

## *'A Land Poisoned': Eugene McCabe and Irish Postcolonial Gothic*

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### **Abstract**

While many of Eugene McCabe's works adhere to the recognisable features of literary naturalism, including a fraught exposition of character, realist narrative language and pessimistic tone, it is my intention to spotlight the formal Gothic dimensions of these literary fictions. I will address, primarily, his most accomplished work to date, the novel *Death and Nightingales* and his acclaimed, and later televised, short story trilogy, 'Cancer', 'Heritage' and 'Victims'. Land and violence are at the core of these narratives and, while the later novel is set in a pre-partition context, many of the same political strains surface across the stories. Appropriation, division, loyalty, and threat are pivotal to the narrative momentum of McCabe's tales, as the author seeks to relate the indelible traumas that stain the physical and cultural landscape of both a pre-partition Ulster and post-partition borderland.

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make your eldest sonne *Isaac*, leaving him all your kingdoms; and provide the rest with private possessions: Otherways by deviding your kingdoms, yee shall leave the seed of division and discord among your posteritie; as befell to this Ile, by the division and assignement thereof, to the three sonnes of *Brutus*, *Lochrine*, *Albanact*, and *Camber*.<sup>1</sup>

As the epigram reveals, anxiety, paranoia, and subversion are as integral to the mechanics of inheritance as unity and legitimacy. Such anxieties, then, have most frequently, and effectively, been mediated through the tropes of Anglo-Irish and English Gothic fiction and drama, in differential ways, since the eighteenth century and across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Furthermore, the protracted

and traumatic nature of Ireland's colonial history furnished Gothic authors with a steady diet of atavistic antagonisms and malevolent mythologies. Even a cursory survey of the stylistic cosmetics of its literary conventions will confirm that inheritance, succession, and primogeniture fuel the suffocating paranoia of the tyrannous, the patriarchal, and the aristocratic within the Gothic aesthetic. Regardless of the testimony of wills, legacies, and antique documents, despite such legislative undergirding, the question of legitimacy continually resurfaces. The contested nature of the Irish geographical and cultural landscape meant that these topographies were haunted by the disinherited revenants of colonial misappropriation. The incendiary nature of history in Ireland created a landscape in which all history was personal. Any romantic sanitisation of Ireland's rugged topography for the purposes of tourism belied the fractious memorial inheritances of the country's disenfranchised population. Segueing from the thematic logic of the Gothic genre to the historical binaries of reason and madness, modernity and tradition, and civility and barbarism, Siobhán Kilfeather suggests that 'Gothic fiction is the appropriate self-image of enlightenment, because it plays with representations of domination, and represents the domination of our fears. It comes to terms with technological advancement and rational organisation by opening a space for terror, regression and atavism.'<sup>2</sup> As the Gothic emerges as a response to Enlightenment, Ireland, and its attendant barbarism, represents an affront to the mores of British civility. Within the metropolitan, imperial imaginary, as *The Nation* reported in 1848:

Ireland is the fatigue-ground of the English imagination, and a full-bellied, dyspeptic people must have some daily providence of terror, that they may 'sup full of horrors', and bless their stars for living east of the channel. Every people in every age have had their country of monsters, where the human kind, like evil demons, drank human blood, and lived on the marrow of dead men's bones...Mrs Anne Radcliffe being dead...it is now our part to furnish England with monsters, thugs, and 'devils great and devils small.'<sup>3</sup>

Ably abetted by the proliferating discourse of touristic literature, which expounded upon the wildness of England's Celtic peripheries, Gothic literature turned its attention to the recalcitrance contained within the Irish landscape. In addition, the growth of commercial tourism can be viewed as an extension of the Romantic aesthetic, a movement with which the Gothic had considerable intersections. In effect, under the discursive logic of imperial modernity, the untamed climes of Ireland and its native population were codified under an array of increasingly dense homologies. Underpinning this process of enlightened codification was the disquietude of British 'civilisation' when faced with its self-legitimizing 'other'. Gothic literature can, then, be seen as a space into which the manifold fears and vulnerabilities of civility were poured; the genre furnished narratives through which the worst excesses of barbarism, superstition, paranoia, sexual deviancy, and illegitimacy could be mediated.<sup>4</sup>

### **Anglo-Ireland and the Gothic**

Yet, when we broach the Gothic in the Irish context, it is necessary to complicate our definitions of the term and of the genre. While English Gothic can justifiably be said to have a 'tradition', this is not the case in Irish literary history. Addressing the distinctions between its Irish and English variants, W. J. McCormack avers in his survey of Irish Gothic:

Whereas the origins of English Gothicism are diverse and obscure – involving the sensibility of a remarkable individual like Walpole, the larger development of literary romanticism, and the growth of aesthetics through concepts such as 'the sublime' – Irish gothic fiction is remarkably explicit in the way it demonstrates its attachment to history and to politics.<sup>5</sup>

Not only are the origins of Irish Gothic trained on the (perceived) injustices of Ireland's colonial relationship with England, but within Irish literary history: 'it has to be said that while Irish gothic writing does not amount to a tradition, it is a distinctly Protestant tradition.'<sup>6</sup> Thus McCormack's précis of Irish Gothic establishes a continuity with that of its English counterpart: its confessional allegiance. This is a fact expanded upon by Terry Eagleton, who re-asserts the Protestant background of the Irish Gothic, but develops upon McCormack's case by enlisting the peculiarities of Protestant experience in Ireland during the nineteenth century. For Eagleton: 'if Irish Gothic is a specifically Protestant phenomenon, it is because nothing lends itself more to the genre than the decaying gentry in their crumbling houses, isolated and sinisterly eccentric, haunted by the sins of the past.'<sup>7</sup> Yet, the distinction drawn by McCormack is significant in the context of nineteenth-century Irish Gothic writing, and for the argument of this essay. The extent to which Irish Gothic was, and remained into the late twentieth century, fixated with the political, economic, and cultural exertions of Ireland's colonial relationship with England provides the motive force, as well as the temperamental anxiety, of an Irish Gothic literature that was principally authored by Protestant, Anglo-Irish writers. As we shall see in more detail below, Irish Gothic is largely founded upon the divisive and violent politics of colonialism. This is a point that informs Julian Moynahan's survey of Anglo-Irish writing and history from Maria Edgeworth to Elizabeth Bowen and Samuel Beckett, in which he addresses the Gothicization of Ireland within the Anglo-Irish literary tradition. Dealing specifically with Sheridan LeFanu and Charles Maturin, Moynahan summarizes the factors that contributed to Ireland's assumption of a quintessential Gothic geography:

Politically oppressed, underdeveloped in the far west and southwest, disrupted and distressed by famines, clearances, uprisings, and the depredations of rural secret societies, devoutly Catholic in its majority population, and full of romantic scenery and prehistoric, not to say feudal, ruins, nineteenth-century Ireland was an impressive candidate for Gothic treatment.<sup>8</sup>

While the Irish landscape furnished, as Moynahan outlines, a quintessential Gothic milieu in which narratives of Protestant anxiety could be played out, the

histories imprinted onto that landscape - manifested in ruined castles, impoverished native dwellings, and demesned properties - were a source of individual and communal suspicion and fear within the landed Anglo-Irish populace. Thus, the topographies of Ireland were aligned with fears of native retribution against the regnant Protestant community within the plot arcs and thematic foci of Anglo-Irish Gothic writing across the nineteenth century. For the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy 'the mode was a way of embodying social fear ... The Gothic encouraged a besieged Protestant elite to dramatize its fears and phobias in a climate of inexorable political decline.'<sup>9</sup> Decline and anachronism are the temporal signs of the increasing pressure exerted upon the Anglo-Irish, Protestant community in Ireland, and Gothic narratives chart the doomed future and restless past of this constituency. But what is of equal significance when we broach the literary history of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy in the nineteenth century, and into the twentieth century, are the spatial co-ordinates of that literary tradition, and how these co-ordinates interplay with the temporal axis of irreversible historical decline. And the most enduring spatial theatre within this literary tradition is that of the 'Big House' novel, which, itself, has intimate connections with the broader history of Irish Gothic writing. Within the 'Big House' tradition the explicit historical decline and geographical isolation engender moods of Gothic paranoia and insecurity. As Vera Kreilkamp argues, drawing the 'Big House' novel within the generic scope of the Gothic:

