

“AND TRIESTE, AH TRIESTE...”: STAGE ASCENDANCY AND CHARLES LEVER’S IRISH CHARACTERS

Elisabetta d’Erme

At the beginning of his career, the Anglo-Irish Victorian writer Charles Lever enjoyed great popularity among British readers, comparable to that of William Thackeray, Anthony Trollope and Charles Dickens. His reputation began to decline among his English readership, however, when he moved away from his sketches of careless young Irish dragoons to more serious descriptions of the plague of absentee landlords. At the same time, in his homeland, his popularity suffered due to the attacks of Irish nationalists who accused him of promoting the Stage Irish cliché to court the favour of his British readers. Unfortunately, these attacks proved fatal to Lever’s reputation in Ireland and even when he made his social criticism of Ascendancy more explicit, this failed to salvage his reputation with his countrymen. The damage was done, and, in addition to compromising his fame during his lifetime, the charge of Stage Irishman clichés in his early novels is among the major causes of his subsequent fall into literary oblivion.

In recent years, new studies have challenged this view, and there has been an on-going re-evaluation of Lever’s place within the canon of Irish studies,¹ especially as part of a reappraisal of many authors² who were decanonised owing to the negative evaluations of the Celtic revivalists and cultural nationalists, who had a narrow understanding of ‘authentic’ Irishness, and because they were Protestant or Anglo-Irish writers.

This chapter will focus essentially on Lever’s works as a novelist, and not as a journalist. It will side with scholars such as Tony Bareham, who questioned the charge of Lever representing Irish peasants in terms of Stage Irish clichés. I will argue that this charge was based on nationalist preconceptions, reinforced by the illustrations of the notorious Phiz, an English artist relying on stereotypes of the Irish as feckless, crapulent troublemakers. Instead, I will maintain that this charge is unjust and stress James M. Cahalan’s concept of a “stage Ascendancy.” That is to say, the “rollicking” behaviour of the irresponsible characters in Lever’s novels is a device used to depict a decadent ruling class, and not the Irish peasantry. In contrast, I will claim that the at-

1 Tony Bareham’s and S.P. Haddelsey’s key studies contributed to Lever’s renaissance, starting with Bareham’s *Charles Lever: New Evaluations* (1992), and Haddelsey’s monograph *Charles Lever: The Lost Victorian* (2000). In more recent years, there have been various articles on Lever, which attempt to re-orient the field. Most of them are acknowledged in the bibliography (if not explicitly in the text).

2 For example, authors like William Carleton, Charles Robert Maturin, and Sheridan Le Fanu.

tribution of Stage Irishness to Lever's manservant characters present in his early novels, such as Mickey Free, Tipperary Joe, Cross Corny, and Darby the Blast, is only a mask that Lever uses to introduce a spirit of Bakhtinian carnival that subverts the political Ascendancy-order and serves as a socio-political commentary on Ireland.

A Lot of Craic

Lever spent most of his life abroad as an expatriate, and, given that his novels are mostly set on the European continent, he could be considered as the first Europeanised Irish novelist.³ This is a label that was later applied particularly to James Joyce, with whom Lever shares a medical background, his exile status, wanderlust, and spendthrift habits, as well as an itinerant lifestyle and a chance residence in the city of Trieste, where he was British Consul from 1867 to 1872.⁴ Lever's skills and experience in diplomacy enabled him to analyse European politics after the 1848 revolutions, to predict the fall of the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman Empires, and to describe the effects of the mid-nineteenth-century 'credit-crunch' financial crisis. He was among the very few Irish writers who saw parallels between the continental turmoil of 1848 and what was happening in Ireland.⁵

Charles James Lever was born in Dublin in 1806, into a wealthy, upper-class, Protestant family, and died in Trieste in 1872. He experienced the great changes that took place in Ireland after the Act of Union, years marked by the Catholic Emancipation Act, the Repeal Movement, the Great Famine, the Encumbered Estates Act, the birth of Fenianism, and Gladstone's Land Act.

Having studied medicine at Trinity College, Dublin, Lever travelled to Canada and to Germany. After practicing in cholera-plagued areas in Co. Clare, he was appointed medical officer in Portstewart, Co. Derry. There, he met the writer Charles Maxwell, who – together with Maria Edgeworth – was a great influence on his works. Lever's first novels seem to be heavily indebted to Maxwell's style of picaresque and military romance, while Edgeworth's legacy is more evident in his later novels, where the ab-

3 The relationship of nineteenth-century Irish and Anglo-Irish writers with Italy has been widely researched. For an exhaustive close-up see Donatella Abbate Badin's "Introduction" to *Irish-Italian Studies: New Perspectives on Cultural Mobility and Permeability* and Anne O'Connor and Donatella Abbate Badin's edition "Italia Mia: Transnational Ireland in the Nineteenth Century".

4 The connection between Lever and Joyce has been stressed by various scholars, such as Albert J. Solomon (791-98) and John McCourt (24, 94, 186).

5 Irish writers who have dealt with this topic are, for example, Edward Maturin, author of *Bianca, A Tale of Erin and Italy* (1852), a love story between an Irishman and an Italian singer set during the Risorgimento, or Francis Sylvester Mahony (Fr. Prout), author of *Facts and Figures from Italy* (1847), or Ethel Lilian Voynich, who in 1897 wrote her popular novel *The Gadfly*, set in 1840s Italy under the dominance of Austria. For a wider British overview or perspective, cf. Bareham and Curreli.

sentee landlords theme becomes more prominent. Lever is described by his biographer Lionel Stevenson as being "typically Irish": he was well-known for his love of sports, off-hand cordiality, convivial hospitality, and anecdotal humour; and he had the reputation of being one of the best storytellers in Dublin. However, behind this mask lay a melancholic, hypochondriac and depressive personality, addicted to gambling and morphine.

