the recent past to anglicize
their surnames by changing the spelling and dropping the Gaelic prefixes are now trying equally hard to reverse that process:

The Raffertys had got home a genealogical tree from Sir Bernard Burke; the Ryans wrote themselves O’Ryan; and O’Donnell, the retired wine-merchant, who bought Lord Ramines’ patrimony, insisted on the prefix Mac. There was great talk of the septs and tribes; and sundry extinct peerages seemed to be only waiting for moneyed claimants to come forward. Hitherto Hogan had overlooked the fact that his ancestry might be of service . . . he determined that the chieftain Rhuadne, and that the ruined Castle Rhuadne, near Tara, should both be skillfully introduced as a background, so to say, to the representation of the family O’Rooney.51

This popular aspect of the Celtic revival is shown as part of a range of fashionable trends, current in late-nineteenth-century Dublin, which fell in with national aspirations in that time of transition from relative acceptance of English rule to its rejection. Other such manifestations were the revival of interest in Thomas Moore’s *Irish Melodies* in the 1870s and the popularity of patriotic songs such as *The Wearing of the Green*, which Diana Bursford sings incongruously at the Brayhead’s reception. However unconsciously, these minor gestures towards cultural separatism went along with the need to develop a more comfortable identity than that of an imperfectly assimilated, subject people.

Moore’s novel *A Drama in Muslin* is almost free from mention of such contemporary trends, apart from his indirect references to women’s rights and their need for education. It is probable that he had read *Hogan MP* before starting on his own more celebrated story. So far as education and marriage are concerned, Laffan and Moore seem to have thought on similar lines. The convent-school opening scenes apart, Laffan’s characters, Mrs. Rafferty the ebullient Lady Mayoress or Diana the fading belle, for instance, could be fitted very neatly into Moore’s evocation of the Dublin Season and its sacrificial victims—one can imagine Mrs. Rafferty as a typical chaperone, and Diana Bursford as one of the Muslin Martyrs:

Poor Miss Bursford! her opportunities were not to be wasted now. Who would think that under the cold, well-bred smiling manner there lay such a torrent of disgust, contempt and fierce self-upbraidings? She looked round and round the room, noted with a sneer that ancient manhunter, Blanche Braginton, playing off all the well-worn tricks in her repertory on the tough hide of Cosmo Saltsache; then noted the sofa, where a couple of women, well-dressed and dull, were keeping up a feeble trickle of small-talk with some dining-out professional; Lord
Brayhead, wooden as usual, on the hearthrug, and the place of honour vacant as yet. . . .

The inhabitants of the ladies’ sitting room at the Shelbourne Hotel in Moore’s story are all Irish Catholics, which would scarcely have been the case in Laffan’s time ten years earlier. Social change has evidently taken place; and awareness of it is shown to have hardened some Ascendancy attitudes. Reference is made in *Hogan MP* to a more tolerant climate existing before Catholic Emancipation. It is implied that Catholics did not then present a threat, because they knew their place and were respectful. Not one of the Anglo-Irish characters in *Hogan MP* explicitly states the native Irish to be *racially* inferior; however, their low status is firmly and ostensibly attached to their religion.

Catholicism was perceived from the outside as a primitive, permissive and anti-intellectual form of belief, hardly Christian, but vaguely related to Christianity. Devotion to the Virgin Mary and the saints was understood as idolatry, and emphasis on tradition was interpreted as a deliberate attempt to prevent the faithful from using their intellects. The Catholic Church was considered to be condoning evil by saying *all* sin could be forgiven. Even the use of visual imagery, of music and drama in Catholic worship was suspect as a form of deception.

Both religion and philosophy were taken very seriously by the Victorians, and the writings of Thomas Malthus and Harriet Martineau, together with the research-based theories of Darwin and Huxley, reached a wide audience in one form or another and fed into a general vague perception of threats to civilization posed by racial and cultural inferiors. Muddled with the fear of such threats was distrust of any belief system apparently not logic-based, or any good not measurable in material terms. For some, in fact, religion altogether lacked any transcendental dimension; it was seen merely as a useful emotional prop for political and social systems.

