

Elegizing an Aristocracy: The Anglo-Irish Protestant Gentry in the Poetry of Richard Murphy



Forum for Contemporary Issues
in Language and Literature
No. V/2024

ISSN: 2391-9426
doi.org/10.34739/fci.2024.04.06

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Abstract

The Irish poet Richard Murphy was a minority within a minority: an Anglo-Irish Protestant of the landed gentry. His privilege, property, and Anglican background set him apart from the common people of an independent Ireland which was Catholic, Gaelic, and nationalist in character. As the last major poetic representative of his culture, Murphy holds a special place in the Irish literary tradition. However, he lived and wrote during a time of significant decline for his patrician caste. His poems documenting the decay of Ireland's once powerful and prominent Protestant elite is the subject of this paper's critical inquiry. With greater consideration for the cultural climate and historical circumstances of his time, a clearer and more accurate understanding of Murphy's conception of the complex facets of Irish identity will be achieved in this analysis.

Key words

Anglo-Irish, Aristocracy, Ascendancy, Ireland, Big House, Protestant, Colonizer

Introduction

Richard Murphy (1927-2018) was the last poet of Ireland's Protestant aristocracy. He came from an elevated Anglo-Irish caste (of the wider Church of Ireland community often termed the Ascendancy) that had contributed greatly to the country's literary tradition. Notable figures from this background include the philosopher George Berkeley, the poets Aubrey De Vere and Emily Lawless, the dramatist and director of the Abbey Theatre Lady Gregory, and the novelist Elizabeth Bowen. Yet Murphy was born in and lived through a time of decline for Ireland's landed gentry. Irish independence led to the partition of the island in 1921 and the establishment in the following year of the Irish Free State (officially becoming the Republic of Ireland in 1949). While Northern Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom and operated under a Protestant-dominated Unionist government, independent Ireland sought to rid itself of the imperial connection and move on from the colonial legacy. Protestants in the South were now a weakened minority. As Terence Brown points out:

[...] Catholic nationalist Ireland was in the ascendant, Protestant in decline [...] The new Ireland, convinced of its Catholic nationalist rectitude on social issues, was prepared to grant Anglo-Ireland the right to remain in the country but was neither to be cajoled [...] nor browbeaten into great regard for the values of a defeated caste. (Brown 2004, 116-121)

The sense of defeat was particularly profound for those of Murphy's background whose historically privileged and propertied condition had led them to be labelled as 'Big House' Protestants. Many from this background self-identified as British and were deemed "unerringly loyal to Britain" (Clare 2021, 1-2), but as independent Ireland began to turn away from Britain, the "Big House" Protestant class began turning inwards on itself.

This retreat from Ireland's cultural, social, and political life inevitably led to the caste's decline and virtual extinction as a distinct group. The community's insularity could hardly be considered a surprise. Following independence, their traditional notions of loyalty, lifestyle, education, religion, and social outlook were being challenged in a nationalist, anti-colonial polity that harbored many Anglophobic sentiments. They could neither "muster any effective political or indeed ideological opposition to the social and political orthodoxies of the period [...] nor counter the cultural protectionism and Catholic nationalism" (Brown 2004, 122) of the new Irish state. Significantly, Murphy's poetry not only records the Protestant aristocracy's decline, but seems accepting of it. There is a sense that the poet is content to elegize the passing of his caste while at the same time deliberately refraining from eulogy. This defeatist posture can be traced to two main points: discomfort with the colonialist origins of his background and the influence of a nationalist conception of authentic Irish identity. A postcolonial reading can be applied to much of Murphy's work dealing with his colonial identity¹ as an Anglo-Irish aristocrat. For the "Colonizer",

It is impossible for him not to be aware of the constant illegitimacy of his status [...] he has succeeded not merely in creating a place for himself but also in taking away that of the inhabitant [...] a privileged being and an illegitimately privileged one; that is, a usurper. (Memmi 2003, 52-53)