Lever's first novel, *The Confessions of Harry Lorrequer*, was first serialised in the *Dublin University Magazine* between 1837-1840. It was subsequently published in book form in 1839 by William Curry, Jun. and Co., Dublin., and enjoyed immediate success, being reprinted twelve times in the first year, and going through numerous other editions during the nineteenth century (see Bareham 1-31). The novel is characterised by a markedly digressive, episodic manner, and consists of a collection of lively, amusing sketches of Irish life, written under the pseudonym Harry Lorrequer, a name which was so popular that it became a byword for a rollicking, devil-may-care young man.

Harry, the novel's main protagonist, is a young British officer who has just arrived in Cork with his regiment. The military environment, the band playing 'Garryowen,' and the "native drollery" (*Harry Lorrequer* 174) of the local people, are rich sources for Harry's witticism and anecdotes. At the same time, these features offer him many opportunities for playing clumsy practical jokes.⁶ Not so much a land of saints and scholars, Ireland becomes a "land of punch, priests, and potatoes" (*Harry Lorrequer* 2), where everything is entertaining, and everyone is amusing. In nineteenth-century Irish literature, language was a sensitive issue and it plays a great role in Lever's works. In his early novels, he displays a facility for reproducing the 'mellow Doric of his country' (*Harry Lorrequer* 59) and is at his best when exploiting verbal wit and eloquence, baroquely displayed in dialogues of servants or members of the middle class. The rich brogue is rendered through exaggeration in speech, mimicry of Irish pronunciation, use of exclamations, metaphors and idiomatic phrases, the casual introduction of anecdotes and repartee, and Hiberno-English phonology and syntax. Examples include the following phrases:

"I'll jist trouble ye to lean aff" (*Harry Lorrequer* 167).

"Have ye the pass? Or what brings ye walking here, in nomine patri?" for I was so confused whether it was a 'sperit' or not, I was going to address him in Latin – there is nothing equal to the dead languages to lay a ghost, everybody knows." (*Harry Lorrequer* 178).

"'Three pounds!' says I; 'begorra, ye might as well ax me to give you the rock of Cashel'." (*Charles O'Malley* 86)

6 For example, while recovering after a coach crash that has caused Harry Lorrequer a broken collarbone and three broken ribs, he meets a rollicking priest, a doctor, and their bibulous friends and they engage in a number of drunken frolics, *en masse*. Mrs. Clanfrizzle's boarding house becomes a hotbed of pranks and banter. With overturned tables, broken windows and ineffectual fisticuffs, the establishment resembles one of Hogarth's cartoons, and is well described in Phiz's illustrations for the novel.

"Oh, devil fear you, that ye'll like it. Sorrow one of you ever left as much in the jug as 'ud make a foot-bath for a flea." (Jack Hinton Vol. I 31)

"And sure when the landlords does come, devil a bit they know about us – no more nor if we were in Swayden; didn't hear the ould gentleman down there last summer, pitying the people for the distress. 'Ah' says he 'it's a hard sayson ye have, and obliged to tear the flax out of the ground, and it not long enough to cut!'" (St Patrick's Eve 15)

Despite his talent for mimicking Irish brogue, Lever abandoned this device, starting from his 1847 novel *The Knight of Gwynne*, thus relieving his peasant characters of a forced comicality.

Although written in a slapdash style, *Harry Lorrequer* proved to be immensely popular, especially with English readers, playing up, as it did, to their prejudices. A. Norman Jeffares suggests that Lever's style suited English readers, among whom "there was a wide acceptance of Lever's early rollicking view of Ireland: in Lorrequer's words, it was 'a round of dining, drinking, dancing, riding, steeple chasing, pigeon shooting and tandem driving...'" (122) as well as "late breakfasts, garrison balls and plays" (*Harry Lorrequer* 9).

Charles Lever under Attack!

In Lever's second novel, *Charles O'Malley the Irish Dragoon* (1841), the protagonist is a young Catholic Irishman. It is also a picaresque farce written under the 'Lorrequer' pen name and it paints a similar picture of life in Ireland. After the success of *Charles O'Malley*, Lever was appointed editor of the *Dublin University Magazine*, a Tory periodical founded by Isaac Butt, and this meant returning to Dublin from Brussels, where he had been physician at the British Embassy between 1837-1842.

Dublin, in 1842, was a city dominated by Daniel O'Connell's politics, and soon Lever, a Tory, became the target of increasing attacks from nationalist authors, namely the "Young Irelanders." Lever's critics disliked what they considered to be the frivolous nature of his Stage Irish writing. In *Charles Lever, His Life in His Letters* (1906), a reconstruction of Lever's biography through his correspondence, edited by the Irish writer and journalist Edmund Downey, it is reported that Lever was "regarded by a considerable section of his countrymen as a farce-writer, or else as that abomination, the Anti-Irish Irishman." Downey qualifies this view by suggesting that "Irishmen [...] are too ready to take offence at having their foibles laughed at" (Vol. I 188). In 1843, Samuel Ferguson was among Lever's chief critics, accusing him from the pages of the *Blackwood Magazine* (June 1843; Nat. Library of Scotland, 4065) of fostering through self-caricature "a pride in being despised." William Carleton, in an unsigned review of Lever's third novel *Jack Hinton, the Guardsman* for the *Nation* (7 October 1843), accused him of "selling us for pounds, shillings, and pence," and in another article (23 September 1843) of deliberately offering "disgusting and debasing caricatures of Irish life and feeling," and of depicting the local peasant as a "Stage Irishman." He also alleged that Lever wrote "for an English audience at the expense of the Irish peasantry" (qtd. in Stevenson 125; also qtd. in Haddelsey 68 and Blake