*Hogan MP* was published in 1876, but one of the most searching reviews it received was to come years later in *The Cabinet of Irish Literature*. This review, quoted in full in chapter two, is unsigned and its authorship therefore uncertain, but the writer compared Laffan to William Carleton, and hailed her as the precursor of “a new era in Irish literature.” One of the criticisms it made about *Hogan MP* was

the manner in which political debates are introduced . . . and do not, as in the case of Miss Keary’s *Castle Daly*, arise naturally out of the incidents of the story ...
but they also . . . reveal a penetrating sense of the real issues and the genuine opinions of people that is especially remarkable in an authoress.59

The “political debate” criticism refers to a long scene between Saltasche and Hogan in chapter six. Saltasche asks Hogan out to dinner with a view to finding whether he might do as a prospective tame MP for the powerful Lord Brayhead. The two men certainly talk politics at length, but as Robert Lee Wolff remarked, it is reasonable that any political “fixer” at any time in history would sound out a candidate in this manner.60 Hogan and Saltasche begin by discussing Catholic-Protestant relations and social interaction, Hogan leading on the subject of bigotry:

“... the root of it lies far back. You have to go back a century or more into the history of the country to see how deeply rooted is the class distinction between the two rival creeds. I assure you even Protestant tradesmen think they have the pull over any R.C. And that is a thing that always gathers force as it gets older. So long as the Protestants were the recognised superiors of the others, they were not nearly so stuck-up and exclusive....”61

The pair goes on to discuss current politics. Saltasche is clearly drawing his protégé out, testing his powers of quick thinking, verbal expression and communication; and Hogan knows quite well what he is up to though not why the test is taking place. Accordingly he gives, not so much the stock answers associated with politicians, but opinions and ideas which appear to be his own and he gives the reasons he has for holding them.

The topic of Home Rule, ostensibly the major political issue at the time, is not touched on at all at this stage, but the issue of undue clerical influence is:

“[Priests] abused their influence? . . . I don’t know that the Government can charge them with that. They certainly have an enormous personal influence over the people, but in political matters, why, look at this Fenian business: in all Ireland, it is a fact there was but one Fenian priest.62 Their lives were actually threatened—you know that. . . . Fenianism was low, too—” said Hogan thoughtfully, “essentially low: it had not a single supporter of the social position of those who were concerned with the Young Irelanders;63 and I may tell you that priests are intensely aristocratic.”64

Then Saltasche gives his opinion of the fundamental reason for Irish unrest:
“The monstrous insolence of the English is at the bottom of all the troubles here. Talk of Infallibility and the Pope’s assumptions,—God bless me, what is it compared to the Anglo-Hibernian Protestantism? A trifle light as air. Their religion is themselves; and everywhere John Bull goes with his egotism and his Bible,—on the Continent, India, Africa—the story is identical; hatred and rebellion spring up at once.”

Hogan agrees with his friend, instancing the Indian Mutiny as an unnecessary war brought about by tactless behaviour on the part of English officials and army officers. He and Saltasche are especially critical of the manner in which the English treat their servants as a lesser species. (The few servants depicted in Hogan MP are strong characters, shown dominating their employers.) The sensitivity of Hogan and Saltasche to this aspect of life under English rule suggests a shared consciousness of their own perceived social inferiority—as marginal people they too have both been at the receiving end of denigration.

Now Hogan believes the tenant-at-will situation may be ruining rural Ireland, but he cannot envisage a way to change it yet, because it would be asking too much to expect landowners to dismantle their own system. He does not think the electorate well-informed enough yet to help themselves:

“... What can you expect of the people? What can they do for themselves? Take into account their wretchedness and degradation, and their ignorance ... how, then, can you expect them to have just or equitable ideas? They really are not one whit more civilised than the peasants whom Arthur Young describes in France a century ago.”

Hogan thinks he understands that the issue of the land ownership in Ireland is fundamentally important. What he cannot imagine is how it could be made to alter in any permanent and satisfactory way.

The next topic raised is the proposed reformation of the existing National School system, necessary because, according to Hogan, the present system was destined from the start to be unacceptable to those for whom it was designed:

“They always wanted to force Scripture, in some shape or sort, down the throats of the children, and insisted on their right to do it. Bah! The priests were quite right to resist such aggression. And let the parsons promise what they like, from the very first time they ever established a school in Ireland, proselytism was their business. There is not a brat as high as your knee but knows that, and hates them accordingly. ... This proselytism was not for the sake of merely winning over their
souls to the rival Church, but also, mark you, as a means of obtaining their allegiance, and thereby strengthening and securing the proselytiser's own position as conquerors in a subjugated country. So at all times here a pervert, or, as the Saturday Review says, a 'vert', was looked upon in the double light of a deserter and an apostate.”

