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RESUMO

'Dando Voz às Pessoas nas Sombras' – O Contributo de *The Silent People* de Walter Macken para uma Compreensão da Identidade na Pré-Fome e Fome na Irlanda.

Esta dissertação discute a contribuição da literatura, com particular referência a *The Silent People* de Walter Macken, para compreender a Identidade Irlandesa antes e durante a Grande Fome. Muitas interpretações históricas da Fome Irlandesa se escreveram ao longo dos anos e, sem questionar a sua importância, argumentar-se-á que estas histórias são limitadas pela sua própria natureza. A documentação dos acontecimentos históricos requer uma abordagem verificável, empírica e quantitativa que não consegue captar a essência da vida real. Margaret Kelleher refere-se a um '' grande vazio'' na nossa compreensão deste período. O papel que a literatura pode desempenhar no preenchimento desta lacuna será avaliado. Através de uma avaliação de poemas selecionados de Seamus Heaney, serão identificados aspetos chave da contribuição da literatura para a nossa compreensão da identidade Irlandesa nestes anos.

A história é muitas vezes vista através de lentes daqueles que procuram validar a sua própria narrativa, que nem sempre reflete a complexidade das pessoas e dos acontecimentos. Mesmo os historiadores que se preocupam com as minúcias de datas, factos e estatísticas perdem muitas vezes de vista a história humana em toda a sua crueza que se esconde por baixo do detalhe. À luz disto, será examinada a distinta contribuição de Water Macken's *The Silent People* para uma compreensão da identidade irlandesa nos anos da Grande Fome. Isto envolverá em primeiro lugar um olhar sobre Macken, o homem e escritor, assim como uma avaliação de como ele tem sido visto pelos seus pares e por críticos. Seguir-se-á um esboço de como *The Silent People* é verdadeiramente representativo do pensamento de Heaney sobre a identidade. Walter Macken tinha uma visão literária única - escrever a história do seu próprio povo do ponto de vista do homem comum. Este projeto irá detalhar a forma como ele dá um destaque único à História irlandesa, dando voz a essas pessoas na sombra. Delineará como ele faz a ponte entre uma versão míope e por vezes icónica da história e uma versão que mostra a história em toda a sua crueza. Finalmente, mostrarei que Macken está empenhado em destacar o sofrimento dos inocentes, o que dá ao seu trabalho um cariz político distinto. Argumentar-se-á que Macken não tem medo de assumir as suas convicções, embora nos seus termos.

Palavras-chave: Fome, Heaney, História, Literatura, Macken.

ABSTRACT

'Giving a voice to the people in the shadows' – The Contribution of Walter Macken's *The Silent People,* to our understanding of Irish Identity in Pre-Famine and Famine Ireland.

This dissertation discusses the contribution of literature, with particular reference to Walter Macken's *The Silent People,* to our understanding of Irish Identity in pre-famine and famine Ireland. Many historical interpretations of the Famine have been written over the years and their importance is not in question but it is argued that these traditional recorded histories are limited by their very nature. The documentation of historical events requires a verifiable, empirical, quantitative approach which fails to capture the essence of real life. Margaret Kelleher refers to a 'gaping hole' in our understanding of this period. The role that literature plays in filling this gap is evaluated as is the extent of the literary response to the Famine years.

Through an evaluation of selected poems of Seamus Heaney, key aspects of what literature contributes to an understanding of Irish identity during these years, are identified. A unique challenge, implicit in Heaney's words, is also identified. Writers are urged to move beyond blind adherence to unquestioned doctrines of the past and retrieve what lies at its essence. History is so often viewed through the lens of those who seek to hand on their own narrative so it doesn't always reflect the complexity of the people and events. Many historians, preoccupied with the minutiae of dates, facts and statistics often lose sight of the human story in all its rawness that lies hidden beneath the detail. In light of this, the distinct contribution of Water Macken's *The Silent People* to our understanding of Irish identity in the Famine years is examined. This involves a look at Macken the man and writer as well as an evaluation of how he has been seen by both peers and critics. This is followed by an outline of how *The Silent People* is truly representative of Heaney's thoughts on identity and how it meets Heaney's challenge head on. Walter Macken had a distinct literary vision - to write the history of his own people from the viewpoint of the common man. This project details how he puts a unique spotlight on Irish History by giving a voice to those in the shadows. It outlines how he bridges the gap between a myopic and often jaundiced version of history and one which shows history in all its rawness. Finally, it shows how Macken is committed to highlighting the suffering of the innocent giving his work a clear political undertone. It is argued that Macken is not afraid to nail his colours to the cross, albeit on his terms.

Key words: Famine, Heaney, History, Literature, Macken.

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Preface: Literature – The Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart!

I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,
I sought it daily for six weeks or so.
Maybe at last being but a broken man
I must be satisfied with my heart, although
Winter and summer till old age began
My circus animals were all on show,
Those stilted boys, that burnished chariot,
Lion and woman and the Lord knows what.

What can I but enumerate old themes,
First that sea-rider Oisin led by the nose
Through three enchanted islands, allegorical dreams,
Vain gaiety, vain battle, vain repose,
Themes of the embittered heart, or so it seems,
That might adorn old songs or courtly shows;
But what cared I that set him on to ride,
I, starved for the bosom of his fairy bride.

And when the Fool and Blind Man stole the bread
Cuchulain fought the ungovernable sea;
Heart mysteries there, and yet when all is said
It was the dream itself enchanted me:
Character isolated by a deed
To engross the present and dominate memory.
Players and painted stage took all my love
And not those things that they were emblems of.

Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind but out of what began?
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone
I must lie down where all the ladders start
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

(Excerpts from The Circus Animals Desertion, W.B.Yeats, 1939)

We can't help but empathise with the ageing poet in his desperate and seemingly futile search for inspiration. Six weeks of fruitless toiling have yielded little. "Where will that elusive poetic theme come from?" he seems to ask in exasperation. He is resigned to "enumerating old themes" and characters. Revisiting can bring new perspectives however and just as Yeats recalls Oisin the "sea-rider" and his travels to the "three enchanted islands" so too does he come to realise that he was secretly "starved for the bosom of his fairy bride." Likewise, when he recalls his musings of the hero Cuchulain and his battles with the sea while "the Fool and the Blind Man stole the bread", he is struck by the fact that he is actually "enchanted" by the dream:

Character isolated by a deed
To engross the present and dominate memory.
Players and painted stage took all my love
And not those things that they were emblems of.

Can it be that Yeats has inadvertently answered his own question? Indeed, he seems to come to some kind of epiphanic moment. Of course! Great poetry comes out of the ugly, the ordinary, the downtrodden and this is where the poet must return to find new inspiration (Tearle, 2019). He must lie down "where all the ladders start" in the "foul rag and bone shop of the heart."

The Circus Animals' Desertion' is a poem about the intertwining of life and art (Worth, 1999:239). Truth doesn't come from that multi-hued yet distanced and non-descript vision but rather it comes through the "old kettles, old bottles and that broken can". There is ordinariness to the human story that is not perceptible unless we actually open ourselves up to it. To fully appreciate the plight of a people one has to be drawn into their story. Literature brings us beyond what is ostensibly verifiable and leads us to the rawness and brittleness of the human condition. Literature enables us to walk in those shadows, to walk with the people. "Beautiful poetry springs from unbeautiful origins, from the curious bric-a-brac of everyday experience" (Tearle 2019). Like Beckett, whose characters must venture down among "the trash" in order to find their right way (Worth 1999:239), the "foul rag and bone shop of the heart" is where story must begin. It is where Macken begins.

INTRODUCTION

October 1845. A putrefying stench of decay filled the air. *Phytophthora Infestans*, a previously unknown fungus, had started to ravage the leaves and tubers of the 'lumper' potato crop, the main food source for many of Ireland's long-suffering people. Similar scenes were repeated along Ireland's west coast from North Connaught all the way down to Cork in South-West Munster. And so started what was to become known as *An Gorta Mór* – The Great Hunger. That nauseating odour of decay and death which was to become a feature of Irish life right up to the 1850s, was to embed itself in the national consciousness – indeed, it was to become permanently and ineradicably stamped on the very soul of the nation.

The Great Potato Famine of 1845-9 "opened up an abyss that swallowed up many hundreds of thousands of impoverished Irish people" (Foster, 1988:318). More than one million people succumbed to typhus, dysentery and scurvy or simply starved to death, and a further two million emigrated to Canada and the US on disease ridden *coffin ships*[1]. Terry Eagleton called it the "greatest social disaster of 19th Century Europe with the characteristics of a low level nuclear attack" (cited in Kennedy, 1999:15) and Michael Davitt, referred to it as 'the holocaust of humanity' (1904:50 cited in Kinealy, 1997:2). In fact, the high population losses make the Irish Famine one of the most lethal in modern world history. Nearly one hundred and seventy years later and Ireland has not recovered demographically from its consequences. Within Europe Ireland is the only country to have a smaller population than it had in 1840 (Kinealy, 1997:2). The effects of the famine went way beyond demographics however. It can be argued that it profoundly altered the cultural and political landscape of Ireland as well as opening up a gaping wound in the Irish spirit which has not fully healed to this day (Broderick, 1967:17).

There have been many historical interpretations of the Irish Famine written over the years (some of which I will refer to in the course of this project), and the importance of these histories cannot be devalued in any way. However, the traditional documentation of historical events has shortcomings, especially when it comes to the recording of an event as profoundly destructive and divisive as the Irish Famine. Terry Eagleton reminds us that the traditional recording of our past is first and foremost a positivist pursuit (1995:22). Indeed, the historical documentation of events by its very nature presumes a scientific, quantitative approach. Of course key moments in history must, up to a certain point, be

[1] Ships which left Ireland full of Irish immigrants trying to escape the Famine became known as coffin ships. The ships which made the perilous voyage were invariably overcrowded, lacking in the legal quotas of provisions and water and were dangerously antique in construction (Woodham-Smith, 1962:216).

analysed in verifiable, empirical data but it is difficult to overlook the fact that such a vision of events is limited to a vast kaleidoscope of contour and detail. As Eagleton implies - there is something missing!

1. LITERATURE, HISTORY AND IDENTITY

1.1 The Narrowed Lens - Can literature fill that gap?

Wilson M. Hudson reminds us that the founders of Irish tradition, the ancient filid,[2] did not observe a distinction between history and fiction. They were both historians and poets and while they sought to keep alive "the genealogies of kings and heroes" and all else that was important for them, they equally gave illumination to the reality of life for the Irish in ancient times by celebrating their deeds and "telling tales of courtships, enchantments, and other adventures" (1951:107). We can thus say that their poems, songs and stories are inextricably linked to their history, but yet they somehow transcend this history. In fact, they are so much more than a recording of events. For generations of Irish these poems, stories and songs were their most valued and sacred possessions. Yes, they are first and foremost about self-preservation, but they also give insights into so many of those primordial questions posed by generation after generation of pre-Christian and early Christian Irish. We can say that they were born out of an innate necessity to narrate the apparently irreconcilable complexities of their existence as a people. Levi Strauss suggests that people define themselves by their myths and stories (Thury and Devinney, 2012: 280-284). Maybe we can say that the seanchaí and the filid are the illuminators of culture, identity and the reality of ancient Irish life in all its manifestations and guises.

When delivering his inaugural lecture at Oxford in 1904, Professor C. H. Firth asked rhetorically whether history is a science or an art. He continued by saying that to him "truth seems to lie between these two extremes. History is neither, but it partakes of the nature of both" (quoted in Peterfield Trent, 1906:456). Some 60 years earlier, Lord Macaulay[3] had said that "history, at least in its state of ideal perfection, is a compound of poetry and philosophy" (1906:454). Terry Eagleton's claim that most modern historians are "unwitting positivists" clearly suggests however, that they have long since distanced themselves from such lofty ideals. One could say that modern history tends to favour that aforementioned kaleidoscope of contour and detail. This type of history becomes something of an abstract commentary. This is not in any way to undermine the quality of our documented histories, and indeed I will refer to some noteworthy histories of the Irish famine in this project, but as Eagleton

[2] Seanchaí were traditional Irish storytellers and the custodians of history for centuries in Ireland. They memorised and recited epic stories and poems (Maureen Donachie, "Seanachies: keepers of Ireland's rich folklore heritage" 2014). The word seanchai means a bearer of "old lore" (seanchas). In ancient Irish culture, the history, laws, folklore and legend of the people were not written down but committed to memory in long lyric poems and stories. They were recited by *filid* and bards - there were two types of poet; the elite class of the *fili*, and the lesser caste of the bard. They normally served a clan chieftain and were highly respected. Some belonged to a community, and served at community ceremonies and events, while others belonged to no particular area or lord, but travelled, offering their skills in return for board and lodging (Seanchaí Foundation, accessed Feb, 2021)

[3] Thomas Babington Macaulay (25 October 1800 – 28 December 1859) was a British historian and Whig politician. He wrote extensively as an essayist on contemporary and historical socio-political subjects. He played a key role in introducing Western Educational concepts in India in the mid-1900s. (MacKenzie, John, January 2013, "A family empire", *BBC History Magazine)*

suggests, there is something missing. Irish story is a story of succumbing and overcoming, of shame and pride, of subjugation and self-determination, of surviving and thriving and these histories have played a key role in the remembering, recording, commemorating, lamenting, monumentalizing, and enshrining of those significant events which now define us. However, while the intrinsic value of these histories cannot be overlooked, there are times when we need to look beyond the documented word, to see the people behind the events. Their story and their testimony must be heard. Margaret Kelleher laments the "gaping hole" that persists at the centre of famine source material, namely this "testimony of its victims" (2009:90). Who are those "faces chilled to a plucked bird in a million wicker huts [...] people hungering from birth, grubbing, like plants in the bitch earth?" (from Seamus Heaney's *At a Potato Digging*). We need to look beneath the veneer of recorded history to unearth the real stories, the real struggles and the hopes and dreams of the Irish people. Literature narrows the lens. John Broderick notes that "the literature of a nation is far more revealing than all the official histories ever written" (1980:30). Whether or not this is fully the case, there is no doubt that Literature takes us where history just cannot go. Mikhail Bakhtin says that "the novel is the only developing genre and therefore it reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding" (1981). Furthermore, the novel is important in modern Irish culture because "as a genre it evolved to formulate narratives in which social, political and historical change could be accommodated" (Smyth, 1997:7). When articulating his ideas of the role of literature in Irish history, Tarien Powell cites 13th century Irish poet Gíolla Bríghde Mac Con Mighde who says that "if poetry and prose were to be extinguished my people, if we were without history and ancient lays forever [...] everyone will pass unheralded" (Powell, 2004:3). Mac Con Mighde is essentially telling us that Irish literature is inextricably bound up with identity and that the writer must realise his/her responsibility not just in the recording of historical facts but in the revelation and celebration of the Irish people. Powell acknowledges that a nation can and must be conceived through literary means (ibid). Indeed, wasn't this the spirit which guided the seanchaí?

So, working on this assumption that a nation can indeed be conceived through literary means brings us to the question of what poetry and prose can contribute to our understanding of national identity in all its idiosyncrasies, enigmas and contradictions. When speaking of Irish prose, Derek Hand refers to the "exposure of the machinations of the individual consciousness" and of the "laying bare all that had been until this moment hidden." He alludes to "realms beyond positivist knowledge" as found in traditional documented histories and hints at "mysteries outside epistemological structures" (2011:1). Hand goes on to suggest that the form of the novel itself "awash with contradictions" becomes a

"vehicle for investigating the periphery, those neglected spaces where, perhaps contradictions abound" (2011:2). Indeed, it is these contradictions, Hand concludes, which energise the novel – its "rage for straining against a shapeless form endlessly and necessarily re-defining itself" (2011:2-3). Different types of stories emerge from different perspectives and different genres impose themselves on the Irish frame (Ibid, 6) with each writer "laboriously detailing the nuances of their own time and place" in an effort to overcome caricatures, distortions and misrepresentations of Ireland and Irishness (Ibid, 7). Hand refers to the power of rendering one's own story in one's own inimitable style - to be able to oscillate between the poles of tradition and modernity" as a real "act of rebellion" (Ibid). The novel also allows for the juxtaposition of what Heaney might refer to as "binary oppositions and ideological tensions" (Cited in Hart, 1989:204). Hand tells us that the novel allows for the bringing together of "difference in terms of native and visitor, Gaelic and Anglo-Irish, Catholic and Protestant, aristocrat and peasant." Thus the pages of the Irish novel are where issues concerning identity are played out repeatedly (Hand, 2011:5) and while Hand himself questions if the novel as a genre is equally appropriate when chronicling the famine given the "horrific scale" of events (2011:94), I would contend that the literary imagination has a significant role to play, not just in furthering our understanding of the Irish famine but in giving us access to a realm of existence far beyond the reach of historiography. Put simply, literature can be seen as a stepping stone to bridge the gap between one version of reality and another, to draw readers from their pre-conceived understanding of history to a space where they can see it as it really was. Literature is a gateway to truth. In fact, maybe immersion in fictional depictions of the Irish Famine can go some way towards compensating for that "gaping hole" that Margaret Kelleher refers to.

1.2 Heaney, Kavanagh and Cultural Amnesia

A mechanical digger wrecks the drill...

Processional stooping through the turf
Recurs mindlessly as autumn. Centuries
Of fear and homage to the famine god
Toughen the muscles behind their humbled knees,
Make a seasonal altar of the sod.

Good smells exude from crumbled earth.
The rough bark of humus erupts
knots of potatoes (a clean birth)
whose solid feel, whose wet inside
promises taste of ground and root.

To be piled in pits; live skulls, blind-eyed.
Live skulls, blind-eyed, balanced on
wild higgledy skeletons
scoured the land in 'forty-five,
wolfed the blighted root and died.

The new potato, sound as stone,
putrefied when it had lain
three days in the long clay pit.
Millions rotted along with it.

Mouths tightened in, eyes died hard,
faces chilled to a plucked bird.
In a million wicker huts
beaks of famine snipped at guts.

A people hungering from birth,
grubbing, like plants, in the bitch earth,
were grafted with a great sorrow.
Hope rotted like a marrow.

Stinking potatoes fouled the land,
pits turned pus into filthy mounds:
and where potato diggers are
you still smell the running sore. *(Extracts from At a Potato Digging, Seamus Heaney, 1966)*

The nature of the literary response to the famine has been discussed widely in academic circles in recent years and it has been claimed that the harrowing events of the famine years somehow eluded the literary imagination of many novelists, poets and dramatists. The extent of this claimed omission, especially in the latter years of the 19th century, has been quite a divisive issue. While a body of literature does exist, there is no denying that there were long periods, especially in the history of the new Irish State, when the literary imagination remained at best, muted. Brian Donnelly refers to this clear failure on the part of Irish writers to find an adequate imaginative response to an event unparalleled in Irish history, noting that "neither the travesty that was the famine nor the resulting heartache and anger seemed to evoke a response from the Irish literary community" (1980:260).

In his poem *At a Potato Digging*, Seamus Heaney appears to question this shallow acknowledgement of the Famine. This is not immediately obvious as the poem is first and foremost a "pastoral elegy for the famine victims of 1845". It becomes more obvious however as he "rhetorically involves his readers in both the sensual and the supra-sensual apprehension of the activity which he is

observing" (O'Grady, 1990:54). He begins by contrasting the "mechanical digger" of the present with the heavy "spade" of the past. Brutal contrasts are deliberate - the "solid" feel of the healthy root and the "blighted root" of the stinking potato. He admits his intention of implicating his audience in his view of this revelatory experience and in his interpretation of the failings of the nation (Ibid). Henry Hart suggests that Heaney seeks to place the human deaths into "the larger context of nature's ineluctable, regenerative rhythm by juxtaposing life and death, beauty and repulsion, past and present. He refers to the "gravid earth as both pregnant womb and a rotting grave, a mound of fallen refuse and the compost heap for new life" (1993:28). For Heaney, the potato acts as the link between past and present and he reflects on both the toil and death of those who cultivated this humble root. Heaney also clearly invokes images from Patrick Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger* (1942). The "mechanical digger" is a direct reference to Kavanagh's "mechanised scarecrows." It seems that he wants us to actively seek connections with Kavanagh's work which is equally invocative of reader involvement. Heaney later referred to Kavanagh's poetry and the Great Hunger in particular, as a type of "restoration of the culture to itself." (1980 in Essay entitled 'Feelings into Words')

Regarding the failings of the nation, there is a very real sense that Heaney sets out to explicitly question that shallow acknowledgement of the Famine. He rebukes the "impersonalised anger of group-consciousness" and the "representative memory of the grotesquely cruel past observed only at a distance" (Sharratt, 1976:315).

