



Romanticism on the Net

Watery Romanticism: Walking and Sailing West with Keats

Claire Connolly
University College Cork

Abstract

This article explores the meanings of John Keats's short-lived trip across the Irish sea in the summer of 1818. His encounters with Scottish and Irish coasts were shaped by a rapidly changing travel infrastructure, including roads, bridges, and harbours. They also resulted in a remarkably vivid description of an impoverished Irish woman whose body and presence challenge romantic aesthetics while also calling up a more contingent, watery Romanticism.

Biographical Note

Claire Connolly is Professor of Modern English at University College Cork in Ireland. Her book *A Cultural History of the Irish Novel, 1790–1829* (Cambridge Studies in Romanticism, 2011) won the Donald J. Murphy Prize, awarded by the American Conference for Irish Studies. With Marjorie Howes (Boston College), she is General Editor of a new six-volume series, *Irish Literature in Transition, 1700–2015* (2020), as well as editor of volume 2 of the series *Irish Literature in Transition, 1780–1830*.

1. The Irish and Scottish letters of the twenty-two-year-old John Keats and his thirty-one-year-old friend Charles Armitage Brown (London merchant and sometime playwright) express a tentative archipelagic Romanticism made with and alongside water. This article offers a close study of the travels of an English romantic writer who crossed the narrow sea between Scotland and Ireland in July 1818. The two men's journey began when they left London in a coach for Liverpool in June 1818, there to say farewell to Keats's brother- and sister-in-law George and Georgiana Keats as they embarked for America.

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

- Keats and Brown went on to Lancaster, from where they began, on June 25, 1818, to walk north via the Lakes. By July 3, they were in Glenluce, Wigtonshire, at which point they decided to cross the Irish Sea to visit the Giant's Causeway in County Antrim. The sea journey took the two men from Port Patrick on the west coast of the Rhins of Galloway across the thirteen-mile-wide North Channel that separates Scotland from Ireland. Landing at Donaghadee, Keats and Brown traversed the distance to Belfast by crossing the northern shores of Strangford Lough before arriving at the western edge of the city and the shores of Belfast Lough. Finding Ireland to be expensive and unpleasant, they turned back and returned to Scotland via Donaghadee on the day after their arrival: "So having walked to Belfast one day and back to Donoghadee the next we left Ireland with a fair breeze" (qtd. in Walker 171). As with the Irish journey, the wider tour—the two men had intended to spend four months travelling from the Lakes to the Highlands, culminating in John o'Groats—was cut short when Keats became ill following an exhausting "stony ascent" of Ben Nevis (Walker 204). A doctor in Inverness suggested that he return to London, and Keats boarded a boat that returned him to the city on August 8, about a month and a half after he had first set out for Liverpool.



Fig. 1. Screenshot of John Keats, Letters 5–7, July 1818 in Walker. Annotated by Daniella Traynor in Recogito, <https://recogito.pelagios.org/document/vyjnkcdf411f6>. Base map: Jacob

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

Abbot Cummings, *Britain or the United Kingdom of England, Scotland and Ireland*, 1817, David Rumsey Historical Map Collection via IIF.

Watery Romanticism

3. If English Romanticism implies an organic national culture bounded by fields, parishes, counties, and urban communities, then the concept of watery Romanticism relinquishes territorial claims and opens itself to the flows associated with bodies of water. As such, it shares qualities with Scottish Romanticism constituted by “an open-ended dialectic between principles of organic wholeness and centrifugal forces” (Duncan et al. 8), with those outward forces encompassing the long sweep of oceanic and imperial history. In relation to Ireland, a watery Romanticism offers a perspective onto Irish sea crossings from west to east: an all but essential aspect of social, cultural, and political life in Ireland from the Cromwellian conquest onward. English, Scottish, and Welsh writers also crossed the sea to Ireland, driven sometimes by politics, administrative careers, family connections, or curiosity: a less diffuse and extensive phenomenon but nonetheless a significant one. Both eastward and westward journeys on the Irish sea were shaped by the colonial infrastructure that joined the two islands, especially the building and upgrading of piers and harbours in the early nineteenth century. As new routes opened and travel times shrank, it became possible to imagine (and to glimpse from the boat, the pier, or the road) a people left behind by progress or, alternatively, to conjure up new forms of cultural value associated with slowness. Along with the hard colonial infrastructure associated with ocean travel, a watery Romanticism also takes its bearings from the soft coastlines along which so many ordinary Scottish and Irish histories were lived. That coastal dimension “admits many fine

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

gradations and strata of experience that ‘oceanic’ history threatens to wash away” (Land 740).

4. Among those “fine gradations” are those that belong to literary history. The *Oxford English Dictionary* attributes the earliest use of the term *Romanticism* to mean “the Romantic movement or style in art, literature, or music” to Lady Morgan, who remarked in 1821 that “[t]he vehemence with which the question of Romanticism has been debated, will have a favourable influence upon the Italians” (*Italy* 260, 261, 310). She returned to the term once more in another travel book, this time based on her time in France. In 1830, Morgan conjured up a fugitive cultural movement in search of refuge at the Northern and Western edges of Europe, finding sustenance where water flows: “Romanticism,” she wrote, “still banished from France, took shelter in the meantime in the dark forests of the Rhine, hummed her *Cronan* on the banks of the Shannon, rhapsodized on the shores of the Clyde, and sent forth, from her abbey-cell at Newstead, such lights of song, as time will never obscure” (*France* 301–02). Surviving only in France as “the unaccountably prevalent admiration of Ossian,” Romanticism was finally restored to “her ancient seats on the Seine” and flourished as part of a modern French literature that had finally broken free of forms of dependence on classical literature (*France* 301n).
5. *Cronan* comes from the Irish word *crónán*, meaning to hum, murmur, drone, or purr; a term associated with bees and cats as well as with the souging of the wind, the babble of streams, and the boom of a waterfall.¹ Lady Morgan’s riparian vision of Romanticism joins Irish to other European cultures via bodies of water across which tensions and forms of

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

contest also flow. Burns and Byron are drawn into alliance with an Irish Romanticism embodied by Morgan herself, singing sad songs at the edge of the Shannon, hearing and echoing other, Scottish and European, sounds. “I became the martyr of romanticism,” as she put it in the book on France (*France* 250). The old antagonism between James Macpherson’s Ossian and Irish versions of the Fianna legend resurfaces (“Ossian was an Irishman,” asserts Glorvina in *The Wild Irish Girl* [115]).

6. By putting the term *romanticism* to work between and across bodies of water, Morgan’s travel books prompt an understanding of the ways in which historical framing of literature has emerged in relation not only to nation and locality but also via experiences of mobility and displacement. Seas and coasts were part of everyday Irish life in the Romantic era: the books in which she sifts through and considers a movement from classical to Romantic modes were the results of lengthy journeys across sea and land, from Dublin to London and on to Paris before crossing the Alps and arriving in Italy in May 1819; and again to France via London in 1829. Bodies of water also belonged to the cultural imagination, not only as metaphors but also as framing concept. The definitions of Romanticism yielded by Lady Morgan’s travels underline the ways in which mobility inheres in acts of aesthetic periodization: literary movements on the move, encountering difficulties as they traverse sea and land, definitions made and unmade in the process.
7. In the case of John Keats, his final journey from England to Italy—a miserable and trying journey that saw him and his friend Severn spending seven weeks at sea and ended with the poet’s death in Rome—is conventionally understood as marking the end of English

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

Romanticism in its second generation phase. But periodization was also a personal matter for Keats, related to the way in which he wished to lend an aesthetic shape for his own life. In April 1818, he wrote of the planned pedestrian tour through the Lakes and the Highlands as “a sort of Prologue to the Life I intend to pursue—that is to write, to study and to see all Europe at the lowest expense. I will clamber through the Clouds and exist. I will get such an accumulation of stupendous recollections that as I walk through the suburbs of London I may not see them” (qtd. in Walker 1). As expressed by Keats, these plans contain echoes of the “atmospheric Romanticism” of Book 1 of Wordsworth’s *Prelude* in which “lines of mist are already transforming into lines of poetry” (Ford 39). Keats’s ambitions might also seem to anticipate the sentiments of Yeats, who was in his turn influenced by Wordsworth. Recollecting the origin of his “Lake Isle of Innisfree,” Yeats said: “I wrote the poem in London when I was about twenty three: one day in The Strand I heard a little tinkle of water and saw in a shop window a little jet of water balancing a ball on the top—it was an advertisement, I think, for cooling drinks—but it set me thinking of Sligo” (Yeats, *Collected Works* 224).