Saltasche hints that the Catholic clergy expect that the fruits of the Church Act, which disestablished the Church of Ireland, should be used to finance the Catholic University. Hogan disagrees, seeing another University as unnecessary:

“Trinity is absorbing such Catholic youngsters as want college education and degrees. I think the Stephen's Green University merely draws medical students. After all, they have a very good excuse for patronising Trinity. Few people can afford to lose time and money taking out a degree that has no market value—a mere certificate, . . . Moreover, who are their professors? Mere nobodies,—or men trained in, or belonging to, the Queen's Universities [sic] or Trinity.”

“It's a pity, Mr. Hogan,” said Saltasche, “that you are not in St. Stephen's; if you were to talk that way, you'd soon make your mark.”

Without knowing it, Hogan has passed the test, and without delay Saltasche recommends him to Brayhead.

The views quoted above, leaving out only the strictures on Protestantism and “perverts,” repeat almost word for word the views of Gerald Fitzgibbon, Laffan's granduncle, as given in his book Ireland in 1868 (see chapter one). Fitzgibbon was a Unionist, but his views coincided with those of many socially aspiring middle-class Catholics at the time. These were business people whose profits depended, or so they thought, on the persistence of British Rule in Ireland. They could see no sense in destroying their hopes of personal prosperity and the futures of their children for what seemed the illusory dream of a self-governing country where a more equitable and just society might possibly arise. The system as it presently was suited them and met their needs. Perhaps their children were to take a wider view, but Laffan does not speculate on the future. She seems to have seen her novelist's role at this point as simply recording the ideas of her present time, with some bias towards subjects of special interest to her. In that connection it is notable that, following on the political discussion summarised above, Saltasche and Hogan go on to have a lengthy and slightly irrelevant session on the pros and cons of religiously mixed marriages, an important
subject certainly, but not at that time a political one. This topic, like women’s education, was a recurrent preoccupation of Laffan.

But caring as much as she did about education she should have been aware that Gladstone’s attempt to design a plan for an Irish University which might be acceptable to all parties was being restricted by the insistence of English Liberals, his supporters, that denominational education must never be subsidised. Some at least of the younger Irish MPs supporting Home Rule foresaw this possibility and refrained from placing much faith in the Liberal Party for that reason. Isaac Butt’s emphasis on Home Rule as the main political aim was beginning to lose impetus, as other issues rose in importance. One of these issues was the need to fund both a University system and a system of post-primary education acceptable to Catholics, on which the formation of a middle class could depend. It was at the time a matter more urgent than Home Rule to some of the townspeople in the Catholic community, and especially to those who, like Laffan’s father, were making regular financial contributions at the church door to keep their Catholic University going.

The Irish town and city dwellers seem to have been most aware of the need for state support to third level education. However, when John Hogan, having received assurance of financial support from Lord Brayhead, goes down with Dicky Davoren as his sub-agent to canvass in Peatstown, he enters an altogether different world: “It was Hogan’s first exploration of the country parts of his native land; and he was astonished beyond measure by the Irishness of everything. The dirt, the carelessness, the merriment; the overflowing genuine hospitality,—all were present. . . .” Hogan begins to experience rural Munster, which as regards life-style, weather and living conditions is a world away from suburban Dublin. He is taken to canvass a distant cousin of Nellie, living off the beaten track:

It seemed almost a desert. Here and there, at long intervals, a cabin sunk below the road-level raised its brown indented roof in a sheltered corner. . . . They turned up a narrow, muddy lane. . . . In front of the hall door was a huge pool of water; stepping-stones laid down in this showed that it was a permanent institution. Barney . . . welcomed the travellers to his mansion and led the way in. Pointing to the holes in the floor of the entry, he . . . related with glee how M’Sutch, the agent, had twisted his ankle the day he came up to inspect the place. [Barney] led the way into the one sitting-room of the house—which indeed looked a great deal more like the robbers’ caves to be read of in romance than a sitting room in the ordinary sense of the word. There was no grate; and a perfect stack of turf was
blazing on the hearthstone. A rickety painted table and a half-dozen old chairs, in a fearful state of dilapidation, composed the whole furniture, save for a broken sofa, one end of which was supported in a hole which had been made in the wall of the room apparently for that especial purpose.77

Barney is a tenant of Lord Kilboggan, and has no incentive to repair the house or outbuildings or drain the yard because if he does so his rent will be raised; and when his lease expires, he will not be compensated for any improvements. Were he the tenant of an Ulster landlord, he would be compensated—operating the practice then known as Ulster Custom and associated with Tenant Right,78 which Hogan quickly learns to be a major political issue. In provincial Ireland, Home Rule means separatism; and the most immediate issue in Peatstown is not even so much Home Rule, as Tenant Right. The names Laffan gives to the local absentee and his agent—“Lord Kilboggan” and “M’Scutch”—appear to be mischievous references to more famous literary characters—Lever’s Lord Kilgobbin,79 and Carleton’s Valentine McClutchy80—illustrating the undeniable influence of both writers on the rural chapters of Laffan’s first novel.