This turn to the Gothic, apparent in the settings of many national tales and subsequent domestic Big House novels, reflects the fears of an increasingly beleaguered Ascendancy society, trapped in overbuilt but decaying homes, surrounded by a newly resurgent Catholic nationalism, and forced to confront its failure to win native Irish allegiance .... The Irish Gothic novel stylistically and thematically encodes the sublimated anxieties of a colonial class preoccupied with the corrupt source of its power.<sup>10</sup>

The 'Big House' tradition, in many respects, is an 'end of empire' literary phenomenon; the assertion of colonial seizure and power is transformed into a scar on the landscape, a persistent reminder of the usurpations of the past. The 'big house' is, then, a mouldering embodiment of the unpaid debts of Ireland's colonial history, and the changing political and social temperature of Ireland in the nineteenth century ominously presage the time when these debts will have to be repaid. It is this sense of the past quaking beneath the very soil of the landed estates, and of the 'big house' as a crumbling burden, or as a ruinous prison, that fuels much of the anxiety of the Gothic, 'Big House' literature during the nineteenth century and up until, and also after, Irish political independence in 1922.<sup>11</sup> As Kreilkamp maintains elsewhere: 'Certainly, the political insecurity conveyed by Gothic conventions expresses ... the reality of Anglo-Irish conditions during the long century of local violence accompanying the development of the big house novel.'<sup>12</sup>

### **Ireland, Race and Postcolonial Gothic**

Irish Gothic writing, and the Anglo-Irish 'Big House' novel tradition, are, then, legacies of the political and cultural exercises of colonialism in Ireland. In recent times, much critical energy has been expended upon teasing out the relationship between the Gothic and colonialism. Centring on notions of cultural incommensurability, as well as the related idea of the psychological demarcation between 'self' and 'other', these critical conversations have established a viable link between Gothic and colonial discourses. It is evident from the discussion above that inter-communal tensions and resentments founded upon a violent history of colonial repression and expropriation nourished the gothicization of Ireland's colonial society and culture. But this wedding of the two discourses has been canvassed beyond the Irish context, and in this vein, William Hughes argues, quite baldly: 'Gothic *has* to be the face of the postcolonial because the culture of Gothic – grandiose, oppressive, deviant and yet awesome in the power of its presence – is somehow not merely the face of the past, but of the imperialist past also.'<sup>13</sup> If the Protestant Gothic pitched reason versus unreason; civility versus barbarism; sanity versus insanity; tamed culture versus unruly nature; and sexual chastity versus libidinous desire, then colonial rhetoric marshalled an equivalent vocabulary in its pathologization of colonized populations. Thus, latterly, the critical resources of postcolonialism facilitate readings of historical Gothic texts, together with literary narrations of colonial expansionism, which serves 'to isolate images of Self and Other in such a way that they identify how a particular brand of colonial politics works towards constructing difference, whilst at the same time indicating the presence of the inherently unstable version of the subject on which such a politics rest. In other words, postcolonialism explains the Gothic's instabilities by other means.'<sup>14</sup>

One of the most explicit, and recurrent, fields through which colonialism and the Gothic intersect in the Irish context is in the racial politics between English and Irish, which consigned the Irish to the lower steps of the racial order. Just as classical Gothic writing had been much concerned with the human body – in terms of, for instance, disease and sexual incontinence – both verbal and visual colonial representations of Irish society and its population, aggregated the terror associated with Gothic tropes with the menace embodied by racial or ethnic difference. In recent Irish postcolonial cultural criticism, racial difference and Gothic terror have been proposed as complicit agents of the colonial demonization of the colonised Irish population across the latter half of the nineteenth century. Rather than solely focus upon the 'Big House' and Protestant pedigrees of the Anglo-Irish Gothic tradition, Luke Gibbons firmly locates this Gothic legacy within a postcolonial critical sphere through his explanation of the ways in which Ireland was portrayed as racially 'other' to metropolitan England. Uniting the Gothic and racial theory, Gibbons suggests that the Gothic 'took on board' much of the 'cultural pathology' of racial theory,

maintaining a series of deep-seated, troubled connections with wider systems of prejudice, paranoia, and bigotry. Though originally a literary genre, with a

distinctively popular or sensational appeal, the Gothic spread out into the recesses of everyday life, giving rise to a phantom public sphere haunted by fear, terror, and the dark side of civility.<sup>15</sup>

Though race is the presiding thematic of Gibbons' survey of Irish Gothic, the thread of disquiet and anxiety that is identified by other critics in their differentiated analyses of Irish Gothic writing remains. Equally, while Gibbons' argument roots itself firmly in racialised biology, the body and sexual reproduction are key elements of all readings of Irish Gothic writing, concerned as it is, as a genre, with inheritance and succession. Whether one focuses upon religious faith, 'Big House' narratives, or the mutual implication of race and the Gothic, it is clear that the histories of colonialism in Ireland demand combined postcolonial and Gothic readings. As Gibbons' makes clear at a later point in his study, power and domination are elemental to both the Gothic and the colonial mind-set:

Though the Gothic invocation of the supernatural points to breaches of the natural order, the true violation of nature involves attempts to press society itself, and hierarchies of power and domination, into a biological mould. It is through the Gothic that race is connected to the paranoid imagination, seeing in every member of a different society or religion a potential source of terror.<sup>16</sup>

As we shall see, all of these concerns regarding ethnicity, infection, legitimacy, threat, paranoia, family history, colonialism, sectarian hatred, and tenurial security are manifest in the latter-day Gothic narratives of Eugene McCabe.

### 'Keeping Going' - Eugene McCabe

Eugene McCabe's career bares witness to the power of 'keeping going', his fictions on the subterranean dynamics of the 'Troubles' are, admittedly, only occasional, but nonetheless are bracing in the manner in which they anatomize the deep-rooted counter-mythologies of both sides of the conflict.<sup>17</sup> In many ways McCabe's confection of realist narrative and non-realist figuration furnishes a dystopian vista of the ways in which history has gone wrong and his stories are powerful diagnostics of the urgency for political and cultural transformation. And they gain added transformative import from their historical and geographical contextual immediacy. McCabe's literary career has, itself, been counterbalanced by his maintenance of a long-term farming occupation; he has engaged at a literary level when he has felt that he has had 'something to say'.<sup>18</sup> He retains a farm on Monaghan/Fermanagh border, a location that was at the coalface of cross-border violence and countermeasures during the heights of the war in the North of Ireland. Yet McCabe remained, intermittently intervening with clinical and convincing articulacy through his fictions.