117). In the same paper and year, Charles Gavan Duffy accused Lever of plagiarism and labelled him as a Quack, a Clown, and a Charlatan (cf. Deane Vol. 1 1255). Moreover, Samuel Carter Hall blamed Lever for "slandering his native country and its people; labouring somewhat successfully to persuade the English public that every Irish gentleman is a blackguard, and every Irish peasant a ruffian" (qtd. in Fitzpatrick 217). These allegations cast a lasting shadow on Lever's work. As stressed by Jeffares:

The paradox was that in 1843 Carleton himself [with his *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* 1831-33, a collection of ethnic sketches of the stereotypical Irishman] was unpopular and was seen as a detractor of Ireland [...], and that Lever, with his *Jack Hinton* (1843), had begun the criticism of English rule in and attitudes to Ireland, which continued throughout those succeeding novels of his which dealt with Irish subject matter. (123)

However, it has been suggested that much of this criticism was born out of jealousy or crassness. Terry Eagleton contends that, notwithstanding "the high jinks and ripping yarns of an early work like *The Confessions of Harry Lorrequer* [...], technically speaking [Lever] is a highly accomplished writer, jovially at ease with the language in a way Carleton could only envy" (214). Unfortunately, William Makepeace Thackeray's dedication of his slightly satirical *Irish Sketch Book* (1841) to Lever increased Lever's negative reputation. As Downey notes, "[i]t was rashly assumed that he had promoted or suggested many things in the *Sketch-Book* which gave offence to Lever's sensitive fellow-countrymen" (174-75). In Ireland, Lever was at this point regarded as a farce-writer, or worst of all, as "the Anti-Irish-Irishman," to such an extent that "[i]t became the fashion for every Dublin print which was not of the same way of thinking, politically, as Lever, to abuse him" (Downey 184). This view of Lever was confirmed by his friend Anthony Trollope in his dismissive reference to Lever in his *Autobiography* (1883):

How shall I speak of my dear old friend Charles Lever, and his rattling, jolly, joyous, swearing Irishmen? [...] His earlier novels – the later I have not read – are just like his conversation. The fun never flags, and to me, when I read them, they were never tedious. As to Character he can hardly be said to have produced it. Corney Delaney, the old manservant, may perhaps be named as an exception. His novels will not live long, – even if they may be said to be alive now, – because it is so. What was his manner of working I do not know, but I should think it must have been very quick, and that he never troubled himself on the subject. (260-61)

To make matters worse, W.B. Yeats's negative judgement on *Harry Lorrequer*, in *Representative Irish Tales* (1891), sanctioned Lever's banishment from the Irish canon. Yeats argued that because Lever never wrote for the people, he never wrote faithfully of the people. In later years, as the nationalist canon became ever more narrowly defined, Lever's exclusion became complete. John McCourt claims that Lever's

pronounced Unionism provided a good excuse for his work to be critically ignored or summarily dismissed down to our times by many Irish critics. [But] ironically, it was the gradual, cautious rethinking of his Unionist belief and his [...] acknowledgement of Irish

Nationalist aspirations that gave Lever's later novels much of their power. ("Charles Lever" 156)

The biographical entry on Charles Lever in the 1975 edition of the *Dictionary of National Biography* confirmed this bad reputation, accusing him of "the most inaccurate and patronising portrayals of Irish life and character" (DNB, Oxford, 1975, Vol. I 1207). Finally, W.J. McCormack's introduction to "The Intellectual Revival (1830-1850)" chapter in the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* brings Lever, together with Carleton, Butt and Brady, among those figures for whom "the variety of whose changes of allegiance, political and denominational, constitutes a veritable Heisenbergian 'uncertainty principle' of Irish ideology" (Vol. I 1175).

In more recent years, Lever scholars have expressed a dramatically different view. For example, J.H. Murphy suggests in *Leisure in Charles Lever's Jack Hinton (1842) and the Continuities of Irish Fiction*:

in Lever's early fiction rollicking seems to be a distinctive Irish quality. For this reason Lever was criticised for supposedly playing into the hands of British stereotypes of Irish irresponsibility. He was aware of this and thought of *Jack Hinton* as actually something of a corrective with an intended criticism of English stereotypes of Ireland in the course of the novel. Indeed, the fact that in *Jack Hinton* the rollicking is mostly that of the ruling classes is itself a way of moving the controversy away from the familiar topic of the irresponsibility of the Irish peasants. (120)

Furthermore, most of the Irish characters present in *Harry Lorrequer* (such as Father Malachi Brennan, Tom O'Flaherty, Mr O'Leary, Mr and Mrs Rooney or Doctor Finucane) are not peasants at all, but members of the upper or middle class: unreliable, mischievous people, prone to having fun at other people's expense. There is no doubt that Lever's books were meant to appeal to the growing Victorian readership on the other side of the Irish Sea, a wider and more lucrative audience than the one in Ireland. Thus, at this early stage of his career, Lever's perspective on Irish affairs was still philanthropic, patronising, full of ideals of feudal loyalty.