Processional stooping through the turf
Recurs mindlessly as autumn. Centuries
Of fear and homage to the famine god
Toughen the muscles behind their humbled knees,
Make a seasonal altar of the sod. (Heaney, 1966)

Sharratt notes that "it is the poet who sounds these ritual resonances, and to partake of them only casually is to remain *mindless*" (315). It is as if Heaney seeks to jolt the conscience of a nation guilty of intentional avoidance and denial into mindful recognition which embodies not just a personal identification with the modern-day potato-gatherers but actually a "phylogenetic[4] identification with a 'people, hungering from birth' with those millions of Irish men and women who suffered and died during the Great Hunger of the 1840s" (O´Grady, 1990:54).

[4] phylogenetic as relating to the evolutionary development and diversification of a species or group of organisms

Kavanagh's call to this type of atavistic immersion is no less emphatic. While *The Great Hunger* is very much about the emotional starvation of rural Ireland during the De Valera years as opposed to the physical starvation of the 1840s, he too deliberately seeks to confront the reader with this harrowing memory that many of his literary peers had, for many years, chosen to side-step. Indeed, as previously alluded to, it seems that many generations of Irish writers had deliberately avoided writing about famine Ireland. Terry Eagleton notes that even for Yeats and Joyce it is no more than a dim resonance (2003:26). While Eagleton acknowledges that there is "a handful of novels and a body of poems" which deal both directly and indirectly with the Famine, he laments that there are "few truly distinguished works" and that many that do exist are characterised by a type of "angry rhetoric." For the most part however, the Famine seems to have "traumatized most into "muteness" suggesting that the event strains at the "limits of the articulable" and is truly in this sense "the Irish Auschwitz" (Eagleton,1995:13). Eagleton asks vehemently, "Where is the Famine in the literature of the Revival?" (Ibid) Brian Donnelly also refers to this clear failure on the part of Irish writers to find an adequate imaginative response to an event unparalleled in Irish history, noting that "neither the travesty that was the famine nor the resulting heartache and anger seemed to evoke a response from the Irish literary community" (1980:262). Donnelly cites Professor Malcom Brown who suggests that this failure could only result from a hesitance to try to articulate a response to something "so catastrophic and of such magnitude." He suggests that quite possibly "most Irish writers hid behind the usual plea that words cannot describe" (cited in The Politics of Irish Literature, 1972:144). William Bennett in 1847 writes:

> *Language utterly fails me in attempting to depict the state of the wretched inmates...My hand trembles while I write. The scenes of human misery and degradation we witnessed still haunt my imagination with the vividness and power of some horrid and tyrannous delusion, rather than the features of a sober reality. (Bennett 1847 apud Kelleher, 1997:18)*

William Carlton writing only a few years later in 1852 describes the Famine as:

> *..something so utterly unprecedented in the annals of human life, as the mingled mass of agony was borne past us upon the wild and pitiless blast, that we find ourselves absolutely incompetent even to describe it. We feel, however, as if that loud and multitudinous wail was still ringing in our ears, against which and the terrible recollections associated with it, we wish we could close them and the memory that brings them into fresh existence. (Williams, 1852)*

Kavanagh's *Great Hunger* can be seen as a challenge to acknowledge this reality inherent in the Irish psyche. Brendan Kennelly points out that Patrick Maguire, the central figure in the *Great Hunger*, is

something of a tragic figure precisely because of this flawed culture. He is a man who, "sentenced to a horribly lingering death, is compelled to watch the natural world reproduce itself with spendthrift fertility while he shrivels into barren anonymity" (Kennelly, 1970:15). Kavanagh juxtaposes this idea of sexual repression among the peasant community in De Valera's Ireland and the desolation of a people during the Great Hunger. Could he be suggesting that, just as Patrick Maguire is stuck in a culturally and sexually repressed Ireland, so too are the Irish suffering from a type of cultural amnesia or even an intentional negation of those darkest of years in Ireland's history? Is the silence which shrouded the *decaying* and *putrefying* land echoed in generations of silence of those who struggled to provide an adequate literary response?

1.3 Muted Literary Response?

It would not be fair to say that the Famine has been completely ignored by Irish literature and indeed there is an on-going debate as to the real extent of this perceived silence. While such a debate is outside the scope of this project, the existence of a literary response cannot be denied. Brian Donnelly in "The Great Famine and the Literary Imagination" acknowledges that such a body of work exits but he argues that the works that do try to grapple with the famine period fail for the most part to confront the enormity of events and their significance (1980:261). Melissa Fegan makes the point that those who represented the famine, especially in the fifty years following the catastrophe were "in mourning for a lost world" and thus were unable to adequately narrate their thoughts (2010:24). Donnelly refers to William Carleton's *The Black Prophet: A Tale of the Famine (1847)* as the first of such failures suggesting that the famine itself becomes "a mere backcloth and a 'piece of machinery' for the enactment of 'a full blooded Victorian melodrama" (Mercier, 1966 abud Donnelly, 1980:263). Donnelly contends that it is Carleton's inability to grasp the full significance of the catastrophe which leads to "the famine as a mere backdrop to his story" (Donnelly, 263). Donnelly does however recognise that such failings are partly understandable given that it would have taken a work of "epic proportions" to do justice to the "historic significance of the famine." He questions if such an achievement might even have been possible given that it took several generations before the fullness of what the famine was became truly apparent (1980:262). The earliest writers (1845–52) such as William Carleton, Mary Anne Hoare, James Clarence Mangan, Jane Francesca Elgee, Samuel Ferguson and Aubrey de Vere were clearly not afforded such "a long perspective on the events and consequences of those years" (Ibid).

The 150th anniversary of the start of the Famine which occurred in 1995 was marked with commemorations and a corresponding explosion in Famine historiography resulting in many noteworthy works such as: *This Great Calamity* by Christine Kinealy (1994), *The Famine Ships* by Edward Laxton (1996), *The Feminization of Famine* by Margaret Kelleher (1997), *The Great Shame* by Thomas Keneally (1998), *Black '47 and Beyond* by Cormac Ó Gráda (1999), *The great Irish Potato Famine* by James S. Donnelly (2001), Tim Pat Coogan's controversial *The Famine Plot: England's Role in Ireland's Greatest Tragedy* (2012) and *The Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*, Edited by John Crowley, William J. Smyth and Mike Murphy (2012), to name but a few. Such a large body of work has brought new perspectives as well as revisiting and reassessing existing theories. Melissa Fegan makes an interesting point that this sudden resurgence in interest in the Famine may not only have been provoked by centenary commemorations and the greater exposure of the Famine in public discourse but also by what she calls "a revival of insecurities that seemed to belong to the past" (2020:412). She cites Fintan O'Toole who describes the forces that destroyed the Celtic Tiger as "nineteenth century revenants come back to haunt its dreams of twenty-first century success and many novels set in the post-crash period invoke the memory of famine as the acme of ruin" (O'Toole, 2009:214). Whatever the reason, what is irrefutable is that after 1995 there was a "resurgence of both popular and academic interest in the tragedy, expressed in an outpouring of new scholarship" (Kinealy, 2014). In fact, the resurgence has resulted in a sustained literary revival. A huge body of historical fiction set in and around the Famine years has emerged. This includes: Niall Williams's The *Fall of Light* (2001), Nuala O'Faolain's *My Dream of You* (2001), Joseph O'Connor's bestselling *Star of the Sea* (2002), Carol Birch's *The Naming of Eliza Quinn* (2005) and Charles Egan's acclaimed triology, *The Killing Snows* (2008), *The Exile Breed* (2015) and *Cold is the Dawn: A Novel of Irish Exile and the Great Irish Famine* (2017). Famine literature has even been brought to a much younger audience with Marita Conlon-McKenna's 'Children of the Famine' triology, *Under the Hawthorn Tree* (1990), *Wildflower girl* (1991) and *Fields of Home* (1996). Many of these novels have provided new insights and perspectives on the famine, its victims and its perpetrators.

So yes, there has been a definite literary response to the Famine and there is a considerable body of work which dates back to the 1840s and takes us right up to the present day. So where is this "mindless" and "distant observation" that Heaney refers to? Christine Kinealy identifies a perceptible historiographical silence, a definite unwillingness to articulate a response to those darkest of years, which lasted from the 1930s to the 1970s. She notes that this silence was all the more alarming given the abundance of available documentary evidence at the time relating to the famine years (1997:1).

Famine literature did emerge sporadically during these years but Brian Donnelly argues that, apart from one novel, the period was marked by an absence of literature of historical or literary significance (1980:263). The exception that he refers to is Liam O'Flaherty's *Famine* (1937) which he argues is the only work that "attempts to deal with the period in terms of its total significance for the Irish nation as opposed to a mere recreation of the literal details of hunger, eviction and disease in the manner of Carleton's The Black Prophet" (1980:264). Such a claim that *Famine* is alone in such an achievement does a huge injustice to Walter Macken's *The Silent people* which one could argue is equally significant for the Irish nation, albeit in a different way. Donnelly refers to O'Flaherty achievement in showing how the political, social and economic events in the latter 1840s impacted on the traditional ways of Irish life as revealed in the small community around the village of Crom (264). Again, it can be argued that Macken achieves a comparable feat in his portrayal of Connemara in the West of Ireland. Yes, there are also notable differences between Macken's *Silent People* and O'Flaherty's *Famine*, but comparing the merits of each is of little relevance to this project. This project sets outs to assess the contribution of literature, of which Macken's *The Silent People* deserves to be seen as an integral part, to our understanding of the Irish people during those dark years. It is within this context that an evaluation of the unique perspective that Macken gives on the famine years will be carried out. Furthermore this project will show why the failure to recognise the merits of *The Silent People* is a blatant oversight by Donnelly and indeed by many others. It will be argued that the contribution of Macken goes some way towards filling that void that Margaret Kelleher refers to.

2. THE LITERARY IMAGINATION AND IRISH IDENTITY

2.1 Heaney, Literature and Identity – An Introduction

No quest for insight into the role of literature in coming to an understanding of Irish identity during the pre-famine and famine years would be complete without referring to Seamus Heaney. Richard Murphy (1986:142) described Heaney as "the poet who has shown the finest art in presenting a coherent vision of Ireland, past and present." Richard Kearney refers to Heaney as "poet of the patria and an excavator of the national landscape." He refers to his "preoccupation with archaeology and genealogy and of returning to forgotten origins" as a type of "vocation" to the "sacramental naming of a homeland" (1986:552). Heaney himself tells us that "like bogs, words are bearers of history and mystery" (Oxford Lectures, 1996:45). Hart thus speaks of Heaney's poetry as "functioning as etymology" in that it reflects back on the polyglot nature of words and their relation to our historical roots. Indeed, he reminds us that the word 'etymologist', means "studier of roots" (Hart 1989:213).

But yet Heaney's poetic effort to bring Irish culture 'home' to itself, cannot be dismissed as a conservative return to antiquated mythologies of 'tradition' and 'nature' (Kearney, 1986:253). Kearney suggests that Heaney is so much more than this stereotypical view and he is at no time "compelled to subscribe to a definitive ideological standpoint" reminding us that Heaney's poetry embraces the modernist view that "it is language which perpetually constructs and deconstructs our given notions of identity" (254). Kearney refers to the fact that Heaney has been criticized for refusing to adopt a fixed unambiguous position, particularly with regard to the national question (254). Indeed, as I have already alluded to, the literary form "awash with contradictions" becomes that aforementioned "vehicle for investigating the periphery and those neglected spaces where contradictions abound" (Hand, 2011:2). Maybe this is part of what Heaney was hinting at when he spoke of the dual or multiple role of language in the following passage from Preoccupations (1980):

> *When I called my second book Door into the Dark I intended to gesture towards this idea of poetry as a point of entry into the buried life of the feelings or as a point of exit from it. Words themselves are doors (as cited in Kearney 1986:554).*

While a comprehensive study of Heaney's poetry with regard to Irish identity is clearly outside the scope of this project, I hope that a reflection on a selection of his work can provide some insight into the profound link that exists between the written word and coming to an understanding of who we are as a

people. Through this reflection, key aspects of what poetry and prose in particular can contribute to our understanding of Irish identity, especially during the pre-famine and famine years, will be identified.

I have chosen only four poems or parts thereof, each of which identifies a key function of the written word in uncovering who we are as a people: The Disappearing Island from *The Haw Lantern* (1987), Bogland from *Door into the Dark* (1969), Digging from *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and Station Island XIII from Station Island (1984). These poems will also provide a framework with which to evaluate Macken's Silent People.

2.2 'Réimeas Leatromach' and Self-Preservation

Once we presumed to found ourselves for good
Between the blue hills and those sandless shores
Where we spent our desperate night in prayer and vigil,

Once we had gathered driftwood, made a hearth
And hung our cauldron like a firmament,
The island broke beneath us like a wave.

The land sustaining us seemed to hold firm
Only when we embraved it in extremis.
All I believe that happened there was a vision.

(The Disappearing Island by Seamus Heaney, 1987)

Heaney's poem recounts an incident from the mythical Voyage of St Brendan when the monks disembark on a remote island which turns out to be the back of a sleeping whale – a most precarious situation indeed! In reference to his use of the term *in extremis*, Heaney later remarked that it is only when faced with adversity that people begin to realise what is precious to them (In an interview with George Morgan in 2008). He suggested that he was really thinking of what would happen in a national or political crisis where people are "thrown back their pieties" concluding that "when threat arrives, people are simpler and clearer." When articulating his ideas on the poetic response to such adversity he went on to explain that "a poem has to begin in the given circumstances, in the usual and the circumstantial and then to trampolene off them and get into some more oneiric and abstract element" (ibid). The starting point is thus rooted in the here and now and that innate instinct to protect and preserve. Indeed nothing fuels the literary spirit like the threat to ones very identity. John Banville echoes these ideas of Heaney when he tells us that literature is far more than the recounting of events or the telling of stories:

It is an ancient, an elemental, urge which springs, like the stream, from a desperate imperative to encode and preserve things that are buried in us deep beyond words. This is its significance, its danger and its glory (Banville, 2019:28).

Indeed, there is an underlying feature that is at the very heart of early Irish Literature. The history of Ireland has been an endless struggle for survival against 'an réimeas leatromach' (the reign of oppression) in all its manifestations. From the first known Viking invasion in AD 795 to the Anglo-Norman invasion in 1169 to the plantations and the arrival of Cromwell in the 17th century, there has rarely been a period free from the threat of persecution and subjugation. The fight to protect and preserve has always been to the forefront of Irish life. Even before these first documented invasions, threats came from within - warring clans were a prominent part of pre-Christian Ireland. Generation after generation of Irish, fearful of their loss of identity, told their story. Indeed Irish mythology was born of necessity – the need for self-preseravtion. While an exploration of Irish myth is certainly not my priority here, it is important to acknowledge that it provides us with those first layers of literary culture which can give us a unique insight into who we are and where we have come from. While history and myth are, to a certain extent, inter-dependent, myth does much more than the recording of a series of events. Myth transcends history in that it tells us about the most fundamental ideas and ideals of a group. People define themselves by their myths. "Myth is the dream of the people - the dream is the myth of the individual" (Claude-Levi Strauss in Thury and Devinney, 2012, pp. 280-284). We can now understand why for archaic societies myths and stories were their most valued and sacred possessions to be protected and preserved at-all-costs.

We can conclude then that Irish story is so much more than a historiographical pursuit. It is about the preservation of identity. Heaney hints at this when he refers to 'the *contemporaneity* of all history in Ireland', where you cannot divorce the literary from the historical, from the political, from the usual life (In an interview with Deaglan de Breadun in The Irish Times, 1983). He speaks of "Irelands of the mind" and myth as an "expression of the past's presentation of the present and the presentness of the past" (In a public lecture in 1976 and reprinted in Preoccupations, 1980:150).

2.3 Heaney, Story and the Famine – Linguistic *Stratigraphy*[5]

We have no prairies
To slice a big sun at evening–
Everywhere the eye concedes to

[5] Stratigraphy is a branch of geology concerned with the study of rock layers (strata) and layering (stratification) of sedimentary and layered volcanic rocks.

Encrouching horizon,

Is wooed into the cyclops' eye
Of a tarn. Our unfenced country
Is bog that keeps crusting
Between the sights of the sun.

They've taken the skeleton
Of the Great Irish Elk
Out of the peat, set it up
An astounding crate full of air.

Butter sunk under
More than a hundred years
Was recovered salty and white.
The ground itself is kind, black butter

Melting and opening underfoot,
Missing its last definition
By millions of years.
They'll never dig coal here,

Only the waterlogged trunks
Of great firs, soft as pulp.
Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before.
The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.
The wet centre is bottomless.

(Bogland by Seamus Heaney From *Door into the Dark*, 1969)

For Heaney the bog is a "sort of placeless place; a shifting palimpsest of endless layers and sub-layers, an archival memory of lost cultures" (Kearney, 1986:557). Richard Kearney alludes to Heaney as an "excavator of the national landscape" He refers to his Irish vocation of the "sacramental naming of a homeland, hence the "preoccupation with images of mythology, archaeology and genealogy, of returning to forgotten origins" (1986:552). Heaney suggests that, in *Bogland*, he seeks 'congruence' between "memory, bogland[6] and our national consciousness" (Heaney, 1980:54). Natural bogland has

[6]Heaney's original idea of bogland as a symbol of memory was objectively confirmed and extended by both political events and archaeological discovery. In 1969 the civil-rights marches in the city of Derry, and the counter-marches by the Royal Ulster Constabulary with batons drawn, focused world attention on the Catholics who lived in a low-lying slum called the Bogside. The word thus became synonymous with minority resistance to police oppression, and subsequently Irish Catholic resistance to British misrule. Bog itself is one of the few words of Irish origin to have been assimilated into English. Literally it

connotations of both decay and preservation. The bog itself is made up of layers of decomposed matter but yet it is capable of both concealing and conserving. The bog can hide remnants of an unknown past. J.A Kearney makes the point that by taking the skeleton of the *Great Elk* out of the peat, a remnant of an Ireland that Heaney knows nothing about is being unearthed (1984:40). The bog preserves bits of a distant and mysterious past. In his lecture "Feeling into Words", addressed to the Royal Society of Literature in London on October 17, 1974, Heaney said: I began to get an idea of bog as the memory of the landscape, or as a landscape that remembered everything that happened in and to it. In fact, if you go round the National Museum in Dublin, you will realize that a great proportion of the most cherished material heritage of Ireland was "found in a bog"

Equally, poetry and literature in their many and varied guises preserve the remains of a mysterious past. Heaney alludes to this idea of procuring, unearthing and deciphering the written word. He remarks that words cease to be fingerprints recording the unique signature of the writer and rather become "bearers of history." Indeed Heaney insists that one of the tasks of the poet is to recover a sense of belonging to a shared past "an ancestry, a history, a culture" – what he refers to as "home". Interestingly, he sees this as a linguistic project rather than a "tribal possession" (Heaney, 1980:54). He sees the written word as expressing this sense of 'home' not literally in the geographical, political or personal sense but rather as a type of metaphysical preoccupation (Kearney, 1986:556). Home cannot be taken for granted. It must be actively sought in the decayed strata. Homecoming thus becomes a "dialectical search for some forfeited or forbidden presence in and through the awareness of its absence" For Heaney, real bogland is thus that place that is not really a place but rather that aforementioned "archival memory of lost cultures" embedded in endless layers of decayed matter. Consequently, "the very process of homecoming reminds us, paradoxically, that we are displaced, in exile, estranged." As I will discuss later, these ideas of exile and homecoming are there in each of the novels that make up Walter Macken's historical trilogy. Equally paradoxical is the fact that Heaney sees bog both as the memory of the landscape and as a landscape that remembers everything that happened in and to it – that intrinsic connection between bogland, memory and national consciousness. Bog is very much a "symbol of an unconscious past which must be unfolded layer by layer" (Panni, 1980:109). A type of linguistic stratigraphy must be an integral part of any search for national identity.