8. Where Yeats imagines a lake-lapped shore removed from the urban environment that generated it and made pristine in memory, however, Keats’s letters stay close to the Irish and Scottish coasts that they represent. They include a notable and memorable encounter with the miserable suburbs of Belfast and its inhabitants as well as remarks on the high cost of living in Ireland. The tone of Keats’s letters from Ireland retain something of the enthusiasm of the young man who set out to garner “an accumulation of stupendous recollections” (qtd. in Walker 1) but also find a way to register the bareness of marginal

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

lives eked out on Irish and Scottish coasts. The journey truly formed a “prologue,” prefacing as it did Keats’s extraordinary outpouring of creative energy in 1819. Critics have explored the geographical coordinates of that moment. James Chandler has shown the significance of America for Keats from late 1818 onward, as the poet “moved into the imaginary cultural space newly occupied by his brother” George (470–71). Meanwhile, a recent collection edited by Katie Garner and Nicholas Roe considers Keats’s Northern walking tour in depth and describes it as “one of the most significant events in his imaginative life” (xvii). The Irish leg of the Scottish tour though has been little discussed and remains a challenge to readers, for reasons that I address here.

9. Why then did the two men add this Irish leg to their Scottish tour? The Ossianic resonances of the basalt landscape of the Giant’s Causeway provide one answer. A noted tourist attraction from the early eighteenth century—the crowning event of any tour of the North of Ireland according to Robin Day, a judge who recorded sights on his circuit as part of a tour of Northern Ireland and Scotland in the course of which he crossed from Donaghadee to Portpatrick in the summer of 1810 (11). In 1818, when Gamble, a British Army surgeon who made three tours of the northern parts of Ireland in 1810, 1812 and 1818, left Belfast to travel to the Giant’s Causeway by stage-car, he met a French man who “had travelled over a considerable part of England, and some parts of Scotland; crossed from Portpatrick to Donaghadee a few days before, and was now on his way to the Giant’s Causeway,” “the grand curiosity of my country” in Gamble’s account (632). J. C. Curwen though speaks for many travellers when he felt “disappointed” enough in the “renowned Giant’s Causeway”

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

to reprise Samuel Johnson's view "that the Giant's Causeway was worth seeing but was not worth going to see" (88).

10. That commonplace dismissal of the Giant's Causeway relates in part to its place amidst a near interchangeable constellation of notable northern Irish littoral sights, including Dunluce Castle and the Carrick a Rede bridge in County Antrim. Such was the familiarity of these coastal places, linked as they were along a recognized tourist itinerary, that when Lady Morgan wished to convey to readers of *The Wild Irish Girl* a picture of Glorvina's home in the Castle of Inismore she appended a footnote suggesting that "[t]hose who have visited the Castle of Dunluce, near the Giant's Causeway, may, perhaps, have some idea of its striking features in this rude draught of the Castle of Inismore" (45). Her editorial note offers an insight into the modular quality of coastal imagination in Irish and Scottish Romanticism, where a much-sketched and discussed coastal sight from the northeast coast of Ireland can stand in for and help to fill out a picture of the far less familiar western Atlantic seaboard. Viewing the Solway firth and the coast of Dumfries and Galloway as he ascended Skiddaw with Keats, Brown remarked on the sudden insignificance of the sights: "Any other Firth and any other coast would have been just the same" (qtd. in Walker 433).

11. Convenient transport links also played their part in Keats's and Brown's decision to travel west. Good transport links across the North Channel must have made the journey seem an easy or natural extension of their tour. Donaghadee had been connected to Port Patrick via a daily mail service since 1791. In August 1795, Lovell and Richard Edgeworth had successfully constructed thirty-foot-high telegraph poles in the facing ports in order to try

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

out their father's new method of "conveying swift and secret intelligence" between Ireland and Britain (Wharton 50–51). Although this particular experiment was not repeated, by 1818, the political economist J. C. Curwen could refer to "the great intercourse between Port Patrick and Donaghadee" (82). Boats carried not only the mail but people, goods and cattle. The crossing was regularly described as "short and safe" while Donaghadee was known as a "neat little town and seaport" ("Donaghadee"). Nathaniel Jefferys's *Englishman's Descriptive Account of Dublin*, which tracks a journey north from Dublin to Donaghadee and westward to Scotland, noted that "the London mail arrives around noon and the packet sails as soon as possible afterwards," describing a passage of "four or five hours" (136). The crossing could be rough: the French traveller De Latocknaye reported that he made the crossing to Scotland in two and a half hours while the return trip to Donaghadee lasted thirteen hours (225).

12. The crossing between Port Patrick and Donaghadee is described in Morgan's novel of 1814, *O'Donnel*, in which a fashionable group of picturesque travellers tour Ireland's northern counties. For these "capricious visitors," it is bad weather that makes the Giant's Causeway an "object of disappointment." In search of novelty, the practised picturesque traveller in that novel, Lady Singleton, wishes to return by Scotland rather than "retracing our steps by Holyhead" (1: 3). But when news reaches them that one of their party, the honourable Mr. Glentworth has died, it is "the result of a severe and neglected cold caught on his unprosperous voyage across the channel, on his way from Donaghadee to Port-Patrick" (2: 85). The news comes via "the fragment of an Edinburgh paper, nearly a month old" suggesting a Scottish-Irish print culture with links reaching across the water. A letter

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

written by Maria Edgeworth in 1804 discusses a request received by a Mr. Mackenzie, a minister at Port Patrick, for her help in promoting his sermons, published in 1800. The Edgeworths (who likely travelled home to Ireland via Port Patrick following a visit to Edinburgh and Glasgow in the spring of 1803) had dined with Mackenzie in Scotland (he “snatched greens from under the beef,” recalled Edgeworth) and though they thought the sermons to be “excellent” (Edgeworth, Letter) were unable to offer the guidance he sought regarding a new copyright and a London publisher.

13. The *Traveller’s Guide to Scotland* (1814) that Keats and Brown may have used refers to Port Patrick as being “situated on the nearest point of the whole island to Ireland, and the passage from it to that kingdom is much resorted to” (Walker 17). Nigel Leask speculates that, rather than the 1814 *Traveller’s Guide to Scotland* suggested by Walker, Keats and Brown may have carried with them James Duncan’s single-volume *Scotch Itinerary* from 1808 (63). An up-to-date pocket-sized guide, Duncan’s book contained detailed descriptions of the numerous new civil and military Scottish roads and included the route from Port Patrick to Dublin among the itineraries listed.