In spite of these shortcomings, Lever's acute social critique is already evident in his first novel, *Harry Lorrequer*. For example, when a Mr Burke visits a show of native Americans, he is baffled by the discovery that they are none other than poor men from Galway who – thanks to "[t]heir uncouth appearance, their wild looks, their violent gestures and, above all, their strange and guttural language" – had been hired by the theatre manager to replace the original *corps dramatique*. The manager thinks that "they were ready-made to his hands, and in many respects better savages than their prototypes." But Mr Burke is not so easily fooled and detects that "they were all speaking Irish" (*Harry Lorrequer* 240-42). Here, Lever's sympathy is evidently with the poor Galway men, while his contempt is reserved for the manager. Lever's engagement with the question of class is already present in this early novel and is an aspect of his work that is developed in his late political novels.

Mickey Free & Co

The cliché of the Stage Irishman is further confounded in *Charles O'Malley, the Irish Dragoon* (1841), a novel which is very difficult to brand as anti-Irish. Here, Lever creates the enduring character of Mickey Free, a whimsical, cunning, gossipy and lovable rogue of a manservant, who alternately amuses and exasperates his 'Masther' Charles O'Malley. Mickey Free is Lever's answer to Dickens's cockney character Sam Weller: Mickey "had the peculiar free-and-easy, devil-may-care-kind of offhand Irish way" (*Charles O'Malley* 81). He is sporty, sings, dances the jig to "Tatter Jack Walsh," plays the violin, wears a striped waistcoat, "a jerry hat" (*Charles O'Malley* 82), and is fond of pranks. He is a Catholic but blessed with sound scepticism. He speaks a Hiberno-English dialect with a Western-Irish brogue. On a superficial reading, Micky Free could be the quintessential Stage Irishman. However, Mickey is the one rational character in the narrative and it is he who is proactively able to solve problems. Behind the persona of the comic rogue, he is instrumental to the development of the story.

The book is filled with ballads, which became popular all over Ireland, such as "Oh once we were illigant [sic] people," which glorifies in the "ould" times when everyone was the son of a King, or the descendant of Irish Milesian Princes. James Joyce mocks this concept in the "Nestor" episode of *Ulysses*: "I have rebel blood in me too, Mr Deasy said. On the spindle side. But I am descended from Sir John Blackwood who voted for the union. We are all Irish, all kings' sons" (26). Mickey Free follows his 'Masther' O'Malley to Portugal, where the Irish Dragoon has moved with his Regiment to fight against Napoleon, until they manage to return home safely, not before celebrating a rollicking "Patrick's Day in the Peninsula," to which Lever dedicates the entire chapter LXXXVIII.

This affection for Ireland is even more evident in *Jack Hinton, the Guardsman* (1843), a novel that is also free of the anti-Irish charge. Here, a 19-year-old aide-de-camp from a London aristocratic family is appointed to Dublin Castle. Despite his initial scepticism about Ireland and its people, the young man learns to love their extraordinary qualities:

in Ireland, where national character runs in a deep or hidden channel, with cross currents and back-water ever turning and winding, – where all the incongruous and discordant elements of what is best and worst seem blended together, – there, social intercourse is free, cordial, warm, and benevolent. Men come together disposed to like one another; and what an Irishman is disposed to, he usually has a way of effecting. (Vol. II 28)

This transformation occurs due to the appearance of a new class of character, which was not present in *Harry Lorrequer* and which first appears in *Charles O'Malley*: the Irish servant, whose function is to provide a wider historical-political commentary on the Irish situation. In *Jack Hinton*, this character is first represented by Cornelius Delany, also called Cross Corny, a stereotypically short-statured Irishman with semi-human features. His role is to express sardonic views of the rollicking at high social

levels, thus providing a constant class-conscious political critique.⁷ The second character, introduced with the catchphrase “*Tally ho! Ye ho! Ye ho!!*,” is none other than Tipperary Joe. He is always good humoured, trustworthy, noble, clever and even ready to give his life for his ‘Masther.’ To counterbalance the much-criticised figure of the unholy and reckless Father Malachi in *Harry Lorrequer*, Lever created the larger-than-life figure of Father Tom Luftus for *Jack Hinton*, a sort of learned, brilliant and compassionate modern ‘street priest.’

In creating figures such as Mickey Free, Cross Corny or Tipperary Joe, Lever was influenced by a long tradition descending from the braggart-warrior and parasite-slave of Greek and Roman comedy, culminating in Dion Boucicault’s and Samuel Lover’s stage clichés of the Irish peasant. Yet, Mickey Free, Cross Corny or Tipperary Joe are not meant to be representative of the whole Irish peasant class. Instead, they are individual, original characters, whose main task resembles that of the jester, since their marginalised status gives them license to say what is otherwise doomed to remain unspoken. Lever’s Irish servants seem to be more intelligent and to have a better historico-political overview than their Masters (especially, as we will see, Darby the Blast in *Tom Burke of “Ours”*), or any other single representative of the rotting Irish squirearchy.⁸

By 1844, with *Tom Burke of “Ours”*, set at the turn of the nineteenth century after the 1798 Bantry Bay rebellion and the 1801 Act of Union, Lever’s political engagement has widened and the alleged Stage Irishness has almost disappeared. Here, Lever presents us with a new, explosive character, the charismatic piper Darby the Blast, a rebel whose wit and skill in plotting and disguise enable him to escape capture, prison and deportation. He will soon become the mentor and loyal friend of young Tom Burke, the second son of a decayed squire, who has just been left a destitute orphan on his father’s death. Darby M’Keown’s speech is baroquely eloquent: a mix of Latin, high-flown phraseology and brogue. Like Mickey Free before him, he has the habit of breaking into provocative songs. Being a performer is a cover for his involvement with the United Irishmen, and he is in charge of Tom’s ideological education. Darby is the first real political subject in Lever’s novels. He is the one who opens Tom Burke’s eyes to the “wrongs his father and grandfather before him had inflicted on their tenants.” Thanks to his political lessons, Tom learns to connect “the possession of wealth with oppression and tyranny, and the lowly fortunes of the poor man as alone securing high-souled liberty of thought and freedom of speech and action” (*Tom Burke* 44).