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means "soft". In English it acquired, perhaps because of its Irish origin as well as its colour, connotations of shame, as in the slang of "bog" meaning "lavatory". Heaney carries the word up the ladder from the "foul rag and boneshop" to give it a nobler meaning (Murphy, 1986:145-6).

2.4 Heaney, Story, Identity and the Famine - Buried Shards

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pens rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.
By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests. I'll dig with it.

Digging by Seamus Heaney from *Death of a Naturalist* 1966

Seamus Heaney once said that "the idea of doing work that doesn't bring a sweat to one's brow seems paradoxical" (In in an interview with John Edwards on ITV Poetry Afternoon, 1980). Indeed, in *Digging* there is a perceptible tone of regret, remorse even, that his toiling must be carried out with the pen rather than the heavy spade like that wielded for generations by the "old man" and "his old man". And yet there is something almost epiphanic when he tells us that "the squat pens rests; snug as a gun between my thumb and my forefinger." *Digging*, Heaney would later reveal, was in fact that poem where he realised that his "feelings had got into words," that he had "let down a shaft into real life." It had the "force of an initiation" (In a Lecture given at the Royal Society of Literature, October 1974). The pen had become his instrument, his spade. The son of the potato farmer is "no longer tied to the land and the spade." He can now use the pen to "dig his way into life." (Spacey, 2020). This is certainly not

to devalue the work of the servant of the land in any way. Indeed a profound respect and reverence for these two *diggers* emanates from his words. He exalts the simplicity, honesty and integrity of their daily toil and he rues his inability to follow them admitting that the only way that he can walk in their footsteps is with the pen. "The squat pen rests. I'll dig with it." It is now his mission, his desideratum. As such the spade and the pen are inseparably entwined. The humble *digger* and the *wielder* of the written word become one. "Grandfather, father and son are bound together, through labour and love, in an arc of endurance which is both productive and self-sustaining" (Whitaker, 2018). Breaking free, albeit reluctantly, of the tie of the land does not in any way break this union. In fact it takes it to a new level – it now allows him to honour, celebrate and preserve the way of his father and grandfather. Steve Whitaker makes the point that *Digging* made a kind of statement of intention: "a declaration of poet as artisan wordsmith, claiming ground previously trodden by generations of his farming forefathers, as fertile land for the growing of words" (Whitaker, 2018).

Digging has archaeological as well as agrarian connotations. Ruth Niel refers to Heaney's newfound literary digging tool as a means of unearthing the past, of "excavating the roots of his people's existence" (1986:36). The pen can thus take the reader deep into ancestral history. Heaney tells us that implicit in *Digging* is a view of poetry: "as divination, as revelation of the self to the self and as restoration of the culture to itself." He refers to his poems as "elements of continuity, with the aura and authenticity of archaeological finds, where the buried shard has an importance that is not diminished by the importance of the buried city; poetry as a dig, a dig for finds that end up being plants" (Seamus Heaney in a Lecture given at the Royal Society of Literature, October 1974). This idea of the 'shard' takes on real significance in the poetry of Heaney, indeed in his view of literature generally. While he digs with his pen "deep into his own soul and the soul of his nation" (Vendler, 1996:93), he never loses sight of these *shards.* Who are they? They are his father, grandfather and so many others just like them – the common man, the man with the *spade*. For Heaney, literature, identity and the common man - the *man in the shadows,* are inextricably linked.

2.5 'You've listened long enough. Now strike your note'[7]. Literature and Nailing Your Colours to the Mast.

I could not speak. I saw a hoard of black
basalt axeheads, smooth as a beetle's back,
a cairn of stone force that might detonate,

[7] The voice of Joyce talking to Heaney - Station Island XII

the eggs of danger. And then I saw a face
he had once given me, a plaster cast
of an abbess, done by the Gowran master,
mild-mouthed and cowled, a character of grace.
'Your gift will be a candle in our house – '
But he had gone when I looked to meet his eyes
and hunkering instead there in his place
was a bleeding, pale-faced boy, plastered in mud.
'The red-hot pokers blazed a lovely red
In Jerpoint the Sunday I was murdered,'
he said quietly. 'Now do you remember?
You were there with poets when you got the word
and stayed there with them, while your own flesh and blood
was carted to Bellaghy from the Fews.
They showed more agitation at the news
than you did.'

'But they were getting crisis
first-hand, Colum, they had happened in on
live sectarian assassination.
I was dumb, encountering what was destined.'
And so I pleaded with my second cousin.
'I kept seeing a grey stretch of Lough Beg
and the strand empty at daybreak.
I felt like the bottom of a dried-up lake.'
'You saw that, and you wrote that – not the fact.
You confused evasion and artistic tact.
The Protestant who shot me through the head
I accuse directly, but indirectly, you
who now atone perhaps upon this bed
for the way you whitewashed ugliness and drew
the lovely blinds of the Purgatorio
and saccharined my death with morning dew.'

Then I seemed to waken out of sleep
among more pilgrims whom I did not know
drifting to the hostel for the night. *Seamus Heaney from Station Island VIII*

While Heaney's *At a Potato Digging* and Kavanagh's *Great Hunger* both appeal to the collective conscience of a nation guilty of denial, indifference, apathy, or at best a sort of cultural amnesia, Heaney's *Station Island* is more about self-reproach, "individual pain" and "individual outrage" (Murphy 2009:56). Heaney partakes in a type of introspective confrontation with his moral subconscious. He appears as a pilgrim communing with "Christ's stations" as he navigates the "sharp, circular rocks" of

Station Island in Lough Derg[8]. There are echoes here of Dante whose descent into hell and encounters with old ghosts also commenced in April in 'imitatione Christi' (Hart, 1988:234). Heaney's 'old ghosts' take the form of accusing voices from his past – figures presented "in the full flow of a life interrupted by an unexpected and brutal death" (Murphy, 2009:61). These ancestral ghosts are invariably victims of the years of sectarian violence and bloody carnage in his native Ulster. As alluded to above, these spirits confront him as he navigates each of the ritual stations of Lough Derg - although it should be noted that the first two encounters take place before the poet arrives on the island itself and the final encounter also occurs on the mainland as he steps off the boat returning him from the island (Murphy, 2009:64). Heaney gives great importance to each station which affords the pilgrim a "privileged place and time for recollection, for coming to terms with what Joyce's Stephen Dedalus called the 'nightmare of history'" (Kearney, 1986:560). As well as coming face to face with his past these ghosts prompt Heaney to question his ideologies, and indeed those of his community, and they prompt a reassessment of his own position in relation to them (Murphy, 2009:64). In a sense these confrontations become an "interrogation of old beliefs and fidelities" (2009:63). Olivia O' Leary talks of the importance of this 'revisiting' for Heaney – the need to keep going back to a story that is never fully written (Irish Times, 2011). In *Station Island XIII*, the pilgrim Heaney revisits the story of his cousin Colum, killed in a sectarian attack in the 1970s. While he had written about it years earlier, he is now forced to revisit it as the ghost of his wounded, muddied cousin accuses and rebukes him for "prettifying his death" (ibid):

You whitewashed ugliness and drew
the lovely blinds of the Purgatorio
and saccharined my death with morning dew.

Colum "chides the pilgrim directly for consorting with effete fellow-poets" when he first heard the news of his death (Kearney, 1986:560) and he reproaches him for writing, in an elegy on his death, not "the fact, but literary euphemisms" (Breslin, 1996:339):

You saw that, and you wrote that – not the fact.
You confused evasion and artistic tact.

[8] St. Patrick's Purgatory, more commonly referred to as Lough Derg because of its location in the lake of the same name in south-eastern County Donegal, has been a place of Christian pilgrimage since the fifth century. The pilgrimage takes place on Station Island, and it has St. Patrick as its patron as it was in this part of Ireland that St. Patrick pursued his missionary work most vigorously. Tradition holds that Patrick himself established the forms of penance required of pilgrims to the island, including a three days' fast, an all-night vigil, barefoot walking on stones, and the continuous repetition of vocal prayers. During his undergraduate years at Queen's University Belfast, Heaney went on the pilgrimage several times. (O'Brien, 1988:52-53).

In *Station Island IX*, the pilgrim is further tormented when he hears the voice of a prisoner who died in his prison bed as a result of a prolonged hunger-strike. Heaney is most likely referring to Francis Hughes, a neighbour from Bellaghy[9] who was imprisoned in Long Kesh (HM Maze prison) for IRA activities and who took part in the hunger strikes of 1980-1 when 10 prisoners died including Bobby Sands, MP. In *The Redress of Poetry*, Heaney writes of his feelings of restlessness and guilt given that he was ironically staying in the Oxford University rooms of a serving government minister on the night that Hughes died. Heaney recalls:

> *It was a classic moment of conflicting recognitions, self-division, inner quarrel, a moment of dumbness and inadequacy when it felt like a betrayal to be enjoying the hospitality of an Establishment college and occupying, if only accidentally, the room of a British minister" (RP, 2002:188 cited in Murphy, 2009:68).*

Paul Breslin notes that *Station Island* marks something of a watershed in Heaney's career in that his "uneasiness with his own disengaged stance toward Northern Irish politics comes to crisis" (1996:340). Indeed, other ghost-like characters from his past accuse him of "otherworldliness, and with similar didactic intent" (Hart, 1988:235). He is berated by a young priest for being a tourist simply "going through the motions" of the pilgrimage without actually believing in their efficacy (SI Sequence IV). Patrick Kavanagh rises from the grave to exclaim, "Forty-two years on....and you've got no farther" (SI V) as if Heaney, like Kavanagh who made the pilgrimage forty-two years before, "mechanically repeats age-old rites which mean nothing" (Hart, 1988:235). But Heaney knows they do mean something and indeed they take him to unexpected places. Some years later when articulating his ideas on journey, exile and story, he tells us that "from the beginning to the end of the Irish tradition, there is this idea of exiling yourself from the familiar in order to compose your soul" and that poetry and storytelling can be seen as "an imaginative journey, as the crossing of some border into an elsewhere.... the idea of a muse who gives you access to another stratum of your own being" (in an interview with George Morgan in 2008). Each storied layer of *exile* into an *elsewhere* thus allows one to delve further and further into that *stratum* of one's *being* in order to return home. Such a `homecoming' in his earlier work involves a personal quest for self-identity but in *Station Island* he begins to interpret homecoming more in terms of a "linguistic search for historical identity" (Kearney, 1986:555). In fact he remarks in *Preoccupations*, that "words cease to be fingerprints recording the unique signature of the poet and become bearers of history" (Heaney, 1980). Home is something that

[9] Heaney was born in Tamniaran between Castledawson and Toomebridge, Derry but his family moved to nearby Bellaghy when he was a boy. The village of Bellaghy is situated just 45 minutes from both Belfast and Derry City. Although much travelled, Seamus Heaney always saw Bellaghy as his home and he ultimately choose it as his final resting place.

cannot be taken for granted as present. It must be sought after precisely because it is absent. Such a quest is born of revisiting, repenting, reassessing and maybe even resetting. For Heaney, "homecoming is not the actuality of an event but the possibility of an advent" (Kearney 1986:555).

So how exactly should the written word facilitate the search for historical identity and that sense of homecoming which must ultimately be our holy grail? As fellow pilgrims on Heaney's purgatorial journey through the nine stations of Lough Derg, we too feel accosted and affected by those ghostly voices and we too come to recognise the importance of revisiting, the primacy of truth and the need to take a stand but yet somehow remain faithful to the person we profess or aspire to be. In *The Redress of Poetry*, Heaney, quoting Wallace Stevens, says that the poet is a potent figure because he or she "creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it, and [...] gives life to the supreme fictions without which we would not be able to conceive of that world" (cited in Breslin, 1996:339).

Thus, for Heaney poetry and literature must be born of commitment and courage to revisit and confront those ancestral ghosts so that others can conceive of that world. This is especially true of the Famine. Indeed, as I have alluded to, both Heaney and Kavanagh seek to question the limited and somewhat shallow acknowledgement of those darkest of years. Just as Heaney is compelled to re-open the 'blinds of the Purgatorio' and face up to that 'ugliness' and 'death' that he 'whitewashed' and 'saccharined with morning dew' so too must the written word be compelled to come face to face with that aforementioned 'grotesquely cruel past' that was 'observed only at a distance' Such a response must be more than the impersonalised anger of group-consciousness (Sharratt, 1976:315) or that 'processional stooping through the turf' which 'recurs mindlessly as autumn' that Heaney speaks of (from *At a Potato Digging*). It must be 'mindful' recognition with those millions of Irish men and women who suffered and died during the Great Hunger (O´Grady, 1990:54).

2.6 'Mindful' Recognition

Just as Eagleton is critical of the passive historian, that "provides a value neutral account of events" (1995:22), so too does Heaney question his own 'disengaged stance' as a writer (Breslin, 1996:340). Indeed, Heaney has been criticized for refusing to adopt a fixed unambiguous position, for not nailing his colours to the mast, particularly with regard to the 'national question' (Kearney 1986:554). An Irish politician once described him as an "artful dodger" who displays "all the skills of the crafty tightrope walker . . . sidestepping and skipping his slippery way out of trouble" (Kemmy,1984 apud Kearney, 1986:554). Sinn Féin's Danny Morrison allegedly accosted Heaney when the two met up unexpectedly:

"When, for fuck's sake, are you going to write something for us?" (O'Leary, 2011). Apparently, Heaney's reply to Morrison was equally as emphatic: "If I do write something...whatever it is, I'll be writing for myself"[10] (ibid). Heaney is clearly telling us that taking a stand does not necessarily mean that one must have a political agenda. Kearney claims that Heaney's poems are about transitional act - the "preference for journey over sojourn and for exodus over abode" which comes from a fidelity to the nature of language itself (1986:553-554). The point that Kearney is making is that Heaney is a poet rather than a party politician. While Heaney never claims that his work is free of political connotations, equally he is never compelled to subscribe to a definitive ideological stance. "Heaney's refusal to be fixed, to be placed in any single perspective is no more than a recognition that poetry's primary fidelity is to language as an interminable metamorphosis of conflicting identities" (1986:553-554).

When writing about Seamus Heaney for the Irish Times, Olivia Leary applauds him for his determination not to be used but to express the truth as he sees it. She suggests that Journalism and poetry at their best try to state the truth. They differ significantly in that journalism, and indeed the traditional recording of history, do the necessary job of reporting things as they happen whereas poets can give us a distance from events and from ourselves. "Poets hold up a mirror in which we can safely look at ourselves". Those mirrors, she says, need to be clear and free from distortion. That is the strength of Seamus Heaney: "his determination to keep that mirror honest – honesty in the work and in a way of life that keeps the work real and rooted" (O'Leary, 2011). Marsden suggests that one of the abiding images of Heaney's *Station Island* is that of the "unnamed yet eminently recognisable shade of Joyce conjuring the pilgrimaging poet" (1989:168):

Let others wear the sackcloth and the ashes.
Let go, let fly, forget.
You've listened long enough. Now strike your note (Station Island XII).

Heaney's Joyce here proposes a view of literature which detaches it from the necessity to provide a "direct engagement with the particularities of the immediate political situation" (Murphy, 2009:70) but yet this in no way means denial or negation. In fact it means the opposite – courageous and mindful confronting and revisiting. It seems that Joyce is urging a certain fearlessness and willingness to accept both the role and responsibility of being a writer. Indeed, later Joyce speaks again, telling the poet:

[10] Danny Morrison later questions Olivia's O'Leary's claim that such words were actually used. Morrison acknowledges however that he did approach Seamus Heaney on the Dublin train - he was seeking moral support for the 'blanket men' (those about to embark on a hunger strike in the Maze Prison). He also says that in a later meeting with Heaney, they both agreed that their memories of that incident 'didn't exactly coincide' (Danny Morrison "An encounter with Seamus Heaney" in The Irish Times, April 9, 2011).

...it's time to swim
...out on your own and fill the element
with signatures on your own frequency,
echo soundings, searches, probes, allurements,
elver-gleams in the dark of the whole sea.' (SI XII)

2.7 From Heaney to Macken

It is in the light of these reflections on the role of the literary imagination on Irish identity that an evaluation of Walter Macken's *The Silent People* will be carried out. Such an evaluation will show that Macken meets Heaney's challenge regarding the chronicling of history head on.

First and foremost it will be argued that Macken writes to preserve and protect the testimony of those people who have become lost in the annals of time. It will be shown that he leads us to a place beyond which our assumptions would never allow us to go and that he helps the reader to enter into a space that they couldn't travel on their own. Indeed, the genius of Macken is that he dares to put a spotlight on those very aspects of History that can be forgotten or intentionally overlooked. This project will explore how he successfully bridges the gap between that aforementioned myopic sometimes jaundiced version of history and a history in all its rawness. It will be argued that Macken unearths and uncovers the lost layers of identity and in doing so he becomes an excavator of the roots of a people's existence. Macken's focus on the shards, the small man, the common man, the man in the shadows, will be evaluated. This analysis will show that such a focus is by no means saccharined or sentimental as some have claimed of Macken's writing. In fact it will be shown that there is a brutal honesty in his prose in that he is fearless in his representation of the complexities and contradictions of the Irish themselves. Finally, an evaluation of *The Silent People* will show how Macken is committed to highlighting the suffering of the innocent thus giving his work a distinct political undertone. It will be shown that Macken, much like Heaney, actively seeks his 'middle voice' without fear of nailing his colours to the mast.

3. WALTER MACKEN

3.1 Macken the Man and the Writer

When Walter Macken died following a heart attack on 22nd April 1967, at the age of 51, Irish literature lost one of its greatest talents...and it didn't know it! (Allen: 2015). A very successful but underrated literary career as an actor, playwright and novelist had come to a sudden and premature end. While Macken left behind a considerable and varied body of work, it has failed to attract anything other than token recognition and hollow accolades, especially when compared to many of his literary peers. His death did indeed receive both national and international acknowledgement but posthumous recognition has tended to be quite provincial and short-lived. Macken's legacy has subsequently been overlooked and even ignored in many academic circles.

Walter Macken's start to life was equally as inauspicious. Born in Galway on the 3rd May 1915 to Walter Stephen Macken and Agnes Brady, he was the youngest of three children (Ultan Macken, 2009:13). Walter Stephen and Agnes were simple hard-working people from Connemara Galway, the cultural heart of Ireland. According to Stephen O'Riordan's dying mother in *Quench the Moon* (Macken, 1948), "when people hear the word 'Connemara', they immediately think of wild animals and pagans" but she contends that being from Connemara means that they have not been corrupted by *civilisation.*[11] Consequently, "the Connemara people are still living. Everything they do is dramatic. When they love, they love unashamedly and tempestuously and in a healthy manner. When they fight, they fight with ferocity [...] their whole life is a fight against something" (cited in Morrison, 2015:26). Walter Macken was incredibly proud of his West of Ireland heritage and it was to be the focus for most of his work. Indeed these were the people that he would seek to champion in both his drama and prose.

