Canon Sheehan:
A Turbulent Priest

by
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Canon Sheehan: A Turbulent Priest

Until a few years ago, I hardly gave a thought to Canon Sheehan as a novelist.

I read his novels when I was growing up seven or eight miles west of here. I was told stories from them when I was very young and I read them before I was very old. I read them around 1950.

I read Charles Dickens around the same time. As I recall it, Dickens and Sheehan were the two basic novelists that people in general were familiar with.

Then, like most people, I went away from here. For more than twenty years I hardly gave a thought to Canon Sheehan. I had not read him because I was studious. I was the reverse of studious. Nor was I particularly interested in literature. All stories were novels to me. I made no distinction between westerns, thrillers, romances and high art. A high art novel which is not a good story is something I have never been able to read. I read Sheehan because he was available and because he told a good story.

Books by or about Canon Sheehan did not present themselves to me in London. The Irish novelists one met with in English public libraries around 1960 were novelists I had never met with in Ireland in the 1950s: O'Connor, O'Faolain and O'Flaherty. I read them because they told are a reasonably good story. But it was always clear in my mind that they were not Irish novelists. What they wrote was English literature on an Irish theme.

I tried reading Somerville and Ross, but I couldn't. Science-fiction has never been to my taste, and my mind categorised the stories of the Irish RM as science fiction. A familiar landscape was peopled with alien characters. The landscape resembled the one I had grown up in sufficiently to make it familiar, but the people were nothing like the people amongst whom I had grown up. It was as if Somerville and Ross had taken the egalitarian society of sociable but self -reliant individuals that I knew as Slieve Luacra and asked me to imagine it perverted into a society of half-subservient and half-insolent peasants and half-cultured half-gentry presided over by a benevolent but bemused English gentleman. And I couldn't do it

About twenty years ago, it seemed that I had much in common with Conor Cruise O'Brien. But I *felt* that l had nothing at all in common with him. I was puzzled by this until he made a remark about how Somerville and Ross had to be recognised as part of Irish literature. If he saw the world of the Irish RM as real, while I could only see it as a science-fiction variant of reality, then we had clearly been produced by different countries which went under the same name.

I liked the recent television adaptation of the Irish RM well enough. Perhaps that was because English cultural restraint at its best went into the making of it—a Dublin production would have made it a morass of stage-Irishism. And perhaps it was because a play has more to do with action and less to do with inner life than a novel. And perhaps it had something to do with the fact that I had got to know more about the patchwork character of Ireland than I knew when I tried to read the novel.

In Slieve Luacra, forty years ago, *Ballydehob* was a by-word for the back of beyond. I supposed that was because Ballydehob was so far away, at the southern extremity of the vast county of Cork. I had never been to Ballydehob. I had rarely been across the Millstreet mountains. It did not occur to me that there might be a substantially different world far to the south of those mountains. I took it that Ireland was all of a piece, and was all basically like Slieve Luacra. But I am not so sure now that the world depicted in the Irish RM was not the real world of south-west Cork sharply observed. All I am sure of is that it was not the world of north-west Cork that I grew up in, or that the generation which produced me grew up in.

After Somerville and Ross and before O'Connor, O'Faolain and O'Flaherty, there was a revolution. O'Connor, O'Faolain and O'Flaherty took part in that revolution beifore going on to write novels and short stories. Most of their books were banned by the Irish censorship. I read them in London. The fact that they had been banned in Ireland predisposed me to like them. But I had to admit to myself that I did not like them as much as I expected. And the one I liked least was the one who tried hardest to be Irish—O'Faolain.

I read most of what all of them wrote. But I read them for a reason. I treated their stories as politics and read them on that basis. I had not read Canon Sheehan as politics. And I read the non-historical novels of Walter Macken simply because I found them readable. But I did not find O'Faolain readable at all, and I only found the other two readable in patches.

The three O's set out after the Civil War to become novelists of the Irish Revolution. They wrote literature which was more or less alienated from the society formed by revolution. And I take this to be connected with the fact that all three developed as writers under the tutelage of benevolent English publishers.

Macken wrote stories, without literary pretension, about the Irish in Ireland and the Irish in England.

In England during the sixties I read the three O's for a political reason, and found out something about them. I did not try to find out anything about Canon Sheehan. He was not visible in English bookshops or libraries, and I did not seek him out.

It was not until 1969 or 1970 that I came across Canon Sheehan again. And that encounter had nothing to do with literature. It had to do with Belfast politics.

In London, in the mid-sixties, I got drawn into Irish politics. I had previously had little spontaneous interest in politics, and none in Irish politics. Someone I knew in another connection dragged me along to a semi-conspiratorial meeting one evening. Representatives of various groups were trying to hammer out an agreement to enable them to act together. I was able to see what was happening and suggest what to do about it, while the others seemed to be deaf to what was going on. Because of that unfortunate aptitude, I got drawn into their affairs. And their affairs consisted largely of anti-Partition propaganda and demonstrations.

From 1965 to 1969 1published anti-Partition pamphlets. I based my arguments on what I had been told about Irish history and about Northern Ireland by people who had long political experience and a keen interest in history. My only direct experience of Northern Ireland was got in a one-day excursion from Dublin to Belfast in 1965. What I saw with my own eyes on that day trip clashed with what I had been told about Belfast by the people for whom I was writing pamphlets. But I continued to take their version of the matter on trust for another four years. The impression made by a day-trip is not sufficient reason for overturning a well-established conception of history and politics.

It was not until the events of August 1969 in Derry and Belfast that I decided my first impressions had been right and that what I had been publishing for four years was essentially wrong. What convinced me of this was the actual behaviour, in the heat of the conflict, of the people who had taught me the version of history and politics which I had been elaborating. They had been using fine phrases about democracy and Republican socialism. But, in the heat of battle, it became obvious that they did not treat these fine phrases as principles, only as pretences. And, when I suggested that we act on them as principles which applied in the real world, they thought I was mad.

The war which has now been going on for twenty years in Northern Ireland originated in the fact that the leaders of the Civil Rights movement in 1968/9 used civil rights slogans deceptively, and because at critical moments they acted as if their purpose was to achieve a condition of all-out conflict, political and military, of Catholic and Protestant.

In the autumn and winter of 1969/70 1 undertook a rapid review of the history of the past two centuries, chiefly through the files of newspapers held in the library in the Shankill Road. I had become thoroughly suspicious of historians, so I decided to look at history in the raw in the newspapers and pamphlets of each period I arrived at a view of things which seemed to be sound, even though it was original.

And then I was pleased to find that it was not so original after all. I discovered that Canon Sheehan had been a politician as well as a novelist, and that the view of things which I had just worked out was very close to the view of things on which he had based a political campaign which all but destroyed the Redmondite Party in County Cork sixty years earlier.

It boils down to this: that the Ulster Protestants are not the puppets of landlords or of English Tories; that they are a people, with all the awkward qualities of a people; that their will as a people could not be broken by intimidation; that they

had sufficient reason for refusing to come under an all-Ireland government based on a form of Catholic ascendancy; and that the factors which might tend to bring North and South together in the long run could never become operative while the South asserted a sovereign right over the North, regardless of the will of the people there.

In 1970, 1 initiated a movement to repeal Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution of the Republic. I argued that any attempt to override the will of the Ulster Protestants, either by political manoeuvre or by force, would only make them more stubborn about Partition and would aggravate relations between the Catholic and Protestant communities in the North. The only way the North could be gained was by letting it go, adopting a fundamentally different attitude towards the Protestants, and relying on factors which would tend to bring about a convergence between the two parts of the island once the provocation of the sovereignty claim was removed.