14. These new roads resulted, in part, from government efforts to secure Ireland more closely to Britain in the aftermath of 1798 and the Act of Union. Lord Byron, some six years earlier than Keats, imagined a fanciful version of the journey north and west as a way of protesting the unfair treatment of Irish Catholics within that same Union. Speaking in the House of Lords on April 21, 1812, on the topic of the Earl of Donoughmore’s “Motion for a Committee on the Roman Catholic Claims” and admonishing the government, Byron

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

suggested that Tory ministers might take a trip through England's midland counties and on to Scotland, "from Glasgow to Johnny Groat's," to find out what the people truly thought of them. "If they take a trip from Portpatrick to Donaghadee," he went on, they will meet "four Catholic millions" whose disaffection they secure by refusing to consider measures to alleviate their alienation (Byron 334). For Byron, the rights of those "Catholic millions" call out for justice, and the imaginary journey north is intended to help make their case, the urgency of which is only sharpened for Byron by the Act of Union, a political arrangement that he likened to "the union of a shark with his prey" (333).

15. Byron makes heavy political weather of a crossing whose history reached back over centuries, its long reach expressed in the name of the Scottish port. Economic and cultural connections between Ireland's northeast and Scotland's southwest ran deep. The coal route across the North Channel is among the aspects of ordinary life chronicled by the Reverend Micah Balwidder in John Galt's *Annals of the Parish* (1821) where the traffic with Ireland is known to be "a better trade for bringing up good mariners than the long voyages in the open sea." Once trained up, "the best sailors from our coast" went on to work the Glasgow to Virginia route (Galt 17). The "putting down of the rebels" in 1798 is also an event in the history of the Scottish parish in Galt's novel: "The alarm of the Irish rebellion in this year was likewise another source of affliction." In the novel, Mr. Cayenne looks kindly on the "Irish refugees": "He waited on them with his wife and daughter, supplied them with money, invited them to his house, made ploys to keep up their spirits" (132). Movement between the two countries in 1798 led to the construction of the military road on which Keats and Brown travelled. Army regiments travelled to Ireland while loyalists fled to

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

Scotland via Donaghadee. Port Patrick was “so completely full of military going to Ireland, and fugitives from thence, that we had no hopes of a bed of any kind; we could only get a dirty bed-changer in the inn to eat our dinner” as one contemporary put it.

“A Peep at Little Ireland”

16. By 1818, the Highland tour was very well-trodden territory, and Nigel Leask has shown how Keats and Brown were at pains to avoid the standard journey north through the Trossachs, bypassing Loch Katrine and all the fuss that went with *Lady of the Lake* tourism. In Cumbria, Keats had ascended Skiddaw, from whose summit he had taken in “the coast of Scotland” and “the Irish sea” (Walker 159). Travelling into Scotland, he writes with energy and brio of the “rich and fine” country about Wigton, sticking where possible to “the sea coast part of it.” Then, in a July 2 letter to Fanny Keats, written from Dumfries, Keats simply notes, “Tonight we sleep at Glenluce—tomorrow at Port Patrick and the next day we shall cross in the passage boat to Ireland.” In Galloway, the two men hear the “jabber” of local people while Keats notes how “The barefooted Girls appear very much in keeping—I mean with the Scenery about them.” Near Stranraer, they boarded a stage coach that took them along a new line of road to Port Patrick in Wigtonshire, from where they crossed to County Down “in a jiffy.”

17. Ongoing changes to infrastructure already underway meant that Keats and Brown passed through a rapidly improving landscape. Improvements to travel were noted by Maria Edgeworth that summer: only a month or so later, on August 16, 1818, she sailed from Howth to Holyhead in the company of her half-sister Honora (Edgeworth, *Letters* 75).

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

Developments at Howth (completed in 1817) and elsewhere along Scottish, English, and Irish coasts meant that the harbours of Port Patrick and Donaghadee were thought to be in need of modernization by 1818: “the want of a proper harbour” at Port Patrick was noted when bad weather struck around Christmas 1818. [William Daniell’s aquatint, Port Patrick 1819](#), part of his *A Voyage Round Great Britain*, illustrates the changes made within the year (see fig. 2). New harbours were constructed in Port Patrick and Donaghadee in 1820 and 1821, designed by Scottish engineer John Rennie, whose works included Waterloo, Southwark and London Bridges on the River Thames; he died as works began and was succeeded by his son, John, later Sir John Rennie who worked alongside another Scottish engineer, David Logan.



Fig. 2. William Daniell, “Port Patrick, Wigtonshire,” *Voyage Round Great Britain*, 1816. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative [Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International \(CC BY-NC-SA 4.0\)](#) licence.

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

18. These rapidly developing infrastructural improvements perhaps explain Keats's confidence in seeing the Giant's Causeway and returning to Scotland within seven days: "It is not so far to the Giant's Causeway as we supposed—we thought it 70 and hear it is only 48 miles—so we shall leave one of our knapsacks here at Donoghodee, take our immediate wants and be back in a week" (qtd in Walker 213). The return was even speedier than planned: turning back from Belfast, Keats describes "our quick return from Ireland" (213) and expected to reach Glasgow earlier than hoped. Looking back on the trip in August while waiting to see his friend Keats off on a ship back to London, Brown told C. W. Dilke senior that they had "skudded over to Donaghadee" and returned "in a whirligig,—that is in a hurry" (213). These repeated references to the pace of travel seem to attach themselves to Ireland in particular ways and are notable in the context of a famous Romantic pedestrian journey more often thought of in terms of "slow travel." There are resonances also with Victor Frankenstein's speedy trip to Ireland's northern parts (a visit also paid in 1818) and the "arrowy swiftness" with which his creature's boat "shot across the waters" (121). Frankenstein's fictional journey itself catches the impress of Percy Shelley's 1812 visit to Ireland, when his vessel was blown off course in the Irish Sea, resulting in a journey south to Dublin from a port on Ireland's east coast. And just as *Frankenstein* asks readers to ponder the "fair wind" that speeds Victor and his father away from "the detested shore of Ireland" (132) alongside the agonisingly slow progress of colonial justice, so in Keats's letters we encounter another version of the disjunction between infrastructural and political forms of improvement. In particular, Keats and Brown's "peep ... at little Ireland" (211) register the different temporalities of those types of improvement, as the former accelerates and the latter stagnates, at least for the wandering poor.

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

19. In an 1813 essay on the state of Ireland in the *Edinburgh Review*, Sydney Smith concluded that the country was “stationary in wretchedness,” suffering from political obstructions that blocked a natural human tendency to improvement. If Keats’s letters might be seen at different points to take the temperature of the relationship between improvement and Romanticism so characteristic of Scottish writing of the early nineteenth century, then in relation to Ireland, his first instinct seems to be to sift through cultures in a mode of comparison prompted by the proximity of the two coasts. In the letter to his brother Tom, written on the July 7, having travelled the previous evening, Keats declares: “I am writing now in little Ireland—The dialect on the neighbouring shores of Scotland and Ireland is much the same—yet I can perceive a great difference in the nations from the Chambermaid at this nate Inn kept by Mr Kelly” (qtd. in Walker 169). Having already returned and directing future correspondence on to Glasgow, Keats ruefully told Tom that even the short trip had afforded “too much opportunity to see the worse than nakedness, the rags, the dirt and misery of the poor common Irish,” an excess understood in relation to Scotland: “A Scotch cottage—though in that sometimes the Smoke has no exit but at the door, is a palace compared to an Irish one.” In the same letter, something of a strained effort toward comparative anthropology can be felt: “I shall endeavour when I know more and have thought a little more to give you my thoughts on the differences between the Scotch and the Irish” (qtd. in Walker 171). A few days later, writing from Kirkoswald on the south Ayrshire coast and having seen Ailsa Craig, Keats undertakes (once more for Tom) to “speak as far as I can judge on the Irish and Scotch” (180). Keats at this point of his journey has yet to cross into the Highlands, where he clearly expected comparisons with the Irish

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

to present themselves: on the 2nd of July, he had told Fanny of his plan to “get among the Highlanders—Before we see them we shall pass into Ireland and have a chat with the Paddies, and look at the Giant’s Causeway which you must have heard of” (167).