McCabe's writing largely intersects with one of the dominant genealogies in twentieth century Irish fiction and theatre: literary naturalism. Extending from George Moore's 1885 *A Mummer's Wife* through Joyce's *Dubliners* onto the literary and critical output of Frank O'Connor, Sean O'Faoláin, Liam O'Flaherty, and beyond to John McGahern, Brian Moore, and Edna O'Brien, naturalism has

a protracted, and variegated, literary history in Ireland. And while many of his works adhere to the recognisable features of literary naturalism, including a fraught exposition of character, realist narrative language and pessimistic tone, it is my intention to spotlight the formal Gothic dimensions of these literary fictions. In doing so, I will suggest that the economies of terror and dislocation so convincingly generated within the Gothic aesthetic lend themselves to the mediation of the unresolved legacies of Irish colonial history. Given that McCabe's literary oeuvre is relatively small, but not insignificant, there is scope within the confines of this essay to broach a selection of his works. Specifically I will address, primarily, his most accomplished work to date, the novel *Death and Nightingales* and his acclaimed, and later televised, short story trilogy, 'Cancer', 'Heritage' and 'Victims'. Commenting on what she views as a certain degree of reticence in McCabe's work, Eileen Battersby recently remarked that 'the all-seeing Eugene McCabe emerged as the shrewdest of writers. He seemed determined not to squander language. While others wrote relentlessly, he used his words sparingly. There was an eloquence in his reticence'.<sup>19</sup> Battersby's conclusion is accurate in as far as it reflects the quantitative limits of McCabe's output. But there is also a sense in which these fictional confrontations with the excesses of borderland sectarianism, together with its recrudescing discourse of racial simplicities, are measured responses to a more fundamental qualitative trauma. The trilogy of short stories, which was re-issued collectively as *Christ in the Fields*, and *Death and Nightingales* negotiate the complex cultural politics of inter-communal memory. Land and violence are at the core of these narratives and, while the later novel is set in a pre-partition context, many of the same political strains surface across the stories. Appropriation, division, loyalty, and threat are pivotal to the narrative momentum of McCabe's tales, as the author seeks to relate the indelible traumas that stain the physical and cultural landscapes of both a pre-partition Ulster and post-partition borderland. Consequently McCabe's interventions are occasional efforts to mediate the traumas of historical dispossession. Just as the Gothic served as a means of ventilation for prior forms of sublimated fear, desire, trauma, and paranoid terror, McCabe's tales are structured in such generic terms so as to air similar anxieties within Irish political and cultural memory.

### **'A Land Poisoned'**

Although published to initial, and continued, critical acclaim, *Death and Nightingales* has yet to be fully acknowledged as a latter-day Gothic thriller, as a revisiting of the most divisive theme of Irish literary and political history: the ownership of land. Crucially, the novel is set in the summer of 1883 and McCabe's narrative unfolds in the context of the Irish Land War. In addition, the events are contemporaneous with William Ewart Gladstone's second Land Act in 1881, Charles Stewart Parnell's imprisonment in Kilmainham Jail in 1881–82 and the Phoenix Park murders of the British Lord Lieutenant, Frederick Cavendish and his Under-Secretary, T. H. Burke on 6 May, 1882. The incremental process of land transfer that was, in fact, initiated a decade earlier with Gladstone's 1870 Land Act and culminated between 1920

and 1922, respectively, with the partition of the island and the establishment of an Independent Irish Free State, clearly had profound social, political and cultural implications at the national, the local and, for our purposes, the familial levels. Indeed, alerting us to the protracted imbrications of the family structure, territorial proprietorship and colonial occupation is Margot Gayle Backus' contention that a 'relatively unmentioned fact of colonial and postcolonial politics is that colonial rule, particularly where colonialism has taken the form of mass settlement, requires the production of children.'<sup>20</sup> Braided within the fabric of the sectarian interfaces of McCabe's rural community are varying levels of paranoia, distrust, bitterness, and warped remembrance. All of which, of course, suffuse the fractured political, confessional and ethnic contours of an evolving colonial milieu. It is within this context that *Death and Nightingales* throws into relief the crisis of inheritance and the legacies of illegitimacy within the Protestant, landowning Winters' family. Billy Winters' estate and his hoarded financial wealth are symptomatic of 'the colonial garrison' in Ireland, and the novel bears affinities with the 'Big House' narratives of Anglo-Ireland in so far as Winters' landholding dominates its hinterland, but is equally isolated and under duress from that same native hinterland. Although the Winters' estate is populated by an ostensibly compliant tenantry and a dependent workforce, creed, race and national character dictate that Billy Winters cannot escape the invisible threat of indigent 'sly sedition.'<sup>21</sup>

At a macro-social level, the demise of estates such as the Winters' are entwined in the broader legislative re-negotiation of the Irish Land Question in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Thus there was a sense of impending extinction, or at least a diminution of tenure, among such classes. As we have noted, the series of Land Acts effected during this period not only enacted a process of change, but suggested a will to act on behalf of dispossessed or precariously tenanted individuals and communities. Parnell is the figure that is most closely tied to the successive stages of the Irish Land War during the latter decades of the century and his absent presence haunts McCabe's narrative. He is invoked or alluded to on at least ten occasions during the course of the novel and the most significant, perhaps, is the revelation that he lodged for a night at the Winters' home. Although he was still alive at the point at which McCabe's narrative is set, there is a profound historical resonance in the repeated allusions to his political capabilities and his dubious morality. In many ways the figure of Parnell embodies the triangulated tensions that propel McCabe's Gothic novel; Parnell is implicated in the moral and political vicissitudes of nationalist politics, land reform and sexual probity.<sup>22</sup> And in their own ways each of these issues is further implicated in the mechanics of sectarianism and legitimate inheritance that infuse the narrative.

Reprising the vulnerability and the attendant terror of the semi-somnolent in nineteenth century Gothic stories such as Sheridan Le Fanu's 'Carmilla' and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the novel opens with a dream-sequence.<sup>23</sup> Our initial impression of the central character, Elizabeth Winters, is mediated through an unconscious enactment of her patricidal desires:



In the dark pantry off the scullery she was looking into the hanging press full of veterinary medicines and gadgetry, and yes, there it was, a small, pale yellow bottle labelled 'oil of bitter almonds' with a separate label which said: 'POISON'. She put it to her nose and sniffed. The astringency of death invaded her lungs. As she watched herself pouring out a teaspoon for Billy's protruding tongue her whole body began to shake. The teaspoon trembled, spilling, and she awoke to the bawling of a beast reverberating around the stillness of her bedroom.<sup>24</sup>

McCabe immediately gestures towards the vexed moral economy of his fictional familial world. As we later appreciate, Elizabeth's murderous appetite is nourished by a confluence of her own traumatic childhood, her illegitimacy, and her perceived disinheritance by her stepfather. Central, then, to the violent tensions within the Winters' family are Elizabeth's illegitimacy and her retention of her mother's Catholic faith. Both of these manifest as racial and confessional indices of 'otherness' and within the moral and political economies of the family preclude her from her paternal inheritance. To her father, she symbolises the omnipresent threat of indigent contamination; her illegitimate blood or race is compounded by a commitment to the nefarious superstitions of 'Romania' (*DN*, 17). In many respects Elizabeth represents the barbaric 'other within'. In the eyes of her stepfather, her true inheritance is that bequeathed by her deceased mother, an inheritance that by its very existence compromises the political and tenurial authority of Billy Winters and his class. Symptomatically, Elizabeth recalls an exchange between her mother and stepfather, remembering the recurrent ferocity of Billy's bitterness towards her mother's illegitimate pregnancy:

Miscegenation, misbegotten; Rome's cup of poison in your belly when we married!  
That child's not kin to me and won't inherit, do you hear me, won't inherit; she  
nor her kind will ever cut my trees, burn my turf, pluck my apples, milk my cows,  
quarry my stone, and never plough, my acres...ever!' (*DN*, 9)

The politics of sexual reproduction are a recurrent feature of the Gothic genre and the anxieties of succession foment a battle for control over the female body. Of more relevance to this passage, however, is Billy Winters' allusion to the pathology of tribal degeneracy. Betrayal and illegitimacy are directly wedded to the Catholic faith, and by implication to the native Irish population. The superstitious tenets of Catholicism were constituent of a whole skein of widely appreciated flaws in the Irish national character, which were believed to have developed historically and had finally congealed into a degraded ethnic nature.