In Peatstown there is a unity of purpose apparent between the very different members of Tenant Associations. Some of them, like Hogan’s host Ned Shea, are wealthy graziers wanting a share in the running of the country; others are able men frustrated by lack of opportunity, like Pat Daly, a Fenian returned from America,81 whose only source of income seems to be poteen-making, and the giant horse-breaker Barney Shane, mentioned above, whose sole recreation is politics, and whom no matchmaker will consider because his lease has less than two years to run. In forceful language Barney describes before the parish priest and assembled guests the insecurity of his existence—as a tenant unprotected by legislation designed only to uphold the rights of landowners:

“You and the likes of you . . . that have nothing to lose, may prate of your peace and quietness, and every man look after his own. We’ll look after our own—and trust you to look after yours.” Here an assenting shout almost rent the ceiling.

“Look at me,” he went on, smiting the table with a fist like Thor’s; “my lease will be out in two year’s time, and what will that gambling blackguard Kilboggan give me? The key of the street! and I born and reared in the place, and my father and grandfathers before me;” and the big man’s voice almost faltered as he spoke.82

Minor characters in the novel, the three tenant farmers Ned, Pat and Barney, are presented in a sympathetic light, contradicting in a positive
way what Hogan has said about “the people” earlier. It may be asked why
a tenant farmer did not stand for election to Parliament himself—why
bring in an outsider such as Hogan? The reality was that only a man with
independent means could afford to be an Irish MP. Of the fifty-odd mem-
bers of the Home Rule party led by Isaac Butt, only two or three were de-
scribed as farmers. These would be also among the few who were
freeholders and did not have to depend on the goodwill of a landlord. This
situation was to alter gradually over the years, and dramatically once MPs
became salaried and had their expenses paid.

At a meeting held in Peatstown to introduce Hogan to the electorate and
recruit support for him, all three tenant farmers play active roles. Ned Shea
opens the proceedings:

“The Land Tenure we’ll never get without Home Rule. . . . We want Fixity of Tenure
and Home Rule; and it’s to Mr. Hogan and men like him that we must look, and
not an absentee like Kilboggan, that’s draining every penny out of this country
to spend it in London and France and all them foreign parts.”

Pat Daly, a reluctant orator, explains in detail the workings of the Secret
Ballot, now to be used in Ireland for the first time. Lastly, Barney Shane has
the chance to make his feelings known, and he gives these full dramatic
emphasis in his account of the parish priest taking bribes from the Conser-
ervative candidate. Already Hogan’s beliefs regarding lack of clerical in-
terference are shifting, and they are to undergo radical alteration when he
encounters the diocesan administrator and parish priest of Peatstown, Fa-
ther Jim Corkran:

A lubberly, coarse figure, bulletheaded, and with the prominent round forehead
that tells of obstinacy and impetuosity, wiry black hair and brows which con-
trasted strangely with round light blue eyes, hard and ruthless, and with a fixed
staring look most unpleasant to encounter; while the lips were scornful, and
pursed out with pride and self sufficiency. And with all this he was utterly devoid
of dignity, either of manner or bearing. Those who feared him—and they were
many—were servile and cringing before the bully; but those who like Shea and
the richer class of farmers, were independent of his good graces, spoke of him, ir-
respective of course of his saintly office, with a freedom which showed that the
reverend Father Jim was valued at his proper rate by them.

This unpleasant individual, a far crueler caricature than Moore’s portrait
of the peasant priest in A Drama in Muslin, is made the target of continual
witty remarks by Dicky Davoren, encouraged by his cousin Ned Shea. Fa-
ther Jim supports Hogan’s rival Wyldoeates, because the latter has promised him land for a new chapel and given him money. But the priest launches an attack at Hogan and his supporters, beginning with the unfortunate school teacher Finlay who has dared to attend Hogan’s meeting:

“If ever you presume to attend any such gathering, or to busy yourself with anything of the sort again, without first consulting me, I’ll turn you away on the spot, mark my words!” and he shook his forefinger threateningly. “Begone now!” and pointing to the door with the gesture he might have used to an ill-behaved dog, he dismissed the terrified schoolmaster. . . .