20. Such Scottish-Irish comparisons drew on forms of cultural knowledge shaped by the archipelago itself: proximity begat prejudices that culture could both represent and disguise. In Nathaniel Jefferys’s tour of 1810, recorded in *An Englishman’s Descriptive Account of Dublin and the Road from Bangor*, the occasion of the Donaghadee to Port Patrick crossing also presents an immediate invitation to compare the Irish and the Scots: “The sudden change which here presents itself, in the minds, manners and habits of the people, from their neighbours on the opposite coast of Ireland, is very striking” (145). But for Jefferys, it is Scotland and not Ireland that lends itself to reveries and to poetry: despite being a “small insignificant place,” Port Patrick is “far more romantic” than Donagahadee (145). And even when faced with Scottish scenery in which “nothing . . . is great in itself,” Jefferys borrows significance from some remembered lines from Ossian which testify to the splendours of a night storm and fill several pages of his tour (145–47).

21. For Keats, poetry enters through the ear, just as for Yeats his lake isle returns as sound (“lake water lapping / And low sounds by the shore”; “the bee-loud glade”). Tim Webb points to Keats’s sensitivities to the cultural specificities of sound throughout the Scottish tour (35). “[W]riting now from little Ireland,” Keats recalls ballads that he heard the previous day while making the sea crossing: “In the Packet yesterday we heard some Ballads from two old Men—one was a romance which seemed very poor—then there was

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

the Battle of the Boyne—then Robin Hood as they call him—‘Before the king you shall go, go, go, before the king you shall go’” (qtd. in Walker 170). In the 1820s, avid ballad collector Thomas Crofton Croker described the “verses current among the Irish” as the means by “which their feelings of revenge or love are kept up for generations” (qtd. in Cronin 138). But the mix of songs heard by Keats testifies to a lively popular musical culture that did not necessarily run on sectarian lines. Lady Morgan described the Battle of the Boyne—a song that she recalled singing as a young girl seeking to gain favour at a new school—as “the Chevy Chase of Ireland,” suggesting a popular common tune rather than a contentious one (*Lady Morgan’s Memoirs* 102). Keats’s famous ballad of that same year, “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” is described by Susan Oliver as expressing an “environmentally mediated aesthetic of absence” that remains disconnected from specific “national ecologies” (67). But might the coastal “soundscape” (Webb 35) resonate in the background of Keats’s poems of 1819, occupying a space between “heard” and “unheard” melodies?

22. Other travellers on this same route more commonly remarked on sights rather than sounds, in particular the spectacle of the two facing coasts (there is no reference either to the roughness of the crossing, though Brown’s letters suggest bad weather in the days just before they travelled). In Jefferys’s description of the journey from Donaghadee to Port Patrick, the sight of Ireland from the Scottish side is singled out as highlight of the crossing: “The passage is about twenty miles—it is generally performed in seven or eight hours, frequently in four; and has been done in two hours and a half. On a clear day the Irish and Scotch coasts being both visible, form a scene of considerable amusement to the passengers

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

who cross by day-light, which is the case for those who come by Scotland” (143). Soon after his return to Scotland, Keats did register the instabilities of sight and perspective on the coast in the sonnet that he wrote when inspired by the sight of Ailsa Craig. “To Ailsa Rock” imagines a marine spectacle registered from shifting ground: on Friday, July 10, Keats noted “The effect of ailsa with the peculiar perspective of the Sea in connection with the ground we stood on, and the misty rain then falling gave me a complete idea of a deluge” (qtd. in Walker 179).

23. Even as that “complete idea” of an island inundated by rain is captured within the sonnet form, however, Keats returns to a prosaic mode of comparative cultural inquiry, giving a lengthy account of the differences between Irish and Scottish peasants in a passage that seems to bend and strain in its effort at even-handed commentary beset by doubt and uncertainty:

As to the “*profanum vulgus*” I must incline to the Scotch—They never laugh—but they are always comparatively neat and clean—Their constitutions are not so remote and puzzling as the Irish—The Scotchman will never give a decision on any point—he will never commit himself in a sentence which may be referred to as a meridian in his notions of things—so that you do not know him—and yet you may come in nigher neighbourhood to him than to the Irishman who commits himself in so many places that it dazes your head—A Scotchman is contended with himself—It seems to me that they are both sensible of the Character they hold in England and act accordingly to Englishmen—Thus the Scotchman will become over grave and over decent and the

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

Irish man over-impetuous. I like a Scotchman best because he is less of a bore—I like the Irishman best because he ought to be more comfortable—The Scotchman has made up his Mind within himself in a sort of snail shell wisdom—The Irishman is full of strong headed instinct—The Scotchman is farther in Humanity than the Irishman—there his will stick perhaps when the Irishman shall be refined beyond him—for the former thinks he cannot be improved; the latter would grasp at it for ever, place but the good plain before him (qtd. in Walker 180).

With both the Irish and the Scottish peasantry understood in terms of England and accordingly pushed down the scale of “Humanity,” the idea of improvement becomes a kind of uneven race toward progress to be observed with English eyes, more comfortable when taking in landscapes, ruins, and views. Keats uses the difference between gravity and impetuosity as a measure of development but allows his distinction to run into a curious account of Irish mobility, in which a strange grasping energy sees them outpace the Scots, who are content within their “snail shell wisdom.”

24. Even this modest admiration for the “neat and clean” and “decent” Scottish people is nothing compared to the delight that Keats and Brown take in the beauty of Scottish landscapes. On their journey from Dumfries to Kirkcudbright and on to Stranraer they “were enchanted with the view,” wrote Brown, “the winding bay—the wood-covered hills—the blue mountains beyond them—the island at the mouth of the bay—the sea at each side of it, and in the distance—the extraordinary fertility of the valley, and the surrounding country” (qtd. in Walker 238). Their arrival in Ireland, however, marked a

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

definitive break with what Matthew Wickman describes as the “recursive loop between Scottish Romanticism and the Picturesque” (61). Once more, Keats and Brown found themselves on the very cusp of improvement. Their journey took them along “the great post road from Belfast to Donaghadee” (“Provincial Intelligence,” February 01, 1814). Plans to improve that route including “an entire new and direct line of Mail Coach road from Donaghadee to *Newtownards*” were presented to the County of Down Grand Jury in August 1817 and began in 1819 (“Provincial Intelligence,” August 16, 1817). The city that they reached, Belfast, was illuminated by gaslight from 1823, two years before Dublin (Dickson 236).

The Sound of the Shuttle

25. In Ireland, Keats and Brown experienced an intense form of the general confusion of identity that afflicted the two men throughout their 1818 travels. Keats’s final letter from Scotland (written from Inverness on August 6) recalled that he and Brown had been “taken for Spectacle venders, Razor sellers, Jewellers, travelling linen drapers, Spies, Excisemen, & many things else” (qtd. in Walker 211). Keats recalled their stop at “a miserable house of entertainment half way between Donaghadee and Belfast” and presents a condensed scene of misrecognition in which he is in turn taken for a Frenchman, a criminal, and a soldier. “Two men sitting at Whiskey one a Labourer and the other I took to be a drunken Weaver—the Labourer took me for a Frenchman and the other hinted at Bounty Money saying he was ready to take it—On calling for Letters at Port Patrick the man snapp’d out ‘what Regiment’?” (211). The exchange recalls Thomas De Quincey’s moment of

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

misrecognition on the Holyhead Road—when he is outraged to be told by the landlady that she has decided that he is not an Irish swindler. The reference to regiments also registers routine military use of the route as regularly reported in the newspapers of the day (“Provincial Intelligence,” November 15, 1817) and noted too in *Annals of the Parish* where the captain’s regiment “was not sent to the plantations, but only over to Ireland” (Galt 64). A major and “very fine” (Jefferys 144) military road ran from Carlisle to Port Patrick, along which Keats and Brown had already travelled, and soldiers making their way to and from Ireland were part of the regular traffic on that route.