While the narrative primarily relates the events of Elizabeth's birthday, Thursday 3 May 1883, with a degree of realist linearity, McCabe embraces many of the generic formal features of the Gothic. The novel navigates the poles of traumatic and consoling personal remembrance, as haunting memories surface both voluntarily and involuntarily. Perhaps the most resonant of the novel's Gothic qualities are its inclusion of extra-diegetic devices such as contemporary police-reports, retained personal letters, newspaper headlines and perpetual inscriptions. The most striking of these alternative discursive registers is the insertion of an extract from *Farms*,

*Families and Dwelling Houses of Fermanagh*. The contents of this publication represent a textual codification of possession and dispossession and, within the context of the novel, constitute a corollary to Canon Leo McManus' personal copies of land commission maps, from which he 'could tell at a glance the name, status and religion of the owner' (*DN*, 19).

The extract exposes the Anglo-Irish heritage of the Winters' land tenure, tracing the genealogy of its occupancy as far back as 1610:

Held under chieftaincy of Brian Maguire (disaffected) crown escheated 1610. Original house built by Thomas Winters under tenant of Sir John Hume of Tully Castle. Burned 1641 rebellion. Rebuilt by Clement Winters 1660. Extended by Captain William Hudson Winters (sea) 1793. (*DN*, 20)

The fragmentary framework of Gothic fiction, then, defies the temporal seamless-ness of the Enlightenment's developmental schema of temporal progress. While the narrative, as we have seen, unfolds within the chronological limits of one twenty-four hour period, narrative continuity is spliced by moments of personal recollection, subjective testimony, and retrieved correspondence. In this way both integrated narrativity and unified textuality are problematised. The Gothic unveils the fracture of narrative, historical, ontological, and sexual selves under pressure from recalcitrant external and internal 'others'. The narration of the unitary self in a stable space under seamless time is impossible as the psycholiterary tropes of the Gothic reveal stress fractures wrought by memory and historical experience.

The Winters' holding is not solely farmland, but also includes bogland, and at one point in the novel McCabe describes the scene of three men, three of Billy Winters' employees, descended twelve feet into the bog, cutting turf. Clearly alluding to Seamus Heaney's recurrent use of the 'bog' trope in his poetry, McCabe gestures towards ideas concerning the secretion of memory, myth, and history into the preservative moisture of bogland. The significance of McCabe's appropriation of this geo-literary trope is consummately expressed in Heaney's own reflections on the memorial resonances of bogland for his art:

So I began to get an idea of bog as the memory of the landscape, or as a landscape that remembered everything that happened in and to it...Moreover, since memory was the faculty that supplied me with the first quickening of my own poetry, I had a tentative unrealized need to make a congruence between memory and bogland.<sup>25</sup>

The disinterred fragmentary shards of ancient Irish history are at once affirmations of historical continuity, but simultaneously interrogate the usurpatory genealogies of colonial conquest. As much as Billy Winters' and his class are underwritten by antique documents and legal testament, contradictory archaeologies of memory remain embedded within the landscape. Indeed the episode in *Death and Nightingales*, the unearthing of 'bog butter', is an experience Heaney also alludes to in his recollection of the associations between 'bogland' and his rural childhood. The 'bog butter' excavated on Billy Winters' bog by Jim Rutledge, Gerry Boyle, and Mickey Dolphin is symbolic of the secreted traces of past lives that farmed, lived on

and, crucially, claimed the land. Like so much else in the novel, and in the Gothic genre, it is submerged elements that constitute the gravest threat to the stability of ownership and the continuity of power. Despite efforts to entomb the past and to enshrine traditions, the Gothic in Irish literary history demonstrates the capacity, and tendency, of recalcitrant deposits of individual and communal memory to be exhumed.

As if revelling in the afterglow of colonial dispossession, Billy reveals the Winters' family motto to Elizabeth, "Watch and seize". He wheezed out another coughing laugh and repeated, "Watch and seize", then dropping his voice to a loud whisper, he said, "And he did..." (*DN*, 34). The act of usurpation is inscribed on the very genealogy of the family; its guiding principle is clothed in rapacity and opportunism. In the same scene Billy Winters discloses, with further pride, the documentary and fiduciary heritage of the Winters' estate. Permitting Elizabeth a glimpse of her inheritance, a conditional inheritance as it transpires, she recalls the contents of her stepfather's safe:

There were rolled parchments, bundles of faded envelopes on open shelves, sandalwood caskets and mother-of-pearl boxes, a black log-book and a large bottom drawer the width of the safe. This he opened with a separate key which he took from within the safe. As he opened it with his left hand his right plunged into a glitter of gold coins. He took out a fistful, pulling off the beaver hat, and thrust them both up towards her and the light of the lamp. (*DN*, 34)

As we know, however, this cachet of wealth and the entire Winters' estate is founded on a reputedly, and an unusually, intimate act of dispossession. Although the documentary contents of the safe externally ratify the legitimacy of the Winters' tenure, as is characteristic of the anxious tenor of Irish Gothic, it is invisible agents that pose the greater threat to such tenurial stability. As the extract from *Farms, Families and Dwelling Houses of Fermanagh* details, the disenfranchised native occupants were Maguires, who, Billy's deceased wife claims, were her familial ancestors. In a sense, then, her pre-marital infidelity represents a punitive return of the repressed dispossessed. The vagrant ghost of the Maguire family, whose legitimate claims to proprietorship were sundered by a colonial seizure, reappears in the form of bastardy: Elizabeth. Even more galling for Billy Winters is the fact that the identity of Elizabeth's biological father remains unknown, her mother even suggests that she was never entirely certain. Elizabeth becomes a tainted symbol of her race; she embodies the contagion of a degenerate sexuality, a barbarous race and a recusant creed.

Reproductive autonomy, then, is precluded within the structures of the Anglo-Irish family, as agitation at the prospect of racial and cultural degeneration, if not extinction, animates the patriarchal order. Again divining such trends in earlier Gothic family romance novels, Backus concludes that 'these novels represent a suppressed tradition that specifies the position of women within the settler colonial order.'<sup>26</sup> The integrities of the colonial estate or the family homestead are no longer simply vulnerable to the external presences of the hinterlands of the Irish landscape.

It now becomes a matter of blood, as the internal dynamics of the familial unit begin to compromise the continuity of inheritance. There is a concern in such fiction with appropriating 'the sexuality and lives of Anglo-Irish children... [and] gender and sexual transgression...symbolize the overthrow of the colonial order, whereas anticolonial resistance, conversely, allegorizes transgressive sexual desire.'<sup>27</sup> Compounding her maternal inheritance of 'transgressive sexuality', Elizabeth pursues an illicit, and eventually criminal, love affair with Liam Ward, an agent of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. As if to accent the visceral textures of Elizabeth's female sexuality, McCabe describes her initial attraction to Ward as one that is piqued by his irreverence and his animalistic, yet ambiguous, physical beauty:

He smiled through misshapen teeth. In the candlelight she could see clearly the whin fleck in his green eyes and the slight squint in his left eye. A hint of tinker? Of mongrel treachery? Sipping the strong black tea, she could not decide if the face was gentle or brutal, cunning or innocent, or a blend of all these. (*DN*, 75)

Preying on her bitterness towards her stepfather and a yearning to escape the physical and emotional confines of his estate, Ward engages in a love affair fuelled by a surreptitious design. In effect the plot to steal Billy Winters' fortune in gold coins and to elope together becomes a Faustian pact for Elizabeth. Ward, in fact, has no intention of committing to Elizabeth, and their affair is little more than a ruse to secure the contents of Billy Winters' safe. Indeed as part of his scheme, Ward intends to murder Elizabeth and to inter her body in an anonymous roadside grave. With dramatic timing this is revealed to Elizabeth and we are presented with a macabre scene in which she looks over her own grave: 'She moved to the edge of the grave and stood looking down into it, remembering her mother's burial. This, a much nicer place to lie, she thought...what more could any girl want?' (*DN*, 187).