It is instructive to an understanding of the tensions in Murphy's work to realize the extent to which the poet internalizes the Anglo aspect of his Anglo-Irish identity in such terms. This paper will analyze Murphy's treatment of his caste in his poetry and forwards the argument that his conception of Irishness could not accommodate the English dimensions of his "Big House" Protestant background. This will be shown to

¹ For an extended definition of "Colonial Identity," see D. George Boyce's *Nationalism in Ireland* (London: Croom Helm, 1982)

have been greatly influenced by an internalized perception, drawn from the nationalist ideology of his time, of his social class as illegitimately established and culturally dissonant.

We Ourselves Limit That Legacy

From the start of his career, Murphy can be seen elegizing the culture of the “Big House” Protestant aristocracy. *Sailing to an Island* (1963) marked Murphy’s first full collection to be published by a major press, Faber and Faber. Within the volume, poems like “Auction,” “Epitaph on a Fir-Tree,” and “The Woman of the House” reflect on the decline of his patrician caste. In the years following independence, the Protestant minority in the South were in a disconcertingly unfamiliar position:

[...] the Church of Ireland community found itself in vastly changed circumstances by the time independence was declared. Wherever they looked, their once secure and legally established position of dominance had been broken over the last 100 years. Although they remained economically privileged and highly segregated, their confidence had been especially shaken by the loss of the Ascendancy leaders [...] They could no longer hope to rely on Britain for their protection, and with their colonial past they were less than certain what the future might hold. Thus, they faced their newly independent country weakened and intimidated by the events of recent years [...] (Bowen 1983, 19)

For the Anglo-Irish elite, the overall response was to become more insular as a community, retreating from their once active roles in public and social life for fear of upsetting the newly established Catholic nationalist order. During the war of independence and civil war, “Big Houses” had been violently targeted by nationalists, not only because of the generally unionist sympathies of upper-class Protestants but because of the historical association of “Big House” estates with dispossession and displacement, landlordism and tenancy, and rack-rents and evictions. As David Clare observes, the “Big House” tended to conjure images of either “Irish-resident landlords who habitually treated their tenants cruelly during famine and other times of hardship” or “heartless absentee landlords who lived in London off the rents from their Irish estates and who rarely if ever visited their Irish Big Houses” (Clare 2021, 3).

The nationalist state imposed its ethos on the public sphere and social morality, but it largely left its Protestant minority communities to themselves. Yet the Protestant landed gentry, which anyway tended to keep within its own privileged circles to the point that “gout was endemic” and marriage between close relatives had “brought a harvest of mental retardation” (MacAodha 1991, 25), became even more isolated from the general life of the country. They withdrew within the walls of their estates in both a literal and metaphorical sense. As the Protestant minority as a whole in the Free State/Republic continued to dwindle due to intermarriage, emigration,

and low birthrates, the patrician minority within the minority decayed in its demesnes, seemingly resigned to its fate on the one hand, seemingly oblivious to it on the other.

Yet the insularity and meekness that the community displayed in the face of the new regime was not without its critics from within. The essayist Hubert Butler commented, often harshly, on the passivity of the Southern Protestants in general to their marginalization from the mainstream of Irish political activity and social discourse. In his “Portrait of a Minority,” Butler states, “We Protestants of the Irish Republic are no longer very interesting to anyone but ourselves [...] we merely exist and even that we do with increasing unobtrusiveness” (Butler 2000, 618-19). Butler eschewed an “Anglo-Irish” designation and castigated the Protestant community in the Irish Republic for their cultural stagnation. He had a declared “commitment to Irishness” with “an equally persistent commitment to the values of Irish Protestantism – as he saw them” (Foster 2002, 190). Butler reflects that Protestants in the South

enjoy telling each other and being told either that they have no stamina or that they would “only do harm by interfering” [...] They have an excuse for whatever form of disengagement may be comfortable and for devoting themselves agreeably to what they call “wider issues” in larger society. But for a small historic community can there be any issue wider than survival [...] (Butler 1990, 142)