Dealing with the matter before Partition, Canon Sheehan held that Partition would inevitably result from the character and policy of the Home Rule Party. That Party had since the overthrow of Parnell become a blatant party of Catholic ascendancy, intent on driving representative Protestants out of public life. And it treated the Ulster Protestants as a rabble to be overawed and put down rather as a people to be negotiated with—and to be sympathised with if they were to feel that there was a place for them in an Irish state.

Canon Sheehan acted politically on the basis of this understanding of the situation. His movement enjoyed considerable immediate success in Cork and the neighbouring counties in 1910, but Redmondism held its ground elsewhere. Sheehan failed. But the consequences of failure were as he predicted. The Ulster Protestants went their own way, carrying a substantial Catholic minority with them. The abomination called Northern Ireland came about—a sort of Limbo between Britain and Ireland. It is administratively, but not politically, part of the United Kingdom. The political parties which govern the Republic do not operate there, though they claim sovereignty over it Neither do the British political parties operate there, even though they govern it. Political life in the North is a kind of dull but permanent ache from which many seek relief by military action. But, though the political abnormality of theregion ensures that the IRA cannot be defeated, the will of the Ulster Protestant people ensures that it can never win either.

So Canon Sheehan failed, but the consequences of his failure have demonstrated the truth of his political analysis.

I have failed in a similar sense. In the early seventies I spoke at numerous meetings and debates in Dublin, Cork and Limerick on the subject of Northern Ireland. I told meetings of IRA sympathisers—and IRA sympathisers of one sort or another then included almost everybody in the Republic—that the campaign to overawe or ride roughshod over the Ulster Protestants could not succeed. I said that the political, journalistic, academic and religious representatives of Catholic Ireland were misleading the people about the character and quality of the Ulster Protestant community because they themselves had formed a false idea of that community. In 1972-3, when the bombing campaign was at its peak, and a permanent pall of smoke hung over Belfast, I said that the Republican campaign had not a hope of succeeding, because it was based on false social assumptions.

Those were the days when Irish Press editorials urged the IRA and the Gardai to coordinate their affairs better in Donegal, so that the final push on the North should not be hindered by unnecessary friction between them. The Press invoked the concept of *realpolitik* to justify this deluded policy. That it was deluded is now hardly open to rational doubt.

The Editor of the *Irish Press* can hardly recall those editorials with pride. But I could today repeat without embarrassment what I said in 1970. And I was made all the more confident in saying it then by the discovery that Canon Sheehan said it before me.

Nationalist Ireland made itself politically stupid with regard to the North when it rejected and forgot what Canon Sheehan said about it.

My discovery of the coincidence between Sheehan's political analysis and mine did not lead me to re-read his novels at that time. His novels had ceased to be currently available, and his name had ceased to be mentioned.

It is quite possible for somebody to be an acute political writer and a poor novelist. Although I did not remember Sheehan as a poof novelist, I allowed it to be possible that he was. I had liked reading Dickens when I was about 14. Later on, I had taken up Barnaby Rudge again to read it for its history, but I found it unreadable. I could not force my mind through its pages. I found the style of the prose and the eccentricity of the characters and the working out of the plot intensely irritating.

So I did not take up the novels of Canon Sheehan again for many years.

But it was inevitable that when time permitted I would take a look at everything publishe eventually I did look at My New Curate again. And I found it, if anything, more readable than before. And likewise with **Luke Delmege** and **The Blindness Of Dr. Gray, and Miriam Lucas.**

I read his books of philosophical reflection, **Parerga** and **Under The Cedars And Stars** and found them by far the most interesting things of that sort published in modern Ireland—Ireland since the coming of Cardinal Cullen. And I found that he was a first-rate poet into the bargain.

Recently I looked him up in a book called, **A Dictionary Of Irish Literature**, published by Gill & Macmillan around 1980. It says that *"He had the conventional opinions one would expect in a Roman Catholic cleric of his day"*. That gets it about as wrong as it could be got.

If the Roman Catholic clerics of Canon Sheehan's day had in the main been of Canon Sheehan's opinion, Ireland wouldnothave been partitioned, the Protestant community in the South wouldnothave been subjected to polite but firm communal suffocation, and Catholic/Protestant relations on the island as a whole would not have been reduced to barbaric antagonism.

Sheehan was an extraordinary Roman Catholic cleric for his time. He was the most effective liberal intellectual of his time in Ireland. He sprang from the heart of Fenian Ireland. And the liberal-national movement which he fostered became powerful in the region of Minister which had been strongly Whiteboy, Young Ireland and Fenian in the course of the 19 th century and which spearheaded the agrarian revolution and the war of independence in the early 20th century.

Others of his time in Ireland dismissed him as a reactionary obscurantist, differing from his clerical brethren only in being more articulate in the modern idiom, and being more dangerous to the cause of progress because he was more articulate. That was the view of him expressed in a Dublin rationalist magazine, **Dana,** in 1904. But Dana was an enclave of English liberal thought in an Ireland which had ceased to develop on English lines. Its systematic formal liberalism was disengaged from the substance of Irish life. It passed judgement on Irish affairs from an external viewpoint. It was an inconsequential phenomenon of the twenty year interval between the second and third Home Rule Bills.

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England did not become liberal by moulding itself on an external standard. It coped with its internal conflicts for a couple of hundred years, and its manner of coping was then given systematic expression in the mid-19th century by John Stuart Mill. But English liberalism did not begin with Mill. It begins, as far as I can date it, with the publication of Richard Hooker's Ecclesiastical Polity in the late 16th century, which is a fairly dense theological work. Insofar as writing is concerned, it progressed chiefly through Milton and Locke in the 17th century. Milton and Locke operated within the evolving politics and culture of their time. Locke had an Irish-born successor called John Toland. Toland, perhaps because he was something of an outsider in England, was much more systematically rationalist than Locke. But, for that very reason, his influence on English thought was less enduring than Locke's. Rationalism easily loses contact with the substance of life.

The chief liberal philosopher of the 18th century is Edmund Burke. At a critical moment in English history, Burke committed himself to a reactionary political position for the purpose of preserving the liberal framework of English life against the systematising influence of the French Revolution. He made propaganda against the French Revolution at a time when English governing circles were still largely sympathetic to it, and he became a fierce warmonger against revolutionary France. Simultaneously, he subjected English government of Ireland to fierce criticism, chiefly on the ground of its failure to admit Irish Catholics to the procedures of Constitutional government.

The real history of English liberalism is not straightforward. And of the two English liberal intellectuals of Irish extraction, Toland and Burke, the more substantial one is the one who was least straightforward.

Liberalism is not cosmopolitan. It is nationally specific. It differs from place to place because the actual medium of social life differs from place to place.

Different elements are in conflict in different places.

One might abstract a general liberalism from all particular instances of it. Many such abstractions have been made. But I cannot see what use they are.

Liberalism begins with the making of a practical accommodation between theological positions which are irreconcilable in principle. The ground of that practical accommodation cannot be theological. Nevertheless, it must be established amidst the theology. It is something to be contrived in the thick of the conflict rather than something to be formulated outside the conflict and imposed on it.

Toland and Burke are not Irish liberals. They are English liberals of Irish birth. Their minds were engaged in English affairs, and in Irish affairs only because Ireland was governed by England.

I would list the main Irish liberal writers as Peter Walsh, Charles O'Connor, Arthur O'Leary, another Charles O'Connor, James Doyle, Gavan Duffy and P.A. Sheehan. Walsh, O'Leary and Sheehan were Roman Catholic priests. Doyle was a Roman Catholic Bishop. All have been forgotten because nationalist Ireland committed itself to an illiberal mode of development in 1850 and sustained that commitment until 1970, and because the aspirant liberals of the past twenty years have failed to engage their minds with the real history of Ireland.