Life was never easy for Walter's father Walter Stephen, Agnes or their children. Walter Stephen was one of ten children. The reason for the untimely death of his father is not known but its consequences were tragic for the Macken family. Walter Stephen's mother Mary lost the family home which had come with her husband's job in Ashford Castle (Ultan Macken, 2009:15). They were forced into extreme poverty and Walter Stephen was even convicted of begging and he and one brother were committed to the Letterfrack Reformatory School near Clifden in 1897 (2009:16). Walter Stephen eventually trained

[11] *Civilisation* in this context here most likely refers to the increasingly anglicised East of the country especially that area known as the Pale (defined in 1495). The Pale referred to the area around Dublin, 'the four obedient shires', directly subject to the Dublin government, which was in turn subordinate to English rule. Here the English resolved to keep one last precarious foothold, or beachhead, in Ireland. The boundary of the Pale started south of Dundalk, near Blackrock, Co Louth and using the River Fane, moved inland to encompass Ardee, then out to the sea near Bray, Co Wicklow. The English crown only effectively controlled the four eastern counties of Louth, Meath, Dublin and Kildare (Drogheda Independent, March 2004).

as a carpenter at Letterfrack and was discharged from the Reformatory School in 1904 (2009:16). He went to work in Galway City where he met and married Agnes Brady from Ballygill, Ballinasloe, Co Galway in 1911. They had three children, Eileen born 1912, Noreen born 1913 and Walter born 1915 (2009:13). Walter Stephen worked as a carpenter for a number of years before losing his job. To support his family he joined the British army during World War 1. He was sent to the Western Front in France where he was reported missing in action – Agnes received a letter from Chaplain Noel Mellish of the Royal Fusiliers dated 28 March 1916 (Ultan Macken, 2009:46). Walter would thus never really know his father although he would inherit some of his talents. Despite being a carpenter by trade, Walter Stephen was an actor and storyteller. In fact he was frequently on stage at the old Gaelic Theatre in Middle Street Galway. This Theatre was still running in 1927 when Galway's famous Taibhdhearc was set up by Mícheál Mac Liammóir. This is where his son Walter would write, produce, and direct numerous plays and where he would really embark on his literary journey (Ultan Macken, 2014). Following Walter Stephen's death, the three children were brought up by their mother Agnes who relied on lodgers, doing odd jobs and a very small service pension to sustain them. Life was not easy although Ultan recalls that his father never spoke of the poverty or deprivation which pervaded their lives. (Macken, 2009:48).

Walter started his school life in the Presentation Convent for infants from 1918 to 1921 before moving to St. Joseph's National School from 1921-1922. He completed his secondary education in St Joseph's (Patrician Brothers) Galway from 1924 to 1934 where he took his leaving Certificate - he did spend one year (1923-1924) at St Mary's Diocesan College (Reid, 2010:12-13 and Ultan Macken, 2014). Despite the changes of school Walter had a mostly uneventful school life although his keen interest in history, English and theatre was noted (Macken, 2009:73) and he was increasingly showing glimpses of a developing talent for writing. In fact he had been writing short stories, novels, and plays in note books from the age of eight (Macken, 2014). He destroyed these sometime between 1939 and 1947 when he returned from England to the Taibhdhearc, saying that this was only his apprenticeship (Ultan Macken, 2009:84). He penned his first short-story of note at the age of 12 which he subsequently submitted to an English newspaper. Much to his annoyance it was rejected (Interview with Ultan Macken in 1996). He became involved with Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe[12] in 1932 while still attending school and worked there in a part-time capacity. He took the leading role as Seán Mattias in a

[12] An Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe is the national Irish language theatre of Ireland. It was founded in 1928, at a time when Saorstát Éireann (the Irish Free State) was struggling for legitimacy, An Taibhdhearc was a unique cultural project, a Galway-based national Irish language theatre.

play called *Íosagan*, a dramatisation by Padraig Pearse[13] of his own short story (2009:72). Interestingly, Macken's *The Scorching Wind* (1966) would be set in and around the Easter Rising of 1916 of which Pearse was one of the instigators and leaders - a role which would lead to his execution.

He completed his School Leaving Certificate in 1934 at the age of 19. Even though work opportunities in Galway were limited Walter did not show any desire to attend university (Reid, 2010:13). In fact he felt that by going to university he would end up "indulging his love for research and he would never become a writer" (Macken, 2009:73). Before committing to anything he went on a holiday to Cleggan (Ibid). This was a noteworthy trip as he met some of the survivors of the Cleggan disaster of 1927 – 25 fishermen had died in a sudden storm at sea. Macken was to be so inspired by their testimony that he set his first novel *Quench the Moon* in this area. Indeed it helped galvanise his bond with Connemara and its people. Upon his return he resumed his work with An Taibhdhearc before taking up a position as a clerk with the county council—a job that his mother had secured for him believing that work as an actor was far too precarious (2009:74). His love however was for the theatre and after three months with the council, he returned to An Taibhdhearc to focus on his acting - although he was later to get into directing and significantly he was to write several plays in Irish. With no formal training, Walter Macken had become a self-taught actor, director and writer. Indeed, he had become an actor of some note extending his skills to the screen in film versions of his own *Home is the Hero* and Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* (Allen, 2015). His priority however was very much his writing.[14]

It was while working at the Taibhdhearc that Walter met his future wife Margaret 'Peggy' Kenny, editor of the Connacht Tribune. Their courtship was not without its problems however. Peggy's father Tom Kenny was very much against the relationship owing to Walter's poor economic prospects- he doubted that someone on a modest actor's wage could offer her a decent life (Macken, 2009:84-85). They continued to see each other despite Tom Kenny's objection. It was at this time that Peggy actually became aware of the extent of Walter's writing. Apparently, while she was waiting for him to return home from An Taibhdhearc one evening, Walter's mother showed her a chest full of Walter's writings (Macken, 2009:83). She had fallen in love with not just a mere actor/director, but a writer! (In an interview with Father Walter Macken -Walter Macken's son, in 1996). Significantly such overseeing of his writing was to become a regular occurrence. Ultan Macken maintains that she was to become a

[13] Padraig Pearse was a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) an organisation which sought the overthrow of British rule in Ireland – to be replaced with an Irish Republic. It was Pearse, acting on behalf of the IRB, who issued the orders to go ahead with the Easter Rising of 1916 and it was he who read the Proclamation of the Irish Republic from outside the General Post Office (on Monday, 24 April 1916)

[14] In the summer of 1965 Macken accepted the Government's nomination to become their second nominee to the Board of the Abbey Theatre and later that year he was also appointed artistic adviser and assistant manager. While the circumstances of his resignation from the position only a few months later are unclear, it seems very much that it arose from his desire to devote himself full time to writing.

"vital audience for his father" throughout his writing life - an ever-present proof reader, guide and critic (2009:84):

> *Each morning Walter would go into the living room or study in Oughterard at around ten o'clock. He would often smoke nearly a packet of cigarettes, walking round the table before he sat down to write. This was because whatever he was thinking about, whether it was a short story, a play or a novel he would have worked out in his head the night before. He would have worked out exactly what part of the plot he was going to write. He would write for maybe half an hour to three quarters of an hour and then when he was finished typing he'd call Peggy into the living room and he would read the material straight off the typewriter [...] if she cried Walter knew it was good. This was the kind of pattern Walter set for every day of his writing life. (Peggy Macken, Cúrsaí , 1988 apud Macken, 2014).*

Whether her discovery of 'Walter the writer' increased his desirability or not is open to conjecture but they soon left for Dublin to get married before moving temporarily to London where ironically Macken worked as a door-to-door salesman. Eloping ensured that Peggy would sacrifice both her position with the Connacht Tribune and her relationship with her father. Tom Kenny effectively wrote Peggy out of his life and according to Ultan, he spoke only once to her before his death, when he accidentally passed her on a Galway street. Peggy's decision to give up a comfortable life is however testament to the strength of her feelings for Walter (Ultan Macken in an interview with Charlie McBride 2019).

Macken's personal life would soon impact on his writing. His experience in London was to inspire his novel *I am Alone*. The couple returned to Galway in 1939 where they rented a house overlooking Galway Bay. Macken resumed his position with the Taibhdhearc but this only afforded them a very modest existence. Despite this, Walter wrote, produced, directed, designed or acted in more than 70 plays (Macken, 2014). They remained in Galway until 1948 when he took up a position with the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. By this time he had two children, Walter and Ultan and significantly he had managed to get two novels published, *Quench the Moon* and the aforementioned *I am Alone* as well as two plays in English, *Mungo's Mansion* and *Vacant Possession*. It was during his time in Dublin that Macken's fortunes changed. The writing of *Rain on the Wind,* which was published in 1950, was to give him his first real financial success.[15] This was quickly followed by more general success as film studios and television companies were interested in him. In fact he was offered a lucrative film contract - $40.000 a year for seven years with a free house for the duration of the contract (Macken, 2014). He declined this offer saying that he had to return home to finish a novel - The Bogman (1952). The financial rewards of

[15] Rain on the Wind won the Literary Guild award in America, which meant sales of over 250,000 copies.

Rain on the Wind had afforded him the luxury of becoming a full-time writer. A move back to Oughterard, Co. Galway quickly followed and it was here that he penned many of his more notable works including his triology of historical novels: Seek the Fair Land (1959), set in Cromwellian Ireland; The Silent People (1962), which depicted the famine years; and The Scorching Wind (1964) which dealt with the Easter Rising of 1916 and the bitter years of war (war of independence and the civil war) which followed. Indeed, the early 60s were prolific years for Walter until his untimely death in 1967.

3.2 Almost a Great Writer! Macken and the Critics

Commemorations for the centenary of the birth of Walter Macken in 2015 were very much a local affair. This very much reflects the lack of esteem with which he is held outside of his native Galway. Indeed claims that he is one of Ireland's finest writers are rarely heard east of the Shannon. There are occasional empty acknowledgements of his contribution to Irish literature but genuine recognition of his legacy is conspicuous by its absence. Comparisons with Beckett, Behan, Shaw, O'Casey and others seem to ring quite hollow. Bernie Ní Fhlatharta writing in the lead-up to his centenary described him as "Galway's neglected genius of literature" (Connacht Tribune, 2014). Again, the fact that such a claim was made by a regional rather than a national newspaper is quite telling. Even the publication by his son Ultan of a biography, *Walter Macken: Dreams on Paper* (Mercier Press, 2009), has not inspired scholars to engage with his work in a serious manner (Maher, 2013). Ultan is indeed one of the few real champions of Walter's literary legacy. He has worked tirelessly to promote the life and work of his late father. He even embarked upon what turned out to be a critically acclaimed one-man show called *My Father, My Son*.[16] The same can also be said to a lesser extent of his other son Fr. Walter Macken. Indeed, where it not for the efforts of both Ultan and Walter to actively promote the life and works of their father, including the re-publication of many of his books, the name of Walter Macken could very well have been confined to Ireland's literary archives - and that would have been a travesty.

It is not entirely unexpected that Walter Macken should have been overlooked during his lifetime. It is said that he never had time for the literati and consequently they never had time for him (Allen, 2015). "Unfortunately for Macken, those who read and appreciated his work weren't in the habit of writing letters or hanging out with the literati. The Establishment, as it had always done, ignored his work" (Ibid). Ironically, given that he was a devout Catholic, he even fell victim of the Irish censorship board on more than one occasion. *Quench the Moon*, his very first novel, was banned, most likely

[16] The show was first presented at The Studio in the Town Hall, Galway in 2001 before going nationwide including Dublin's Andrew's Lane Theatre. There have been performances as recently as September, 2019 in Galway's Town Hall Theatre.

because of Kathleen Finnerty's pregnancy outside of wedlock (Maher, 2013). Both *I am Alone* and *Rain on the Wind* were later to suffer the same fate. Macken found this deeply hurtful. "People in Ireland have very little respect for writers," he concluded. "You are writing for your own people. What's going to happen if they stop your own people from reading you?" (Ultan Macken, 2009). He was equally resentful of how his work was often received; indeed, "as so often happens in Ireland, his books were praised by critics abroad but savaged at home" (Lonergan, 2009).

Ultan Macken feels equally resentful today that his father's work has not received the credit that it clearly deserves: "It always hurts me, and it hurt my mother as well, that whenever they're talking about famous Irish writers he's never mentioned" (Ultan Macken speaking to Karen McDonnell in March, 2014 about Walter's legacy and his approaching centenary). Getting to the crux of the matter Karen McDonnell (2014) asks if he is "unworthy of our interest" or if it is a case of "plain snobbery?" Indeed, she has a point. Perhaps Ultan Macken is right when he adds ruefully: "Because he's easy to read, academics never took account of him" (McDonnell, 2014). Even those who have acknowledged his contribution to Irish literature always seem to qualify their praise in some way. Norman Jeffares in the *Macmillan History of Anglo-Irish Literature* refers to Macken as a "particularly evocative writer" but then says that his novels are "well written" but "workmanlike" rather than "deep" (1982:247). Robert Hogan in *After the Irish Renaissance: A Critical History of the Irish Drama since The Plough and The Stars (1967)* echoes these sentiments. He acknowledges that Macken is one of the most successful modern Irish writers, and "one of the best" and he suggests that his fiction has found a "fairly wide, Book-of-the-Month Club, upper-middle-brow audience." He goes on to say however that his "critical reputation lies about halfway between that of a Frank O'Connor and that of a Maurice Walsh [...] and though his stories lack the qualities likely to get them discussed in the Hudson Review or Modern Fiction Studies, they are *fine* work, and no less fine for being both traditional and *easily readable*" (1967:65). *Fine* and *easily readable* are clearly not the defining characteristics that Ultan Macken would like his father's writing to be remembered for. In the *Macmillan Dictionary of Irish Literature* (1985) Hogan again starts out by praising his work, suggesting this time that his fiction "hangs between entertainment and art [...] between the excellent popular novels of Maurice Walsh[17] and the serious work of a Liam O'Flaherty." He says that his novels have an "easy and often evocative style" and at his best Macken is "powerful and memorable". He undermines this once again however by saying that Macken's books are what is often

[17] It is actually quite ironic that Hogan should choose to use Walsh again as a point of comparison. Much like Macken, his novels proved to be very popular at the time (in the 1930s) but they are little known and little read today. I can only conjecture that Hogan referred to him because his work also contained a mix of romance and drama and was often set in a rural West of Ireland that was fast disappearing. He is probably best remembered for his novel *The Quiet Man* as it was later to inspire the iconic movie starring John Wayne.

referred to as "a good read" with "well-drawn if somewhat *simple* characters." He concludes that Macken's fiction has force, energy and a confident craftsmanship and that, at its best, only narrowly misses lasting excellence" (Hogan, 1985:406-407). It is as if critics just can't acknowledge that readability can be reconciled with greatness. Even his historical triology has been criticised with Hogan labelling *The Scorching Wind* as "thin" (Hogan, 406) and Donnelly describing *The Silent People* "primarily an adventure story of the R.L. Stevenson kind", which "bears even less relation to Irish history than Stevenson's *Kidnapped* does to Scottish history" (Donnelly, 1980:261).

Critical reaction to the production of Macken's very first play in English can give us a clue as to how his later work would be critically received. *Mungo's Mansion* opened at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, on 11 February, 1946. It was reviewed by the three national papers the following day (cited in Reid, 2010:72-73). The Irish Press review titled 'Macken the O'Casey of the West' wrote:

> *Unless 1 am greatly mistaken, Walter Macken has done for Galway what Sean O'Casey has done for Dublin. Mungo's Mansion, which received its Irish premiere at the Abbey Theatre last night is an authentic dramatisation of a section of Irish life...,Macken belongs to the modem realistic Ireland, which has little sympathy with John O'Leary's romantic Ireland. His drama is hard, and his mind works within the ambit of a State in which doles are more important than dreams.... (The Irish Press, 12th February 1946, p.3)*

The Irish Times review however was far less favourable. The play was compared with Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* and was deemed "not entirely to the advantage of Macken." Mungo and Mowleogs were described as "at best, pale shadows of Captain Boyle and Joxer Daly." Mackens characters do not "arrest us with the thought [...] that O'Casey's characters do" (The Irish Times, 12th Feb, 1946:2). The Irish Independent was not as harsh and did not in fact invoke any comparisons with O'Casey but it did comment that "there was a distinct difference between life in Buttermilk Lane in Galway and Marrowbone Lane in Dublin" (Irish Independent, 12th February, 1946) Indeed Allen confirms that there was always something very provincial about Macken's work in that his inspiration always came from the people around him in his native city and county, and in the wider province of Connacht. These people "populated his novels, plays and short stories with all their contradictions, fears, hypocrisies, idiosyncrasies, prejudices, lies and secrets in full colour". It was however these "lively characters" and "smooth narrative flow and subtle plot weaving" that made his books difficult to put down but also appear "lightweight" (Allen, 2015). Macken was to spend the rest of his career in the shadow of his literary peers – in a constant battle to prove that his plays and prose had anything other

than local relevance and interest. Indeed, Macken was never to achieve the recognition that he deserved. He lived an existence "that eluded stereotype, not least by those who believed that Irish literature began and ended with W.B. Yeats, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett" (Allen, 2015).

4. WALTER MACKEN AND THE SILENT PEOPLE

4.1 Historical Context

Walter Macken's *The Silent People* was first published in 1962. It is the second part of that aforementioned historical trilogy that Robert Hogan refers to as Macken's most ambitious work (1980:406) and many consider his greatest literary achievement. The trilogy spans perhaps the three most eventful and controversial periods in Ireland's struggle for survival and ultimate freedom: *Seek the Fair Land* (1959), set in 1649, deals with the Cromwellian invasion; *The Silent People* covers the period from 1826 until the Famine of the 1840s and *The Scorching Wind* (1964) takes the reader from 1915, just before the Easter Rising, to the War of Independence and the Irish civil war.

Noteworthy is the timing of these novels, not just because of the limited historiographical and literary response to the famine as previously mentioned, but also given the changing political, social and cultural climate in Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s. To say that Ireland was enjoying a period of stability or relative prosperity is probably something of an exaggeration, but there was certainly a sense that it was in transition or somehow emerging. Yes, a "dominating southern nationalist interest represented the revolutionary political elite's realpolitik after 1920" (Regan, 2007:197) and this was reflected in historiographical narrative. Likewise, the 30s and 40s had also been characterised by heightened nationalist fervour following the abolishment of the Oath of Allegiance by De Valera in 1933 and the replacement of the Irish Free State with a new constitution and independent Republic of Ireland in 1937. There was however a perceptible shift in the following decades – the beginnings of a move away from that more extreme nationalist sentiment previously associated with the politics of partition. Not all agreed with this. Brendan Bradshaw for example claimed that many so-called revisionist historians employed "evasion" or normalization", or were guilty of "the simple expedient of ignoring the evidence" in their observations of Anglo-Irish relations (Bradshaw, 1989:340-41). While such views cannot be ignored, there is no question that some historians had begun to question the nationalist portrayal of the past as a story of subjugation, oppression, deprivation and suffering at the hands of British rule.

T. W. Moody, D. B. Quinn, and R. Dudley Edwards were in part behind this revisionist movement in the 1930s, transforming Irish historiography which until then was "subordinating historical truth to the cause of the nation" (Curtain, 1996:195). Within this spirit, a new generation of Irish historians sought to develop a professional approach to their field and among their objectives was the dispelling of politically-oriented readings of history, particularly so called nationalist myth (Brady, 1994:71-86). Put another way, their mission was to "cleanse the historical record of its mythological clutter"

(Curtain,195) and engage in what Moody called "the mental war of liberation from servitude to the myth" of Irish nationalist history by applying scientific methods to the evidence, separating fact from destructive and divisive fictions (Moody apud Curtain, 1996: 195). This began a period in Irish history-writing, and indeed in Irish literature generally, that was increasingly characterised by a distancing from the nationalist narrative. It is within this context of a growing spirit of revisionist historiography that Macken began to write about such divisive issues as Cromwell, the Great Irish Famine and the Easter Rising and subsequent struggles. Interestingly and somewhat ironically, Cecil Woodham-Smith's *The Great Hunger*, considered by many as an affront to revisionist views of the Famine, emerged in the same year as Macken's *Silent People*.