7 Just to give an example: in *Jack Hinton* (Vol. I 107-8), the drunken Lord Lieutenant conducts a pseudo-knighting of Cross Corny; Delany interprets it as an attempted act of humiliation, as he justly thinks the Lord Lieutenant is making fun of him.

8 Lever’s lively Irish manservants also have an endless reservoir of self-irony, even in circumstances of bleakest hopelessness. The capacity to maintain a sense of humour even in bad times is a trait that links the Irish with the Hebrew. James Joyce would transform this equation into one of the main topics of *Ulysses*.

Exposing the grotesque body of Irish high society

In Lever's early novels, the figure of the clownish Stage Irishman hides a "stirring nature" (*Jack Hinton* Vol. 2 76) and the rollicking functions as a mask for political critique. In these early works, Lever is depicting what Mikhail Bakhtin would have called 'the grotesque body' of a carefree, crumbling, Irish upper class, shown in its "innate tendency to drollery, that bent to laugh with every one and at every thing, so eminently Irish" (*Jack Hinton* Vol. 1 74). Bakhtin's figure of the grotesque body is profoundly ambiguous: on the one hand, it is linked to birth and renewal, on the other hand – as in this case – it symbolises death and decay. Accordingly, Lever's description of Irish high society's grotesque body is a swaggering "exposure of feudal unreasonableness" (King 129);⁹ and it can be read as a carnivalesque response to the impending collapse of Anglo-Irish ascendancy. All the key elements of the grotesque style, exaggeration, hyperbole, and excessiveness are to be found, for example, in *The Dodd Family Abroad* (1853-1854), an exhilarating epistolary novel in which Lever depicts a *parvenu* Irish family of small landowners on their catastrophic Grand Tour through Europe. Beside the absentee landlord theme, Lever's second pet hate was Thomas Cook's growing mass-tourism, a target that unflinchingly excludes the Irish peasantry.

Conversely, Lever draws his main humble Irish characters empathetically. He portrays them as human – all eagerly searching some kind of "diversion" (amusement) – and compassionate in contrast to the spendthrift landlords, judges, lawyers, clergymen, doctors, "pothecaries" and officers, whom he casts as "punch-drinking, rowing, and quarrelling bumpkins" (*Charles O'Malley* 54). Lever's Irish manservants are not buffoons, but representations of a healthy Bakhtinian spirit of rebellion and subversion. Their sharp tongues, and tall-tale-telling songs have a utopian, liberating, dimension, characteristic of Bakhtin's "carnivalistic laughter," which "is directed toward something higher – toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 127). Consequently, rather than accusing Lever of reinforcing the Stage Irishman cliché, it may be more appropriate to speak of a "stage Ascendancy." As early as 1988, James M. Cahalan observed in *The Irish Novel* that "Lever's novels exemplify the Ascendancy laughing at itself instead of at the peasantry and, rather than perpetuating the Stage Irishman, created instead a 'stage Anglo-Irishman'" (67). No wonder that, in private letters, Lever pointedly described himself as a "court-jester" and as "Her Majesty's flunkey" when in his consular duties, thus laughing at the people he knew best, including himself. In "Writing

9 In "Emigration and the Irish Novel: Charles Lever, The Picaresque and the Emergence of the Irish Emigration Narrative Form," Jason King makes references to Mikhail Bakhtin's study on the Picaresque in *The Dialogic Imagination* while analysing the figure of the Picaro and of the so-called "Victorian Picaresque" genre used by Lever in minor novels such as *Arthur O'Leary* (1844), *The Confessions of Con Cregan: the Irish Gil Blas* (1849) or *Roland Cashel* (1849). In this chapter, I refer to Bakhtin's idea of "grotesque realism" expounded in his study of François Rabelais.

from the Outside In: Charles Lever" (2004), Andrew Blake – while referring mainly to Lever's journalistic contributions to *Blackwood's Magazine* – establishes that "Lever simultaneously embodied various aspects of the Irish stereotype and explored them through his literary output" (116). He argues that "while his output was not one-dimensional – he was also capable of writing fiercely against those Hibernian clichés – his importance to the scholar lies precisely in his ability to capture and express the Irish stereotypes offered by the British periodical press" (116). Under the O'Dowd pseudonym, Lever also turned these stereotypes on their heads and challenged them, for example when he criticised the prejudiced attitudes and "negative stereotypes" evidenced in British press coverage of clashes between Orangemen and Catholics in Belfast offering a "fierce denunciation of anti-Irish racism in England" (Blake 122).

Who is to blame?