It is understandable that the liberal mentality which emerged cautiously after Vatican 2 should look back to England for its principles. Catholic-nationalism had erased all memory of Irish liberalism from the greater part of society. But Ireland ceased to live within the ambit of the British body politic seventy or eighty years ago—seventy years ago objectively, eighty years ago subjectively—and it cannot now graft the over-ripe liberalism of Britain onto its own illiberal roots. It must construct a liberal movement from the elements of its own history.

There is no better starting point for this work than the last representative men in Irish life who were liberals—Canon Sheehan and his colleagues in the All-For-Ireland League. They possessed the liberal disposition in the highest degree. They had the inclination to make a practical accommodation between elements in conflict in order to make Ireland viable as a nation. And they knew that this could not be done by caricaturing one of the elements.

Canon Sheehan's political career began in the land reform of 1903.

The agrarian revolution which was accomplished with a British Act of Parliament in the first decade of the present century was the biggest economic and social event in Irish history since the confiscations of the 17th century.

Some years ago I made a selection of articles from the **Cork Free Press** (the paper of the All-For-Ireland League). I intended to publish them with an Introduction describing the political situation in the decade leading up to 1910. I assumed that for information about the Land Act I could refer readers to a number of histories of that enormous event. I knew that there had been a great amount of historical publishing in Dublin since 1970. I had not attempted to keep abreast of it as I had been preoccupied with Northern affairs. I took it for granted that histories

of the Land Act had been published. But none had.

This is as if English historians took no account of the 1832 reform, or Russian historians took no account of collectivisation.

There is no history of the Land Act. And it is skated over in the general histories.

Of the histories currently available, the eleven volume Gill & Macmillan paperback series appears to be the most widely used. The volume on the 19th century is by Joseph Lee, who is I think a professor at University College, Cork. That volume ends before the Land Act. The 20th century volume is by John A. Murphy, also a professor at UCC. It begins after the Land Act.

What would one think of a multi-volume history of England which ended one volume in 1945 and began the next in 1950, omitting the construction of the Welfare State in between?

Professor Murphy at the beginning of his volume describes Ireland in the early twentieth century as being in a condition of *"conservatism bred by peasant proprietorship and by Irish Catholicism"*.

Conservative peasant proprietorship was in 1900 an idea in the minds of some agrarian revolutionaries and some aristocratic Tories. William O'Brien in Munster, T.W. Russell in Unionist Ulster, and Arthur Balfour in the Salisbury connection of English Toryism Were convinced that the Irish countryside would reach a state of stable equilibrium only on the basis of peasant proprietorship. In other words, an agrarian revolution was required to get the countryside to settle down.

An agrarian revolution facilitated by a Tory Act of Parliament began in 1903. Successful revolutions conserve themselves. So, I suppose it could be said that on the very point of successful revolution, a condition of conservative inertia sets in. But I find it distinctly odd that Gill & Macmillan should skip over the revolution itself and describe the condition of Ireland in the instant following the revolution (indeed, while the revolution was still unaccomplished over much of the country) as *"conservatism bred by peasant proprietorship"*.

The agrarian revolution was accomplished rapidly and thoroughly in County Cork. But, in the greater part of nationalist Ireland it was neither rapid nor thorough, because the Home Rule Party tried to prevent it from happening. That is one of the dark secrets of modern Irish history. And it probably why there is no history of the Land Act.

When I was growing up a few miles west of here I knew vaguely that there had been landlordism in Ireland once. But I was not able to envisage the country I was growing up in with the addition of a landlord class to it. And nobody ever spoke of the landlords that had been. The people had sloughed off landlordism easily when the opportunity presented itself, and had then promptly forgotten about landlords.

Later, thinking about it, it became obvious to me that certain big houses I had known well must have been houses where gentlemen had lived. But I had never

thought of them as Big Houses. They were just bigger than usual farmhouses, with drives leading up to them, and plantations of trees around them., I never heard . reference to a single gentleman who had lived in any of them. And the farmers who had taken them over were in no way distinguished from other farmers.

I began to take in impressions of life in the early forties. Which means that a lot of the people I knew must have grown up when the country was peopled at the top by landlords. But, once people had disposed of the landlords they simply forgot them. No information was passed on to my generation about who the landlords of the locality had been. There was no remembrance, either hostile or kindly* that landlords had ever been.

When I went to London I met a man—Tom Skelly—who told me he had led a sort of peasants' revolt in Longford in the late forties. He was an honest man whose word I could not doubt. But I found it impossible to imagine a peasants' revolt in North-West Cork—they were not peasants, and they had nothing to revolt about or against. They were their own people, unoppressed and unresentful—and very unpeasantlike.

The difference between Irish society as I knew it and as Tom Skelly knew it resulted from the fact that in the one instance a thorough agrarian revolution had been enacted in the years immediately after 1903 and had been followed by a revolution in politics in 1910 by which the people asserted a moral and cultural ascendancy over their ex-landlords while, in the other instance, the agrarian reform was dragged out by the retarding influence of the Home Rule Party and there was no revolution in politics connected with it.

I do not intend giving a general history of the land agitation. In summary, the situation in 1900 was that the tenant farmers had acquired a sort of inconvenient dual ownership with the landlords under the *Landlord And Tenant Act* of 1880. They had fixity of tenure, and were able to sell their improvements. In a lot of practical ways the land was theirs. But, legally, it belonged to the landlords, and they still had to pay rent for it.

William O'Brien, Canon Sheehan's colleague, was the architect of the 1903 Act He had been active in the land agitation since the 1870s, chiefly in Connacht. In his books, he brings out the immense difference in social conditions between Connacht and Cork. He spent most of his time in Connacht stirring the people out of a condition of hopelessness and building grass-roots organisation for them. In Cork, the people, with a long Whiteboy tradition behind them, took social organisation for granted and only needed to see an opportunity to take advantage of it.

Landlordism under dual ownership did not work because it continued to be oppressive in a material sense where the people were deferential, and because where the people were not materially impoverished they were not deferential and they rebelled against the idea of landlordism.

In North Cork at any rate, where the tenant-farmers had come from a very

lively and democratic 18th century Gaelic development in which there were no chiefs, they were too vigorous in style and wide-ranging in interest to settle down in reasonably affluent conditions under landlords in the English manner.

Dual ownership could not stabilise the Irish countryside because landlordism remained too strong and oppressive where the people were deferential and had become too weak where the people were not deferential.

The latter condition of things was aggravated by the Tory *Local Government Act* of 1898, which set up elected local councils. This Act deprived the landlords of their power over local government as of right, and that power was certainly not sustainable even on the somewhat restricted male franchise which then applied. And it became increasingly irksome that the landlords, whose political power had been undermined, should remain owners of the land.

A great agitation for the abolition of landlordism was sustained from 1900 to 1903. This was an all-Ireland movement It was every bit as strong in the Protestant North as in the Catholic South. In fact, the Protestant tenant-farmers in the North had pioneered both tenant-right and land-purchase in Ireland well before these demands were taken up in the South. But, as the smaller part of Irish society, they did not have the leverage or the power to compel Parliament to legislate.

Ever since 1886 all Ulster Unionist MPs—all candidates appearing before Unionist Party selection boards—had to give an undertaking to the Orange Lodges that, if they were elected, they would support compulsory land purchase—a compulsory abolition of landlordism. And, where official Unionists were suspected of not being sufficiently hostile to landlordism, independent candidates were run against them, and often defeated (hem.