Allied to the disruptive valences of female sexuality, another recurrent strand in the novel is the intimation of an 'incestuous' relationship between Billy Winters and Elizabeth. Per se, there is nothing biologically incestuous about such a relationship, but realistically it is ethically transgressive and telescopes the desiring impulses of the self. Colonial paranoia and imperial fear, as recent interventions in postcolonial studies indicate, were volatile and revelatory admixtures of desire and revulsion. Fear and loathing of a depraved and alien 'other' is never absolute or self-sustaining, because embedded within such fear are threads of loss and longing. It is a point developed by Eagleton:

[Anglo-Irish Gothic] carries with it a freight of guilt and self-torment, and these are arguably more Protestant than Catholic obsessions...much of the Anglo-Irish obsession with magic, the occult, secret societies and the rest was an attempt to surmount the solitude of the Protestant self – to find in ritual and mystical brotherhood a consoling substitute for that sense of a system and solidarity which the Catholic Church was able to bestow on its adherents.<sup>28</sup>

Billy Winters cleaves to various forms of hermetic austerity and his paranoia is excited by his step-daughter's private confessional conversations with her Catholic priest.

Moreover, his illicit sexual advances toward Elizabeth are, perhaps, a function of the broader Gothic concern with the politics of sexual reproduction. The possibility, and indeed in Billy Winters' mind the likelihood, of Elizabeth bearing Catholic offspring, threatens to unravel the seams of the Winters' planter lineage. In effect, can we read such desires as counter-desires to the perceived treason of Elizabeth's female sexuality? Does Billy Winters attempt to inoculate his landed inheritance against the imminent, and immanent, contagion of Catholic usurpation?

**'amid the mingling glooms'<sup>29</sup>**

In a recent essay on the political and historical context of McCabe's border trilogy, 'Cancer', 'Heritage', and 'Victims', Henry Patterson accents the 'locality' of the origins of McCabe's suite of 'Troubles' narratives. Just as *Death and Nightingales* had its source in an orally received story, Patterson makes the case that incidents and characters from each of the trilogy have their roots in the actual historical violence of the Northern Irish 'Troubles' of the early 1970s, especially in the Monaghan/Fermanagh border area. Patterson states:

McCabe's stories are one of the few literary representations of how these borderlands experienced the Troubles and that deal directly and powerfully with the charged issue of the violent antagonisms that had their roots in local structures of sectarian power and land ownership.<sup>30</sup>

It is more often the case in contemporary 'Troubles' literature that the narrative drama unfolds within the shadowy, expressionistic backdrops of urban or suburban settings, but McCabe's mediations of the conflict centre on the geographical peripheries of the province.<sup>31</sup> As a Catholic writer, whose farmland straddled the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and whose immediate neighbours included both Catholics and Protestants, McCabe felt a responsibility to respond to the narratives that were motivating and sustaining the campaigns of guerrilla warfare. Speaking in 1977 to a local newspaper, *The Northern Standard*, McCabe reflected:

In recent times, since the outbreak of the troubles in the North, I am very conscious that I am a writer living on the border. There is no way a writer can turn his back on what is happening around him. All other themes seem trivial to what is now happening around us.<sup>32</sup>

McCabe also outlined the structural pattern of his recently published border trilogy:

But it ['Cancer'] seemed to me it was only taking the problem from one side - the Republican side. To balance this, I wrote 'Heritage', which attempted to see the agony through Protestant eyes and then I followed this with Siege ['Victims'] which brings what we regard as the old enemies, extreme Republicans and the old English establishment, into direct dramatic confrontation.<sup>33</sup>

The trilogy, then, is enmeshed in the politics of late twentieth-century ethnic conflict in Northern Ireland, a conflagration often read in terms of a 'late colonial crisis.'<sup>34</sup>

Where *Death and Nightingales* broached the tensions wrought by territorial dispute in Northern Ireland from an historical perspective, the three stories that make up *Christ in the Fields*, all of which precede the novel, represent direct responses, as McCabe explains above. The legacies of Ireland's colonial relationship with England were keenly felt during the sectarian warfare of the 1970s, the period under scrutiny in McCabe's fictions. Thus, while the historical context may have changed across McCabe's works, the concern with land, mythology, and sectarianism have remained. Equally, there are many stylistic continuities across both *Death and Nightingales* and *Christ in the Fields*, primarily the author's employment of Gothic tropes and figurations. While McCabe might well be pioneering in his foregrounding of the ramifications of sectarian terrorism on the residents, both Catholic and Protestant, of the province's borderlands, his invocation of the Gothic as a mode of representing Northern Ireland's late colonial experience is not unique. As Matthew Schultz argues, 'both nationalist and unionist writers regularly couch their observations in terms of Gothic repetition and recurrence—the Northern Troubles are repeatedly represented as a conflict from the past that will not stay past, the past that had in fact never disappeared.'<sup>35</sup> Indeed, a cursory review of both of McCabe's texts reveals various connections that are consistent with the longer history of Gothic writing in and about Ireland: the presence of a 'big house' under duress from a restive native population; insecurity and anxiety surrounding land ownership and inheritance; heated conflict centered on religious faith; and persistent feelings of menace and paranoia emoted by the principal characters.

Notwithstanding the fact that the three stories that make up *Christ in the Fields* were not originally published together, from a formal point of view they do constitute a unified short story cycle; McCabe has pointed out that 'they were written as one, and separated at birth.'<sup>36</sup> Most obviously the narratives are united by their common concern with the pathologies of sectarianism within the border counties between the Republic and the North of Ireland. The effectiveness of the cyclical patterning of such short story collections is tangible in the sense of intimacy and community that is engendered by recurrent exposure to characters, rituals, terrains and vocabularies. In short, 'the reader's successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts.'<sup>37</sup> The communities detailed in McCabe's border narratives are also co-extensive with his own lived experience of that region. While his fictions are distillations of local myths and stories, McCabe's narratives bear indelible watermarks of autobiography – but the fragmented style of the short story genre reveals the problematic nature of integrated self-narration under the compressed circumstances of this sectarian geography:

A dim, hidden country, crooked scrub ditches of whin and thorns stunted in sour putty land; bare, spade-ribbed fields, rusted tin roof cabins, housing a stony faced people living from rangy cattle and Welfare hand-outs. [Who] from their gaunt

lands...looked down on the green border country below watching, waiting. To them a hundred years was yesterday, two hundred the day before.<sup>38</sup>

The lengthiest piece in the collection is 'Victims', which is the story that has received most critical attention.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps because it bears affinities with narratives such as Benedict Kiely's *Proxopera*<sup>40</sup>, and, more obliquely, Brian Moore's *Lies of Silence*<sup>41</sup>, 'Victims' has entered the cultural economy of the Northern 'Troubles' more effectively than its companion pieces. Detailing the hostage-taking of the Anglo-Irish Armstrong family (plus assorted representative associates) at the 'big-house' at Inver Hall by a motley fivesome of IRA kidnapers, the story dramatises the resilience of the local, provincial and, of course, universal agon between good and evil. As Laura Pelaschiar notes of the novella:

*Victims* directly follows the Big House novel tradition of Somerville and Ross... puts together two narrative modes, the Big House novel and the 'Troubles' thriller, and skilfully intersects two important themes of Northern Irish life, the crisis and decay of the Anglo-Irish world and the increasing role of Republican terrorism.<sup>42</sup>