The charge of "malicious libel" against the Irish character might have been better directed towards the caricatures drawn by Halbot Knight Browne (1815-1882), alias Phiz, the famous illustrator of Charles Dickens's novels, who also drew plates for fourteen of Lever's stories. An important Lever scholar, the late Tony Bareham, suggested in a private interview:¹⁰

there is no shadow of doubt that the 'culprit' is Phiz NOT Lever. The repeated graphic image of a dopey-looking tattered figure with a broken hat capering across the country waving a stick is degrading, stupid and absolutely untrue to what the text itself says about the Irish peasantry. And Phiz's other repeated standard response to the text is hideous gaping tatterdemalion females who offer no remission to the vision of the native Irish as ugly, stupid and degraded. The illustration for the front cover of the Railway Library edition of *St Patrick's Eve* just about sums up the whole thing.

Bareham is not alone in blaming Phiz for having used the stock caricature of the Stage Irishman and for providing grotesquely exaggerated, degrading caricatures of the Irish character. Informed in 1839 by his publisher James M'Glashan that Phiz was going to illustrate his first novel *Harry Lorrequer*, and knowing that Phiz tended to represent people in a satirical way, Lever asked the publisher to commission George Cruikshank instead. However, Cruikshank – another popular Victorian book-illustrator – was unavailable. The young Phiz was an "irresponsible roisterer" (qtd. in Browne Lester 109), with a boyish delight in slapstick. Aware of the problem, Lever was at pains to know if he had at least "any notion of Irish physiognomy" (letter to M'Glashan January 1839, qtd. in Downey Vol. I 109). His anxiety was well founded. It turned out that Phiz had selected the most uproarious passages in the novel to illustrate.¹¹

10 Private email to author, 25 December 2018.

11 Phiz's illustrations are easily found on the web. In *Harry Lorrequer*, particularly coarse were the plaques for the second inside cover and those with Father Malachi, whose character has been emphatically sketched in the plate "The Supper at Father Mala-

The Anglo-Irish, Protestant, Unionist Lever was already aware of criticism from Irish Nationalists, who assumed that an Anglo-Irishman like him was incapable of writing without ridiculing his countrymen. Unfortunately, Phiz's rollicking illustrations helped reinforce that Irish nationalist belief. In her biography of her uncle, Halbot Knight Browne's niece writes that "Phiz's early illustrations of Irish peasant characters resembled those seen on the English stage – drunken, red-nosed troublemakers – the only type to which he had been exposed until he visited Ireland" (Browne Lester 114). Following his journey to Ireland, Phiz's representation of the Irish changed. One example is his plate "Farewell to Tipperary Joe" at the end of *Jack Hinton*. He no longer depicts the loyal manservant as the usual ape-like Irishman, but with all the gentleman-like traits that Lever actually attributes to his character.

It was these wilful preconceptions on the part of Irish nationalists, together with the grotesque illustrations of Phiz, that led critics to mistake the target of Lever's ire: the butt of his social satire was never the servant-class Irishman, but the absentee landlord, and the entirety of the drinking, duelling, fox-hunting, and indebted squirearchy, mercilessly described in the novels *The O'Donoghue* (1845), *The Knight of Gwynne* (1847), *The Daltons* (1852), *The Martins of Cro'Martin* (1856), *The Bramleighs of Bishop's Folly* (1868) and *Lord Kilgobbin* (1872). In these works, Lever tells the story of the material and moral bankruptcy of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy. As he wrote in *Davenport Dunn* (1859):

The old feudalism that had linked the fate of a starving people with the fortunes of a ruined gentry was to be extinguished at once, and a great experiment tried. Was Ireland to be more governable in prosperity than in adversity? This was a problem which really might not seem to challenge much doubt, and yet was it by no means devoid of difficulty to those minds who had long based their ideas of ruling that land on the principles of fomenting its dissensions and separating its people (Vol. I 93).

Instead of realising that even in his early works Lever was denouncing the weakness of the Ascendancy party, contributors to the *Nation*, like Charles Gavan Duffy or William Carleton, denounced him for degrading and mis-representing his countrymen. It is thus understandable that the hostile atmosphere of Dublin in the 1840s, and the closed-mindedness of the *Dublin University Magazine* owners, did not encourage Lever to stay in Ireland. In 1845, he set off on a tour of Central Europe, that would prove to be a self-imposed exile, as he was never to live in Ireland again.

Writing abroad, in addition to addressing the collapsing Anglo-Irish ascendancy, the rise of nationalism and of the Irish Catholic bourgeoisie, Lever began drawing parallels between Irish nationalism and the independence movements growing across Europe. As Bareham has pointedly stated: "Lever became more European than his readership could well stomach, and having first reviled him for invoking the stage Irishman, they then neglected him for his intelligent internationalism" (9).

chi's." Among many, a perfect example of the representation of the 'grotesque body' of the carefree, crumbling Irish upper class could be found in Phiz's plate for Jack Hinton entitled "The Rooney's Party."