4.2 Macken's Mission – The Common Man

We are the Silent People.
How long must we be still,
To nurse in secret at our breast
An ancient culture?

Let us arise and cry then;
Call from the sleeping ashes
Of destiny a chieftain who
Will be our voice.

He will strike the brass
And we will erupt
From our hidden caves
Into the light of new-born day. *(Flan McCarthy in SP 5)*

Scylla in Joyce's *Ulysses* remarks that the "supreme question about a work of art is out of how deep a life does it spring" (1922:183). This takes us back to Heaney's idea of the pen as a 'digging' tool - that instrument of unearthing the past, of "excavating the roots of a people's existence" (Niel, 1986:36) where the act of digging with that pen is an atavistic activity and words become "doors" (Preoccupations, 1980) that provide an entrance "deep into one's own soul and the soul of our nation" (Vendler p.93). Literature beckons us in and allows us to partake in that archaeological activity of seeking out those buried *shards*. For Heaney, as I have already pointed out, these shards are his father, grandfather and so many others just like them (Digging 1966). Walter Macken also wants us to come face to face with the common man, the man with the spade. For Macken, as with Heaney, literature, identity and the common man - the man in the shadows, are inextricably linked.

Macken realises that history can often be paralysed by facts – by lifeless detail detached or removed from the reality of life in 19th century Ireland and the raw suffering of its people. He calls us into the heart of the human story that lived that history. He seeks to take us beyond that distanced empirical observation of the Irish people epitomised in recorded histories and rather pushes us to partake of their humanity. Macken told his wife Peggy that his objective was to write the history of his people from the point of view of the ordinary man:

> *Before I die I want to do the history of our own people from the viewpoint of the little man, not all the big shots and the people who have done 100 things or anything like that." (Peggy Macken, Cúrsaí, 1988).*

His son Ultan tells us that with *Seek the Fair Land, The Silent People* and *The Scorching Wind*, he wanted to give his audience an insight into how "the small man" came through "traumatic periods" of Ireland's history (1996). This is echoed in the words of his other son, Fr. Walter Macken, who states emphatically that his father set out to write a history of Ireland as seen through the eyes of the "unsung hero who never gets anywhere near the history books, except as a statistic" (in 'Peggy Macken: Towards a Character Sketch' p.7). This is not to suggest that Macken did not have his own particular political bias or agenda. Indeed, as I will also point out, Macken was never afraid to revisit where others were reluctant to go, especially at that muted and transitional stage in Ireland's history. He answers Heaney's call for 'mindful' recognition of the famine and all that this implies. Yes, he 'strikes his note' with his explicit condemnation of the terrible injustices and atrocities committed during those times but if we focus exclusively on his political views or statements then we are failing to appreciate the fullness of what he was really trying to achieve. Macken puts the common man centre stage and he reminds us that coming to an understanding of our identity as a nation lies not only in those cold empirical facts but also in our willingness to walk side by side with these ordinary people, "full of contradictions, fears, hypocrisies, idiosyncrasies, prejudices, lies and secrets, who populated his novels, plays and short stories" (Allen, 2015). It is fitting that Macken should begin *Silent People* with Flan McCarthy's poetic eulogy to those nameless victims. Indeed, maybe it is Macken who assumes the role of their "chieftain" in the form of a modern day seanchaí who will be the "voice" that will "strike the brass" and allow them to "erupt" from their "hidden caves into the light of new-born day" (SP, 5).

4.3 Defining the 'Common Man' - Macken, the Modern Day Seanchaí

Robert Allen refers to Macken as a storyteller in the tradition of the seanchaí (2015). Indeed, this would explain much about his writing. As I alluded to earlier, the seanchaí were traditional Irish

storytellers and the custodians of Irish history, tradition and identity for centuries. This tradition of storytelling has continued, albeit provincially, and seanchaí are still to be found. John Messenger, writing about the modern day *Seanchaí of Aran*, tells us that they still adhere to the ancient seanchaí principles of storytelling. Myths, legends, stories and tales are never embellished but told as accurately as possible. These narratives can also deal with recent and contemporary events and with personal experiences of the seanchai. The most striking characteristic of the seanchaí is that they believe strongly in the narratives they relate – in fact they are often deeply and emotionally involved in the events they are describing (1964:203). Genuine storytellers learn by listening and interacting with all individuals in their immediate native culture's surroundings and thus stories can arise organically from social, cultural, physical, and/or emotional needs of participants and their contexts (Ryan, 2008:65). Walter Macken's stories came from his people in his native city, county and province. Fr. Walter Macken tells us that his father's books are "full of the little man. They are about everyday people and their everyday battles, their joys and their sorrows, their lives and their deaths, because this is reality for the world of Walter Macken" (cited in Allen 2015). Karen McDonnell echoes this by highlighting that Macken wrote about what he knew: the land, the people and their ways. He wrote in "his time, of his time, and with his own and his time's view of Ireland" (2014), and he did this unashamedly and courageously. Dunning once said that History is based on the noble principle of truth in that it has "truth for its subject matter and the discovery of truth for its end" (1914:217). The same can be said of Macken's view of literature. Yes, he was a writer of fiction, but much like the seanchaí, the conviction and courage to remain faithful to the undeniable truth about life in Ireland at that time permeates his work. Eamon Maher refers to the fact that this harsh realism that characterises Macken's fiction "may not sit easily with those who are enthralled by Connemara's undoubted charms" but he reminds us that "life in this western outpost was undoubtedly demanding for those exposed on a daily basis to its less savoury aspects" (2013). The world of the Irish subsistence farmer was indeed a world of extreme poverty, hardship and exploitation but it was also characterised by hypocrisy, betrayal, terrifying secrets, stifling social norms, loveless arranged marriages and physical and emotional violence. *The Bogman* (1952) for example while giving us insights into the plight of poor peasant farmers in the West of Ireland also tells of the trials and tribulations of Cahal Kinsella, a 'bastard' child released from institutional care into the hands of his abusive Grandfather. Given its sensitive nature the book was immediately banned by the Irish Censorship Board. Maher concludes that Macken knew the people and the surroundings he was depicting intimately and this is what gives his writing its particular resonance (2013). Indeed, not only did Macken know and write about the people he lived among, "he understood how they functioned

in their daily rites of passage, and this allowed him to write characters that were as real as the day was long" (Allen, 2015). Indeed, authentic characters in a world that he understood so well characterised both his drama and prose from the very beginning. *Rain on the Wind* (1950) explores the harsh life of the fishermen of Galway Bay while *Sullivan* (1957) and the book of short stories The *City of The Tribes* (posthumously published in 1997) are set in the western part of Galway city, an area that Macken associated with deprivation and poverty during his own childhood. (Moloney 2001).

While critics are reluctant to liken Macken to Synge or O'Casey, we can argue that Macken, in his own unique and authentic style, was able to capture the contradictions and complexities of the people of the west of Ireland in much the same way that O'Casey was able to characterize working class Dubliners and Synge the inhabitants of Inishmaan. Indeed similarities with Synge in particular don't stop there. The writing of *Playboy of the Western World*, *Riders to the Sea* and *The Aran Islands*, was based on stories that Synge heard during his time on the Aran Islands[18] (Deane 1991:405 and Hogan, 1979:656). Indeed, Synge had immersed himself in the life and culture of island existence to such an extent that he gained profound insight into the hidden realities of life on the islands. Macken too was to base many of his novels on stories he had heard about the people of Galway and Connemara and he too had unmatched insight into the world of the West. Much like Synge, he also immersed himself completely in his stories. Ultan Macken points out that his father had spent months on all aspects of "historical minutiae" before writing his trilogy. He recalls the many journeys that he had made with his father to plot the routes taken by the characters in *Seek the Fair Land* and *The Silent People* (Macken, 2009). Interestingly and maybe somewhat ironically, Macken was invited by Cyril Cusack to play the part of old Mahon in the Gaiety Theatre's 1953 production of Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* (Reid, 2010:135) and he had already played the parts of Captain Stanhope in a production of Sean O'Casey's *Shadow of a Gunman* in Galway's Taibhdhearc in 1940 (Reid, 45) and Captain Boyle in O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* in Belfast's Hippodrone in 1943 (47).

[18] "Go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression" (cited in Mortimer, 1977:293). It is claimed that Yeats told Synge to go to the Aran Islands. Indeed he did go and he spent a total of four and a half months over four summers there (Hogan 1979:656).

5. THE PEOPLE IN THE SHADOWS

5.1 Shards - Dualta Duane and his uncle Marcus.

The spade for you and the manure fork for me! See, with this spade I give you a livelihood. Here is a spade and go into the great world and make your fortune. (SP:15)

It is noteworthy that Macken should begin his 'Famine Novel' in 1826 almost twenty years before what is the acknowledged beginning of the Great Irish Hunger in 1845. *The Silent People* is not a mere literary representation of the Potato Famine and Macken's concerns and intentions go far beyond Phytophthora Infestans. His often stated goal of telling the story of his people from the point of view of the 'little man' cannot be limited to an event or time span. The Famine must thus be seen within the context of the lives and struggles of the real Irish people in the nineteenth century and beyond. Dualta Duane, the protagonist in *The Silent People* and his uncle Marcus are representative of these people - the 'common man,' the 'man with the spade.' Dualta, an ingenuous 17 year old and his cottier/schoolteacher uncle are the embodiment of a people whose story must be told. Macken's pen is his 'digging' tool with which he must "excavate" and reveal the roots of the existence of Dualta, Marcus and others like them. Macken opens the door and allows us into their world, the world of the sub-classes of peasant farmers, cottiers, 'conacre' holders and landless labourers. To reclaim truth, the stories of these ordinary people must be retrieved. Macken seeks to give us a lens into the window of their lives. He gives us little snapshots or capsules of time with which we can accompany them on at least a part of their journey. These ordinary people and the ordinary things they did can so easily be forgotten, overlooked or even dismissed but Macken puts them centre stage.

5.2 The Sub-classes

In 1841, William Tighe Hamilton, Henry Brownrigg and Thomas Aiskew Larcom, Ireland's three census commissioners, set out on an ambitious project – to conduct a census of Ireland that would be a "Social Survey, not a bare Enumeration" (Crowley et al, 2012). Their idea was not just to count the people, although this was important too given the rapidly increasing population, but to try to come to some sort of understanding of the social and economic conditions in which they lived (O'Keeffe, 2021). The census report gives us a real snapshot of what life may have been like in the West of Ireland in nineteenth century. It concluded that two-thirds of Irish families were classified as 'chiefly employed in agriculture' – such a dependence on the land would make them constantly vulnerable to crop failures. The survey also referred to literacy levels which was another crucial factor in the survival of a family at

that time. The ability to read government notices or take advantage of opportunities to emigrate could greatly increase their chances of survival (Crowley et al, 2012). As the nephew of a cottier and school master Dualta is one of the literate minority. Apparently some fifty-three per cent of the Irish population were completely illiterate with a further nineteen per cent having limited reading ability but unable to write. Significantly the census revealed that most of the province of Connacht was Irish-speaking so that even those who could read were still unable to read or understand English (Crowley et al, 2012).

The survey also graded the people into social categories based on the quality of their houses. Four different classes were identified. The fourth and lowest class lived in "single room mud walled cabins" while the third class was only slightly better off with "mud walled cottages with two to four rooms and windows" (Ibid, 2012). The Census Commissioners concluded that nearly half of the families of the rural population were living in the lowest state. These were the landless labourers and cottiers such as Dualta Duane's uncle Marcus. Significantly, in parts of the West of Ireland, which was to be the area most affected by the Famine, three fifths of the houses belonged to the fourth class and "west of a line drawn from Londonderry to Cork the proportion was two-fifths" (1841 Census cited in Woodham-Smith, 1962:20). All this "wretchedness and misery" could be traced to a single source – the "system by which land had come to be occupied and owned in Ireland" (ibid). During the seventeenth century, England confiscated in excess of three million acres of land (Morris, 1896:126). These confiscations paved the way for the exploitative land-tenure and middleman systems that dominated the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

5.3 The Plight of the Peasant Farmer in 19th Century Ireland

In 1843 the British government set up a Royal Commission known as the Devon Commission into the law and practice regarding the occupation of land in Ireland. The Earl of Devon visited every part of Ireland and produced three volumes of evidence. The final report concluded that the principal cause of misery was indeed the awful relations between landlord and tenant. "Ireland was a conquered country, the Irish peasant a dispossessed man, his landlord an alien conqueror [...] there was no paternalism, such as existed in England, no hereditary loyalty or feudal tie" (Woodham-Smith, 1962:21). Indeed, with some notable exceptions, the majority of landlords saw their estates in Ireland merely as a source of extracting as much revenue as possible. Many of them saw Ireland as a hostile, dangerous and backward place and absenteeism was the norm. Estates were left in the hands of agents whose ability was measured by the amount of money they could "contrive to extract" (ibid, 22). During the eighteenth century the practice of letting out large expanses of land at fixed rates on a long lease to a single

individual was common. This land was then sub-let at the tenant's own discretion. This resulted in a middleman system that was to lead to endless misery for tenants lower down this social hierarchy. Exploitation was the norm as middlemen became authentic 'land-sharks' and 'bloodsuckers' (ibid, 22). Farms were split into smaller and smaller holdings in order to maximise profit. The terms by which the Irish peasant held land were incredibly harsh and leases offered little security of tenure. The majority of tenants were tenants 'at will' meaning that they remained only at the will of the landlord (ibid 22). Indeed, the peasants agreed to any terms or conditions offered by the middlemen rather than quit the land. This will later become the plight of Dualta who must accept the terms offered by middleman Clarke who is responsible for the estate of absentee landlord Tewson from whom Dualta has a ten year holding. Under another system called the land-tenure system, landlords rented small tracts of land directly to Irish peasants usually at exorbitant rates so peasants fared no better. The alternative to a plot of land on which to grow potatoes was almost certain starvation. The consequences of this need for land meant that holdings under both systems were divided and sub-divided, over and over again. Farms that had already been divided and sub-divided by landlords and middlemen were further sub-divided by the tenants themselves especially in the years preceding the famine. The rapidly growing Irish population ensured that the quest for land became ever more desperate. Parents allowed their children to occupy a portion of their holdings and these children eventually did the same for their children meaning that these tiny plots of land could barely sustain a family even when the potato harvest was abundant (ibid, 32). Competition for land also meant that rents increased as middlemen frequently let land by advertising for proposals with the holding going to the highest bidder. An ever increasing number of people were too poor to pay these increasing prices.

5.4 Dualta and Marcus - Cottiers, 'Conacre' and Landless Labourers

'I'm your uncle,' Marcus said. 'What do I own? I own nothing. I built this house but it isn't mine. I grow potatoes in a two-rood field but it isn't mine.' (SP,18)

Dualta was the only surviving member of his family from the famine of 1817. The Duanes and so many others like them were at the bottom of the social and economic pyramid, even below that of the aforementioned tenant farmers - although the plight of the poorest farmers would not have differed greatly from those who were theoretically on the tier below. The 'cottier' class numbered more than three million by the 1840s. Irish agriculture had developed greatly in the years following the economic boom years of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century "when Ireland was effectively the 'granary' of Britain during the Napoleonic Wars (Reilly 2020) and the rapid growth of the cottier

population was a feature of this development. Essentially, the overabundance of cheap labour in the form of the cottier class allowed Irish farmers to work larger tracts of land (Reilly 2020). The increased prosperity of some Irish farmers did not filter down to the cottiers however and given their precarious position they were invariably the first to succumb to the hunger and disease which came with crop failures (Reilly, 2020) such as that which hit in 1817 leading to the deaths of Dualta's family. In fact there were fourteen partial or complete potato famines in Ireland between 1816 and 1842 (Foster, 1988:320).

Ciaran Reilly notes that the 'cottier' class remained somewhat hidden in the Famine narrative despite their numbers and the role they played in the agricultural life of Ireland in the pre-famine years (2020). Indeed, given the fact that direct access to land was denied them, mostly because of their inability to meet the ever increasing rents, they were also to play a central role in the frequent social agitation that characterised these years. Reilly suggests that difficulty in defining the term 'cottier' may well, in part at least, be at the root of their relative obscurity as a recognised class (ibid). Indeed, confusion with the poorest tenant farmers and the 'landless labourers' is somewhat understandable given the extent of their poverty - the three terms were to be seen by many as almost indistinguishable (Ó Tuathaigh:1972: 148-149). The Poor Inquiry' of the early 1830s acknowledged such confusion and sought to provide some clarity:

> *The most prevalent meaning of the term 'cottier' is that of a labourer holding a cabin, either with or without land, as it may happen (but commonly from a quarter to three acres are attached), from a farmer or other occupier, for whom he is bound to work, either constantly at a certain fixed price (usually a very low one), or whenever called upon, or so many days in the week at certain busy seasons, according to the custom of the neighbourhood, the convenience of the landlord, or other local or personal circumstances [...] This class, in order to distinguish them from the former, we shall denominate 'cottier' labourers. They make their contract with the farmer for the cabin and land they hold in a money value, and the work they perform is set off against the rent at a price agreed upon, universally under the wages paid to other workmen (apud Ó Danachair 1980:154).*

This description gives a degree of clarity up to a point, but differences in understanding still existed, especially in different parts of the country. The term 'cottier' was used so loosely at the time that a comprehensive definition has never fully been agreed on. There has however been something of a consensus on certain features. In 1849 J.S Mill noted that usage of the term could include "all peasant farmers whose rents were determined by competition" (Mill 1849 cited in Beames, 1975). A little later,

E.R.R. Green suggested that the "cottier tenure was essentially 'under-tenency' and customarily involved labour status" (Green, 1956 cited in Beames, 1975). Another feature that seems to be reasonably clear and that differentiates the cottier from the landholder is that the small landholder holds the land from the proprietor whereas the cottier holds it from a middleman[19]. Differences of opinion seem to exist regarding the exact relationship of the cottier to the land and the means by which such land was paid for. One usage of the term suggests that the small quantity of land held was paid for in money while the second usage of the term revolved around the idea that the cottier paid all or part of his rent in labour (Beames, 1975). This usage was most prevalent in the West of Ireland and is most likely the understanding that Macken was working with - although he could equally be referring to another group, the conacre holders, who were almost indistinguishable from the cottiers in as far as we can have a working definition of this class. In fact, technically the 'conacre holders' actually fall within the 'cottier system' in that they too were 'bound' rather than 'landless' labourers and were also forced to try to eke out an existence by means of the 'hiring' of land.

Essentially, 'conacre' was a contract by which the use of a portion of land was let to grow one crop. Conacre land was normally let on an eleven-month system, considered long enough to sow and harvest a crop – although once again there are different interpretations about the exact nature of the agreement especially regarding duration of 'contract' and size of the portion of land to be let. Conacre was not a lease but an agreement to occupy, and the relation of landlord and tenant was not created (Woodham-Smith, 1962:34). The essential feature of this system was that the labourer was, in fact, paid the wages of his labour not in money but in land (Ó Danachair, 1980:156). It has often been referred to as a 'potato wage.' The 'conacre holder' thus endured a miserable and most uncertain existence. In return for the 'small holding', the farmer was effectively repaid by work in kind. In doing so, the conacre holders and indeed the cottiers, if one can make such a distinction, were 'bound' by an unwritten contract, which could be terminated at a moment's notice and without recourse to the law. For this reason, cottiers and conacre holders, assuming now that the two were one of the same, were 'the most insecure class' (Ó Tuathaigh, 1972: 134). Despite this, demand for conacre was enormous as without it many would starve – indeed the existence of many of the poorest Irish depended on this "precarious speculation" (Woodham-Smith, 1962:34). Ironically, it was precarious and speculative for both the peasant landowner and the labourer although the labourer had most to lose. For landowners the difficulty was often in collecting the rent as the custom was for the rent of conacre ground to be paid

[19] The term 'middleman' is somewhat ambiguous, as the meaning of this term as used in the 1830s is not always clear. There could in fact be as many as five or six middlemen standing between the owner and the cottier or conacre holder. Labourers (cottier or conacre) generally held their cabins from farmers residing on the lands where their cabins were built (Ó Danachair, 1980:158) so we can, in this instance, take the term 'middleman' to mean tenant farmer.

after the crop was harvested. For the conacre labourer, if the crop failed, he was ruined – "a gambler playing for a stake he cannot pay" (A witness to the Devon Commission as cited in Woodham-Smith, 34). Despair and desperation ensured that there was an exponential increase in the number of conacre holders in the 1820s and 1830s (Ó Danachair, 1980:156). The ever increasing surplus of agricultural labourers led many to speculate in this type of 'on the margin'[20] potato-growing. The census report of 1841 noted that the system was "under-going dissolution" in some counties as the farmers increasingly preferred to have their work done by occasional labourers (O'Keeffe, 2021) but it still remained the only means of survival in many areas particularly in the West of Ireland.