These independent anti-landlord Unionists were called Russellites, after T.W. Russell, the leading agitator in the compulsory purchase movement. The Northern Russellites combined with the Southern O'Brienites in the great agitation from 1900 to 1903. The Prime Minister, Balfour, who had served a term as Irish Secretary, had long been in favour of a *"peasant proprietorship"* in Ireland (recognising that the English landlord/tenant relationship could not develop here), and the agitation gave him the power to pass the 1903 Act.

The *Land Act* of 1903 did not take the land away from the landlords and give it to the tenants. It was neither an Expropriation Act nor a Compulsory Purchase Act It was an enabling Act.

It enabled the tenants of a particular landlord by joint action to buy out the estate.

The landlords were not unite" legal obligation to sell. The pressure on them to sell was economic.

It was up to each group of tenants to combine and to bargain with the landlord for the purchase of the estate. They had to make a bid for the estate.

The landlords were demanding much more for the estates than the tenants were willing to pay. The Tory Government, which regarded Irish landlordism as a political nuisance, made a financial arrangement under the Act, whereby the

difference between the landlords' asking price and the tenants' offer could be made up by a subsidy. It was judged to be in the public interest to cover this difference out of taxation. And it was this subsidy which gave the landlords a strong incentive to make deals.

Possibly, the Government reckoned that this bargaining process would help to remove the animosity from the social relationship between the gentry who were about to cease to be landlords and the tenants who were about to become landowners.

In addition to making up the difference between the asking price and the offer with a subsidy paid out of taxation, the Government also loaned the actual purchase price to the tenants. This loan was to be paid back in small annual instalments over a forty year period.

William O'Brien was both an agrarian reformer and a Nationalist politician. T.W. Russell was both an agrarian reformer and a Unionist politician. Neither of them made the politics of agrarian reform subservient to the requirements of his other politics. They tended to the land question in the tenant farmers' interests regardless of what might be called Constitutional considerations.

The Tory leader, Balfour, had a similar attitude. As Irish Secretary, he saw that there was a crying need for a number of particular economic and political reforms. He was called "Bloody Balfour" because he insisted on maintaining a framework of basic law and order as the medium within which these reforms would be enacted. He astonished some of the Home Rule MPs, including William O' Brien, by having them arrested for whipping up mass agitations. But, unlike almost all other 'law and order' politicians, he proceeded from the enforcement of law and order to the enactment of basic reforms.

His strategy has been summed up as one of *"killing Home Rule with kindness"*, but it was actually something quite different.

Balfour was a philosopher who became a politician. As far as I know he is the only philosopher who became a successful politician at the highest level, and the only one whose politics followed in substance from his philosophy. And he is certainly the only philosopher who ever governed Ireland or Britain.

When, as Irish Secretary, he had suppressed agitation and reinforced the framework of law and order, he went on a personal tour of Connacht and Donegal, by-passing both the Irish politicians and the Castle bureaucrats. Through talking to the tenant farmers he decided that they were capable of being competent landowners, and he decided that they should become the owners of the land in Ireland. The phrase, *"a property owning democracy* is a hollow shibboleth in the mouths of Thatcher Tories. With Balfour it was a programme of action through which landlordism was abolished.

When Balfour, the philosopher and aesthete, decided to become a politician, he did not have to fight his way to the top because he was Lord Salisbury's nephew and Lord Salisbury was running the Tory Party. The Salisbury connection was the

final fling of the best of English aristocracy in the early period of democracy, and it was able to give considerable protection to its own. Thatcher has acquired some freedom of action because of her appeal to the baser instincts of the rabble of Yuppies. Balfour had considerable freedom of action because he belonged to the Salisbury connection. So long as he appeared to know what he was doing, and in the long run was seen to be making the situation better rather than worse, his uncle backed him. And then he succeeded his uncle in the Tory leadership, and backed his cousin, George Wyndham, as Irish Secretary.

It is a misconception of Balfour's political world to say that he implemented a strategy of killing Home Rule with kindness. He, above all politicians, knew that, in the complexity of human affairs, it would be foolish to suppose that simple connections like that applied.

As Irish Secretary, he saw that some fundamental reforms were urgently required and that it was the business of the United Kingdom government to enact them. His strategy was to enact the reforms which were required for the good government of Ireland within the United Kingdom. This would separate matters on which the Irish had genuine grounds of grievance simply as citizens of the United Kingdom from the matter of nationality. It would separate the national question from issues which might be remedied within the United Kingdom.

If it turned out that what presented itself as a national movement was only a by-product of removable grievances, it would wither away when those grievances had been remedied. If, after the reforms had been enacted, the national movement continued undiminished, then it should be recognised as the genuine article, and its right to independence should be acknowledged.

Balfour was unalterably opposed to Home Rule as a mischievous arrangement. He was not opposed to Irish independence, if it was established that there was a real national will in Ireland.

In the 1920s his niece, Blanche Dugdale, interviewed him for a biography. She asked if he was disappointed at seeing all his work in Ireland wasted. He replied that, leaving aside the detail that it now had its own state, Ireland remained exactly as he had shaped it.

Balfour wanted to discover whether the apparent national movement was more than a by-product of social grievance. The Home Rule leaders believed in their hearts that it was not.

The Redmondites were convinced—at least they acted as if they were convinced—that the national movement could not survive without social grievances and without the antagonism of Catholic and Protestant. They saw the Land Act as a threat to nationalism because it offered the prospect of removing the major social grievance which had been disrupting the life of the country for generations, and at the same time removing the main economic ground of Catholic/Protestant antagonism in most of the country. Therefore, they used all their resources to persuade the tenants that the Land Act was an attempt to swindle them out of their savings.

I have read the chief Home Rule newspaper—*The Freeman's Journal*—for 1903. Day after day it poured out spurious arguments purporting to show that the Act was a bonanza for the landlords at the expense of the tenants, and advising the tenants to have nothing to do with it. And, since the *Freeman* was immensely influential around the country—no newspaper today exerts anything like its influence—land purchase got off to a very slow start

The complexity of the land purchase procedure under the Act enabled the Redmondites to depict it almost as an instrument of terror.

William O'Brien, who had set up the Act by developing a land agitation to bring the landlords to reason and by then reasoning with them, had retired from the fray. The pattern of his life was long bouts of intense activity followed by periods of nervous exhaustion. Having accomplished the Act, he went off to recuperate.

It was at this critical juncture, when tenant farmers who had put a lot of trust in the Home Rule Party were puzzled, that Canon Sheehan intervened to initiate actual land purchase activity in the area around Doneraile. He organised meetings of tenants in the area to discuss what was possible under the Act. He brought in lawyers to explain the law of it. He mastered the law himself. He convinced the tenants that the Act was anything but a swindle, and that it enabled them to become owners of their land on very reasonable terms, if they combined to negotiate with their landlords.

He was assisted in this activity by D.D. Sheehan of Dromtarriffe (no relation), whose family had been evicted when he was a child, and who had developed a political base independent of the Home Rule Party in the form of the North Cork *Land And Labour Association. Land and Labour* was a Labour movement of rural Ireland which developed in conjunction with the tenant farmer movement of the late 19th century to defend the interest of agricultural labourers and workers in rural towns against the farmers. At the beginning, it used against the farmers methods which were every bit as brisk as the methods which the farmers used against the landlords, with the result that the farmers of the region never acquired the cultural status of a superior class. The farmers had to resign themselves to forming part of a common humanity with their labourers.