Looking at Ireland from Abroad

In 1847, Lever settled in Florence, a Habsburg satellite. The Habsburg empire then ruled various Slav nationalities as well as large sections of Italy, a country in the making, divided into kingdoms and duchies ruled by foreign powers, struggling for its *Risorgimento*, just as the Balkan countries were struggling for their independence from the crumbling Ottoman Empire. Great Britain followed with interest the changes occurring on the continent, always having the Irish Question and Home Rule in mind. The intelligence on European politics that Lever was delivering through his fiction, as well as his articles for his humorous monthly column "Cornelius O'Dowd Upon Men, Women and Things in General" in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* between 1850/60,¹² led to the offer of a diplomatic position. He was first appointed vice-consul at La Spezia in 1858 and in 1867, his Tory sympathies enabled him to obtain the consulship in Trieste, a city that he rapidly learned to hate and in which, fulfilling his worst fears, he is now buried. Lever's first impression of Trieste was hard to change; nonetheless, he wrote some of his best books there, such as his last novel *Lord Kilgobbin*, published shortly after the abortive Fenian Rising of 1867. Set in Ireland, Wales, Greece and Turkey, it tells the story of Mathew Kearney, sixth Viscount of Kilgobbin, a decayed Whig Irish nobleman, who lives in his crumbling castle with his wise daughter Kate. His son Richard studies medicine at Dublin with his friend Joe. After meeting the English diplomats Lockwood and Walpole, the two young men become involved in missions to the Mediterranean by the Foreign Office. The novel also sports a Fenian hero, Daniel Donogan, inspired by Donovan O'Rossa, who, having fought beside the Greek independence fighters, eventually escapes to America with Nina Kostalergi, Lord Kilgobbin's niece and capricious Greek-Irish beauty.

Bareham acutely notes that: "The career of Charles Lever very strongly suggests a man striving to be at the centre of things, but constantly being impelled towards a periphery, [towards] a position of 'Outsiderness'" (*Charles Lever: New Evaluations* 96). Lever's exile status – he was an outsider at home and abroad – did give him a different perspective on historical events that were happening around him. To this 'outsiderness,' we owe the surprising originality and quality of his forgotten fiction.

The Stage Irish Mask

Lever's later political novels explore themes of dislocation, social breakdown, and alienation, but their trademark is a conflict between generations. On the one hand, we have fathers, representatives of dissipated landed gentry belonging to the old colonial order; on the other, the sons and daughters – a younger generation struggling

12 Lever used his column in *Blackwood's Magazine*, not only to focus on social politics and British politics in general, but also to deliver information on the activities of the "Italian Regenerators." Innumerable articles were on the process of the *Risorgimento* and the epic figure of Giuseppe Garibaldi, whom he met personally at La Spezia. The "Hero of the Two Worlds" also inspired his 1865 novel *Tony Butler*.

in Ireland for freedom and independence, for identity and lost heritage, just like their brothers and sisters in Europe. It was the young people who were choosing exile from their homeland that Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* would later compare to an "Old Sow that Eats Her Farrow" (220). In this way, Lever prefigures certain aspects of Irish modernism and its experimentations with narrative voice and the theme of identity. A key example in this regard is Lever's 1860 novel *A Day's Ride. A Life's Romance*, the story of a man who exchanges fiction with reality, a sort of Zelig *ante-litteram*, who assumes the personality of the first person he meets. The novel was among George Bernard Shaw's favourites.

It is based on these late novels, *The Daltons*, *A Day's Ride*, *The Bramleighs of Bishop's Folly*, or the final masterpiece *Lord Kilgobbin*, that Lever should be read, judged and remembered. Jeffares describes the latter novel as a "clash of cultures" ("Introduction" xv) and as "a despairing picture of a decaying and discontented Anglo-Irish Ascendancy at the mercy of political unrest, angry terrorism and of that English ineptitude, swinging between repression and appeasement, which Lever could not venerate" (*Anglo-Irish Literature* 124). Lever's detractors should read, for example, the cameo in chapter 9 of *Lord Kilgobbin* of the Irish driver who takes Cecil Walpole, secretary to Lord Danebury, the new Whig-appointed viceroy, on a pretty jaunt through the Bog of Allen. Walpole ventures into the bog, taking little with him except his English hauteur and a conceited faith in his own superiority – a passage (among many in Lever) which consistently shows the English, not the Irish, as exhibiting grotesque cultural patterns.

Conclusion

The cosmopolitan, uprooted Lever seems to tell us that the clownish Stage Irishman may be hiding a "stirring nature," and that all the rollicking may be only a mask:

But how vain is it for one of any other country to fathom one half the depth of Irish character, or say what part is inapplicable to an Irishman! My own conviction is that we are all mistaken in our estimate of them; that the gay and reckless spirit, the wild fun, and frantic impetuous devilment are their least remarkable features, and in fact only the outside emblem of the stirring nature within. (*Jack Hinton* Vol. II 76)

Lever's works are not to be found in any bookshop in the whole world. Among thirty novels written during his life, only one has seen a new edition in the twentieth century: *Lord Kilgobbin* (published by the Belfast-based Appletree Press in 1992). No mainstream publishing house lists Lever in its catalogues. Anyone who wants to discover him must be satisfied with old second-hand copies or print-on-demand editions. Nobody can form an opinion of his real literary value if his books are not on the market, are not annotated, translated or reviewed, as has happened with innumerable other Victorian writers.

Lever has been branded with fostering the caricature of the Stage Irishman for too long. As we have seen in this chapter, the charge of peddling Stage Irish clichés for comic effect largely stems from the preconceptions of Irish nationalists and the unfor-

fortunate illustrations of Phiz. Rather, Lever refashioned and repurposed the Stage Irish cliché to satirise the lifestyle and abuses of the country's pro-English squirearchy – in other words, the people of his own class.

Lever's carnivalesque aesthetics function as social criticism, subverting and exposing the values of the crumbling Ascendancy, turning the tables and showing the Anglo-Irish, Unionist, absentee landowning elite as the real buffoons, fiddling and rollicking while their world burns around them. On the basis of this re-reading, it is now time to reconsider Lever's legacy and finally re-establish this gifted Anglo-Irish writer to his true place in the Irish literary canon.