26. In the northeast of Ireland, the new lines of road were laid down over watery, peaty ground along which the two men trudged. En route to Belfast, Keats and Brown crossed a “dreary, black, dank, flat and spongy” bog where they saw “poor dirty creatures and a few strong men cutting peat” (qtd. in Walker 171). The raised bog crossed by Keats and Brown was one typical of the kind of peatlands that form in low-lying areas, close to the sea, with porous soil. In Lady Morgan’s *O’Donnel*, the fashionable travellers en route to Donaghadee from Lough Swilly encounter “a treacherous bog” whose wet surface they are only able to traverse via a poorly constructed road made for carrying turf. There are “deep pools covered with rushes, and its deeper ruts covered by moss, which trembled even to the lightest pressures” (247). And in Edgeworth’s *Ennui* (1809), a novel that opens a perspective onto everyday Irish life on the edge of an upland bog, the character of Lord Glenthorn confesses that a sight he first understood in terms of Irish absurdity—turf-cutters working beside bonfires on a hot summer’s day—has its own persuasive cultural logic, given the power of the smoke “to drive away or destroy those myriad of tiny insects, called *midges*” by which

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

the workers are “tormented” in the summer. When the well-meaning Lord Glenthorn builds an “ornamented farm-house” with a slated roof for his old nurse, Ellinor, she dismantles the staircase for firewood and pulls down walls made from peat “to get at the turf” (207). Readers familiar with conventional English housing built by craftsmen who invested time and skills in the fabric of a stone structure are likely to understand this scene in terms of ignorance and vandalism. Edgeworth, though, like Keats, points readers to marginal lives sustained by a subsistence economy built around turf.

27. As with Keats’s account of the “poor dirty creatures,” these descriptions by Morgan and Edgeworth focus on lives framed by environmental pressures, with houses scarcely able to contain their inhabitants. Does this help to make sense of Keats’s comments regarding the “impetiosity of the Irish”? Here are his remarks in full, with their echo of the earlier attribution of “over-impetuous” feelings to Irish peasants:

On our walk in Ireland we had too much opportunity to see the worse than nakedness, the rags, the dirt and misery of the poor common Irish—A Scotch cottage, though in that sometimes the Smoke has no exit but at the door, is a pallace to an Irish one—We could observe that impetiosity in Man Boy and Woman—We had the pleasure of finding our way through a Peat-Bog—three miles long at least—dreary, black, dank, flat and spongy: here and there were poor dirty creatures and a few strong men cutting or carting peat. (qtd. in Walker 171)

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

If impetuosity is understood to mean sudden or violent energy of movement, then the letter may capture a scarcely repressed note of vehemence or anger that relates to the recent experience of the 1798 rebellion. Richard Lovell Edgeworth's letter to Lord Selkirk concerning emigration observes that the Irish are always "ready to combine in any sudden enterprise," another oblique invocation of 1798 (*Memoirs* 2: 312). In John Gamble's tours, Ireland's northern counties are marked by memories of conflict: he refers to "the late rebellion, of which the memory still is green" (622). Gamble observes growing sectarian unease and the poor treatment of the Presbyterians while David Dickson notes that Belfast experienced its first "quasi-sectarian riot" in 1813 (236). Guy Beiner's *Forgetful Remembrance: Social Forgetting and Vernacular Historiography of a Rebellion in Ulster* (2020) tracks the work of memory and forgetting in Ireland's northeastern counties as loyalist Protestants and Presbyterians came to disavow the memory of having participated alongside Catholics in 1798.

28. Having crossed the bog, the pair passed through Newtownards and arrived into Belfast "through a most wretched suburb" where they encountered raucous activity, once more registered as sound: "We heard on passing into Belfast through a most wretched suburb that most disgusting of all noises worse than the Bag pipe, the laugh of a Monkey, the chatter of women *solus* the scream of a Macaw—I mean the sound of the Shuttle" (qtd. in Walker 171). That noise implies mechanized linen or perhaps cotton making and a description in George Benn's *History of the Town of Belfast* from 1823 echoes the one that Keats gives: "In many of the streets and populous roads in the suburbs of the town, particularly at Ballymacarret, the sound of the loom issues almost from every house, and

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

all, with very few exceptions, are employed in the different branches of the cotton trade” (101). Belfast’s “first industrial suburb,” Ballymacarret was laid out on ground that had been reclaimed from the River Lagan and its tidal edge in the 1780s (Dickson 175–76). Along the river to the east, the city’s quays testified to “a lively maritime trade” (Dickson 73), first established in the late seventeenth century and soon to benefit from the transport revolution heralded by the arrival of steam on the Irish Sea around 1820.

29. Originally an urban settlement founded at the lowest fordable point of the River Lagan, where it met the River Farset, Belfast had grown rapidly from about 1780 “in a sustained expansion of wholesale trade and manufacturing that peaked in the early ’90s” (Dickson 337). For Gamble, in 1818, Belfast was “a great commercial” town and “the country around this town is in the highest state of cultivation” (621). But Gamble also notes high levels of migration—“this summer, beyond all former ones” (621)—and vagrancy everywhere. Dickson remarks upon “unprecedented labour disputes in 1815–17” in a city where “the post-war recession hit hard” (241). There was widespread in-migration to towns and cities across Ireland as the consequences of the sudden fall in agricultural prices post Waterloo fell hard upon “those without a stake in the land”: “The abnormal seasons, multiple harvest failures and encompassing fevers of 1816–17 were the time of greatest extremity, the worst since the 1740s (Dickson 238). Food shortages and a breakdown in urban public health in 1817 followed. In January 1818 the Mendicity Institution was established in Dublin and it was in this context that Robert Wilmot-Horton’s advanced state-sponsored emigration schemes for the poor of Ireland (in 1823 and 1825), devised to

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

alleviate poverty but also to inject a spirit of colonial industriousness into an apparently feckless and hopeless Irish workforce.

30. Severe economic distress helps to frame the ugly observations made by Keats during his time in Ireland, written in Scotland with his Irish journey in the past, concerning an old woman whom he met on the road back to Donaghadee:

On our return from Belfast we met a Sadan—the Duchess of Dunghill—It is no laughing matter tho’—Imagine the worst dog kennel you ever saw placed upon two poles from a mouldy fencing—In such a wretched thing sat a squalid old Woman squat like an ape half starved from a scarcity of Biscuit in its passage from Madagascar to the cape,—with a pipe in her mouth and looking out with a round-eyed skinny-lidded, inanity—with a sort of horizontal idiotic movement of her head—squat and lean she sat and puff’d out the smoke while two ragged tattered Girls carried her along—What a thing would be a history of her Life and sensations? (qtd. in Walker 171)

Among the many striking aspects of this passage is Keats’s proximity to the woman he can only understand in terms of distance across space and species: he can see not only her trembling head and her mouth but her very eyelids, making her quite different from the abstract Irish and Scottish men invoked elsewhere in the letters. The final question resonates strongly with the altogether more familiar poetic voice found in the poet’s letter to his brother in 1817—“O for a life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts” (*Letters* 184)—but the mode is cautious and questioning rather than exclamatory or exultant.