Father Jim succeeds in frightening Ned Shea’s pious wife Margaret also, by ignoring her greeting and cutting her dead whenever they meet in the town:

She began to conjure up in her own mind all the dismal stories she had ever heard; Hara’s haggard burned down not six months after he quarrelled with the clergy; Mr. Magrath, of High Park, who married the Protestant lady, and drank himself to death within the year; Biddy Flannery, that would marry the Presbyterian sergeant, and had a deaf-and-dumb baby, and never held up her head after. It was tempting Providence clearly, with “foot and mouth” raging in the very next county; and she determined to send a pound to her sister the nun, Mary Columbkille of the Poor Clares, for such “intentions” and prayers as could be had for the money.

Father Jim’s opposition to Hogan and his supporters reaches its climax on the Sunday before the election, when after Mass he makes a speech from the foot of the altar, saying that a good parishioner will vote as the priest tells him, and going on to threaten horrible but unspecified consequences to disobedient members of his flock. Threats of this sort from the altar had actually been banned within the diocese of Cashel and Emly by Archbishop Leahy since 1867, but this does not seem to bother Father Jim, a law unto himself.

In the chapel yard afterwards, Laffan describes the reactions of the congregation: the men “laughing, indifferent, a few frightened,” and the women “in consternation . . . one or two of them defiant and reckless, maybe revengeful, cackling shrill sedition from beneath their blue hoods, the cynosure the while of their more impressionable sisterhood.” When the election finally takes place under secret ballot conditions, Hogan is brought in with a large majority.
There is a deliberately dramatic quality to the whole incident, and it is hard to take Father Jim’s behaviour, outrageous as it is, very seriously, especially as the effect of his speech is shown to be greatest on the women who were in any case ineligible to vote. In the later chapters of the story, he is shown as reconciled to the Shea family—because he is unwilling to lose his fees for conducting the marriages of their many daughters. It is probable that there was more than one “Father Jim” known to Laffan. One possible model for the character is her cousin, Archdeacon Michael Laffan (1791–1861). He had a formidable reputation for using strong language, but an observer records him, unlike Father Jim, as a strikingly handsome man with an impressive presence. He may not have given unqualified support to Home Rule, but, again unlike Father Jim Corkran, he was one who held it was impossible for any sincere Irish Catholic ever to vote Tory (Conservative).

Official political opposition to Hogan begins when Theodore Wyldeoates, Lord Kilboggan’s nephew, arrives in Peatstown as Conservative candidate. He represents an absentee whose agent M’Scutch oppresses tenants to raise money for his master to gamble, and pulls down the cabins of the labouring poor, leaving them nowhere to go but the workhouse. It is clear that he, too, will be an absentee if elected. But Wyldeoates says he is sympathetic to Home Rule, which is thus shown to be a kind of general catch-cry; little more in Laffan’s estimation: “It was the new shibboleth which was to succeed Fenianism, and to do all that Fenianism had left undone; just as Fenianism was to wipe up the tears of the Young Irelanders or the Phoenix party,—the fatal legacy of unrest and discontent that seems entailed on the Celt.” Laffan, who was politically a Whig (Liberal), attacked conservatives in general, and perhaps especially conservative priests. She was equally ready to attack priests who might be thought to sympathise with members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB).

With a few exceptions the Catholic clergy did not give strong support to the Home Government Association (HGA), which was set up in 1869 to promote what came to be called Home Rule. There were other reasons for this in addition to those suggested by Laffan. From correspondence now available it would seem that initially members joined the H.G.A. for widely different reasons. Some former Unionists who joined it were felt to be over-reacting to Disestablishment of their church and expressing their feelings at being, as they perceived, left in the lurch by England. Their conversions to nationalism were very new and the question was how genuine
they were and how long they would last. Concern was also expressed at the time about the Association’s urban bias. Most of its members were Dubliners (it has been described as a Dublin pressure group)—and its consequent tendency was to shelve issues relating to the land. In fact, there seems not to have been any inclination on the part of the H.G.A. to encourage provincial branches, probably because the funds were lacking to develop these.  

Few knowledgeable people believed that Home Rule would be achieved very rapidly, so the question often arose as to how domestic matters relating to Ireland could be dealt with in the meantime. One of these urgent but neglected issues was Tenant Right, lack of which was thought to encourage emigration. In fact, no detailed and effective plan to call attention to the country’s domestic legislation needs was put together until Parnell succeeded in doing this, at a date some years later than the Hogan era.