5.5 Dualta's Transgression

'Dualta,' he said, 'what have you done?'

'He hit me,' said Dualta. 'I only tumbled him off his horse.'

'You only tumbled him off his horse,' said Marcus. 'Ah, well, that's not much. He's only the son of the landlord' (SP:17).

I want you to hear this said the Half-Sir. This man is hereby evicted, and anyone who shelters him will suffer his fate. You hear that, school-teacher? (SP:22).

Dualta Duane is the victim of a vicious and unprovoked aggression by the son of the local landlard. Dualta inadvertently steps in front of the "Half-Sir's" horse as he rides through the local fair. The Half-Sir instinctively strikes him across the face with his horse whip. Dualta's rash and ill-judged reaction of throwing the Half-Sir from his horse results in Marcus being evicted from his home and Dualta seeking refuge in the hills before making his way south in search of work as a landless labourer. Along the way he is given refuge in the house of Cottiers Máirtin and Máire.

5.6 Many Mouths to Feed!

'How many have you got?' Dualta asked.

'Nine, thank God,' said Maírtin. 'Four girls and four boys and big Paidi that's out visiting. He's tracking a girl but she'll have none of him. He has nothing and her father has six cattle'

Máire was turning the drained pot of potatoes onto a flat round kish. They steamed in their big pile. Some of the jackets were open invitingly.

'You must be weak with hunger said,' said Máirtin. 'Take up and eat.'(SP, 31-32).

[20] A reference to the speculative buying of shares in 1920s America known as 'buying on the margin' whereby a bank-loan could be negotiated to buy shares with the intention of selling at a profit and then paying off the bank loan

Just as subsistence farming in its many guises was a defining feature of 'pre-famine'[21] Ireland, so too was rapid population growth and this was to exacerbate the problems for a people that relied almost exclusively on the land for survival. While there is no consensual agreement as to the causes of this population explosion, it is agreed by all that it was somewhere between the 1780s and 1790s that the population began to take an extraordinary upward leap (Woodham-Smith, 1962:29). While the practice of taking a ten-yearly census did not begin until 1821, it is estimated that the population increased from 4.7 million to 8.2 million between the years 1791 and 1841 (O'Rourke, 1991:2). The usual population growth factors of other countries at this time, such as increasing industrialisation and the resulting growth of towns and cities, did not apply to Ireland. It is however possible to point to certain circumstances particular to Ireland that would unquestionably have made population growth more likely. One of these was the "abundant supply of incredibly cheap and easily obtained food" in the form of the potato. With the addition of milk or buttermilk, potatoes make a "scientifically satisfactory" diet (Woodham-Smith, 30). Nevertheless, nutrition alone can't explain this remarkable rise. There is a convincing argument that the 'cottier class' played a key role. They married very young and raised large families in contrast to members of the farming class who were bound by the conventions of the dowry and the matchmaker and consequently married less readily (Ó Danachair 1980:155). Woodham-Smith argues that, far from acting as a deterrent, the "miserably low standards of Irish life" encouraged couples to marry early as "no savings were necessary, no outlay was required, a cabin was erected for little or nothing in a few days and a scrap of land was secured." She goes on to tell us that "marriages were daily contracted with the most reckless providence" (1962:30). George Nicholls in his Report on Ireland tells us that girls married at sixteen and boys at seventeen or eighteen [...] and girls were very fertile (1841:11 cited in WS p.30). "For twelve years 19 in 20 of them breed every second year. Vive la pomme de Terre!" wrote Arthur Young in 1780 (cited in WS p.30-31). Children in pre-famine Ireland were deemed a necessity. The Poor Law[22] did not come into existence until 1838, and when it did it provided limited help to the needy, so a man and woman's "insurance against destitution in their old age was their children" (Woodham-Smith, 31). But their children needed land. Father Finucane, who will later become a good friend of Dualta, put it succinctly when referring to the increasingly inadequate size of his church:

[21] To refer to the years leading up to the Great Famine of 1845-53 as 'pre-famine' years is something of a misnomer in that Ireland had been subjected to successive years of crop failure and famine throughout the early 1800s. Indeed, famine had also been a part of Irish life back in the 18th century especially the years 1740-41.

[22] The Poor Law was an attempt to come to terms with some of the problems arising out of widespread poverty in Ireland in the early 19th century by providing institutional relief for the destitute. The Irish Poor Law Act of 1838, heavily influenced by an English Act of 1834, divided the country initially into one hundred and thirty poor law unions each with a workhouse at its centre. Each union was administered by a board of poor law guardians. The system was originally designed to accommodate 1% of the population or 80,000 people but, by March 1851, famine had driven almost 4% of the population into the workhouses (https://www.nationalarchives.ie/article/guide-archives-poor-law/ accessed 31-3-2021)

Every year there were more and more children being born. If a family had half an acre they could grow enough potatoes to feed them for a year. So when sons and daughters were marriageable, they got married. Their fathers cut of another bit of their holding, they built a small house and they were away. It was rare in the parish for anyone not to be married before they were twenty-one…Half the holdings in the valley were sub-let and sub-sub-let. No wonder a third of the people couldn't fit into the chapel (SP, 193).

There may well be other contributing factors leading to this increase in population but, whatever the source, the conclusion remains that Ireland was becoming an ever more densely populated country that relied exclusively on its land for support. As a result, "the proportion of labourer to farmer increased to the point of redundancy and the labourers standard of living fell to subsistence at the lowest possible level" (Ó Danachair 1980:155). This is the Ireland that Macken clearly seeks to portray and it is within this context that he brings the reader into the home of Máirtin and Máire.

5.7 Máirtin and Máire

Dualta ducked his head and entered. The place was lighted only by the flames of a roaring fire on the open hearth. His nose was assailed with smells, smoke and children and yes, pigs. There was a sow lying on straw in the corner to his right…He looked around. He saw many eyes glinting at him… (SP, 30)

Máirtin and Máire are such people, part of an ever increasing group who so desperately need land for their survival. They are cottiers, subsistence farmers, living in a mud cabin "built by a tumbling mountain stream" (SP, 29), a typical dwelling for cottiers who were invariably forced to live on the edges of bogs or mountain and marginal land (Reilly, 2020). They etch out a meagre existence on a tiny patch of ground, or 'potato garden' as it was commonly called (ibid) although they have a sow which offers them some security in the worst of times. Indeed, in pre-famine Ireland the pig was a saver against hard times for those cottiers lucky enough to have one – "a poor crop or a rent increase might mean the cottier having to sell his pig in order to pay his rent and thus retain possession of his patch, his means of subsistence" (O' Tuathaigh, 1972: 133-4). Máirtin, Máire and their nine children live in a one-roomed thatched cabin with no chimney but rather a hole in the thatch to let to smoke from the turf fire out. Such families lived in primitive conditions and endured great hardship especially in the winter. Rain would have seeped through the poorly-thatched roofs in most parts of the cabin and bedding would have to be moved to avoid the water dripping down. While some floors may have been of stone most would have been of mud (McMahon and O'Neill, 2010:246). Cabin furniture would have been as primitive as the cabin itself. In some case beds would have been some sort of wooden structure, enough to raise the straw off the ground so as to avoid the worst of the dampness although many

families did not have such a luxury and had to sleep on the floor. Bedclothes did not exist for the majority. Some may have had one blanket between them so they invariably had to cover themselves with their day clothes to keep warm at night. They tended to huddle together for warmth which their ragged clothes did not give (McDowell, 1957 cited in McMahon and O'Neill, 2010:246).

Once again it is worth pointing out that Macken wrote The Silent People for those people in the shadows who are so often forgotten in the annals of documented history. Máirtin and Máire are such people. Macken intentionally takes us into their home giving us a lens in the window of their lives. He wants us to meet them personally and come face to face with the rawness of their poverty. Like Macken does with Dualta and Marcus, he allows them to speak their own truth without commentary. These and millions more like them, are the people whose story he felt obliged to tell. Máirtin and Máire are at the bottom of the pyramid. They have no voice and can be evicted on a whim at any time but yet they open their door to the fugitive Dualta, fully aware of the consequences. As Dominic, another of Macken's characters, tells us in The Scorching Wind:

> *You know who is the real hero? . . . The ordinary people. . . . There is hardly a house in the country where you can't knock on the door and ask for food and shelter, even though they know the terrible consequences, and many have paid them. This is the greatest period in history because the people are great. Right? If it wasn't for them, where would we be? We'd be like hares on the hills, eating heather (1966:243).*

6. THE POLITICAL MACKEN

6.1 The Common Man: Contradictions and the 'Middle Voice'

I stood between them,
the one with his traveled intelligence
and tawny containment,
his speech like the twang of a bowstring,

and another, unshorn and bewildered
in the tubs of his wellingtons,
smiling at me for help,
faced with this stranger I'd brought him.

Then a cunning middle voice
came out of the field across the road
saying, 'Be adept and be dialect,
tell of this wind coming past the zinc hut,

Go beyond what's reliable
in all that keeps pleading and pleading,
these eyes and puddles and stones,
and recollect how bold you were

through my own country, adept
at dialect, reciting my pride
in all that I knew, that began to make strange
at the same recitation.

Excerpts from 'Making Strange' (from Station Island, part 1, 1984)

Seamus Heaney tells us in *Preoccupations* that he was born into a 'realm of division' (1980:20) and consequently his poetry is also very much conditioned by such division. Yes, he expresses a view of poetry as "secret and natural" yet it must operate in a world that is "public and brutal". Indeed, he has found himself "caught in the sectarian cross fire with fellow Catholics pressing him to write political verse and liberal critics congratulating him on not taking sides" (Andrews 1985:368). Andrews also refers to Heaney's own personal battle to define and interpret the present by bringing it into significant relationship with the past (p.369). In this, Heaney likens himself to Kavanagh (Atfield, 1991:80) by explicitly stating that 'his quarrel with himself was the quarrel . . . between the illiterate self that was tied to the little hills and earthed in the stony grey soil, and the literate self that pined for the "city of kings/ where art, music and letters were the real thing"' (Preoccupations, 1980:137).

In *Making Strange* Heaney is “straddling the division between his past and present,” the farming community which he left, as “embodied in the shy countryman,” 'unshorn and bewildered/ in the tube of his Wellingtons', and “the literary world he has entered, epitomised in the smooth-talking cosmopolitan,” with his 'travelled intelligence' (Atfield, 1991:80). Blake Morrison suggests that we can take this “both as a real encounter and as a parable of the poet's divided self” (1984:1191). He suggests that he is somehow caught midway. It is a type of 'middle voice' that Heaney has to cultivate to embrace both aspects of his nature (Atfield, 1991:82). As he put it: 'one half of one's sensibility is in a cast of mind that comes from belonging to a place, an ancestry, a history, a culture, whatever one wants to call it. But consciousness and quarrels with the self are the result of what Lawrence called the voices "of my education". These voices pull in two directions, back through the political and cultural traumas of Ireland, and out towards the urgencies and experience of the world beyond it' (Preoccupations, 1980:35).

Macken also writes within a ‘realm of division’ and he too must find his middle voice, both in his political stance, which I will deal with later, and in his portrayal of those forgotten Irish that he specifically set out to represent in his historical trilogy. Indeed, he must navigate his way through the contradictions and complexities of many facets of life for those at the bottom of the social pyramid in pre-famine Ireland. It is somewhat ironic that Macken should be accused of whitewashing or, at the very least, providing a simplistic view of Irish history[23] when in fact he sets out to do the very opposite with *The Silent People*. The adoption of this middle voice is evident in his critical but honest portrayal of landless labourers, peasant farmers, agrarian secret societies and the forty-shilling freeholders among others. Coincidentally Woodham-Smith also refers to the complexities and contradictions of the Irish sub-classes. She speaks of their “good nature, gaiety and light-heartedness” (1962:24) but she also acknowledges their “darker and more sinister side.” (p.26). She goes on to suggest that in order to fully understand their “blend of courage and evasiveness, tenacity and inertia, loyalty and double-dealing” it is necessary to look at the cultural and political impact of the Penal Laws[24]. The Penal Laws, dating from 1695 and not repealed totally until Catholic emancipation in 1829, aimed at the eradication of

[23] As outlined earlier, references to Macken’s “easy style” and “romantic approach” (Cahalan, 1983:159) can lead readers and critics alike to focus on the sentimentalism of Macken’s work at the expense of its realism. Indeed, Robert Hogan alludes to this by praising Macken’s “effective recreations of the time” but immediately qualifying this description by suggesting that Macken’s prose cannot be seen alongside the “serious work of a Liam O’Flaherty” (Hogan,1980:406). Although not explicitly mentioned, this is a possible comparison with O’Flaherty’s novel *Famine* (1937).

[24] The Penal laws were a complex body of anti-Catholic legislation dating back to 1695. (Kinealy, 1997:19) The laws aimed at the destruction of Catholicism in Ireland by a series of enactments provoked by Irish support of the Stuarts after the Protestant William of Orange was invited to ascend the English throne in 1688 and England faced the greatest Catholic power in Europe – France (Woodham-Smith, 1962:27). The Penal Laws sought to prevent Catholics from ever holding land or power again. Indeed, by 1775, only 5 per cent of land was in the hands of the native Irish. (Kinealy,1997:19). The laws impinged on all aspects of life for Catholics. They were effectively banned from the Irish Parliament or holding public office. An Act of 1703 limited the rights of Catholics to inherit land or secure leases on it (Kinealy, 1997:19). They were barred from the army, the navy, commerce, and from every civic activity. Education was made almost impossible since Catholics could not attend, nor keep schools ((Woodham-Smith, 1962:27).

Catholicism in Ireland. (Woodham-Smith, 1962:27). Edmund Burke described the Penal Code as "a machine as well fitted for the oppression, impoverishment and degradation of a people, and the debasement in them of human nature itself, as ever proceeded from the perverted ingenuity of man" (Edmund Burke 1792 apud Woodham-Smith, p.27). While the direct physical effects of the Penal Laws for the Irish were catastrophic, Woodham- Smith argues that their most disastrous effects were in fact moral. She claims that the Penal Laws "brought lawlessness, dissimulation and revenge in their train, and the Irish character, above all the character of the peasantry, did become degraded and debased" (1962:27). The poorest Catholic peasants bore the full brunt of the laws. In the Irish House of Commons they were known as the 'common enemy' and whatever was inflicted, redress could not be found from landlord or law. In such a scenario, "suspicion of the law, of the ministers of the law and of all established authority worked into the very nerves and blood of the Irish peasant and since the law did not give them justice, they set up their own law (1962:28). Secret societies proliferated. "To worship according to his faith, the Catholic must attend illegal meetings; to protect his priest, he must be secret, cunning and a concealer of the truth (ibid).

Indeed, violence, lawlessness, vengeance and dissimulation permeated life for those living on the margins. This is not to say that the poorest of the Irish had become unprincipled and amoral but rather that the harsh reality of life in pre-famine Ireland had brought out extremes in their character and consequently in their actions. Macken juxtaposes these different facets of life and living for the people in the shadows. An honest representation of the common man that avoids sentimentalism must reflect the real complexities and contradictions of "the poorest and most oppressed people in Europe" (John Stuart Mill. 1825:66-67) and this is what Macken sets out to do in *The Silent People.* "Telling the history of our own people from the viewpoint of the little man" (Peggy Macken, Cúrsaí, 1988) as he clearly stated would mean finding his 'middle voice.'

6.2 Forty-Shilling Freeholders

Then Paidi started calling sheep.

Ma-a-a-a! Ma-a-a-a! Ma-a-a-a!

.....Dualta felt sorry for them. It wasn't their fault. They were the forty shilling freeholders, who were neither free nor holding anything. They did look like sheep gathered into the fold, tended by shepherds who told them there was an election and when and how they were to go and who they were to vote for. It was as simple as that. If they didn't do as they were told, their houses would be pulled down about their ears and they would be given the road" (SP, 38-39).

Dualta, Paídi (the eldest son of Máirtin and Máire) and some young men make their way to Galway in search of work as labourers in the fields. Upon reaching Galway town, they witness a group of forty-shilling freeholders[25] being walked to the polling booths to vote for their landlord's candidate. The name is deceiving as these men are not free and what they hold is not theirs. Dualta's initial feeling of sympathy for them certainly comes from his awareness that refusal to vote as they are told would certainly result in eviction - and being put off the land at this time was nothing short of a death sentence. However, this initial compassion and concern quickly changes to derision and scorn. In a drunken stupor, Dualta rants: "We are slaves. You hear that? Look at those stupid people [...] walking into those stupid booths and voting for men they never heard of. Is this the action of free men, or is it the action of slaves?" (SP, 43). Dualta later suggests that the freeholders are responsible for the election of those that would bring in "more Coercion Acts or something else that would bind them deeper to their chains" (SP, 43). Maybe these thoughts have their origins in the fact that Dualta is on the run and has nothing left to lose. He is also single and free from responsibilities of those family men who stand to lose everything they own. Macken's deliberate portrayal of Dualta in a state of inebriation allows him to reflect on the complexities and contradictions of life at that time without having to explicitly take a side. Macken is clearly caught between empathy and condemnation. All these thoughts have been "liberated from a bottle, or from the austere thoughts of the poets talking of long times ago when men were free [...] to argue and declare their freedom and their rights" (SP, 43). It is clear that Macken seeks to remind the reader of the difficulty of finding that middle-voice. Indeed, it would seem intentional that Macken later puts Dualta in a similar position to these coerced voters when, as a freeholder under threat of eviction, he too is pressured to vote according to his landlord's wishes in the elections of 1928. Dualta will record his misguided condemnation: "We baaed at them like sheep. Now I know how they felt" (SP, 191). Could it be that Macken has taken us to a place where we are permitted to honour the integrity of each person's story. Indeed the forty shilling freeholders may have been sheep in the eyes of history but Macken helps us to view them from a new vantage point.

6.3 Dualta Duane and Peasant Agitation in Pre-Famine Ireland

Tooley: You have been warned.
You have only hours left.
Go now, and withdraw your bid.
You know the consequences.

[25] Tenants who leased land valued at 40 shillings annually were entitled to vote. They were given the vote as a consequence of the relaxation of the Penal Laws although Catholics could still could not sit in parliament (Kinealy, 1997:22).These tenants, referred to as forty-shilling freeholders, were "a potential source of power to a landlord" since his electoral influence was "in direct proportion to the number of voters on his land" (Hickey and Doherty, editors (2005). A New Dictionary of Irish History from 1800, p. 157. Published by: Gill Books).

Captain Right [...]