Thus we have a whole skein of formal idioms in McCabe's novella through which the moral poles of the 'Troubles', and humanity, are prised. The politics of sectarian ideology, then, invade the stability of the domestic and violate the private – yet could the 'big-house' ever be adjudged to have been beyond politics? Its literary heritage and its cemented, demesned physicality are assertions of a political and cultural will, a will that was a continuing affront to the sympathies embodied by the ruthless IRA cell of the story. Yet despite the nocturnal drama of murder and intimidation, accusation and counter-accusation, and moral reckoning, 'Victims' ends McCabe's border trilogy with the word 'Beautiful'.<sup>43</sup> Uttered by the freshly liberated matriarch, Harriet Armstrong, the word suggests a projective mind-set. Again Pelaschiar argues that herein resides an intimation of hope absent from the other stories.<sup>44</sup> 'Victims', then, gestures to a form of resolution even within the drama of a terroristic kidnapping; it reaches beyond the Gothic architecture and legacies of the 'big house' and urges the reader to think 'otherwise' about the previous two stories. Yet, it is necessary to unpack the two shorter narratives in order to apprehend fully McCabe's conflicted vision of the embattled province at the height of the 'Troubles' in the 1970s.

There is little doubt that McCabe's narratives are cast as latter-day legatees of the Gothic genre; his moods, landscapes, motifs and image-scapes all bear the watermarks of the earlier literary style. Perhaps most explicitly, there are basic questions of territorial proprietorship, precedence and inheritance at stake across his fictional oeuvre. The Gothic, then, befits these topographies stalked by history's repressed grievances. These historical disturbances are manifest, in McCabe's Ulster, as undiluted ideological agents, who, in turn, have engendered a dystopian social milieu, which is scarred by endemic suspicion and narrative contestation. Land and the carceral are imported by McCabe from the Gothic as primary stylistic devices in his rendition of this violent excess. The opening story of *Christ*

*in the Fields* is 'Cancer', a title that is clearly a metaphor for the condition of the Northern Irish body politic. McCabe here echoes Susan Sontag's insistence on the chilling resonance of 'cancer' as a social metaphor. Indeed McCabe's employment of the oncological motif might well be seen as a ratification of Sontag's argument concerning the alarming declensions of 'cancer' in literary, political, and social discourses. However the title's transparency as a metaphor is also a direct, and perhaps simplistic, political statement by McCabe. The story parallels two different types of death/disease, both seemingly inoperable: the slow natural death of Jody McMahon from cancer, and the murder of the British Army soldiers in a terrorist bomb attack. Both, then, are symptomatic of the insatiable and resolute agencies of death – one physical, the other political. Yet if the figuration of the province is as a region afflicted with a cancerous disease, what prospect is there of resolution? Certainly hope is at a premium in 'Cancer', and may only be divined in the equable figure of the dying Jody McMahon and not in his contrary brother Dinny.<sup>45</sup>

Dinny relates how his father had died of what he terms 'a rare breed' of cancer.<sup>46</sup> This 'rare breed' was such that:

If he went out in the light, the skin would rot from his face and hands, so he put in the latter end of his life in a dark room, walkin' about the roads at night. In the end it killed him. He hadn't seen the sun for years.<sup>47</sup>

Notwithstanding the glaring Gothic features of the father's protracted, and almost vampiric, demise, it is what Dinny says immediately after this that is perhaps more arresting: 'A doctor tould me once it could be in the blood fifty years, and then all of a shot it boils up and you're a gonner' ('Cancer', 9). The cancer that afflicted Dinny's father is now manifest in his brother Joady, in Walpolean fashion the decay of preceding generations is now meted on its progeny. In broader terms, the carceral rot that will physically kill Joady symbolises the self-devouring hatreds of this frontier community. The carcinogenic motif of McCabe's narrative, then, gestures towards the insipid ethnic essentialisms that are so intrinsic to the architecture of antipathy in the North of Ireland.

In making their way to the hospital to visit Joady, Dinny and his younger companion, Boyle, pass by a Catholic graveyard and again it evokes memories of historical displacement. Dinny tips his hat with due respect as the narrative reveals a litany of the local deceased: 'McCaffreys, Boyles, Grues, Gunns, McMahons, Courtneys, Mulligans'.<sup>48</sup> In listing the names of the families of the surrounding lands Dinny engages in an act of narrative consolation. Residing in a geography of threat, suspicion, and resentment, he is culturally traumatised and historically dislocated. His recitation of his deceased co-religionists assumes the form of a lament or an incantation, acting as a gesture towards narrative continuity in a society bedevilled by grave uncertainty. We witness a ritualised effort to enforce narrative; a representational projection with origins in the competing batteries of local mythology. He may have the certainties of sectarian hatred and perceived victimhood, but they are self-annihilating and, ultimately, debilitating. The graveyard serves as a trigger for Dinny's recollection of his own family's exile from their historical homeland.



Predictably, his account, gleaned from an article in the *Anglo-Celt*, is suffused with violence and mythology:

Kings of Monaghan for near a thousand years, butchered and driv' north to these bitter hills, that's what it said, and the scholar that wrote it up maintained you'll get better bred men in the cabins of Fermanagh than you'll find in many's a big house.'<sup>49</sup>

In Dinny's description the landscape itself is infected with the divisive bitterness of the two communities' violent history. Subsequently, Dinny refers to the endurance of blood kinship; he is unequivocal as he asserts, 'Blood tells...it tells in the end.'<sup>50</sup> In what amounts to a highly cryptic, and ambiguous, invocation of a recurrent haematological motif in the story, Dinny re-enforces the biological indices of ethnic difference. His is an emotionally invested narrative that buttresses the contours of this dystopian landscape. While blood can assure kin fidelity, as we see later in the narrative, it also possesses the capacity to infect and destroy from within.

As part of McCabe's loosely interrelated short-story trilogy, 'Heritage' is a companion piece to 'Cancer' and to the much longer story 'Victims'. While Dinny McMahan retains a central role in 'Cancer', he reappears fleetingly in both 'Heritage' and in 'Victims'. This is one of several intertextual 'hauntings' used by McCabe to engender a sense of intimacy, claustrophobia, and paranoia in the compressed geography of his border community. Eric O'Neill is the Protestant, and loyalist, protagonist of 'Heritage', a young man burdened with both his own uncertain convictions and the sectarian faith of his maternal uncle, George. Both are members of the Ulster Defence Regiment, a part-time wing of the British military in Northern Ireland, and their relationship is rooted in a surrogated desire to maintain tribal animosity. George's *raison d'être* is congruent with that of Billy Winters in *Death and Nightingales*: both obsessively strive to secure the continuity of their tenurial possessions. In an effort to impress the urgency of loyalist militancy upon his vacillating nephew, George captures the self-destructive impulses of this mentality: 'My life, have you thought on that, no woman, no brother, no close friend ever, wrought on my lone all my days, for what? I have nothin' but this house and forge, a few acres and a stretch of bog but *that* is somethin', land that is somethin'.'<sup>51</sup>

Such is the corrosive nature of George's hatred for his Catholic neighbours that all are diagnosed as murderous or, at best, complicit with the agents of sectarian murder on the Republican side of the conflict. While on patrol as part of their UDR duties, Eric and George encounter a Catholic neighbour, Cassidy, who informs them that there has just been a double murder of two Protestant men in the locality – the father and brother of Eric's girlfriend as it transpires. But the encounter further reveals George's festering, and paranoid, contempt for the entire 'Romish plot'. In his eyes the Protestant community, the latter-day planter class, are truly a colonial garrison, under siege from unseen, but pervasive, threats. Referring to Cassidy, George rants:

Catholic and Civil Rights, isn't he?...Seen him two years ago on the platform in

Derry with that wee whore Devlin. See the way he smiled. He's laughin' at us; every bomb that goes off, every man that's maimed or murdered, laughin' 'cause they think we're afeced. No balls, that's what they say to themselves. He knows who sent that note, knows where, when and how you'll be got, it's all linked: Rome, politics, America, gunmen. In Christ's name how did he get money to buy Protestant land and pay two prices for it, a back-hander to a crooked solicitor and some lundy to bid; and them cows! The whole shute must come to near £30,000!<sup>52</sup>

Again McCabe showcases a rabid narrative assertion – its fantastic qualities potent in a simplistic historical lineage of inter-communal relations. Both language and geography, then, in McCabe's fiction are co-opted as indices of the Gothic milieu in which these bordered lives co-exist. In George's eyes the local, the national, and the international are sources of potential and actual menace, but it is the immediate prospect of dispossession, the intimacy of sectarian usurpation that is his governing hatred. Guided by this paranoid logic, he assures Eric that the death threat received by Eric earlier in the day is a communal act rather than an isolated act of intimidation. Of course, the devious land purchase and the IRA death threat are closely allied; both are efforts to depopulate the land of its Protestant occupants, a motive that only serves to entrench George's warped sense of morality. Ultimately for George, it is a fight to the death, 'Murder money; they're diggin' graves for us night and day and we're standin' lookin' at them like the Jews in Europe; they've got their score to settle and they mean to settle once and for all; if we let them.'<sup>53</sup>

McCabe dramatises the corrosive contours of sectarian mythology in the North in a preceding exchange between Eric and his girlfriend, Rachel. Rachel recounts a recent shift spent working as a trainee nurse in a Catholic maternity ward, and herein McCabe introduces the politics of reproduction and the base politics of ethnic essentialism: 'I heard them talk, so coarse and stupid, holy magazines and rosaries and this fuzzy-headed priest going about blessing their labours and their babies, and the horrid way they sucked up to him.'<sup>54</sup> Although Rachel's remarks here are, superficially, common currency in such circumstances, they subsequently mutate into a maniacal, quasi-Swiftian register, once more alluding to the imbrication of land, creed, and reproduction. Rachel confesses: 'I was on night duty a month ago, infant wards, all Catholics, in the middle of the night I thought...I thought if I set fire to it they'd all be burned, about thirty less of them.'<sup>55</sup> Tellingly, she is repulsed by her thoughts and by the incessant hatred that bleeds into every facet of her life, sentiments that are shared by Eric. Yet later in the story, when the sectarian violence is visited directly upon her family, Rachel recedes from the verbal economy of hatred into silence and, then, animalistic paroxysm. The verbal articulation of the earlier passage may superficially belong to a cognitive human register, but its consuming hatred broaches the beastly. Ironically, in the later episode Rachel's mode of articulation dissolves beyond the verbal logic of sectarianism. Her remaining mode of expression is a haunting wail that re-enforces the presence of the gothic through its invocation of human transmutation and the realm of the supernatural: 'And the cry that came from her mouth, he had never heard before, and never wanted to hear again. She made a sort of noise, like something choking. It seemed to come more

from her lungs than her throat as though she were drowning in grief'.<sup>56</sup>

'Heritage' ends with a decisive act of somatic violence by Eric O'Neill – he drives his car directly into a British Army patrol at high speed and is shot and killed before his 'attack' can kill any soldiers. In the end Eric is attempting to escape the freight of a burdensome familial and communal heritage; but equally he has glimpsed a prospective future for himself. This future consists of either striving, futilely perhaps, to evade capture and execution by the IRA and/or in some ways replicating the pathetic, blind life of his uncle George in isolation or bringing that hatred into a future relationship just as his mother has done. These options represent what is the most downbeat of the stories in McCabe's trilogy. In effect, Eric commits suicide in order to avoid such a 'heritage'; the fatal responsibilities that he is being coerced into assuming are traded for the sacrifice of his life. In a way his body becomes a weapon: in the eyes of the patrolling soldiers he is a prelude to modern day suicide bombers who intend to liberate through faith-inspired action; but in fact his body is a device for seizure of control. His past and his future are, in many ways, beyond his control – his body is not his own, either bedecked in UDR uniform, or when he is eventually seized and violently dispatched by the IRA. This act is pessimistic in a general sense, but it might just signal a moment of fatal agency; it is despairing but it is also aiming for autonomy?

'Cancer', 'Heritage' and 'Victims' constitute a Northern Irish border trilogy and it is salutary to recall McCabe's own comments on the very notion of a border or borderland. McCabe turns to *Webster's* definition of borderland: 'a vague or undetermined situation, condition or place. Clearly an obstacle to normal contact and communication, a hindrance, a nuisance, a hostile, unfriendly, defensive thing: Border'.<sup>57</sup> Just as the inhabitants of McCabe's narratives both recall and ultimately play out the intransigence of sectarian myth, McCabe reveals how his own biography is firmly enmeshed within the asphyxiating ligatures of such mythologies. While the border may have been legislatively anchored, it still remained notional for much of the surrounding community. Indeed the border achieved a spectral quality as it becomes elemental to the propagation of inter-communal antipathy. The border may be concretised as a contemporary political frontier, but its very existence is a direct index of past traumas and usurpations. In this sense, the Northern Irish border, and of course, the micro-borders that divide competing communities, are haunted by disturbing memories and, as McCabe demonstrates, debilitating mythological narratives. McCabe's effectiveness rests in the cyclical construction of his short stories – the intimate and intense temperature of these local hatreds. Myth, popular history, rumour, and news media are all differential components of the narrative fabric of the community; all are constitutive of a complex skein of discourses that confirm and amplify inchoate suspicions and concrete convictions. While the portraits map the exhausting divisions of the sectarianised rural landscape, there is a sense in which McCabe's texts are historical artefacts and, as such, are admonishments against, as well as exposures of, primary interpersonal and intercommunal violences. McCabe's narratives critically diagnose the ills and regressions of his contemporary society and, equally, in the manner in which they

implicitly suggest that these are conditions under which a transformed peaceful and egalitarian future cannot be imagined. The formal patterning of McCabe's narratives, realist and Gothic, are not just representations of hauntings – they haunt each other as literary and political forms. These stories expose the limits of monolithic ideological thought as manifested in irredeemable sectarian hatred. McCabe's writings are valuable literary historical and historical artefacts that arose out of the decades long Northern Irish 'Troubles'. They are part of the cultural legacy of that period in Irish history, and their Gothic tones and themes furnish powerful diagnostic representations of much of the cultural and political dynamics of the conflict and its colonial pre-history.