Laffan’s knowledge of the provincial scene derived at least in part from strong family and political connections with Tipperary. A cousin, known as “Honest” John Lanigan, had been Liberal MP for Cashel in Tipperary from 1859–1865. His nickname arose from his refusal to give or receive bribes. Laffan had four other cousins who, during the period 1855–1891, were politically active priests in the Cashel diocese, supporting Home Rule but not separatism or republicanism. From her Macmillan correspondence and the Recess Committee Notes it appears also that Laffan knew personally diverse nationalists such as William O’Brien, John Dillon, and the Davitt family. On the opposite side of her family, the Fitzgibbons were strongly Unionist and conservative. She was well placed, therefore, to know how opposites really thought and spoke about burning political issues of the day. She does not appear to condemn either nationalism or unionism, seeming more concerned to investigate, acknowledge and understand something of the roots from which they spring.

It is notable how convincing Laffan is when it comes to describing the political scene at a local level. Moore’s picture of similar scenes is coloured by a sense of the landowner regarding tenants with a mixture of apprehension and distaste. The distaste is mainly shown in an incident where landowners and peasants come together at Mass on Sunday: “The peasants came, coughing and grunting with monotonous, animal-like voices, and the sour odour of cabin-smoked frieze arose. . . . Olive and May, exchanging looks of disgust, drew forth cambric pocket-handkerchiefs, and in unison the perfumes of white rose and eau d’opponax evaporated softly....”
Later in the story, Mrs. Barton, watching from a window as the tenant farmers negotiate with her husband, feels only apprehension and anger towards them: “she saw the pretty furniture, the luxurious idleness, the very silk dress on her back, being torn from them, and distributed among a crowd of Irish-speaking, pig keeping peasants. . . .”98

Tenants were often perceived by landowners as ungrateful and menacing and their power to perpetrate violence was acknowledged and feared. The idea that they could ever have real political power was evidently unimaginable to Moore at that time; but not, it seems, to Laffan writing a decade earlier. She does not underrate, though she may satirise, the hard-drinking “big farmers” in their frieze coats, the wife who dreads being “told off from the altar,” and the bullied school master trying to remain anonymous at a political meeting. She is near enough to these people to understand them and, almost despite herself, to express how they feel. She is unable to condemn or, albeit critical of aspects of their behaviour, to caricature them as mercilessly as she does the Ascendancy ladies and gentlemen. She seems to think that there is hope for them. Their way of expressing feelings may not fit in with the restraint of the Victorian ethos, but they certainly have a case. Between the country people and the Dubliners of the early chapters of *Hogan MP* there is a social gap—crossed temporarily by Hogan and Dickie Davoren for what they can get out of the situation. Yet the class divisions bedevilling city life are not so marked in rural Munster, nor is sectarian intolerance so evident. What is seen to matter most there is ownership of the land. This is the key to the political future, and the country people, pragmatic to the core, are little concerned about the religious allegiance of anyone who can help them to that key, which they see in the shape of political autonomy.

Following his election, Hogan goes off to Westminster nominally pledged to support Home Rule, Tenant Right, the Catholic University, Fenian Amnesty, Papal Rights—and Lord Brayhead’s Railway Bill. He has less than two years in which to make a name.

The *Spectator* review of *Hogan MP* criticised lack of input about Hogan’s Parliamentary life. This would be just criticism if Laffan had really intended to write a political novel in the manner of Trollope’s *Phineas Finn* (1869), for instance. But we have no evidence that she did. She wanted to illustrate John O’Rooney Hogan’s decline and fall, and she could do this very well without bringing in much detail about his inadequate performance in the House. The aspect of an Irish Member’s life which Laffan does see fit to
dwell on is the relative loneliness, poverty and isolation. That Irish MPs were a class apart, and did not feel at home in the system, has been stated by more than one commentator. Relative to their English counterparts, they were poor, most having no private means; and those who tried to keep a career going found the effort to meet Parliamentary responsibilities as well overwhelming. The failure of Hogan to organize his life sufficiently to make a political mark while meeting his personal financial obligations reflects the experiences of other would-be politicians. Not all members of the Irish Party at the time demonstrated a deep loyalty to that body, or even attended Parliament regularly.

The impression Hogan gives, of being uncertain of what is going on, may have been fairly usual in an age when information was not so widely or easily available. Melmotte, the newly created Conservative MP in The Way We Live Now, is humiliated by his series of mistakes on first entering the House. No one has shown him the ropes—it is assumed that he has, like other Members, friends to tell him what to do and what to avoid. But Melmotte, an outsider, has no friends. Like Hogan, he wanted a Parliamentary seat for his own unworthy reasons; and now he pays the price. His personal inadequacy is obvious to all. He is out of place there and is not wanted. Trollope had been a Parliamentary candidate himself and knew very well the scenes he described. He demonstrated, as did Laffan by other means, that some MPs were less welcome than others.