Two generations later I grew up, in a propertyless family, entirely free of all mental and cultural habits of deference towards the owners of property. I take that to be a consequence of the fact that the founders of the aboriginal labour movement in Duhallow used Whiteboy methods against the farmers when the farmers were using them against the landlords.

D.D. Sheehan, the leader of this unusual Labour movement, became an active organiser of land purchase. He later boasted that he had done away with more landlords than anyone else in Ireland. And, while establishing the tenant farmers as landowners, he secured for the labourers the system of publicly supplied labourers' cottages, each with a substantial plot of land, which underpinned their cultural equality with the farmers.

Once the two Sheehans had set land purchase in motion, the landlord system

dissolved very rapidly in County Cork and the neighbouring regions. According to figures given by William O'Brien, 16,159 purchases had been made in Cork by 1909, when the financing ran into difficulty. And, in the Congested District region of Cork (the region of poorer land such a I grew up in), 1,785 purchases had been made.

The effective leaders of Redmond's Home Rule Party were John Dillon, whose base was in Mayo, and Joseph Devlin, whose base was in West Belfast. Devlin represented a purely urban interest. He had no representative concern with the Land Act But, as organiser of the militant lay Catholic body, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, he had an interest in preserving Catholic/Protestant antagonism, and therefore he supported Dillon's attack on the Act.

In Mayo, under Dillon's influence, there had by 1909 been 774 purchases in the unclassified part of the county (compared with 16,159 in Cork), and 485 in the Congested Districts (compared with 1,785 in Cork).

Thus landlordism was preserved by the Redmondites as providing a grievance necessary to the survival of nationalism.

The rapid abolition of landlordism in Cork against the advice of the Redmondites created apolitical breach between County Cork and Redmondism. North Cork was the storm centre of the assault on Redmondism, and the Home Rule Party soon gave it up as a lost cause. In the 1910 General Elections, all Cork seats were contested and the Redmondites lost all but one of them—East Cork.

If that assault on Redmondism was progressive—and I have no doubt that it was—it demonstrates that what is generally considered to be the normal relationship of town and country is reversed in Ireland. The movement against Redmondism began here in small country towns, and villages, and places that were not even villages.

Matters came to a head in 1909, when the financing of the Land Act ran into difficulty.

A movement in the money market diminished the fund allocated for land purchase. This would have been no real problem if the Tories were still in office. But the Tories lost the 1906 election. The new Liberal Government was not itself committed to land purchase, and it was happy to placate its Home Rule allies by acting on their advice on Irish affairs. So it let the financing of land purchase run into trouble. At the same time it enacted a limited measure for compulsory purchase under which not much land would be transferred from landlord to tenant, but that which was would be transferred without the social contagion of bargaining.

North Cork went into uproar. It declared that the Redmondites, having failed to persuade the people that the Land Act was a swindle, were now trying to sabotage the financing of the Act.

The Cork landlords had not only been bought out faster than elsewhere, but they had got less for their land. Purchase prices were driven down by hard bargaining. In areas under Home\Rule influence the landlords got better prices because the Party did not assist the tenants in the bargaining process.

Redmond himself was a landlord and he sold the estate to his tenants under the Act, even though the Party line was that the Act was a device for swindling the farmers. And he got a much higher price for it than he would have got if his estate had been in Cork.

The Party was therefore accused of trying to stop land purchase in the first instance; and, where it could not stop it, of being responsible for squandering the purchase fund by failing to bargain down the purchase price hard enough.

The financing of the Land Act and the general conduct of the Party on land purchase was one of the major issues in the 1910 Elections. It combined with two other issues to produce a rounded political movement: the striking of a historic compromise with Protestant Ireland with the purpose of forging a viable form of nationality in the island as a whole, and Lloyd George's Budget.

After years of gestation, *the All For Ireland League* was launched between the two General Elections of 1910. The Redmondites were defeated by Independents in the January Election, and by the AFIL candidates (generally the same people) in the December Election. (The Redmondites left North Cork uncontested in December.) Canon Sheehan wrote the manifesto of the movement—a very long editorial for the first number of a new daily paper, *The Cork Free Press* (June 11, 1910). He asked:

> *"We are a generous people; and yet we are told we must keep up a sectarian bitterness to the end; and that Protestant ascendancy has been broken down, only to build Catholic ascendancy on its ruins. Are we in earnest about our country at all or are we seeking to perpetuate our wretchedness by refusing the honest aid of Irishmen ? Why should we throw into the arms of England those children of Ireland who would be our most faithful allies, if we did not seek to disinherit them? A weaker brother disinherited by a stronger will naturally be his enemy...*
>
> *"England owes her world-wide power... to her supreme talent of attracting and assimilating the most hostile elements in her subject races... Ireland, alas, has had the talent of estranging and expelling her own children, and turning them... into her deadliest enemies. It is time that all this should cease, if we still retain the ambition of creating a nation."*

The *Cork Free Press* was both a newspaper in the fullest sense and a party organiser. It quickly became the main Cork newspaper of the period, overtaking the *Freeman's Journal* and the *Cork Examiner.* Though never mentioned by historians, it is one of the three great radical newspapers published in Ireland—the other two being *The Nation,* published in Dublin in the 1840s, and *The Northern Star,* published in Belfast in the 1790s.

The historic compromise with Protestant Ireland was seen by the All For Irelanders as having been made possible by the abolition of landlordism. This possibility was twofold, since Protestant Ireland was twofold—the Protestant people of Ulster and the Protestant gentry of the south.

Catholic and Protestant tenant farmers—O'Brienites and Russellites—had joined forces in the great agitation leading up to the 1903 Act, and both had set-to with a will to abolish landlordism under the Act.

There is a widespread notion, fostered by nationalist historians, that the Orange movement in the North was a device by which a landlord aristocracy kept the Protestant people subservient. There is no truth in the notion. In the past, aristocratic landlords held leading ceremonial positions in the Orange Order. On occasion they attempted to use their ceremonial prestige to underpin their economic privilege. But on such occasions they always found that, while the Orange tenant farmers respected them for their grand titles, they did not respect them as mere landlords.

I know that around 1870 the Orange aristocrats tried to frighten the Orange farmers off the tenant-right issue by declaring it to be Fenian, and that the farmers muttered that if they could only have tenant-right from the Fenians then they would become Fenian. The attempt at political blackmail was stopped in its tracks by that response

The formation of the Unionist alliance in response to the 1886 Home Rule Bill is usually depicted by nationalist writers as an aristocratic affair designed to retard social progress. It was no such thing. It included as one of its most powerful elements the tenant-right movement of the Orange farmers, and the farmers required candidates for a Unionist nomination to give an undertaking to support land purchase. And, when some official Unionists were deemed to be half-hearted on the issue of land-purchase, independent Russellite candidates were run against them, and won a number of seats from them.

In 1903, the Orange Grand Master—the Earl of somewhere or other—addressed a meeting of landlord diehards at Enniskillen. He declared that the Land Act was a piece of Fenian devilment which all good Orangemen would have nothing to do with. But the Orange farmers promptly passed resolutions in their Lodges supporting the Act. The Earls and Viscounts immediately lapsed into silence.

Canon Sheehan, William O'Brien and their colleagues took the view that the successful joint action of Catholic and Protestant tenant farmers against the landlord system was a social fact of great political potential. And they tried to develop this potential by appropriate policies. They tried to develop a common political movement which would supersede the religious division and build on the Catholic/Protestant unity of the land struggle.