### Notes

- 1 C. H. McIlwain (ed.), *The Political Writings of James I* (1918; New York, 1965), p. 37.
- 2 Siobhán Kilfeather, 'Origins of the Irish Female Gothic', *Bullán: An Irish Studies Journal* 1.2, (1994), 36.
- 3 'Priest-Hunting', *The Nation* (5 February, 1848). Cited in Chris Morash, "'Ever under some unnatural condition": Bram Stoker and the Colonial Fantastic', in Brian Cosgrove (ed.), *Literature and the Supernatural* (Dublin, 1995), p. 99.
- 4 David Punter summarises the Gothic as representing 'a cultural knot: entirely unsusceptible to purgation, it constantly demands that we reject the narrative of cultural cleansing and engage instead with a textual and psychic *chiaroscuro* where plain sight is continually menaced by flickerings from other worlds', David Punter and Glennis Byron (eds.), *Spectral Readings: Towards a Gothic Geography* (Basingstoke, 1999), p. 3.
- 5 W. J. McCormack, 'Irish Gothic and After', in Seamus Deane (General Editor), *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Volume II* (Derry, 1991), p. 833.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 837.
- 7 Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London, 1995), p. 188. Later in the same chapter Eagleton provides a materialist critique of the Gothic, underscoring the genre's focus on inheritance and succession in financial terms (p.194).
- 8 Julian Moynahan, *Anglo-Irish: The Literary Imagination in a Hyphenated Culture* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1995), p. 111. A more recent survey of Anglo-Irish Gothic writing is Jarlath Killeen's *Gothic Ireland: Horror and the Irish Anglican Imagination in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Dublin, 2005). Also see Killeen's 'Irish Gothic: A Theoretical Introduction', *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, 1, (2006), <http://irishgothichorrorjournal.homestead.com/jarlath.html>
- 9 Declan Kiberd, *Irish Classics* (London, 2000), pp. 382–3.
- 10 Vera Kreilkamp, 'Fiction and Empire: The Irish Novel', in Kevin Kenny (ed.), *Ireland and the British Empire* (Oxford, 2004), p. 171.
- 11 The 'Big House' genre persists in later twentieth-century Irish literature; notable examples include: J. G. Farrell's *Troubles* (1970); John Banville's *Birchwood* (1973) and *The Newton Letter* (1992); and Aidan Higgins' *Langrishe, Go Down* (1966). For a recent critique of the genre and of criticism of the genre see Yuri Yoshino, 'The Big House Novel and Recent Irish Literary Criticism', *Journal of Irish Studies* 22, (2007), 48–54.
- 12 Vera Kreilkamp, 'The novel of the big house', in John Wilson Foster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 67. For an extended treatment of this genre see Kreilkamp's *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1998).

13 William Hughes, 'A Singular Invasion: Revisiting the Postcoloniality of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*', in William Hughes and Andrew Smith (eds), *Empire and the Gothic: The Politics of Genre* (Basingstoke, 2003), p. 89. Hughes and Smith make similar claims for the adjacency of the Gothic and the postcolonial in their 'Introduction: Defining the Relationships between Gothic and the Postcolonial', *Gothic Studies*, 5:2 (2003), 1–6. See also Elizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, 'Colonial and postcolonial Gothic: the Caribbean', in Jerod D. Hogle (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 229–57.

14 William Hughes and Andrew Smith, 'Introduction: The Enlightenment, Gothic and Postcolonialism', in Hughes and Smith (eds), *Empire and the Gothic*, pp. 3–4. On this same point, Tabish Khair writes: 'The Gothic and the postcolonial are obviously linked by a common preoccupation with the Other and aspects of Otherness', *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness* (Basingstoke, 2009), p. 3.

15 Luke Gibbons, *Gaelic Gothic: Race, Colonization and Irish Culture* (Galway, 2004), p. 10.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 83. Gibbons also refers to the animalization of the colonized Irish in *Gaelic Gothic* (p. 38). On Victorian visual portraits of the 'simian' Irish, particularly in *Punch* magazine, see L. Perry Curtis, *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature* Second Edition (Washington, D.C., 1997).

17 See Seamus Heaney, 'Keeping Going', *The Spirit Level* (London, 1996), pp. 10–12.

18 Eileen Battersby, 'A farmer who happens to write', *The Irish Times: Weekend Review*, 8 August 1992, p. 2.

19 Eileen Battersby, 'Powerful polemics motivated by injustice', *The Irish Times: Weekend Review*, 15 January 2005, p. 13.

20 Margot Gayle Backus, *The Gothic Family Romance: Heterosexuality, Child Sacrifice, and the Anglo-Irish Colonial Order* (Durham, North Carolina, 1999), p. 2.

21 Gibbons, *Gaelic Gothic*, p. 60.

22 Charles Stewart Parnell was a figure that featured prominently across James Joyce's writing, most famously in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and he also featured in W. B. Yeats's poetry, see 'Parnell's Funeral' from *A Full Moon in March* (1933) and 'Parnell' from *Last Poems* (1936–1939).

23 The dream sequence trope is also employed in McCabe's other short fictions, 'Heritage', 'Music at Annahulion' and 'Roma' collected in *Heritage and Other Stories* (London, 1978).

24 Eugene McCabe, *Death and Nightingales* (London, 1998), p. 1. All further references are given in the main text as *DN* with page number.

25 Seamus Heaney, 'Feeling Into Words', *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (London, 1980), p. 54.

26 Backus, *The Gothic Family Romance*, p. 9.

27 *Ibid.*

28 Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, pp. 188–9.

29 Ann Radcliffe, *A Sicilian Romance* (1790; Oxford, 1993), p. 117.

30 Henry Patterson, 'Border Violence in Eugene McCabe's *Victims* Trilogy', *Irish Studies Review*, 19.2 (2011), p. 158.

31 On the Northern Irish 'Troubles', urban space and contemporary Gothic Literature see Neal Alexander, 'Strange City: Belfast Gothic', *European Studies: A Journal of European Culture, History and Politics*, 23, (2006), 113–25.

32 Eugene McCabe, *The Northern Standard* 1 April 1977.

33 *Ibid.* McCabe's 'Victims' Trilogy was filmed and broadcast on RTE, the Irish national television broadcaster in the 1970s. 'Cancer' was first broadcast in 1973, and 'Heritage' and 'Victims' followed in 1976.

34 For an influential and divisive diagnosis of the Northern 'Troubles' in these terms see

Seamus Deane's 'Introduction', in Seamus Deane (ed.), *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* (Minneapolis MN, 1990), p. 6.

35 Matthew Schultz, "Give it Welcome": Gothic Inheritance and the Troubles in Contemporary Irish Fiction', *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, 10 (2011), [http://irishgothicjournal.homestead.com/Schultz.html#anchor\\_29](http://irishgothicjournal.homestead.com/Schultz.html#anchor_29).

36 J. Doyle, 'Still Alive: A Familiar Voice Returns from a Long Silence', Review of Eugene McCabe's *Death and Nightingales*, *The Sunday Tribune – Review Section*, 23 August 1992, p. 4.

37 Ian Reid, *The Short Story* (London, 1977), p. 47.

38 Eugene McCabe, 'Heritage', *Christ in the Fields* (London, 1993), p. 22. All subsequent references will be given in the main text as 'Heritage' with page numbers.

39 For example see Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *(de-) constructing the North: Fiction and the Northern Ireland Troubles since 1969* (Dublin, 2003), pp. 67–76.

40 Benedict Kiely, *Proxopera: A Tale of Modern Ireland* (London, 1977).

41 Brian Moore, *Lies of Silence* (New York, 1990).

42 Laura Pelaschiar, *Writing the North: The Contemporary Novel in Northern Ireland* (Trieste, 1998), p. 83.

43 Eugene McCabe, 'Victims', *Christ in the Fields* (London, 1993), p. 198.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

45 For a discussion of the dangers of facile deployments of 'cancer' as a metaphor see Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors* (London, 1991).

46 In an interview with *Film West* McCabe admitted that 'Cancer' is his favourite of the three short stories because 'it is the most oblique...It comes at the situation in an allegorical way and is much more subtle than the other two which tackle the issues head on', <http://www.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest/29eugene.htm>

47 Eugene McCabe, 'Cancer', in *Christ in the Fields* (London, 1993), p. 9.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

49 *Ibid.*

50 *Ibid.*

51 McCabe, 'Heritage', p. 83.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

53 *Ibid.*

54 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

57 Eugene McCabe, 'Borderlands', in Malcolm Anderson and Eberhard Bort (eds), *The Irish Border: History, Politics, Culture* (Liverpool, 1998), p. 1.

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