Works Cited

- Abbate Badin, Donatella. "Introduction." *Irish-Italian Studies: New Perspectives on Cultural Mobility and Permeability*. Ed. Chiara Sciarrino. Palermo: Palermo UP, 2018. 9-23.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981.
- . *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994.
- . *Rabelais and his World*. Trans. Hélène Iswolsky. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968.
- Bareham, Terence. *Charles Lever: The Rise and Fall of an Irish Literary Giant*. The Publishing History, with an Illustrated Bibliography. Brighton: Edward Everet Root, 2020.
- . *Charles Lever. A Short Illustrated Biography*. Coleraine: U of Ulster, 2007.
- Bareham, Tony, ed. *Charles Lever: New Evaluations*, Colin Smythe, Gerrards Cross, 1991.
- . "Lever, *Blackwood's Magazine* and Garibaldi." *Anglistica Pisana* IX.1-2. Ed. Tony Bareham and Mario Curreli. Pisa: ETS, 2012. 25-32.
- . "When consular duty's to be done, (to be done), a Consul's lot is not a happy one (With apologies to W.S. Gilbert)." *Anglistica Pisana* XI.1. Ed. Laura Giovannelli. Pisa: ETS, 2014. 17-24.
- . "Virgin, Victims and Viragoes." *Questioni di Genere: Femminilità e effeminatezza nella cultura vittoriana*. Ed. Roberta Ferrari and Laura Giovannelli. Bologna: Bononia UP, 2016.
- Bareham, Tony, and Mario Curreli, eds. *Papers from the Charles Lever Bicentenary Conference: August 31st-September 1st, 2006, University of Pisa and Bagni di Lucca*. *Anglistica Pisana* IV.1-2 Pisa: ETS. 2007.

- Blake, Andrew. "Writing from the Outside In: Charles Lever." *Writing Irishness in Nineteenth-Century British Culture*. Ed. Neil McCaw. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004. 116-27.
- Browne Lester, Valerie. *Phiz: The Man Who Drew Dickens*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2004.
- Bucanan-Brown, John. *Phiz! The Book Illustrations of Halbot Knight Browne*. London: David & Charles, 1978.
- Cahalan, James M. *The Irish Novel: A Critical History. Twayne's Critical History of the Novel*. London: Twayne P, 1988.
- Deane, Seamus, gen ed. *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Vol II*. Derry: Field Day Publications, 1991.
- D'Erme, Elisabetta. *Trieste Vittoriana: Ritratti*. Monterotondo: Fuorilinea, 2017.
- Downey, Edmund. *Charles Lever. His Life in His Letters*. Vol. I and II, 1906. Honolulu: UP of the Pacific, 2003.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger. Studies in Irish Culture*. London: Verso, 1995.
- Fitzpatrick, William John. *The Life of Charles Lever*. Vol. I and II. London: Chapman & Hall, 1879.
- Foster, Roy F. *Paddy & Mr Punch. Connections in Irish and English History*. London: Allen Lane, 1993.
- Haddelsley, Stephen P. *Charles Lever. The Lost Victorian*. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2000.
- Harvey, J.R. *Victorian Novelists and their Illustrators*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1970.
- Jeffares, A. Norman. *Anglo-Irish Literature*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1982.
- . Introduction. *Lord Kilgobbin*. By James Lever. Belfast: Appletree, 1992. ix-xvii.
- Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. London: Penguin Books, 1992.
- . *Ulysses*. London: The Bodley Head, 1986.
- King, Jason. "Emigration and the Irish Novel: Charles Lever, The Picaresque and the Emergence of the Irish Emigration Narrative Form." *The Irish Novel in the 19th Century: Facts and Fictions*. Ed. Jaqueline Belanger. Dublin: Four Court, 2005. 123-38.
- Kreilamp, Vera. *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1998.
- Lever, Charles. *The Novels of Charles Lever*. 36 vols. ed. Julia Kate Neville. London: Downey & Co. 1897-99.

- McCormack, W.J. *Ascendancy and Tradition in Anglo-Irish Literary History from 1789 to 1939*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985.
- McCourt, John. "Charles Lever: An Irish Writer in Italy." *Studi irlandesi: A Journal of Irish Studies* 6 (2016): 149-69.
- , *Irish Novelists and the Victorian Age*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011.
- , *Writing the Frontier. Anthony Trollope between Britain and Ireland*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015.
- , *The Years of Bloom. James Joyce in Trieste 1904-1920*. Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2000.
- Moynahan, Julian. *Anglo-Irish. The Literary Imagination in a Hyphenated Culture*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995.
- Murphy, James H. "Leisure in Charles Lever's Jack Hinton (1842) and the continuity of Irish Fiction." *Leisure and the Irish in the 19th Century*. Ed. Lane Leeann and William Murphy. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2016. 119-29.
- O'Connor, Anne, and Donatella Abbate. "Italia Mia: Transnational Ireland in the Nineteenth Century." *Studi irlandesi: A Journal of Irish Studies* 6:6 (2016): 19-26.
- Rauchbauer, Otto, ed. *Ancestral Voices. The Big House in Anglo-Irish Literature*. Dublin: Lilliput P, 1992.
- Solomon, Albert J. "Charles Lever: A Source for Joyce." *James Joyce Quarterly* 29 (1992): 791-98.
- Stevenson, Lionel. *Dr. Quicksilver. The Life of Charles Lever*. London: Chapman & Hall, 1939.