Migration of Culture(s): Gay Lynch

‘Materialising’ a Diasporic Irish Family on the Frontier of S.E. S.A. (1852-1860)

Paul Carter suggests that in *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes throws out a challenge to inventors, and that ‘the function of mytho-poetic invention is to produce artificial myths, reflective structures which incorporating fantasy, keep alive the hope of becoming ourself at that place’.¹

This paper interrogates the idea of using fiction to re-imagine local myth. Can the novelist history-writer seeking to construct a narrative from the occluded stories of an 1850s Irish settler family, give just consideration to the essentialisms of modern history?

A central concern of the paper is the representation, then and since, of the Irish diaspora on the frontier of S.E. SA. (1852-1860). It calls attention to the complex diversity of Irish immigrants on station settlements dominated by Scots cleared from the Highlands, Prussians fleeing religious persecution, and enterprising English pastoralists. How are Gambierton Irish settlers portrayed, and by whom? What did they carry with them? Where did they spring from, and have some histories fallen through the cracks? Are there contradictions, instabilities?

I will refer to my novel, which is framed by two events, the arrival of a settler-family and a shipwreck. Historians too, select, discard; choose their moments to illuminate. An Irish family, for the most part absent from the public record, inserts itself into local myth, a main event, the 1859 shipwreck of the Admella, and furthermore, connects itself with the life of reckless horse-breaker, hero, tragic poet, Adam Lindsay Gordon. Family members claim to ride with him on stations and at country races, and that they (not him), are first to arrive on the beach beside the stricken Admella. Years after this event, in his poem ‘From the Wreck’, Gordon pens his version of the wild horse-ride to Carpenter’s Rocks. What is his intention? What obligations do real-life historical figures, like him, and Father Tennyson Wood, bring to the writer of new narratives about old events?

What harm can come from adding new voices, other stories to the old— even if they are flights of fancy, a shouldering into other people’s space, the vicarious sharing of physical exploits. Is the wreck of the Admella part of a master narrative or a secondary one? How might local Irish perceive it? Are all stories constructed, disputed, forgotten, and re-remembered in a dialectical way? In *Material Thinking*, Carter, discussing Michael Herzfeld’s reference to Cretan *ìstories*, when ‘how a story is told’ and ‘what actually happened’ are conflated, says ‘myths resist reduction to a single point of view’.² How do myths, in their various incarnations, intersect with official history?

How does a fiction-writer dare enter the fraught and disputed territory of historians? Now, more than ever, the right to speak on history is being contested. Inga Clendinnen speaks of ‘past actuality,’ and when she reads ‘great historical writings’, she says, she

¹ Barthes, Roland *Mythologies* p. 135. cited in Paul Carter’s *Material Thinking* Melbourne: Melbourne
feels ‘a critical alertness and an undertow of intimate moral implication not present in the limpid realms of fiction’. Is she simply trying to protect fiction-readers, seduced by narrative, who turn off their historico-critical faculties, or is she merely re-asserting the historian’s valid place in culture? Should good novels spring from empiricism? Which stories suppressed, unrecorded or forgotten by Irish families: criminal, political, familial and archetypal, should be remembered? Thousands of words have been generated on the colonial clash with indigenous landowners on the frontier, and writers ignore them at their peril. How do Irish see eviction in another place?

For the sake of argument, my fictional, small sub-altern family, less stereotypically Irish than some, has been left outside official history. Employed as boundary riders by the big-house English (Welsh), domiciled on a frontier outstation, their children estranged from education, churches not yet built, and saving for land which belongs to Other, (the decimated Boandik people), they are readers not writers. They are marginalized, silent. Constructing the characters in my novel, on the basis of a tatty photograph, and three barely iterated stories, may be a challenge, or alternatively, bring a certain freedom.

What did this migrant Irish family bring to the frontier, and was it at odds with homogenized mainstream depictions of nineteenth-century colonial Irish. The family in my novel migrated from a village–near Loughrea, in County Galway– with a history of dissent and insurrection, from where, according to historian, Peter Moore, their landlord, the Marquis of Clancaricarde, ten years before the family’s departure, is linked with the South Australian Emigration Society, and accused of “shovelling out paupers” (500 in 1839). The mother is a daughter of publicans, the father a blacksmith, and in 1852, money is available for assisted passage. They land, with three children, in the colony of Victoria, and are conveyed over the River Nelson, and due northwest to Mingbool Station. Desperate and depressed by the exodus of his workers to the goldfields, John Meredith, their pastoralist employer, must be glad to have them. They leave behind village congeniality, lochs and decimated oak forests, and potato famine, to face a strange new place of swamps and creeks and creatures, indigenous inhabitants, heat and cold and a terrifying isolation. They bring their language and their stories, which, I have discussed at length in other papers.*

While there is a connecting contemporary strand, like many nineteenth-century novels, mine is concerned with inheritance and character. I will suggest in this paper that I am preoccupied in both kinds of writing, with cultural baggage, political, familial, and archetypal, amplified by the act of migration, and resonating still in some Irish families. My fictional female character is white, European-Irish, races her brother’s horse, and finds her place among frontier heroes but never marries and dies young? This paper will suggest that a writer may be bold, or foolish to make the imaginative leap back into the past, into an alternative historical reality, let alone into an actuality.

* (More than likely they are aware of the apocryphal story of the Magistrate of Galway, whose name they share. They may also know of a play based on that story, performed in Galway City, and no doubt reviewed in local newspapers. Perhaps more likely they have

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heard another version, written by an Irish convict, and performed successfully in Sydney Town and later Melbourne. (No doubt reviewed in the Adelaide Register or interstate papers hawked around).