Murphy’s poems do not reflect much hope for the survival of his “Big House” culture. Perhaps one could not have expected the poet to have approached his heritage in any other way. Demographic trends forecast the disappearance of a distinguishable Southern Protestant community, irrespective of class distinctions. Recent census data indicates that those identifying with a Church of Ireland background compose barely over two percent of the population (Central Statistics Office, 2023). In general terms, “As southern Protestants have embraced civic nationalism, the insularity of their social life declined, partly in response to declining numbers [...] The result is that the Protestant population is now substantially less of a distinct ethnic group” (Poole 1997, 141). From inception, “the links between the Free State political parties and the Catholic Church enhanced the Catholicity of the State” and “Catholicism was deeply embedded in the framework of Irish public life” (Doyle et al. 2024, 209-210). In response, Murphy’s caste withdrew and tightened its circle to such an extent that by the mid-1970s, “Big House” Anglo-Ireland seemed all but dead (Butler 1977, 69).

The Good of Being Alive Was Given through Them

Thus, Murphy’s early poetry does not so much participate in the psychic decline of his community, instead it posthumously memorializes its “way of life” and “its

passing” (Grennan 1999, 238). In “Auction,” the passing off of property is correlated to the passing away of a generation:

When furniture is moved
From a dead-free home
Through lean, loved
Rooms alone I come,

To bid for damp etchings,
My grandaunt’s chair,
Drawers where rings
Of ruby in water flare. (Murphy 2013, Part One)

Dispossession of a social order occasions the elimination of the poet’s family history. The home is a symbolic representation of Anglo-Irish dominion, and the speaker is a lonely figure, evocative of the endangered status of his social class. Kurt Bowen comments, “Protestants will eventually disappear by being absorbed into the larger Catholic community [...] it is obviously of greatest concern to southern Protestants for whom it is a matter of life and death” (Bowen 1983, 4). Yet in Murphy’s poetry, the “Big House” culture is framed with respect only to its death. Murphy does not express concern about the “wider issue” of “survival” which Butler implored, and is instead resigned to elegize the passing of his once important and impactful “small historic community.” With the house in the poem cleared of its patrician dead, the property can be absorbed back into the larger community from whom the land upon which it was built had originally been taken:

A sacked gardener
Shows me yew hedges
House-high, where
The dead made marriages.

With what shall I buy
From time’s auctioneers
This old property
Before it disappears? (Murphy 2013, Part One)

“Auction” reflects “a spectacle familiar in the annals of postcolonial criticism” on Ireland, of independence furthering the dispossession it was meant to overcome (Stasi 2022, 69). The traditional power structure of the household is reversed as a “sacked gardener” leads the speaker around the estate, the overgrown hedges a likely result of the gardener’s dismissal. Such descent into disorder is emblematic of Ascendancy decay, and there is a sense of helplessness in the speaker’s tone when he

asks, “With what shall I buy.” Neither the property itself nor the dead who once maintained it are retrievable.

The speaker in “Auction” noted the overgrowth of the property’s garden. The important function of the garden to an Ascendancy estate is articulated several times in Murphy’s work. The preface to the poet’s final iteration of collected poems, *The Pleasure Ground*, is an updated version of a 1964 essay of the same name. In it, Murphy recalls:

We loved our Pleasure Ground. A great grey limestone wall wreathed in ivy surrounded it on three sides, enclosing us with midges and horse-flies in a seedy paradise of impoverished Anglo-Irish pride [...] It was the happiest time of my life. Looking out on the Pleasure Ground or sitting under the copper beech [...] (Murphy 2013, Preface)

Seamus Heaney notes:

It had run wild, but under the untutored profusion of yews, laurels and briars there lingered the ordered lines of ancestral care. When he arrived there as a boy with his mother, brother and sister, they made an effort to restore its decorous features, and the delight that came from this adventure of entering and ordering such natural abundance, he tells us, pervaded the disciplines of his education. (Heaney 1978, 20)