In the first instance, they advocated as scheme of limited all-Ireland administrative devolution. The Castle administration was out of joint with the new local government administration. O'Brien advocated, with the support of Russell, the establishment of an all-Ireland body, partly elected and partly appointed, to replace the old Castle administration. Since it would not be a legislative body, and Whitehall would have supervisory authority over it, the Ulster Protestants would not have grounds to fear it as they feared a Home Rule government. Through

participation in it, they would become habituated to acting in an all-Ireland institution doing administrative business with Catholics, and Catholics would be familiarised with actual Protestants in a practical lay environment, instead of knowing them only as the ogres of theology.

Canon Sheehan and O'Brien took it for granted Irish nationality was a thing of substance, which would flourish amidst progressive reforms, and which was capable of attracting Protestants in large numbers, provided it was given the opportunity. And they saw a partly elected all-Ireland administration harnessing the cross-community goodwill of the land struggle as the opportunity.

But the Redmondites, who saw Irish grievances as their ticket to power and who had no confidence in the capacity of the national movement to survive reforms, feared that this administrative reform would kill off Home Rule and would make independence inconceivable. So they wrecked the scheme.

The Ulster Unionist leaders were also uneasy about the scheme, but the Russellite Unionists were prepared to give it a go. Russell encouraged the Unionists and Nationalists to leave aside the ultimate question for the time, and to see how far they could go together in achieving the reforms of which the country stood in need. It might be that experience in common action for reforms on which all were agreed would bring about a situation in which they need never divide on the ultimate question. But if it did not, and if a time came when they had to part company, they would part on better terms for having known one another.

The scheme was dropped by the Tories due to protest from the Ulster Unionist leaders. Because it was such an eminently sensible scheme, it was revived by the Liberal Government The Liberals were forced to drop it by a Redmondite outcry.

Failing a public framework in which an Irish unity might have evolved, Sheehan and O'Brien tried to achieve national unity of Catholics and Protestants in political movement.

The Protestants immediately to hand were the landlords who were being bought out. Between 1904 and 1910, the O'Brienites were intensively engaged in abolishing landlordism and drawing the abolished landlords into a liberal national movement.

The idea was that the landlords would sell off their tenancies, but would keep their own personal farms. I don't know what they were called here: the farms that were farmed by the landlords themselves.

A member of the audience: The demesne land.

The former landlords would have their demesnes and would become gentlemen farmers. The O'Brienites said: Look, we've got rid of landlordism here; the Protestants who used to be landlords are now just country gentlemen. Let us give them a place in our society as Protestant country gentlemen. And let us demonstrate to Protestant Ireland that the nationality generated by Catholic Ireland is no mere gloss on the Catholic Church.

But the Redmondites, instead of liberalising the national movement and developing it in such a way that Protestants would feel at ease in it, in these very

years developed it into an aggressively Catholic-nationalist movement. The instrument by which the last traces of Parnellite complexity were obliterated was called the Ancient Order of Hibernians, or the Molly Maguires.

I never heard of the Hibernians or the Molly Maguires around here when I was growing up. I first came across the name in London when I was reading James Connolly. It seemed highly improbable to me that a movement such as he described should have been running rampant around Ireland only twenty-odd years before I was born, and that I should never have heard of it. But so it proved to be. In the newspaper library of the British Museum I found that in 1910 there had been great battles all around County Cork between the Mollies and the O'Brienites.

Hibernianism was repudiated in Slieve Luacra. Great mass demonstrations against it were held in Kiskeam and Knocknagree. No trace of it survived into my time. But in other parts of Cork the repudiation of Hibernianism was less thorough. The Hibernian hotel in Mallow and the Hibernian soccer team in Cork appear to have been connected with the AOH. And I am informed by Jack Lane that a remnant of the Hibernian institution in Millstreet was formally wound up only a few years ago.

The Ancient Order of Hibernians was a militant lay-Catholic mass movement, highly organised and tightly controlled, founded in the 1890s by Joseph Devlin, MP for West Belfast It resembled Lenin's Bolshevik Party in many respects.

The ideology of the AOH consisted of a combination of Vatican I Catholic doctrine with a historical conception of itself as a continuation of the 1641 rebellion. In 1641 a Catholic uprising attempted to wipe out the Protestant Plantation. It was an attempt to regain the lands recently confiscated.

That was fair enough in 1641. But it was not fair enough in the first decade of the 20th century.

The AOH depicted the Home Rule movement as a resumption of the 1641 effort. And if the Ulster Protestants had forgotten much of their history, they certainly had not forgotten what 1641 was about.

Devlin was a gifted organiser. Under his direction the AOH spread out from West Belfast all through Ireland until it reached North Cork. It became a component part of the Home Rule Party, and through it Devlin became the effective controller of the Party. He enlisted most of the Hierarchy in his cause, and he took John Dillon in tow. There are indications that Redmond himself did not like what was happening. But he just let it happen.

An active resistance to Hibernianism was launched in County Cork. An attempt was made to combat it within the Party. But at the 1909 Conference Devlin drafted in some battalions of Belfast Hibernians to police the event, with instructions that nobody with a Cork accent was to be let near the platform.

The anti-Hibernians responded by publishing a newspaper called *The Cork Accent* (which was later incorporated into the Cork Free Press), and by destroying Redmondism in Cork in the 1910 Elections.

Canon Sheehan's long editorial for the first number of the Cork Free Press was a declaration of war on Hibernianism.

This editorial, and the mass meetings held in all parts of the county, but especially in the Duhallow region, were the high points of liberal democracy in Ireland.

Of course that movement, so successful in Cork, failed elsewhere. That is why Ireland is as it is. The sequence of events after 1910 was unfortunate. Who knows what would have happened if there had been a general election at the moment when it was becoming obvious that Redmondism was causing Partition?

But the world war intervened at a critical point. This disrupted the internal logic of events in Ireland. The Home Rule issue was put into suspended animation for the duration of the war. There was no general election between 1910 and l918. By 1918 the framework of politics had been altered by the Easter Rising and the formation—or reformation—of Sinn Fein. Canon Sheehan was dead by this time. William O'Brien threw all his influence behind the new Sinn Fein on the ground that the Redmondite Party had degraded Irish public life and brought about a state of *de facto* Partition, and that Sinn Fein represented at least a possibility of something better.

The All-For-Ireland League merged in with Sinn Fein. The main battles in the war of independence of 1919-21 were fought in the region where the AFIL had overcome Redmondism in 1910. But the AFIL did not determine the character of Sinn Fein. After the 1918 election, the bulk of Redmondite Ireland also went over to Sinn Fein and ensured that its substance was Catholic-nationalist.

In those years Hibernianism triumphed in substance but withered in form in Southern Ireland. But, in North West Cork at least, much of the All-For-Ireland culture survived in substance beneath the official level of things.

When it became known that Canon Sheehan had written the early editorials of the Cork Free Press, he was silenced by his Bishop. Thereafter his influence had to be exerted discreetly.

He died in October 1913. Towards the end he wrote some autobiography. A fragment on his youth was published in *The Cork Free Press.* William O'Brien knew that he had also written about more recent events, but he discovered that Sheehan had burned that manuscript a couple of days before his death.

I consider this to be the great Irish literary tragedy, and altogether much more of a tragedy than Moore's burning of part of Byron's Diary, but I don' t think it has ever been mentioned in an Irish literary history.

It would seem that, when summing up his life, Sheehan had to decide whether to embarrass the Church with a frank account of his treatment by the Hierarchy during the preceding decade, and that, seeing Redmondism triumphant everywhere outside Cork and apparently heading for power, he concluded there would be no purpose in doing so.