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

31. Keats, a former medical student, was surely alert to the dangers of disease. In 1818, Ireland was in the midst of a horrendous typhus epidemic that may have claimed as many as 100,000 lives. Seven thousand weavers in Belfast were said to have died between 1817 and 1819, years that coincided with a slump in the cotton trade (Bardon 69–70). Contemporary newspapers are full of warnings about typhus in Belfast, including advice on hygiene that specifies the danger of dunghills, middens, and heaps of rotting waste: “Great attention should be paid to cleanliness: dunghills and other putrid substances should be removed from the neighbourhood; the walls of houses should be whitewashed with lime and the floors carefully washed and kept perfectly free from filth” (“Typhus Fever”). John Gamble suggests that more women than men were affected by typhus and the likely exposure of women to disease in domestic environments lends credibility to his suggestion (520).

32. The relative positions of Keats and the woman that he observes bears further scrutiny: she is seated and carried about; he is on foot, tired and out of sorts. The ironic aristocratic title that he bestows on her drives the distance between them further in the direction of satire. In Mary Prince’s history of her enslavement, published in London in 1831, she recounts how she was given the name “Mary, Princess of Wales,” as recorded in her copy of a spelling book, dated August 30, 1817. The nineteenth-century editor of *The History of Mary Prince* remarked in a footnote that “[i]t is a common practice with the colonists to give ridiculous names of this description to their slaves; being, in fact, one of the numberless modes of expressing the habitual contempt with which they regard the negro race” (Prince 29n). Is there something of this same “habitual contempt” in Keats’s

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

language? Perhaps the woman's elevation makes her seem even stranger in the eyes of the walking poet. This might explain the note of nasty mockery that Keats adds to the "masculine, middle-class self-fashioning" (Jarvis, qtd. in Leask 59) usually associated with romantic pedestrianism.

33. Timothy Webb remarks on the "extraordinary and unprepossessing sequence of adjectives (squalid, squat, and squab, 37) and it does not seem out of place to suggest a connection with the tone and language of Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal*. The "inanity" of the woman's gaze finds a terrible echo in the observations of the American journalist Asenath Nicholson during the Great Famine. Describing "the first starving person that I saw," while staying at the port town of Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire), Nicholson asked her readers to imagine the effects of "the progress of protracted hunger" on a human body dying by degrees: "Life will struggle on to maintain her lawful hold if occasional scanty supplies are given, till the walking skeleton is reduced to a state of inanity" (38). It seems that this very "inanity" or vacuity generates Keats's resonant question, expressed as it is in public and exclamatory mode, rushing in to fill an imagined blank: "What a thing would be a history of her Life and sensations?"

34. If, as Carol Kyros Walker attests, "Keats's journey was defined in part by what he had read and heard about the places he was visiting and in part by what his own creative imagination brought to the walk," then how can we account for this description? Heidi Thomson reads the figure of the Duchess of Dunghill as both a caricature and "a testimonial of reluctant care for extreme human decrepitude" (141). The shift between the two registers, of comedy

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

and concern, is unsettling. Leask notes a general tendency for Keats's Highland letters to move between "'Cockney' facetiousness" and "romantic nature description" (70), but the language here encompasses a longer trajectory. Keats seems to know and to echo accounts of the abjection of the Irish that are familiar in colonial literature from Edmund Spenser's *View of the Present State of Ireland* onward:

Out of every corner of the woods and glens they came creeping forth upon their hands, for their legs could not bear them; they looked like anatomies of death, they spake like ghosts, crying out of their graves (101).

Andrew Motion describes the old woman as "a Spenserian monstrosity" (280). We know that Spenser, his "first love among the poets," was on Keats's mind during these long summer days by a reference to Brown as "the Red Cross Knight" (qtd. in Walker 213). Greg Kucich suggests that Keats "might have been contemplating Spenser's Irish hardships when he visited Ireland in the summer of 1818. Certainly the trip made him associate Ireland's miserable living conditions with the ubiquitous grief of Spenser's poetic world" (187). Kucich also argues Keats, while working on "Endymion," gained a new appreciation for Spenser's "sensitivity" in writing about sorrow and suffering. Andrew Motion suggests that "Keats became increasingly doubtful about Spenser's politics" around 1818, citing the "antique verse" that Keats penned inside his own copy of *The Faerie Queene* at the end of Book V (284).²

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

35. While ideas of wildness were remade in this period within new romantic registers, they did not lose their old connection with forms of cultural denigration. In Galt's *Annals of the Parish*, when migrant Irish workers arrive in the southwest coast of Scotland they are regarded as "a troop of wild Irish, seeking for work as they said, but they made free quarters, for they herring the roosts of the clachan, and cutted the throat of a sow of ours, the carcass of which they no doubt intended to steal" (35). We encounter this language again in Humphry Davy, who made his own journeys between Port Patrick and Donaghadee, taking sketches as he travelled, noting the geological composition of the distinctive basaltic landscape. (One pair of sketches feature Dunluce Castle on its basalt outcrop.) He wrote to his wife-to-be, Jane Apreece, in November 1811, describing Connemara as a place only scarcely within the reach of improvement with a people possessed of a savagery sadly lacking in nobility:

The people of Conamara are not so interesting as the country.—In the wildest scenes of a mountain country, the cultivated man perhaps most feels his powers; & rocks & stoney vallies & cataracts & clouds at the same time that they delight the eye display a contrast by which his dominion over the elements is made evident & shew how much his efforts have tended to increase life & happiness; but in a moral wilderness there is no beauty & little grandeur.—Man as a savage chilled by poverty; robbed by oppression of his *rude* virtues can awaken pity only or pity mixed with anger.
(Davy 132)

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

Keats's close-up view of the old Irish woman he meets in Belfast, though, departs from Davy's distant voicing of the views of "the cultivated man" just as his references to Ireland offer a fuller picture of human life on the roads than many contemporary travel narratives.

Parting the Irish from the Scottish Shores

36. Keats returned to Scotland with first-hand experience of Belfast's epidemic and the bare lives eked out on Ireland's roads. Did those encounters in turn shape Keats's ability to imagine the body as a "burial ground" (Nersessian 94) in the subsequent writing? The difficulty of drawing a line from these days in Ireland to the later writing occupies the remainder of my essay.

37. When Keats and Brown turned back from Belfast to make their way back to Donaghadee, they must have known the regular daily schedule of the mail boat. "We stopped very little in Ireland," Keats wrote, blaming the expense and hard going on the road. In July of 1818, the Church of Ireland clergyman Charles Robert Maturin, whose *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) is a classic of Gothic literature, published *Women*, a tale of doomed love and damaged psychology. Toward the end of the novel, its heroine remarks on "that terrible sensation so common in the imaginations of the Irish, of a being whom we believe not to be alive, yet knowing not to be dead" (2: 321). To expand on the idea, Maturin refers to the prophecies found in the Scottish ballad of Thomas of Ercildoun as well as Wordsworth's "Lucy Gray." Keats too sought out a frame of reference for such a "sensation" just months before his own death when he wrote to Charles Brown that "I have an habitual feeling of

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

my real life having past, and that I am leading a posthumous existence” (*Letters*, November 30, 1820).

38. Once back in Scotland, Keats and Brown struck out for Burns country, Dumfriesshire being marked for Keats by Burns’s presence just as the Lakes were experienced via Wordsworth. There, the Duchess of Dunghill remained with Keats, who writes of sensations deadened by “scenery and visitings”—including disappointments borne of seeing Burns’s tomb in Dumfries and the “flummery” of the birthplace cottage at Alloway—even as he looks forward to seeing Loch Lomond and Ben Nevis. Keats’s own ambitions were awakened by the heights glimpsed from the Ayrshire coasts, “a grand Sea view terminated by the black mountains of the isle of Arran”: “How is it they did not beckon Burns to some grand attempt at Epic” (qtd. in Walker 181). Keats’s plans for *Hyperion* may well be taking shape at this point, as Leask and others have suggested. While an earlier Scottish letter reflects on the value of “Fancy” over “remembrance,” it is as if imagination itself falters when in Ireland. In the previous letter, addressed to John Hamilton Reynolds, Keats opens on a jokey rendition of the trip to date—“Mountains, Rivers, Lakes, dells, glens, Rocks, and Clouds, with beautiful, enchanting, gothic, picturesque fine, delightful, enchanting, Grand, sublime—a few Blisters &c.” The same letter though sets the Irish journey to one side, finding it at once thin in mnemonic texture and dense in visual detail: “The short stay we made in Ireland has left few remembrances, but an old woman in a dog-kennel Sedan with a pipe in her mouth is what I can never forget. I wish I may be able to give you an idea of her” (qtd. in Walker 176).