The care with which the family took to rehabilitate the garden reflects Murphy’s upper-class Protestant ethic of orderliness and authority. Yet when Murphy writes of “pleasure grounds” in his poetry, the gardens are usually shown to have reached a point where mastery over the landscape is beyond capability. This is symbolic of the decline of the Protestant gentry but is also suggestive of Murphy’s acceptance of his culture’s lost dominion. It must be recognized that the loss of dominion occasions loss of the culture itself. As Eóin Flannery comments, “All that was lost to history was well lost [...] the landscape is purged of its historical details” (Flannery 2010, 91). This would seem anathema for a poet like Murphy, for whom “the grandeur of history and the handed-down versions, the stories of tradition” (Dawe 2019, 72) were so cherished.

Yet Murphy expresses neither bitterness nor objection in his work. Rather, the emotional tone that most strongly resonates is resignation. “Epitaph on a Fir-Tree,” later renamed “Epitaph on a Douglas Fir,” correlates the disempowered symbolism of the tree with the end of Protestant aristocratic authority:

She grew ninety years through sombre winter,
Rhododendron summer of midges and rain,
In a beech-wood scarred by the auctioneer,

Till a March evening, the garden work done,
It seemed her long life had been completed,
No further growth, no gaiety could remain. (Murphy 2013, Part One)

Like the property in “Auction,” the tree is a symbol of a bygone era. That there will be “No further growth” forecasts the gentry’s own diminishment. Brandon C. Yen notes that trees were associated in Ireland on a more abstract level with Anglo-Irish “improvement” and “land-owning oppressors who could afford to plant [...] who planted hedgerows to exclude the poor” (Yen 2020, 131). The foreshadowed fall of the tree metaphorically anticipates a kind of decolonizing surrender.

The poem follows some conventions of seventeenth century English “Country House” poetry. One convention is the “family tree,” the fir being to Murphy’s poem what the Lady Oak is in Ben Jonson’s quintessential poem of the genre, “To Penshurst.” Another convention is the allusion to founders and predecessors, a “family tree” in a different sense:

We think no more of granite steps and pews,
Or an officer patched with a crude trepan
Who fought in Rangoon for these quiet acres.

Axes and saws now convert the evergreen
Imperial shadows into red deal boards
And let the sun into our house again. (Murphy 2013, Part One)

There are some political sentiments that can be discerned from these stanzas. The first is the abandonment of Anglicanism, which was the main social criteria for membership in the Ascendancy (Foster 1988, 170). The other is in the recollection of the family’s history. Alistair Fowler notes that “most estate poems are epideictic, urging their subject’s praises [...] often the poem culminates in explicit eulogy for the family’s virtues” (Fowler 1994, 7). However, the tree’s demise coincides with an abandonment of the family’s imperial history. Murphy mentions the imperial legacy, his grandfather’s participation in the Anglo-Burmese Wars, but cannot bring himself to eulogize its virtues. Linked to this is the fact that the felling of the tree and its “imperial shadows” allows the sun back into the house. Natural light being no longer obstructed by imperial shadows carries nationalistic symbolism. When the poem ends with the hope “that we might do better,” it may be understood as an espousal of a more enlightened ideology than the imperialism of the past.

The poet’s sense of ambivalence, this dynamic of feeling fond for his family while being averse to his family’s virtues, is evident in Murphy’s eulogy for his grandmother, “The Woman of the House.” Yet there are also cultural and political implications underlying his memorialization. Murphy expresses deep affection for

his grandmother, Lucy Mary Ormsby, in both his poetry, “She fed our feelings as dew feeds grass,” and prose, “Granny was our ally in trouble, sickness or romance” (Murphy 2013, Preface). However, after she was left in charge of the family estate, the property witnessed substantial decay:

Soon our grandmother was left alone in the big empty house, where we stayed for short holidays. Her mind wandered. The copper beech was cut for firewood to keep her warm. Chickens fouled the beds of our mother’s lupins, and rabbits burrowed into our tennis court. When rust unhinged an iron gate, an errant cow ate a mouthful of yew leaves and died. The yew still bore a crop of berries, the fig tree survived, but the planted symmetry of our Pleasure Ground had vanished. The aura I had breathed under the yew, the fig and the copper beech had gone [...] There was no young energy with a will and money to mend walls, plant trees, sow and cultivate and labour. I felt guilty and lost. (Murphy 2013, Preface)

The poet’s beloved Pleasure Ground “went to wrack and ruin because of an absence of the shaping spirit” (Heaney 1978, 21). However, the 1964 version of this excerpt originally stated that “there was no masculine energy in the place” rather than “no young energy.” Murphy’s self-consciousness about too strongly reflecting a masculine ethos reflective of both Protestantism and imperialism is indicative of a larger anxiety about his colonial identity. Traces of that ethos are apparent in the excerpt’s statement of needing to “mend,” “plant,” “sow,” “cultivate,” and “labour”; clearly “a reflection of the masculine ordering spirit of Ascendancy families who cultivated gardens and built great houses, transforming the disorder of rural Ireland into a coherent beauty” (Garratt 1989, 270). Yet one might consider an observation made by Seamus Deane on the work of Heaney, who himself was the first to make note of the significance of an “absence of a shaping spirit.” Deane states that paternity belongs to those who build or cultivate the earth, “in political or sectarian terms [...] that which is unionist or Protestant, belongs to paternity, the earth cultivated” (Deane 1985, 175). The gendered sectarian paradigm is well known, and Murphy’s revision may indicate a further desire to distance himself from the political and cultural implications of masculinity in its Irish context.

However, the subject of “The Woman of the House” is ostensibly feminine. It begins with Murphy recalling, “On a patrician evening in Ireland / I was born in the guest room: She delivered me” (Murphy 2013, Part One). Yet “those happy days” will soon give way to discomfiting descriptions of his grandmother’s descent into madness, “The undeveloped thoughts died in her head.” The poem is an extension of the “Big House” literary tradition:

The Big House novels of Ascendancy decay in the early twentieth century [...] feature a recurrent trope of male corruption and decline [...] Ascendancy decay is represented through the declining virility and eroded authority of landlords and patriarchs.

Masculinity, the prerogative of the imperial ruler, ebbs away. Mothers, in turn, become monstrous as a dying colonial order turns inward on itself. (Kenney 2004, 17-18)

His grandmother's mental degeneration mirrors that of both her house and the aristocratic Protestant social order:

'I don't know who you are, but you've kind eyes.
My children are abroad and I'm alone.
They left me in this gaol. You all tell lies.
You're not my people. My people have gone.'

Now she's spent everything: the golden waste
Is washed away, silent her heart's hammer.
The children overseas no longer need her,
They are like aftergrass to her harvest. (Murphy 2013, Part One)

The children "overseas" and "abroad" reflect a larger trend of migration witnessed in all rungs of society in twentieth century Ireland, but for an already tiny minority this would mean larger ramifications in terms of demographics. The "Big House" is now a prison for the lone inhabitant. Her demented declaration, "You're not my people," reflects the unrecognizability of her once-proud community. Eventually, Murphy's grandmother is "removed / to the hospital to die there." Her nonsensical insistence, "I must get back, get back. They're expecting me," evokes the futility of the Ascendancy ever reliving its heyday and reinforces the notion "that setting is not a neutral category, but rather one freighted with the baggage of social and cultural determinants" (Bootes 2024, 82).