I have left little time to discuss Canon Sheehan as a novelist, essayist and poet I am in any case not a literary critic. I will say little more than that when I read his novels again a few years ago I found them no less readable than when I had read them first thirty years earlier.

He is the novelist of the transitional period between Fenian Ireland and present-day Ireland. He is in a sense the first novelist of contemporary Ireland. He lived through and reflected the social revolutions which preceded the national political revolution, and which made the national revolution a thing of such little social consequence. If you go back to the novelists before Sheehan—Lady Morgan, Banim, Griffin, Lover and Lever—you find that they are about a society which has comprehensively ceased to exist. There is no evolutionary connection between Lady Morgan's time and ours, and very little between Banim's time and ours. But Sheehan was there in the period when present-day Ireland was being forged through a social revolution guided by the British administration, and he was active in the forging of it.

I saw Sean O'Faolain interviewed on British television a few years ago. He was understandably irritated at being listed along with Joyce as an Irish novelist, and explained that he and Joyce belonged to different worlds. He was asked why there were so few Irish novels and so many Irish short stories. He said that Irish society had become too simple for long narratives to be produced within it.

The development of nationalist Ireland, from the sprouting of the first seeds around 1810, is a long, thorough process of simplification. The multifarious nation imagined by Young Ireland was boiled down to a Church and its agents.

There was a nest of gentlefolk a few miles east of here until the 1950s—the Bowens of Bowen's Court at Kildorrery. The last of the Bowens, Elizabeth, was a famous novelist. Her books are still found on the shelves of all English public libraries. I never heard of her when I was growing up here.

I went looking for Bowen's Court a few years ago and discovered where it had been. The farmer who bought it pulled it down and excavated it When I went there a field of mangolds occupied the space where it had been. I think that farmer did the right thing.

I like looking at English country houses because they are interwoven with the evolution of English society. But Bowen's Court, despite its three centuries of occupation, had in the end as little to do with the evolution of Irish life as if it were a meteorite that blundered in from outer space.

Canon Sheehan saw that the greater part of Ireland was in process of being simplified down to Catholic-nationalism, both in its own inner life and in its attitude to others. He tried to halt that process by making a space in national life for the ex-landlords as Protestant country gentlemen and for the robust Orangemen of the North, and by depicting intellectual and social life of considerable complexity in his novels. If he had succeeded, Elizabeth Bowen might well have become an Irish novelist and Bowen's Court might still be standing. Because he failed, I never heard of Elizabeth Bowen until I went to London, and Irish literature is a literature of short stories.

Daniel Corkery, author of **The Hidden Ireland**—it should really be called The Hidden Duhallow—asks an interesting question about Irish literature in his book on Synge, and makes this comment:

> *"1 recall being in Thurles at a hurling match... There were 30,000 onlookers. They were as typical of this nation as any of the great crowds that assemble on Saturday afternoons in England to witness Association football matches. It was while I looked around on that great crowd I became acutely conscious that as a nation we were without self-expression in literary form... Our national consciousness may be described, in a native phrase, as a quaking sod. It gives us no footing. It is not English, nor Irish, nor Anglo-Irish; as will be understood if one thinks a while on the thwarting it undergoes in each individual child of the race as he grows into manhood... All that the English child learns buttresses, while it refines, his emotional nature. Practically all the literature he reads focuses for him the mind of his own people... At a later stage if he came to read a foreign language he seizes what he reads in it with an English mind. He has something of his own by which to estimate its value for him.*
>
> *How different with an Irish child! No sooner does he begin to use his intellect than what he learns begins to undermine, tb weaken, and to harass his emotional nature... It does not focus the mind of his own people, teaching him the better to look about him, to understand both himself and his surroundings. It focuses instead the life of another people. Instead of sharpening his gaze upon his own neighbourhood, his reading distracts it... His surroundings begin to seem unvital." (p14.)*

That is certainly the case today. The literary and philosophical culture of Ireland becomes largely English once you go beyond a very elementary level. Instead of providing minds bred in Ireland with a foundation on which an infinite variety of structures might be built, it shifts Irish minds into other cultures. There is not an Irish literature that consolidates Irish society in thought and gives it that feeling of internal infinity which Kant regarded as the most marvellous feature of humanity.

Raymond Crotty recently made the statement that 60,000 people are born every year in Ireland, and 30,000 of them leave, the bulk of them for England. I left in the great emigration of the late fifties, when it was almost impossible for the unemployed to survive in Ireland and there was both full employment and high unemployment benefit in England. But today there is high unemployment benefit in England, and the social welfare rates are not significantly better there. The reason people leave now is that life is pretty arid here if you are not earning good money. The culture exerts a very slight gravitational pull on the people.

I did not leave because I was unemployed. I had a labourer's job in a Creamery, taking in the milk in the morning and humping around 20 stone bags of maize in the afternoon—or the evening, as we called it. Nor did I leave because I found life arid. I left because, after many years of oblique negotiation, and attempted

compromise, society decreed that I must go to Mass and I insisted that I mustn't. That was the sole ground on which I left. And, a few years later, Vatican 2 subverted the dogmatic certainty which forced me out

The point I am making is that Corkery's description of the retarding intellectual character of Irish culture does not tally with my experience of life in Slieve Luacra between the mid-forties and the late fifties. I never felt intellectually thwarted there, and I never felt that my mind could not take in the world there.

Slieve Luacra then—I cannot speak of now—lived among the conserved remnants of Jacobite Ireland, Young Ireland, Whiteboy Ireland, Fenian Ireland, All-For-Ireland and, of course, rebel Cork. I was familiar, from purely local sources, with Mangan, Duffy, Davis and Thomas Darcy M'Gee; with Fenian songs; and with the novels of Standish O'Grady and Canon Sheehan. I was familiar with the philosophy of Carlyle, which was not alienating since it came through Young Ireland and Sheehan. And I was familiar with Goethe and the Germans, who likewise came through Young Ireland and Sheehan.

There is a wealth of thought in Canon Sheehan's novels. And it is thought of the most diverse kind.

He delivered lectures and sermons against novel-writing. He said there were two kinds of novelists, those who wrote for money and those who wrote because they must. Both were bad, but those who wrote because they must were worst.

He did not write his novels for money.

He aspired as a priest to foster a simple orthodoxy, but his novels and essays are avenues into the great unorthodoxy of the modern world.

In the days when religion was a vital force in the life of France, the Kings of France persuaded the French Bishops to act in the French national interest against Roman directives. Canon Sheehan would never have described himself as a Gallican in theology. As a priest he was dedicated to the Ultramontanist vision of Vatican I. He addressed students for the priesthood in Maynooth in December 1903 thus:

> *"Yes, the pure white light that strikes here from Rome is broken up into a hundred, a thousand rays that penetrate even to the ends of the earth. Maynooth is the Propaganda of the West, and you are its Apostles... It is, let me repeat it, for I glory in the title and all its vast significances—the Western Propaganda!... You are the Apostles of the world to day."*

But, as a national citizen, intent on laying the foundations of an all-Ireland national state, he acted more independently of Rome than Bossuet or Fenelon had ever done. He insisted not only on freedom of conscience for heretics, but on full civic freedom for them, and of a measure of accommodation with them, which would have positively encouraged the persistence of heresy.

The conflict of the priest and the enlightened citizen is what gives Canon Sheehan's writing its depth and power. To my knowledge he never made a formal attempt to reconcile the two. Perhaps he did so in his autobiography and that is why

he burned it. Otherwise, the diligent priest defended the doings of the active citizen by striking apose of childlike belief. Perhaps it is unfair to call it a pose, but I know no other word for it If the belief of the priest became childlike, this was an act of the cunning of reason done to give the citizen wider scope for action.