Hanley: This is the last warning.
Go, or you will sleep in the
Embrace of the briars.
Captain Rock. (SP, 53)

Sometime later Dualta is standing with Paídi waiting and hoping to be hired to work in the fields. When provoked for no obvious reason by a "gentleman" on horseback, Dualta is reminded of the incident with the "half-sir" which resulted in his flight from Connemara and his uncle's eviction. Dualta struggles to control his anger but is prevented from reacting violently by a policeman and a by-stander named Cuan McCarthy. Cuan, the leader of a local secret agrarian society, recognises Dualta's ire at having been unjustly treated and he subsequently offers him "opportunities to fight oppression [...] to hit back" (SP, 52). Dualta accepts and joins Cuan and the other members of the secret society in their vendetta against the local landlord, his bailiff, and those who bid for the land of evicted tenants such as Marcus his uncle and many others. Macken does not name this secret society but we can assume he is referring to the Whiteboys.[26] While the acknowledged outbreaks of Whiteboyism occurred in the late 1700s, they were still very prominent in many parts of rural Ireland during the pre-famine years. Knowing how to read and write, Dualta is given the job of writing intimidating letters to those deemed guilty of such transgressions against the poorest classes. In one such letter, Dualta warns a farmer named Tooley not to bid for the land of a tenant who is facing eviction, or he will face reprisal and in another he threatens Landlord Wilcock's bailiff Hanley, who is responsible for carrying out such evictions, suggesting that he leave his post or face the consequences (53-54).

Macken seeks to be as accurate as possible in his representation of the Whiteboys, their activities and how they have been seen historically. There is still much debate about how they recruited and operated and their real impact on life in pre-famine Ireland. Indeed, "secret societies do not lend themselves to scrutiny even ex post facto" (Flaherty, 1985: 120). What is known is that these participants in agrarian crime came from the most vulnerable segments of the peasantry which is from "poor but not destitute" peasants (ibid). Beames tells us that the localities most susceptible to

[26] In pre-Famine Ireland, there were many agrarian secret societies. These secret societies adopted generic names such as the Hearts of Oak, the Hearts of Steel and the Whiteboys. Different groups operated in different areas. Eventually however, these groups tended to be referred to collectively as Whiteboys (Donnelly, 1973:29). The objectives of the societies were mostly to safeguard the interests of the peasant farmers and cottiers like Marcus and Mártin from extortionate rents and evictions among other injustices. The main targets of the Whiteboys were landlords, middlemen, large farmers, land grabbers (those who bid for the land of the evicted) but rarely the central government. They resorted to agrarian violence, which the authorities countered by arresting the ringleaders and introducing a series of repressive measures. These measures forced the secret societies to go underground but violent activities and a policy of non-cooperation continued, especially during periods of distress (Kinealy, 1997:35). The policy of coercion adopted by the government, however, was 'an admission that Ireland was in a state of smothered war' (Wall, 1967:229).

Whiteboyism were those where the majority of peasants held between five and 15 acres. These were the families who had enough land to grow potatoes for food and to pay the rent - in effect they had something to lose but little security against losing it (Beames, 1983 cited in Flaherty, 1985.120). The forced loss of land was thus at the heart of the Whiteboy movement. Developments in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had made the position of the tenant ever more precarious. Tenants like Marcus and Martin were tillage farmers with the majority of their crop most likely being made up of the Lumper potato. They worked to provide a crop surplus large enough to pay rent to the landlord, tithes to the church as well as other dues to the state yet still have enough left over to eke out a meagre existence. Things began to change with the growth in population in the late eighteenth century. Initially, the economy could absorb the population increase by recourse to new land, by subdivision of existing holdings and by even more intensive cultivation of tillage crops and potatoes. Even with smaller holdings, those at the bottom of the rural economy could survive. (Lewis Solow, 1987:664). Kinealy (1997:34-35) tells us that in the years after 1815 this on-going population explosion, coupled with the collapse in agricultural prices and the beginnings of de-industrialisation, led to a period of transition. Basically landlords dismissed the middlemen in an effort to counter the problem of falling profits. Consequently, shorter leases became the norm, on the basis that they increased profit margins and made the process of eviction easier. Kinealy adds that a number of Irish landlords, such as Wilcocks for whom Dualta will come to work, influenced by the changes in English agriculture, sought to 'improve' their properties and thus take advantage of new technologies and processes (1997:35). They saw a move away from labour-intensive tillage in favour of land-intensive grass crops as the way forward. However, this inevitably accelerated the move to consolidate property which, in the context of Ireland, meant the ending of subdivision (Lord George Hill, 1853, cited in Kinealy, 35). This transition to a more capitalised system of agriculture "represented a threat not only to the livelihood of the small tenants and cottiers, but also to the society and culture that was an integral part of it" (Kinealy, 1997:35). The lowest tiers of the peasantry increasingly faced eviction or failure to acquire a holding. Consequently, it is the "struggle of the peasant to remain on the land in the face of pressures to turn him into an agricultural or industrial labourer which provides the essential context for Whiteboyism in the first half of the nineteenth century" (Beames, 1983:30).

The Whiteboy movement was "a continual source of anxiety to the Irish propertied classes and a constant concern to the British authorities" Kinealy (1997:35). Indeed, owing to the actions of the Whiteboys, the Irish poor acquired a reputation for lawlessness. This is clear from a speech to

parliament at the beginning of 1846 by Whig MP Lord Grey in which he draws attention to the increasing level of crime in Ireland:

> *The state of Ireland is one which is notorious. We know the ordinary condition of the* country*. We know the ordinary condition of that country to be one both of lawlessness and wretchedness. It is so described by every competent authority ... Ireland is the one weak place in the solid fabric of British power; Ireland is the one deep (I had almost said ineffaceable) blot on the brightness of British honour. Ireland is our disgrace (Speech by Earl Grey in the House of Lords, Hansard (H of L), cols 1345–6, 23 March 1846, cited in Kinealy, 1997:35).*

While the extent of such lawlessness is clearly debatable, what cannot be denied is that the Whiteboys did resort to agrarian violence, which the authorities countered by arresting the ringleaders and introducing a series of repressive measures. This is Macken's setting for the peasant protest of the pre-Famine years, of which Dualta Duane becomes an active part.

Beames divides Whiteboy activity into two distinct roles, both of which are represented in *The Silent People*. Firstly, Whiteboy groups in each area sought to bind their fellow peasants, and consequently their landlords, to "an unwritten code of fairness regarding land tenure, rent, and other peasant concerns" (Flaherty, 1985: 120). This involved swearing tenants to oaths recognising Whiteboy authority. Typically such oaths would call for loyalty to Whiteboy "captains," a vow to absolute secrecy regarding activity and membership and more specifically a commitment to such things as the refusal to pay tithes through middlemen (ibid). The following oath found in the possession of a number of Whiteboys apprehended at Tallow in April 1762 dealt primarily with matters of organisation and discipline:

> *"I do hereby solemnly and sincerely swear that I will not make known any secret now given me, or hereafter may be given, to anyone in the world, except a sworn person belonging to the society called Whiteboys, otherwise Sive Oultho's children. Furthermore, I swear that I will be ready at an hour's warning, if possible, by being properly summoned by any of the officers, serjeants, and corporals belonging to my company. Furthermore, I swear that I will not wrong any of the company I belong to, to the value of one shilling, nor suffer it to be done by others, without acquainting them thereof. Furthermore, I swear that I will not make known, in any shape whatsoever, to any person that does not belong to us, the name or names of any of our fraternity, but particularly the names of our respective officers. Lastly, I swear that I will not drink of any liquor whatsoever whilst on duty, without the consent of any one or other of the officers, serjeants, or corporals; and that we will be loyal one to another as in our power lies" (cited in Donnelly, 1978:27).*

The second role concerns the warning of transgressors and the punishments administered in the event of such warnings not being fully heeded. Warnings usually took the form of poorly written letters by semi-literate members. The following letter was sent in 1839 to Sir Francis Hopkins, a landlord in the Irish midlands accused of being too harsh on his tenants (cited in Flaherty, 1985:118):

Sir Francis Hopkins ther did come to look for you
one day with what you might
call a boney brace of pistols to shoot you
and if you do not be lighter on your tenants
than what you are you shall be shurely shot
so now we give you timely notice and if you
dont a bide by this marke the Consequence.
So nomor at preasant
(recorded in British Parlaimentary papers, 1839:152).

To be "lighter on your tenants" meant not to collect rents which had fallen into arrears. Sir Francis continued to show no pity with the eviction of one of his tenants in 1843. He would eventually pay the ultimate price with his life some two years later (Flaherty, 1985:118). It was however quite uncommon for bigger landlords to be singled out in this way although it did happen. The target of Dualta's letter was Hanley the bailiff rather than Wilcocks the landlord, but Wilcocks himself would later be a target. Whiteboy targets were mostly middlemen, bailiffs, land-grabbers[27] and even other peasants who were too accommodating of landlord's rent increases. Whiteboy reprisals were often swift and brutal. Warning letters were quickly followed by the maiming of cattle, home burning, beatings, torture, rape and murder (Flaherty, 1985:118, 120). It is for this reason that the whole concept of Whiteboyism was so polarising at that time. Indeed, it continues to divide opinion among historians even today.

Just as Heaney struggles with his divided self, through Dualta Macken grapples with the many questions that exist in his own mind. Who are the victims and who are the villains, or is it even possible to distinguish? Are some tenant farmers responsible for their own predicament? What is retribution, who is deserving of it and is it justifiable? A true representation of the common man demands that Macken confronts these questions. The portrayal of Dualta as young and carefree with no family attachments or

[27] Land-grabbers usually referred to individuals who had taken possession of a farm from which another had been evicted. The term could also be applied to those who may have assisted in the eviction process, or those who bought produce or stock which had been seized from tenant farmers who had failed to pay their rent. (Moody, T.W. (1981). Davitt and Irish revolution, 1846-1882, p.345. Published by: Oxford).

responsibilities allows Macken to embark on such a mission. Dualta Duane helps him to straddle the divide in search of his middle voice.

Dualta's lack of real understanding of the situation first manifests itself in his attitude to the writing of threatening letters such as the ones he wrote to Tooley and Wilcocks. "As far as Dualta was concerned, it was a game" (SP, 54). His lack of pity regarding the pending eviction of Morogh Ryan, whose land Tooley had bid for, is also telling. He argues that Morogh is "weak man" who was "bound to go to the wall someday" (SP, 56). Morogh Ryan is one of those farmers who had no choice but to pay over the odds for his small holding. The survival of his family depended on it. Five pounds an acre for five acres meant however that life would be a struggle to pay the rent. Despite the protests of Cuan, Dualta continues to lack empathy:

> *He was a lazy man anyhow, and he grew weeds. You didn't need to be a prophet to know that one day he would fall. It was part of life. He wasn't a good man with land" (SP, 56).*

Unquestionably, the fate of the peasant lay in the hands of the landlord, middlemen and agents but the notion of the lazy tenant or the peasant that worked without due diligence did exist at that time and Macken reminds us of this fact. Indeed, Kinealy suggests that the potato enabled poor tenant farmers "to maintain a lazy and indolent lifestyle" as it provided no incentive generally for the Irish people to modernise their agriculture or their economy (1997:10). Laziness and a reluctance to improve their working environment were however two very different things. Woodham-Smith notes that any improvements made to the tenants holding became the property of the landlord without any compensation when the lease expired or was terminated. She also points out that most tenants had little or no security of tenure as the majority of tenants were tenants 'at will' in that they could be put off the land at any time at the will of the landlord (1962:22).

Cuan replies abruptly to Dualta's ambivalent assertions regarding Morogh Ryan:

> *You dismiss men like straws. It is not the men. It's the system. Morogh has five children. What will become of them? He will beg and look for odd jobs [...] he will have to sell the small bodies of his daughters for a stone of potatoes (SP, 56).*

Dualta however continues to feel that Morogh is somehow responsible for his current predicament and warrants no pity.

Cuan, Dualta and the others then make their way to the humble dwelling of Tooley, the man who had bid for the house of Morogh Ryan and who would have justifiably been classed as a 'land grabber'. Thomas Brown is emphatic in his description of such men: "The deadly sin was to take land over the head of another. Violence trailed eviction notices like a tiger and the peasant who took over a holding from which a fellow had been ejected did so in peril of his life" (1953: 427). The Irish peasant, said John Stuart Mill, "has nothing to hope and nothing to fear, except being dispossessed of his holding, and against this he defends himself by the ultima ratio of a defensive war" (quoted by John Blake Dillon in a House of Lords Report, Tenure, Ireland, Act, 1867, 112 apud Brown, 1953:428). Tooley must be made to pay for his actions. Again, this incident reveals something of Macken's quarrel with himself – whose side is he on? He initially juxtaposes Dualta's lack of feeling for Ryan with Cuan's sense of justice being served by striking out against Tooley - even though Tooley had only bid for the land of a 'lazy man'. Dualta initially revels in his thoughts of retribution: "It gave you a feeling of power. That you were hitting back [...] you were an anonymous freedom-fighter..." (SP, 58).

"A baby started to cry in the house" (SP, 59). Dualta is immediately reminded that Tooley is a family man. Tooley's constant pleas echo in Dualta's head:

> *I need Ryan's land... I have ten children. The five acres I possess are not enough. Ryan was lazy. I need that land to live (SP, 59)*

Watching the Ryans being burned out of their home brought back to Dualta "the sight of the death of the house of his Uncle Marcus. But that was free. That was done by a free man. This was different" (SP, 57). Could this be a moment of clarity for Dualta, that injustice exists on all sides? Some moments later, Cuan remonstrates with Tooley: "You pay no attention to the wishes of the people?" Tooley's response is emphatic: "Who are the people?" he asks (SP, 59). It is as if Macken has been building to this moment. Once again something resonates with Dualta: Is this the realisation that it is no longer simply a question of landlord against tenant but also poor against poor? George Lewis noted at the time:

> *The peasant, who saw directly, struck at the nearest oppressors, the tithe proctor, the bailif, the hard farmer- those whose ambitions drove them to violate the code of their class and whose punishment brought immediate relief (Lewis, Devon Commission 1845 apud Brown, 1953:428)*

Macken does not let up as he keeps bringing us back to those questions – who are the oppressors, who are the poor and can such acts of retribution be justified? Once again Tooley's words torment Dualta:

If they are men let them face me, not write letters behind closed doors behind timorous women. I have a right to live. I have a right to feed my children. I have a right to better myself. And that I'll do, if all the cowards in Ireland were gathered out there, skulking behind torches (SP, 60).

Macken seems to deviate from his earlier narrative when he accentuates the resilience and moral fortitude of Tooley in the face of condemnation and persecution at the hands of his fellow farmers and countrymen, anonymous under the cover of darkness:

Brave men" he said. Oh, the brave men of Ireland! Burn me? I'll build again. A hundred times [...] From the back of a bush," said Tooley. "From a drain, from a ditch, where rats lurk. Is there a man that will face me in the daylight among you? (SP, 60)

But Cuan insists that "there has to be a purpose in the things we are doing, there must be reason." Indeed, he concludes that there is a reason. "It is the working of landlordism. They insisted on a Coercion Act[28]" (SP, 62). Tellingly, "Dualta kept his head down. There was plenty of light now to recognise people. But he didn't want to. He didn't want to know who they were" (SP, 61).

Just as Dualta's resolve as a militant defender of peasant rights seems to be on the wane, he is put in a position where he is forced once again to evaluate his social and political allegiance: Cuan takes him to the public hanging of two men accused of shooting a bailiff. Cuan tells him that he knows that one of the men is innocent of the crime but Dualta finds it hard to believe that they would "hang an innocent man" (SP, 63). Dualta soon realises that the innocent man is his friend Paidi, the same Paidi that he had promised to "keep an eye on" (66) for his father Máirtin. Dualta can do nothing to help his friend:

Scream now about a miscarriage of justice. Who do you scream to, cold-faced indifferent officers of martial law, taking damn good care that somebody hangs to try and break a conspiracy of silence? (SP65-66).

Dualta equates the hanging of his friend to a murder:

Paidi is gone out like a light, just like a light you quench, and not in fair time. So now you know what murder really is, whether it is by the hand of a civilian or by the hands of the rulers with all the outward show of justice and impartiality (SP, 67).

[28] A Coercion Act was an Act of Parliament that gave a legal basis for increased state powers to suppress popular discontent and disorder. The label was applied, especially in Ireland, to acts passed from the 18th to the early 20th century by the Irish, British, and Northern Irish parliaments.

Based on what is known about the activities of secret agrarian societies in pre-famine Ireland such as that represented by Macken, one might come to the conclusion that the typical Irish peasant was “a rather barbaric creature whose respect for law and the rights of others was almost non-existent” (Christianson, 1972:383). Such a perception would suggest that Dualta would have little concept of justice and law. Indeed, as Kinealy (1997:35) points out, the actions of the Whiteboys contributed greatly to such a reputation for lawlessness among the Irish peasantry. Unquestionably, violent acts were committed regularly and somewhat arbitrarily, but yet such acts were, for the most part, condoned by large portions of the peasant population. The perpetrators generally received the protection of the local community when the consequences of the unlawful act appeared beneficial to the local peasant community as a whole (Christianson, 1972:383). Even for those tenants who inwardly questioned the methods of the Whiteboys, they had no one else to turn to. Michael Davitt (1904:40) makes the point that not a single measure for the protection of the Irish tenant rights was introduced into the British House of Commons in the first twenty-nine years of the Union with England

Davitt notes that many acts were passed to put down or curb peasant unrest and further the arbitrary powers of the landlord to do whatever he wanted. Looked at in this context,

the Whiteboy organization was the only security for the tenant. Davitt outlines how one Protestant landlord, Sharman Crawford, tried to introduce two bills, in the sessions of 1835-36, “to effect some slight amelioration of the lot of the Irish tenant, but no attention was paid to his pleading and his bills were dropped” (1904:40). Mr. Isaac Butt summed up the legislative record of the House of Commons, in 1866, when he said: "For two centuries they had seen all the law arrayed on the side of the landlord. Numerous statutes had been passed to enforce his rights. Not one has been passed in favour of the tenant" (Butt, 1866 apud Davitt, 1904:40).

Justification for violence and retribution thus seemed to rest firmly on the side of the Irish tenant and it can be argued that acts of violent retribution do not necessarily equate to lawlessness and a breakdown of the moral fabric of peasant life. Christianson argues that the Irish peasant clearly had another side to his nature - one which demonstrated a very high regard for the law (1972:283) as suggested by Dualta’s outburst. For the peasant, “a violent act committed on behalf of a wrongfully dispossessed tenant was one thing, a crime committed strictly for personal gain was quite another” (ibid). George Lewis, a notable commentator on Irish peasant views during the early nineteenth century, wrote, "A man who murders for his own gain must make up his mind to general execration: if he is detected he must be prepared to die on the scaffold in the midst of yells and curses of the lowest of the populace” (Lewis, 1854:301). Christianson cites Alexis de Tocqueville, a French visitor to Ireland in the

1830s, who reported that “there is no country in the world where the stranger has less to fear than in Ireland" (de Tocqueville, 1835:179). Despite extreme poverty, and in many cases destitution, Irish peasants generally “recoiled from attacking strangers or robbing fellow husbandmen in the hope of lightening their own economic burdens” (Christianson, 1972:384). Irish peasants had nothing but the land with which to eke out a meagre existence so when a tenant lost his holding, the threat of starvation and death was a harsh reality. “When viewed from this perspective, it becomes much easier to understand, if not to condone, why evictions gave rise to such implacable hatreds and numerous agrarian outrages” (ibid, 384). Christianson suggests that had the the Irish peasant been politicized, or “even more readily disposed toward violence,” then the incessant hardship and suffering resulting from discriminatory legislation and the constant threat of crop failures would almost certainly have led to a state of open rebellion. Instead the peasant classes showed incredible patience, indeed resignation, to the economic and social plight that they found themselves in (ibid, 384).

6.4 Landlords and the Limits of Tolerance

This was no law. It was law without reason or hope for the people who came under its shadow.
‘I have lost my youth well and truly now,’ he thought.
Only one sentence he spoke.
‘I will go to Wilcocks, Cuan,’ he said (SP, 67).