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

39. The Ireland in which Keats tried to clamber through the clouds and “exist” was a society reeling from the effects of economic depression that set in after Waterloo, a “regional society,” as Breandán MacSuibhne describes it in his introduction to Gamble’s tours, “pummelled by a combination of environmental, economic and epidemiological blows . . . close to collapse” (lxxii). Gamble in 1818 saw “social dislocation” everywhere and wrote from his native Strabane a striking account of the wretched condition of the wandering poor, whose presence had begun to challenge customary practices of hospitality:

Hordes of wandering beggars, impelled by the cravings of hunger, carried the distemper from door to door; and, from their wretched habiliments, wafted contagion far and wide. Almost the entire mountain population, literally speaking, took up their beds and walked; and, with their diseased blankets wrapped around them, sought in the low lands, the succour which charity could not give, but at the hazard of life. Irish usages have always opened a ready way to the beggar. . . . but they now, in frightful numbers, besieged every house, and forced their way into kitchens, parlours, and even rooms the most remote (519).

Passing from Dublin through Meath in July 1818, Gamble wrote “of the distress which the poor of this devoted land of late endured, from the accumulated pressure of cold, hunger, and disease” (487). And yet when Gamble requested a book in a Lurgan inn, expecting “an odd volume of Don Quixote or Roderick Random,” he was offered instead “the second volume of Mme De Stael’s Germany”: “this is an age of refinement as well as knowledge,” Gamble notes (619).

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

40. The emerging role played by an Irish Romantic literature in that age of knowledge comes into view via Keats. We know that in 1818 and 1819 Keats understood his poetry with and against the works of Irish writers Mary Tighe and Thomas Moore (Chandler 396), but the Belfast trip brings into view a book that Keats never mentioned and most likely did not know, a collection of poems by Hugh Tynan of Donaghadee, published by subscription in 1801. Along with a number of subscribers from Port Patrick, the list includes the schoolmaster and writer Samuel Thomson along with weaver poet James Orr of Ballycarry and one Walter Scott (“Advocate, Edinburgh”). Tynan, who died aged twenty-one, is described in the preface to his *Poems* as a young poet living in a “remote” part of Ireland, a potential peer of Burns, Yearsley, and Chatterton (Orr 56). Tynan worked as a clerk in Donaghadee custom house as well as teaching “in a little school” in the town, and his writing takes account of his coastal location: “Here, at our feet, St. George’s Channel roars / Parting the Irish from the Scottish shores.” His poem “An Evening spent in and near Donaghadee” registers the everyday realities of marine traffic, describing the evening breeze that

with gentleness wafts o’er

The *packet* from the neighb’ring Scottish shore.

I join the crowd that throng about the pier

To gaze on strangers, and the news to hear (Tynan 6).

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

His “Verses Written in the Ruins of Dunskey Castle, Portpatrick” assesses the potential claims to fame of

A young Hibernian Bard—“proud of the name,”
Who newly from his native fields came o’er,
With heartfelt pleasure would take up the theme,
And hail thee from thy wild romantic shore (74).

Dunskey Castle’s location on a cliff a short distance from Port Patrick meant that it was a noted sight on the crossing to Donaghadee (see fig. 3). For the young Irish writer, Scotland’s ruins evoke romantic introspections on the march of “ruthless time” and a chance to measure his own reputation (his “rhymer’s fate”) against the “rank and estimation” of the Scottish poets. An implied reference to Burns is made explicit by other poems in the collection while James Orr wrote elegies on the deaths of both Tynan and Burns.

41. Looking at Tynan’s writing via the prism of Keats’s journey, we can see his efforts to bring both shorelines into view as he tried and failed to make a poetic reputation across the body of water that separated the northeast of Ireland from the southwest of Scotland. To this extent, Tynan’s name might be joined to those of poet Jeremiah Joseph Callanan and novelist Gerald Griffin, both Irish romantic writers whose lives were also marked by difficult passages across bodies of water. Callanan died young and without fame in Lisbon in 1829, having travelled there to work as a tutor to an Irish merchant family while Griffin

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

left his London literary life behind to end his days in the North Monastery in Cork, devoting his final years to educating the poor children of a rapidly declining port city at the edge of the Atlantic world.



Fig. 3. William Daniell, “Dunskey Castle, near Port Patrick, Wigtonshire,” *Voyage Round Great Britain*, 1816. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative [Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International \(CC BY-NC-SA 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/) licence.

42. John Gamble prefaced his account of his 1812 tour of Ireland’s northern counties with an apology for having omitted details of science, topography, and “natural curiosities”: “Men and women, however, are of more importance than pillars or columns” (Gamble 231). The idea that attention paid to the basalt pillars and columns of the Giant’s Causeway might distract attention from the plight of the people resonates with Keats’s suggestion, found in a letter written just as he is about to cross into Scotland from England, that he and Brown were becoming “mere creatures of Rivers, Lakes, & mountains”: “I fear our continual

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

moving from place to place, will prevent our becoming learned in village affairs” (qtd. in Walker 159–60). In both cases, the two men reject coastal sights in favour of a more meaningful encounter with people.

43. The same letter, addressed to Tom, contains Keats’s sonnet “On Visiting the Tomb of Burns,” written from Dumfries, located on the River Nith before it widens and flows south into Solway Firth (Burns’s Sweet Afton is a tributary of the Nith). The proprietor of the inn at which Keats and Brown stayed in Dumfries, Mr. Murray, assured the travellers that they “had come by the wrong road for a beautiful country”: “Had we gone some eight or ten miles round” and taken in the “sea coast,” wrote Brown, “we should have witnessed, he assured us, the finest scenery in the south of Scotland.” While John Gamble is more explicitly critical of the literary conventions of travel narrative throughout his tours, both he and Keats express forms of disappointment and scepticism about their journeys that routinely connect to the bodies of water across which they pass. Gamble’s 1812 tour began with a violent sea storm: the boat on which he travelled was wrecked on the east coast of Ireland and he (along with thirty-seven other passengers) was saved by some Skerries fishermen. Keats’s journey ended with a safer journey by sea: when Keats contracted a “violent cold” that left him “too thin and fevered to proceed on our journey,” Brown saw him “off in the Smack for London” from Inverness.

44. Vividly disagreeable as they are, the remarks made by Keats about Ireland did not leave a marked literary or cultural legacy (by contrast, think what the poet Ciaran Carson made of John Ruskin’s account of Belfast). Nor have they been taken up and made part of the fabric

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

of our understanding of Irish Romanticism. But in so far as they give voice to a quintessentially romantic dilemma encountered in a highly specific place—the troubled relationship between culture, people, and place experienced by Keats as he made his way to and from Belfast in 1818—his letters can be seen to inscribe the limits imposed upon the creative imagination by the crowded, miserable landscapes of pre-Famine Ireland. And because those letters also capture and condense the experience of travel across the Irish sea, Keats’s remarks prompt an awareness of the cultural imprint of a colonial infrastructure made with and around water, at once the result of travel networks so long-lived, entrenched and extensive as to be nearly invisible and an experience that is crystallized within highly singular images that continue to command attention—among them Keats’s encounter with the poor wandering woman whom he calls “the Duchess of Dunghill.” In this meeting, the “consciousness of history” (Chandler 408) that so distinguished Keats’s writing from around 1818 seems both to dissolve and to rematerialize as a conditional, contingent query that expresses a desire for knowledge borne of boggy roads and coastal travel: “What a thing would be a history of her Life and sensations?”