Sheehan's mind was childlike only in the sense of possessing the ultimate naivete which is indispensable to genius, enabling it to do unheard of things. For the rest, it was a powerful mind, astonishingly well informed and entirely unacademic,-able to range interestingly over German metaphysics, American free-thought, English philosophy, and St. Dominic's crusade.

The only direct statement of his general position that I know of was made in his correspondence with Oliver Wendell Holmes, the son of **The Autocrat Of The Breakfast Table** and a famous liberal Supreme Court judge (USA) in his own right. Sheehan wrote in a letter dated 26th August, 1910, soon after the launching of the Cork Free Press:

> *"We Catholics believe that... revelation has been made to the Church; and it is the only Church in Christendom which asserts that and speaks with authority. You think that therefore the Church is bound to coerce and persecute. Certainly not. First, because to coerce conscience by punishment is totally opposed to the spirit of the Church on the sole ground that it is a fundamental principle of Catholic theology that 'the end can never justify the means'. You will lift your eyebrows at this; and say: What about the 'Provincial Letters' and 'Jesuitism' and all that? But I am only stating the literal truth, no matter how Catholic doctrine has been twisted and abused by men. There is no more fundamental principle in all Catholic ethical teaching...*
>
> *"I am thoroughly in sympathy with you in your conviction of the sacredness of human liberty. It seems to me a kind of sacrilege to trespass on that Holy of Holies—the human conscience. Hence I have been for the past few months here in Ireland in a state of silent Jury against the insolent domination of the Irish Parliamentary Party and their attempt to stamp out political freedom. At last I was forced to speak out, and I send you two articles on our political situation, and in favour of a new movement to establish political liberty and break down the barriers between Protestants and Catholics in this country." (p34/5).*

The *Sheehan/Holmes Correspondence* was published in New York in 1976, as part of the Holmes correspondence. Vatican 2 was then in full flow in Ireland. But Ireland took not a blind bit of notice of that remarkable correspondence. A few years ago, I searched Dublin high and low for a copy of it The bookshops had never heard of it, and the name "Canon Sheehan" only evoked yawns.

In this letter Sheehan deals with the conflict by evading it. A moment's reflection shows that the men who *"twisted and abused"* Catholic doctrine were the men who had authority to determine what Catholic doctrine was.

Sheehan was both a devout priest and a freethinker. I simply accepted that he was both of those things and did not attempt to find any ground on which they might be reconciled. **I** discussed the matter with Dave Alvey while he was driving me down to Newmarket. He suggested that implicit in Sheehan's writing was the position that the Ultramontanist revival of the 19th century could not succeed by pitting itself against liberal culture, but only by encompassing that culture. I can think of no better explanation. And that brackets Sheehan with Lammenais, the French priest and theologian who, in the 1820s, pioneered the Ultramontanist revival, but postulated it on Rome making itself the spearhead of liberalism in the era of post-Napoleonic reaction. When, in the 1830s, Rome decided to reassert all its universal claims on reactionary grounds, Lammenais was excommunicated.

Canon Sheehan was not excommunicated. But it was decreed that his novels and philosophical publications and politics should not form the core of the literature of independent Ireland. The decree was published four years after his death, in the June 1917 issue of *Studies.* Studies was then, and remained until the 1950s, an immensely influential publication capable of laying down the law. The name on the decree is John D. Colclough. But there is little doubt that Colclough was implementing an agreed policy to remove Sheehan from Irish intellectual life.

The criticism begins:

> *"In my opinion he was much over-rated as a novelist during his lifetime, and has been idolised with the usual post-mortem apotheosis. He was admittedly a man of splendid talent. He was not a man of genius. Talent imitates and criticises: genius creates and sublimates. What has Canon Sheehan created in fiction? Echo answers—What?"*

Ireland was told that Sheehan created nothing of human interest, and that he had no humour. Since this is patently absurd, I take it that somebody decided that Sheehan's novels were full of too much unorthodox human interest and the wrong kind of humour.

Ireland was told that Sheehan presented an empty parade "*of multiform and multifarious erudition",* and that his books of philosophical reflection *"are not mental tonics but mental opiates".* I can only say that I, who was never attuned to religion, found them fascinating.

The only book praised by Studies is **Mariae Corana,** which is, of course, one of the few books by Sheehan which I did not find interesting.

The gist of the criticism of Sheehan as a novelist is that, because he was a priest, he could not write about human passion, which is the stuff of novels. The only characters he could depict convincingly were priests—and priests ought not to be made the subjects of novels:

> *"They [the novels] spread large upon the canvas no life-like figures, no new and original creations, except, perhaps, that of the model priest of the 19th century—a type of man least of all others adapted to treatment in fiction; owing to the very nature of his sacred character and office; and, furthermore, an unnecessary type of portraiture upon the written page. Unnecessary: the good priest of to-day, as of yesterday, is a type of genuine manhood that all men see and most men revere, if they view him and his work with unprejudiced eyes. There is no cabalistic secrecy about him. Not of the world, he is yet in the world; and the world needed no My New Curate and no The Blindness of Dr. Gray for enlightenment as to his excellences and his limitations. The truth is, Canon Sheehan seemed to view human character, human life from the standpoint of the Pulpit, or... the Confessional. He never discards his sacerdotal spectacles for the plain vision of a man of the world...*
>
> *"... Canon Sheehan... might have been an Irish Faber—the populariser of devotion, and especially of devotion to the Immaculate Mother of God.*
>
> *"But injudicious and undiscerning critics took him in hand, hailing him as the pioneer of a new world of Catholic imaginative literature... So Sheehan held aloof from the world of epexegesis, for which he was so adequately equipped, to play the novel-wright, wherein his limitations of life-experience placed him outside the sphere of renown and perpetuity. Sheehan mistook his vocation as a man of letters. He was not a great litterateur. He was a great priest."*

I think this is the nub of the matter: that instead of merely *being* a priest, Sheehan wrote novels about priests. His three clerical novels, the two mentioned above, plus Luke Delmege, are among his best. And, a generation after his death, Maynooth had still not forgiven him for Luke Delmege. (See Don Boyne: **I** Remember **Maynooth.** 1937.)

He peopled his novels with interesting Protestants (his only active heroine is the Protestant, Miriam Lucas), and with priests who were not only *in* the world but *of it.*

While Studies purports to find fault with him on the ground that he could *only* write about priests, his real fault was that he was able to write about priests in human terms.

I can think of no fitter subject for Irish novels in the 20th century than priests. The clergy were the successors of the aristocracy. Society cannot exist as an atomised heap of people. There will always be some more or less hierarchical arrangement by which it is given a structure and a tone. The Catholic clergy is what gave its tone to nationalist Ireland in the twentieth century, as the aristocracy did to England in the 18th century.

I'm not sure what *"the plain vision of a man of the world"* refers to in the nationalist Ireland in the first decade of this century. The real men of the world were the priests. The people could not have plain vision as men of the world until they emerged from under the tutelage of the clergy. Nothing in Irish literature was more conducive to the development of an independent spirit in the laity of nationalist Ireland than the novels of Canon Sheehan, which demystified the priesthood without debunking it, and which were bustling with unorthodox ideas.

The priesthood, at the onset of independence, preferred to enhance its mystical prestige amongst the people—to be still more *in* them than *of them* than was the case

in the 19th century. Therefore *Studies* dismissed Canon Sheehan in thatformative period between the Easter Rising and the 1918 Election. It decreed thus:

> *"The next generation may know the titles of Canon Sheehan's novels; they will not know their contents."*

And so it was.

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