Murphy's grandmother had been a benevolent figure to the poor Catholics who lived on the family acres, "Mistress of mossy acres and unpaid rent / She crossed the walls on foot to feed the sick... People had faith in her healing talent... She bandaged the wounds that poverty caused" (Murphy 2013, Part One). However, the ideology of empire and colonialism often "masked its exploitative structures under the guise of paternalistic benevolence" through acts of generosity and welfare; over time, the colonized "began to see the colonial masters exactly as the masters wanted themselves to be seen: as gentle, firm, just and benevolent protectors" (Nayar 2010, 35). The grandmother is "loved" in a maternal sense, and the historic context in which she "Gave her hands to cure impossible wrong" does not go unnoticed in the poem. Kiberd notes that Ascendancy women often developed close relationships with their kitchen maids and domestic staff, and when "the doom of the big houses was sealed," they often wondered

whether the lot of the landless labourer would prove happier under peasant proprietors than it had under paternalistic landlords. These fears were most often articulated by ascendancy women, among whom Edith Somerville, Violet Martin [Martin Ross] and Augusta Gregory were the outstanding literary figures. (Kiberd 1996, 68)

Yet later in the poem, it is witnessed on bookshelves that “Somerville and Ross \ Have fed the same worm as Blackstone and Gibbon.” Somerville and Ross were authors of the “Big House” literary genre, active during a time of relative tranquility for the Ascendancy in the 1890s, “a decade of fine consciences and a humour that was uncombative, mellow and disengaged,” but only a generation before the wider Anglo-Irish sense of security in the country would be thrown into disarray (Moynahan 1995, 162-163). The poem’s imagery indicates that the gentry’s sense of security and social order has been upset for good.

In his criticism of the Protestant gentry in “Portrait of a Minority,” Butler had humorously satirized the upper-class mentality through allegory in the character of an elderly patrician “Mrs. A.” Like the poem, Butler’s essay mentions emigration, “I’m thankful to say. Amy is in the Brussels branch of Thomas Cooks and Arthur is in the British Consulate in Cuba,” and he is critical of her continued affiliation with Britain, “She is really more concerned that England should get the ports than that the Anglo-Irish should be able to raise their voices again in Ireland.” As for “Mrs. A.,” “For thirty years and more she has grown used to the Cassandra-like mournings of her hybrid race; gradually they have become less shrill and have the familiar monotony of a lullaby” (Butler 2000, 620-621). Butler’s critique could be read as a call to action, a reprimand of Protestant failure of nerve in the Republic. However, Murphy’s representation of an Ascendancy woman of the “Big House” portrays a character who, like her community, is beyond redemption. “Mrs. A.” maintains “an air of assurance based on a long inheritance of privilege of which only the tradition now remains” (Butler 2000, 620-621), but the poet’s grandmother has become “monstrous,” her airs undermined by her insanity, and the tradition that bequeathed her privilege is outdated and decayed, “The mildew has spotted *Clarissa’s* spine / And soiled the *Despatches of Wellington.*”

When other connections with Britain are made in the poem, it is through violent contexts and imagery: an uncle “slaughter[s] a few sepoys,” a “pistol that lost an ancestor’s duel,” “Rangoon prints and the Crimean medal” (Murphy 2013, Part One). With her nonsensical mutterings, the woman of the “Big House” assumes the role of Cassandra, her “mournings of her hybrid race” heard by no one, save for the poet who can only put her to rest. That Butler’s essay and the composition of the poem are roughly coterminous, speaks to the different, defeatist mentality that the poet writes from with regards to the prospects of his desolate caste.

Perhaps “Big House” Protestant culture was “doomed to fail” long before Murphy could have been expected to attempt to redeem or assert its virtues in his poetry. Declan Kiberd considers that by 1916 the Anglo-Irish gentry were hopeless provincials, “if by provincial one means to indicate people who have no sense of their own presence” (Kiberd 1996, 364). It is true that from the time of Maria Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent* (1800), authors from C.R. Maturin to Elizabeth Bowen concerned themselves with the major issues confronting the “Big House” aristocracy in their works of fiction. It has become commonplace to point out that once the community assumed the title of “Ascendancy” at the end of the eighteenth century, it marked the beginning of their descendancy. Yet in Murphy’s case, the decline of his social order seems like something regarded as necessary in order to shed the discomfiting aspects of his colonial identity. The trajectory of “The Woman of the House” leads from “a patrician evening in Ireland” in the poem’s first stanza to “a wet winter evening in Ireland” in the its last, signaling an acceptance that the era of the “Big House” tradition, as it had existed for the poet’s ancestors, had definitively drawn to a close.