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

Works Cited

- Bardon, Jonathan. *Belfast: An Illustrated History*. Blackstaff Press, 1982.
- Beiner, Guy. *Forgetful Remembrance: Social Forgetting and Vernacular Historiography of a Rebellion in Ulster*. Oxford UP, 2020.
- Benn, George. *History of the Town of Belfast*. London, 1823.
- Byron, Lord. *The Works of Lord Byron: With His Letters and Journals*. Vol. 6, London, 1833.
- Chandler, James. *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism*. U of Chicago P, 1998.
- Cronin, Maura. "Popular Politics, 1815–1845." *Cambridge History of Ireland*, edited by James Kelly, vol. 3, Cambridge UP, 2018, pp. 128–50.
- Curwen, J. C. *Observations on the State of Ireland, principally directed to its Agriculture and Rural Population*. London, 1818. 2 vols.
- Davy, Humphry. *Collected Letters of Humphry Davy, 1809–1816*. Edited by Tim Fulford and Sharon Ruston, vol. 2, Oxford UP, 2020.
- Day, Robin. Diary. 18 August 1801–27 August 1801. Royal Irish Academy Manuscript 12 W 15 (3).
- De Latocknaye. *A Frenchman's Walk Through Ireland, 1796–7*. Blackstaff Press, 1984.
- Dickson, David. *The First Irish Cities*. Yale UP, 2021.
- "Donaghadee." *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 22 February 1817.
- Duncan, Ian, et al. "Introduction." *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism*, edited by Leith Davis et al., Cambridge UP, 2004, pp. 1–19.
- Edgeworth, Maria. *Ennui*. Edited by Jane Desmarais et al., vol. 1, Pickering and Chatto, 1999.

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

- . *Letters from England, 1813–1844*. Oxford UP, 1971.
- . Letter to Frances Edgeworth. National Library of Ireland, MS 10166/472.
- Edgeworth, Richard Lovell, with Maria Edgeworth. *Memoirs*. London, 1821. 2 vols.
- Ford, Thomas H. *Wordsworth and the Poetics of Air*. Cambridge UP, 2018.
- Galt, John. *Annals of the Parish*. Edited by Robert P. Irvine. Edinburgh UP, 2020.
- Gamble, John. *Society and Manners in Early-Nineteenth Century Ireland*. Edited by Breandán MacSuibhne, Field Day Press, 2011.
- Garner, Katie, and Nicholas Roe. “Introduction.” *John Keats and Romantic Scotland*, edited by Katie Garner and Nicholas Roe, Oxford UP, 2022, pp. xvii–xxvi.
- Jefferys, Nathaniel. *An Englishman’s Descriptive Account of Dublin and the Road from Bangor*. London, Cadell and Davies, 1810.
- Keats, John. “In after time a sage of mickle lore.” *Mapping Keats’s Progress: A Critical Chronology*, 2018, johnkeats.uvic.ca/poem_in_after_time_a_sage_of.html.
- . *The Letters of John Keats, 1814–1821: Volume 1, 1814–1818*. Edited by Hyder Edward Rollins, Cambridge UP, 2011.
- Kucich, Greg. *Keats, Shelley, and Romantic Spenserianism*. Pennsylvania State UP, 1991.
- Land, Isaac. “Tidal Waves: The New Coastal History.” *Journal of Social History*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2017, pp. 731–43.
- Leask, Nigel. “‘Werry romantic . . . among these Mountains & Lakes’: John Keats and the Highland Tour.” *John Keats and Romantic Scotland*, edited by Katie Garner and Nicholas Roe, Oxford UP, 2022, pp. 56–71.
- Maturin, Charles Robert. *Women*. London, 1818. 3 vols.
- Morgan, Lady. *France in 1829–30*. Vol. 1, London, 1830.

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

———. *Italy*. Vol. 2, 1821.

———. *Lady Morgan's Memoirs: Autobiography, Diaries and Correspondence*. Vol. 1, London, 1862.

———. *O'Donnel: A National Tale*. London, 1814. 3 vols.

———. *The Wild Irish Girl: A National Tale*. Oxford, 1999.

Motion, Andrew. *Keats*. Faber, 1997.

Nersessian, Anahid. *Keats's Odes: A Lover's Discourse*. University of Chicago Press, 2021.

Nicholson, Asenath. *Annals of the Famine in Ireland, in 1847, 1848, and 1849*. New York, 1851.

Oliver, Susan. *Walter Scott and the Greening of Scotland: Emergent Ecologies of a Nation*. Cambridge UP, 2021.

Orr, Jennifer. *Literary Networks and Dissenting Print Culture in Romantic-Period Ireland*. Palgrave, 2015.

Prince, Mary. *The History of Mary Prince*. Edited by Sarah Salih, Penguin, 2000.

"Provincial Intelligence." *Saunders's News-Letter*, 01 February 1814, 16 August 1817, 15 November 1817.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein: The 1818 Text*. Norton, 1996.

Smith, Sydney. "Essay." *Edinburgh Review*, vol. 43, 1813, pp. 340–64.

Spenser, Edmund. *View of the Present State of Ireland*. Edited by Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley, Blackwell, 1997.

Thomson, Heidi. "Keats's Muses 'In the Midst of Meg Merrilies' Country': Meg, Mnemosyne, Moneta and Autumn." *Keats's Places*, edited by Richard Margraff Turley, Palgrave, 2018, pp. 135–56.

Tynan, Hugh. *Poems by the late Hugh Tynan of Donaghadee*. Belfast, 1803.

Romanticism on the Net #79 (Fall 2022)

“Typhus Fever.” *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 29 September 1817.

Walker, Carol Kyros. *Walking North with Keats*. Edinburgh UP, 2021.

Wharton, Joanna. “The Optical Telegraph and Maria Edgeworth.” *Technology in Irish Literature and Culture*, edited by Margaret Kelleher and James O’Sullivan, Cambridge UP, 2023, pp. 49–64.

Webb, Timothy. “Impulsive Aeronauts and Railway Rationalists: Irish and Scottish in the Romantic Dictionary.” *Scotland, Ireland, and the Romantic Aesthetic*, edited by David Duff and Catherine Jones, Bucknell UP, 2007, pp. 32–54.

Wickman, Matthew. “Travel Writing and the Picturesque.” *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Romanticism*, edited by Murray Pittock, Edinburgh UP, 2022, pp. 61–71.

Yeats, W. B. *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*. Vol. 10, Scribner, 2010.

Notes

¹ Thomas Crofton Croker glossed the term to mean “song” in his manuscript *Ballad History of Ireland*.

² Where Book V of *The Faerie Queen* advocates for the violent Elizabethan regime in Ireland via the figures of Artegall and Talus, Keats’s poem, written in mock antique style, has a giant named Typographus who blinds Artegall and Talus. Books enact a vicious victory as “the Giant, strengthened by a progressive education, defeats his reactionary foes” (Kucich 229):

In after-time, a sage of mickle lore
Y-cleped Typographus, the Giant took,
And did refit his limbs as heretofore,
And made him read in many a learned book,
And into many a lively legend look;
Thereby in goodly themes so training him,
That all his brutishness he quite forsook,
When, meeting Artegall and Talus grim,
One he struck stone-blind, the other’s eyes wox dim. (Keats, “In after time”)