Neither Butt nor his successor Parnell seems to have seen any need to concern themselves about newly elected Irish MPs; in fact, they sometimes appeared to avoid getting to know them. This was probably done to protect the complicated personal lives of both leaders, but it would have had some negative results as far as the novices were concerned, enhancing their feelings of isolation. Hogan avoids taking up Bishop O’Rooney’s contacts; he makes no new London friends, and his consequent total reliance on the Bursfords for company makes his entrapment by Diana a foregone conclusion. Hogan’s involvement with two women at the same time is probably a polite version of that politician’s hazard the work-based “second relationship,” in Victorian days kept discreetly hidden from the public eye and until recently ignored by biographers.

How accurate was the general political scene as depicted in Hogan MP compared to the way we think things actually were? John O’Rooney Hogan’s details and his history do not correspond closely to those of any one real-life Parliamentary candidate in 1871–1874. What does correspond is
the attitude and motivation he displays, characteristic of some candidates of the time as described in memoirs and biographies of the period. The shortage of candidates meant that almost any educated man able to attract financial sponsorship and prepared to declare for Home Rule could hope for acceptance as a Liberal candidate. What he would then do—whether he would gravitate towards a National Home Rule party or not was quite another matter. There were various ways of subsidising a needy but useful MP, some methods verging on bribery, while others took the form of the one-off grant or “testimonial.” It did not follow either that Catholic candidates always attracted greater clerical support—this circumstance reflected in Hogan MP, where we can see that of the four clerics involved at different stages with John Hogan’s ambitions, only one, the “mountainy” curate Father Desmond, gives any practical help. Hogan wastes his time trying to present himself as an ardent defender of the faith, but the priest is not fooled any more than the electors are. He will support anyone who, whatever their religion, will press for Tenant Right, and Hogan has undertaken to do this anyway.

Hogan knows there will be a General Election in a year or so, but hopes that by then he will be firmly enough in the saddle to be retained as candidate—he is a Whig (Liberal) insofar as he is anything, and is sure as many were that the Liberals will get in again. He shares the view current in Tipperary at the time that support for the Liberal party under Gladstone offered the best chance Ireland had to achieve some of the people’s aims. He does not see Irish MPs having the power to exert great pressure on a British Parliamentary party by interfering with the system—this is to come later, with Parnell. But Hogan, as a barrister, knows that there are rich pickings in the form of office and privilege available to lawyers in return for political services. There is no doubt that he hopes for some of these benefits offered in the past to Irish Members:

He had set to build a mansion to himself, and he had fixed the top stone of the building first—a well-paid and lofty Government situation, to be the reward of Parliamentary services, to render which services a seat in Parliament must be attained, which seat in Parliament must be obtained by—any means.

In Unionist writings of the time, priests were widely depicted as influencing Catholic voting patterns. Recent research casts doubt on the extent to which this really happened, and calls attention to the lack of consistent policy anyway among Irish bishops and priests on all the important political issues, as well as the tendency of most priests to follow rather than to
initiate political trends. The involvement of Catholic clergy in administering rural politics, once assumed by their opponents to be due to their “hold” over a superstitious laity, is now considered to be more likely a result of other combined factors: the priests’ very close identification with the interests of the tenant farmer class from which many of them came, and their level of education and relevant experience, superior to that of most of the laymen around them, which made the organizing aspect of an election campaign relatively easy to them. On the other hand, the covert bribery associated with electioneering certainly sometimes included donations to priests, as well as to convents and other religious institutions. These contributions raised moral questions, and occasioned some debate at the time.

Attitudes of mind depicted in Hogan MP as customary in late-nineteenth-century Ireland, with regard to the way people of some education viewed issues of class and politics, were probably very accurate. Laffan’s panoramic view took in a range of Irish middle-class thinking. She did not attempt to write of concepts outside her personal scope; but that scope was wide. As she saw it, all sections of the Irish middle class, whatever their religious allegiance, openly or otherwise attached blame to England for mismanaging Irish affairs. Socially conservative views were fairly widely held in the Irish Catholic middle class she described. Most people agreed that Ireland would benefit from autonomy, but there was no consensus as to which class should do the governing. Many people believed Home Rule an impossibility for some time to come, because the electors needed more education before they could choose a government. Radical policies were generally believed to come chiefly from the personal circumstances of unhappy and frustrated individuals, and were always suspect because of their association with the use of physical force. Hard-line right-wing political views were held mainly by those who, like Lord Brayhead, took up a position of superiority and whose religious tolerance was very limited—and most of the people Laffan showed in this unflattering light were members of the Protestant Ascendancy. These had of course most to lose by change, which she thought was bound to come. And when change came about, she implied, the peasantry would take a large part in achieving it.