Even late in Murphy’s career, as evidenced in some of the sonnets from *The Price of Stone* (1985), there is a continued self-consciousness about the colonial and imperial aspects of his family’s propertied inheritance. The narrative voice in each sonnet is the structure or building referred to in the poems’ titles. “The Family Seat” is characterized by the “grim, grey face / Of limestone cut by famine workmen” (Murphy 2013, Part Five). This repeats the imagery of “The Woman of the House,” the house having been built by exploited “famine labourers” with the poet’s ancestors being implied to have committed an “impossible wrong” (Murphy 2013, Part One). Murphy’s “Birth Place” states, “I’d been expecting death by absentee / Owner’s decay, or fire from a rebel match” (Murphy 2013, Part Five). If the gentry have no sense of their own presence, this is a further mark of distinction for Murphy from his community. Murphy’s poetic persona is almost always self-conscious of a “colonizer’s” presence on “colonized” places. In mid-century Ireland and after, his family’s “Big House” assumes the characteristics reflective of how the nationalist politician and commentator Daniel Corkery had described the Ascendancy estates some three to four decades prior:

The typical Big House was as ill-cared for as the cabin – as untidy in its half-cut woods, its trampled avenues, its moss-grown parks, its fallen piers, its shattered chimney stacks [...] The slatternliness of the Big House was barbaric: there was wealth without refinement and power without responsibility. (Corkery 1925, 10)

Murphy’s descriptions of the Ascendancy world join his early poetry with the “Big House” genre; the gentry are isolated from the wider society around them by the walls encircling their demesnes while events outside those walls unfold that the aristocrats

make a point of not noticing (Kiberd 1996, 364). By the time Murphy sets to write about his “Big House” colonial Anglo-Irish Protestant heritage, the poetry must leave the demesne and confront reality in the ninety-nine percent republican atmosphere (Murphy and O’Malley 2013) where a more viable tradition that is native, Gaelic, and Catholic holds sway.

Conclusion

Having been born in the nascent years of the Irish Free State, Murphy was part of a Protestant minority that was “a dwindling and infinitesimal proportion” of the new confessionally Catholic and politically nationalist independent Ireland (Foster 1988, 534-535). The Protestant gentry, bereft of imperial safeguards from Britain, found itself in an unfamiliar position of disempowerment and uncertainty. This new status caused the community to draw itself inwards, sealing their obsolescence in modern Irish life and sowing the seeds of their own extinction as a distinguishable community. While some, like Butler, advocated for the reinvigoration of Anglo-Irish Protestant culture in the South, Murphy took a different approach. His poetry, observant of the conditions of the period’s cultural climate and his caste’s already deteriorated state, sees to the passing of the Protestant aristocracy in an ambivalent and elegiac mode. A community that had long identified with the English dimensions of its ancestry could not be sustained in an Ireland which was making a concentrated effort to rid itself of the English influences of its past. The colonial identity of the Anglo-Irish Protestant aristocrat as an illegitimate “colonizer” was entrenched and either had to be abandoned by its holder, or its holder had to abandon Ireland. Indeed, many chose to emigrate while others, as has been shown, rotted away in isolation on their estates. However, Murphy stayed and dedicated much of his poetry to the lives and landscapes of his native western region of Ireland. Though the poet could not reconcile himself with the imperialistic and violent aspects of his lineage, if his poems could be said to have passively recorded the death of his caste, they undoubtedly did so with a characteristically aristocratic sense of measurement and restraint.

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