Hogan MP may be considered as a social and political record, but how far can it be described as satire? If satire is defined as the holding up to ridicule of vice and folly, this description would certainly fit all three of the novels discussed above, and fits Hogan MP in fact rather better than it does A
Drama in Muslin. The latter work is perceived today more as a feminist, polemical novel than a satirical one, presenting as it does alternatives to the vice and folly described by Moore. On the whole, it is a fairly optimistic book. Hogan MP and The Way We Live Now have in common a far less hopeful view of their respective worlds, and their happy endings are scarcely convincing. In the case of Hogan MP, this aspect was actually identified by the early review in the Spectator:

From rival Lords, Kilboggan and Brayhead, down through Roman Catholic Bishops, lawyers, land and financial agents, parish priests, farmers, tradesmen and gossoons, there is not so much wholesome ground as a man may rest his foot on,—nothing but one turbid stream of jobbery, greed, gluttony and truculence, sketched with a cynicism untempered by humour. The stream undoubtedly runs, but it is not a healthy brook, but an open sewer.109

One has to allow for the critic's over-reaction to the realism of some of Laffan's descriptive writing, and it is scarcely accurate to accuse her of a lack of humour. However, the anonymous critic goes on to say:

The reader, unless his appetite is of the strongest, will be nauseated by the monotonous vulgarity and meanness of the characters. . . . we should have set the book down as the work of some Saxon, banished to the Irish capital, and bent on having his revenge on all it contains. But the internal evidence is too strong, and we are driven to the conclusion that the writer is an Irishman, who has a keen eye for the meanness and vulgarity of the society in which he lives, but is either blind or indifferent to its good side.110

This reviewer has in fact identified one of the most curious elements in Laffan's satire—relative absence of contrast. Her world is darker than that of Trollope. He did introduce some benign characters to point up the negative nature of the others; she does not really do this consistently. Her heroine Nellie Davoren lacks cohesion as a character; the dialogue she has been given is critical and slightly carping, somewhat at odds with her otherwise naive and trusting personality. Cousin Dorothy is more positive, though incredibly tactless and almost never saying the right thing. Dermot Blake, the rescuer of Nellie, appears insubstantial and perhaps too good to be true. The Spectator's reviewer thought many of the other characters not merely flawed, but distorted—still, there remains a human quality about them. Cosmo Saltasche, Lord Brayhead, and Father Jim Corkran are wonderful caricatures, and they are also more entertaining than their betters.
This imbalance can be explained away by saying that as a novice writer Laffan in *Hogan MP* concentrates on grotesques because she has yet to learn how to make good people interesting; but she also gives the impression that she can scarcely believe there to be any good people left anywhere. She is a pessimist, afraid to hope lest she invite disappointment. Her ridicule has a slightly desperate air; it amuses certainly and also makes one feel uneasy. But perhaps that is exactly what effective satire is intended to do.

It is important to keep in mind that, as novel-reading was the main recreation of literate people in the nineteenth century, filling the space in people’s lives now taken up by television and radio, a surprising number of people in Britain and Ireland was able to make a living from writing fiction. The writing population of Ireland was large for such a small country, and May Laffan was one of many. She stands out now because her work was more realistic and less conventional than the work of most of her literary colleagues, making it still accessible to us today. Few women writers then were issue-driven by the need to write stories with a social and political content, above all in a satirical style which entertained even while it stung.

So there were aspects of *Hogan MP* which were unique. It seems intended to be a book on its own, without a sequel. But where did the impulse to undertake such a book come from?

Before she submitted *Hogan MP*, Laffan could have read Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now*, which was published by installments about a year before; but if she did, her first novel holds few echoes of Trollope. *Hogan MP* reminds one instead of Balzac. Just as some of the *Hogan MP* characters seem to blend with those of Moore, others, for example Cosmo Saltasche, Dorothy O’Hegarty, and John O’Rooney Hogan himself, could have come from the series of extraordinary novels which we know as the “Human Comedy.” Laffan’s gift for characterization, relentless pace, lack of descriptive padding and realistic yet non-judgemental approach were not learnt from English fiction. She may even have dreamed of a series of novels, to present her Ireland in microcosm as Balzac presented his France. It is possible that it was in this way and with this purpose in mind that *Hogan MP* came to be written.