The execution of Paidi leads Dualta to the realisation that “hitting back” is the only way - tolerance and respect for the law has its limits. Dualta agrees to help Cuan seek retribution. By offering to become an infiltrator in the house of Wilcocks, he can facilitate a later attack by Cuan and his comrades. Could this be Macken’s acknowledgement that violence can be an acceptable response in times of extreme injustice? Indeed, Macken seems to accentuate that there was no effective law for the poorer classes in Ireland at this time.

Dualta finds work with Wilcocks and comes to live within the confines of his extensive property. His first observation of the estate is that of many trees being planted. Dualta “wonders if in time, men would praise Wilcocks for his love of tree planting or if they would stumble on the ivy-coloured ruins of what was once a cottage and marvel in the sun-filtered wood at the grass-covered ridges which had once grown enough potatoes to fill the bellies of ten people” (SP, 95). Wilcocks is in the process of

consolidating[29] his estate and this means evictions. It seems that Macken wants to raise the issue of landlordism and he clearly sets out to evaluate their role in the plight of the peasant. This means looking at the scourge of eviction which is synomous with the landlord class. It is worth mentioning that there were distinct phases of eviction in pre-Famine Ireland. At the time of Dualta's stay in the Wilcock's estate, cosolidation would have been a common cause of moving tenants off the land. This however changed significantly as the worst of the Famine years in the 1840s approached and Macken makes reference to these throughout the novel. Ciarán Reilly (2021) tells us that Famine era evictions occurred in four distinct waves. The first of these followed the introduction of the Irish Poor Law Act of 1838 when landlords took advantage of the newly created workhouse system. Tenants could be moved on to "where they were somebody else's problem." The second wave coincided with the 1841 General Election when landlords reacted to their declining political influence by evicting tenants. Reilly does note however that when the potato blight struck in 1845 some landlords did at first grant "abatements of rent and contributed to relief schemes", hopeful that the crop failures would be confined to that year (Reilly, 2021). Others were less sympathetic and actually used this period to their advantage by evicting more tenants than ever, especially those in arrears, in what was referred to as the 'horrid clearance system'. The third phase came about with the introduction of the Gregory Act (also known as the 'Quarter Acre Clause)[30], in 1847. This was a particularly brutal phase with the use of 'crowbar brigades'[31] used to clear the poorer classes from the landscape. The fourth wave of Famine eviction came about after the implementation of the Incumbered Estates Court legislation[32] in 1849 where people were evicted before and after the sale of an estate (O'Reilly, 2021).

Whatever the reason, eviction in Dualta's eyes is an act which cannot go unpunished and Wilcocks is fully deserving of what is coming to him! But yet, having spent some time in his house Dualta finds it difficult to dislike the man he has vowed to betray and ultimately harm. He comes to realise that Wilcocks has some redeeming qualities. "Wilcocks fed many mouths. Many would be hungry without him" even if the payment came from the "highly priced acres of the tenants" (SP, 98). Furthermore Wilcocks is a man of principle:

[29] Many years of sub-dividing land into increasingly smaller farms meant little agricultural improvement and the devaluation of estates. Additionally, many landlords realized that they could increase the value of their estates by turning their properties to pasture than to continue with the old practice of collecting rents (Reilly 2021).

[30] Sir William Gregory introduced the 'Gregory clause' to the Poor Law Bill that became law at the height of the Famine. This meant that starving families on holdings of a quarter-acre or more would not receive outdoor relief, or be admitted to a workhouse, unless they abandoned the tenancy (Burke, 2020).

[31] Crowbar brigades were groups of men who were prepared to knock down the houses of their very own neighbours for the price of a meal and the chance to survive another day.

[32] The Encumbered Estates' Court was established by an Act of the British Parliament in 1849, to allow for the sale of Irish estates whose owners were unable to meet their obligations due to the famine

Principles to him were things that you stood for, and if necessary died for. It didn't matter if the principles were faulty. Principles were what you yourself held to be the rule of life as you saw it. You stuck to those. He genuinely regarded the lower orders as lower orders, if Catholic, superstitious, obstinate and irredeemable...he was kind, thoughtful (except where the sacred rights of private property might be in danger), generous (within the spoken limits set by the order of landlords, so you didn't raise your workers by a penny a day if a more feckless member of the class couldn't afford it) (SP, 99).

While Macken specifically set out to be a voice for and a defender of the Irish poor, and his portrayal of Dualta seeking vengeance does seem to suggest that he is condoning of violence towards landlords such as Wilcocks, he does not allow himself to fall into a narrow nationalist rhetoric of condemning all Irish landlords as heartless and exploitative. Yes, evictions were common place and, as previously mentioned, occurred with greater frequency during the worst of the famine years, but a blanket condemnation cannot be fully justified. In fact many political commentators accept that it is not possible to judge all with the same yardstick. Indeed, Curtis tells us that "over the years Irish landlords have had a rather poor press. Writers of both history and fiction have depicted them as personifying almost all of the seven deadly sins with few, if any, redeeming virtues" (1980:332). In a significant number of cases, this could not be further from the truth. "The Landlords as a class were hardly generous but their economic position was by no means enviable either" (Nowlan, 1956:179). O'Connell (1822) tells us that "an Irish estate is like a sponge, and an Irish landlord is never so sick as when he is sick of his property" (cited in Curtis 1980:332). In the mid-1800s many landlords found themselves in financial difficulties for a variety of reasons yet did not resort to rack renting[33] and evictions were in many cases a reluctant last resort. While Macken does not set out to exonerate or play down the role of the Irish landlord in the suffering of the Irish peasant in pre-famine Ireland, he does, through his representation of Wilcocks, seek to represent the landlord class honestly but fairly. Such honesty and fairness will also characterise Macken's depiction of the landlord class post 1845 with the onset of widespread crop failure and the Famine proper.

6.5 Macken's Middle Voice and Taking Sides

Dualta's decision not to follow through with his promise to act as 'Trojan horse' ultimately leads to the failure of the planned attack on the Wilcocks house by Cuan and his comrades. This decision prompts Dualta to ask some key questions: "How would the burning of this house advance the cause of patriotism?" (SP, 101). "What was success? [...] Wilcocks had succeeded on account of him. To whom

[33] Many landlords practiced Rack Renting in order to get rid of unwanted tenants. Rents were increased to the point that the tenant was no longer in a position to pay them. The landlord would then have the tenant evicted for non-payment of rent (Blanck 2010).

was the victory then? He couldn't say" (SP, 105). Dualta goes on to admit that "he had come to a part in his life when he had taken sides, for no clear reason that he could see, and in this case he couldn't see that taking sides would be of the slightest avail" (SP, 105-106). Despite his whistleblowing, Dualta is interrogated and beaten for his part in the plot but he does not react: "Once before I was hit and I hit back. I will not hit back" (SP, 107). In fact Dualta sees it as a necessary part of his redemption: "This will purge me of the distaste I have for myself. Perhaps this will make me one of the people again" (107). There are echoes here of Heaney's purgatory on Station Island. Just as Heaney questions his ideologies, and indeed those of his community so too does Dualta. The importance of *revisiting* - the need to keep going back to a story that is never fully written, is primordial for Heaney (O' Leary, 2011). Macken also seeks to revisit many untold stories of conflict and contrition in pre-famine Ireland. Can injustice and retribution be reconciled? Can the perpetrators of vengeful acts be exonerated when they pit neighbour against neighbour? The position of Cuan, albeit seemingly morally justifiably, is increasingly difficult for Dualta to accept. Yes, Dualta feels for the people but he begins to question the validity and indeed the virtue of violent action in their defence. For Cuan however, violent retribution is the only way:

> *He was always angry at the shabby people in the shack towns [...] ragged men with large frail families erecting frail shacks made of wood and mud, begging, half-starving [...]Why did they submit to this? They didn't have to submit to this [...] Wilcock's house would soon be just a blackened pile. If they took revenge afterwards on the people, so much the better. Out of persecution would come bitterness, a lust for revenge, and Wilcocks house could be a torch that lighted freedom in the south (SP, 108).*

The juxtaposition of the diverging beliefs of Dualta and Cuan is key to coming to an understanding of the "polarities characterizing Irish life in the pre-famine period" (Bexar, 2016:227). While Bexar argues that Macken's aim is to present Cuan's and Dualta's particular points of view objectively and impartially, she recognises that a pacifist theme begins to emerge in the novel and this has the effect of making such objectivity almost unsustainable. She suggests that there is a "perceptible, though seldom unequivocal, bias against Cuan's creed of hitting back" (2016:227). Macken does not choose Cuan's path but his characterization of him suggests that he is not unsympathetic to the cause and to the ideals of some of those who would see violence as their only option. Macken also recognizes however that violence breeds violence. He tells us that:

> *Cuan was a dedicated animal. A man of violence and wherever he went he would bring that with him, but he knew what he wanted and he was prepared to do what he thought was right in order to do it (SP, 114).*

Macken also knows that the world of secret societies was not a simple world of right and wrong or hero and villain. Indeed, Macken subtely introduces the theme of divided loyalties, even among those seemingly committed to the way of violent retribution, when Annie attempts to betray both Dualta with the attempted planting of Dualta's unfinished letters where they would fall into the hands of Wilcocks and his comrades. Cuan reflects: "He thought they all felt the same as himself, imbued with love of an ideal to be wrested, however violently, from life" (SP, 110). This is something of a turning point in the *Silent People*. Yes, Macken recognises the importance of finding his 'middle-voice' but he is equally committed to standing his ground and 'nailing his colours to the mast' when the occasion calls for it. This will become obvious once again later in the story when he comes face to face with Cuan on his wedding night to Una. For the time being, he has chosen the path of non-violence and he has renewed his commitment to those on the margins. 'I want to be commonplace,' said Dualta. 'I want to be one with the people. I want to dig and sow and harvest, just being one of the people.' Once again there are echoes of Heaney's *Digging*. Macken, the wielder of the written word and the humble digger become one:

> *'There are two worlds,' said Dualta, 'and you must choose which one you are going to live in. I have chosen mine now, and I will not desert it again. I will live in it with all my heart, and some way while living in it and I will add to it, and survive in the middle of it' (SP, 116).*

6.6 Nailing his Colours to the Mast

To-night, a first movement, a pulse,
As if the rain in bogland gathered head
To slip and flood: a bog-burst,
A gash breaking open the ferny bed.
Your back is a firm line of eastern coast
And arms and legs are thrown
Beyond your gradual hills. I caress
The heaving province where our past has grown.
I am the tall kingdom over your shoulder
That you would neither cajole nor ignore.
Conquest is a lie. I grow older
Conceding your half-independant shore
Within whose borders now my legacy
Culminates inexorably.

And I am still imperially
Male, leaving you with pain,

The rending process in the colony,
The battering ram, the boom burst from within.
The act sprouted an obsinate fifth column
Whose stance is growing unilateral.
His heart beneath your heart is a wardrum
Mustering force. His parasitical
And ignmorant little fists already
Beat at your borders and I know they're cocked
At me across the water. No treaty
I foresee will salve completely your tracked
And stretchmarked body, the big pain
That leaves you raw, like opened ground, again *Seamus Heaney, Act of Union*

Seamus Heaney referred to this as a "pregnancy poem" (From an interview and cited in Haffenden, 1987:90) and indeed it is. The opening lines compare the sexual act to "heavy rainfall flooding the bog, breaking over the land with the force and suddenness of an ejaculation" (Sinner, 1988:159) and he then refers to the "stretchmarked body" of his now pregnant wife. It is impossible however to look beyond the explicit political overtones that permeate his verse. The juxtaposition of sexual intimacy and political violation is clearly intentional. Heaney brings together "his imaginative engagement with his own experience and his country's predicament" (Kearney, 1984:51). In a sense, *Act of Union* becomes an analogy between Ireland's historical-political situation and his relationship with his pregnant wife (ibid). Heaney is consciously and somewhat ironically comparing his role as husband/father to that of the "English conqueror" (ibid, 1984:51). The oppressor towers over the weaker female Ireland. The sexual encounter that takes place has connotations of an unsolicited and unwanted act - a rape. The violence of the act of union, the "boom" that "burst from within," leaves the victim abused and aggrieved at the hands of the "imperial male" and destined to face the pain of childbirth. Heaney seems to be suggesting that "just as the child growing in the womb is the inexorable result of the act of conception, so the present situation of Ireland is the direct result of that seizure by force" (Kearney, 1984:51). With this intentional merging of the sexual and the political "the man becomes England, planting a colony, the woman Ireland, and the child in her womb both loyalist and rebel" (Tracy, 1979:87). The child-to-be-born can be seen as "the rebellious spirit of Ireland, the Ireland that had separation imposed on it and that has fought against the separate rule of North and South since 1690" (Kearney, 1984:51). Indeed the history of Ireland is not only about being overcome, it is also a history of struggle and resistance. Heaney's conclusion however is somewhat ominous. While his reference to that 'big pain that leaves you raw, like opened ground' is a clear reference to "the suffering

that gives birth to revolt," he also seems to be suggesting that it is a "suffering that will always remain for Ireland" (Kearney, 1984:51).

Such endless suffering is thus inextricably linked to that invasive act of union. As previously mentioned, Heaney juxtaposes the personal and the political and there is an intentional allusion to the actual *Act of Union* of 1801[34]. With this *Union*, the two countries were effectively made into one - the economy of Ireland was assimilated into the economy of England, the Irish Parliament at Dublin disappeared and the Parliament at Westminster henceforth legislated for both countries (Woodham-Smith, 1962:15). Woodham-Smith refers to this coming together as a "marriage" that had been celebrated between Ireland and England, with the clauses of the Act of Union as the "clauses of the marriage settlement" (1962:15). While free trade, one of the terms of the 'marriage' contract, seems to suggest that Ireland could benefit from such an arrangement, Woodham-Smith affirms that the reality was very different and that the sole reason for the Act of Union was not to assist Ireland in any way but rather to "bring her more completely into subjection" (1962:15). In fact, she seems to anticipate Heaney by going on to suggest that the Act of Union was seen by some contemporaries not as a marriage but as a "brutal rape" comparing Ireland to an "heiress whose chambermaid and trustees had been bribed while she herself is dragged, protesting to the altar" (Coote, 1802:77 cited in WS, p.16).

Walter Macken begins The Silent People with this historical note:

The Union

The Irish House of Commons, although a sectarian and unrepresentative Assembly, was still an Irish voice. It was destroyed by William Pitt, who succeeded in having the Act of Union passed in 1800. From January 1st, 1801, Ireland was represented in the United Kingdom Parliament by 100 members of the House of Commons and 32 Peers in the House of Lords. No Catholic could be a member of Parliament although four-fifths of the Irish nation were of that Faith" (SP, p.6).

Such an explicit reference to the Act of Union seems to suggest that Macken has every intention of putting us in the realm of the political from the very outset. In fact, he begins each of the novels in his historical trilogy with such historical notes that patently go beyond mere contextual setting. James Cahalan suggests that these are both "expository and didactic" (1983:160). While Macken often stated

[34] The parliamentary act of 1800 was England's response to the 1798 rebellion. In actual fact there were parallel acts of the Parliament of Great Britain and the Parliament of Ireland passed in 1800, which were referred to as a single Act of Union which came into being on 1 January 1801. The act effectively created the 'United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland'' (Corcoran 1986:121).

his goal of re-writing the history of Ireland from the point of view of the small man, it is clear that he also wants to make a political statement and the increasing pacificism of Dualta throughout the novel should not detract from this. In fact, at times Macken seeks to unashamedly lead the reader to what Cahalan refers to as an explicit "Irish nationalist interpretation of the facts" (ibid), which is even more poignant given the climate of revisionism in Ireland at that time. This however is not to say that Macken is limited by such a stance as shall be discussed later, but it does tell us that Macken is not afraid to nail his colours to the mast. The Act of Union is inextricably linked with the persecution of the people and it is here that Macken takes a stand.

Indeed, the extended timeframe of The Silent People, which begins back in the 1820s, is important in that it allows Macken to put the Famine and the plight of Dualta and so many others like him into the context of the on-going struggle of the Irish people in the 19th century and beyond. The consequences of the Act of Union for the Irish people are at the very heart of Macken's narrative and he deals with the suffering that gives birth to that rebellious spirit of Ireland which Heaney refers to. Noteworthy too is that Macken's historical note is extended to refer to Daniel O'Connell who was vehemently opposed to the Act of Union and was committed to seeking its repeal, albeit by legal and constitutional means (Woodham-Smith, 1962:17). Indeed, the fate of Dualta Duane becomes inextricably linked with his chance meeting with Daniel O'Connell suggesting that the politics of O'Connell will be a key part of Macken's political stance.

7. DANIEL O'CONNELL

7.1 Daniel O'Connell and Passive/ Constitutional Nationalism

O' Connell then turned to Dualta. He smiled. 'How about you?' he asked. 'Have I sounded a chord in you?' Dualta thought.
'Oh, yes,' he said. 'You have played a tune on me. I am your man. Haven't I given you one shilling and ten pence?'

Feeling remorseful for having alerted Wilcocks to Cuan's planned attack, Dualta agrees to participate with Cuan in one final act of reprisal. They set off for Cuan's native village in County Clare. It is there that they plan to visit the house of Clarke, a middle-man in charge of absentee landlord Tewson's estate. On their journey, they come across a group of men out hunting hares. They strike up a conversation with these men and discover that one of them is Daniel O'Connell:

There it was, the thick curly hair with the reddish tint, dusted with grey, intelligent blue eyes and an impudent snub nose. He found himself looking at Daniel O'Connell, who came forward to meet him, as curious as a Kerryman, as strange as if a drawn figure had walked out of the pages of a newspaper (SP, 119).

This is the same man that Paidi´s father Máirtin had spoken so highly about and the same man that Dualta had readily dismissed as a mere talker who never actually did anything (SP, 34). Dualta's experiences as part of Cuan's secret society have however, led him to something of a turning point in his life. While he has agreed to one last job with Cuan, he has clearly distanced himself from Cuan's belief in violent retribution. Yes, the protection of the inalienable rights of the Irish people is still paramount for Dualta, but he is increasingly turning against physical force and violence as a means of exacting such change. Bexar suggests that a "preference for constitutional over militant nationalism" becomes increasingly "discernible in the polarized characterizations of Dualta and Cuan" and she goes on to note that such a preference becomes even clearer in Macken's mostly sympathetic portrait of Daniel O'Connell (2016:231). In fact, by the end of their brief meeting, Dualta readily admits that he is becoming a supporter of O'Connell and his politics.

While the meeting of Dualta and Daniel O'Connell might seem contrived, it allows Macken to take us into the under-layer of history. Macken does not see the reader as a distant spectator of past events but rather a witness and a participant in the unfolding story. He wants us to take a vested interest in the well-being of those ostracized and trampled on by such an unjust system. This means meeting O'Connell the man rather than O'Connell the historical figure. Fintan O'Toole argues that O'Connell's

place within Irish history has been deliberately and systematically downgraded (2006). Macken seeks to undo this by allowing us to meet him in the flesh. Confronting him face to face allows us to become one with his journey, indeed one with history. Dualta tells us that:

> *The reality of meeting a famous man was very different from the hearing of him. He had long read his speeches. They seemed verbose, wordy and long-winded. But that was the style of speechmaking [...] men who were there said that the way he said them bore no resemblance to the wordy words of them. He could send the blood pounding in your veins with the sound of his voice, his inflections (SP, 121).*

Macken recognises that O'Connell is a controversial figure and he hints at the consternation that existed at the time and continues to exist regarding how he conducted his political affairs. This is particularly true regarding the Catholic Rent[35] that he received weekly to fund his political campaign for Catholic Emancipation,[36] which was achieved in 1829, and his subsequent campaign to repeal the Act of Union. Olivia O'Leary claims however that it was the ideas of a Catholic Association[37] and Catholic Rent which actually set him apart. She suggests that he was the first one to recognise the possibility and the power of popular politics where everybody could contribute. "Politicians weren't paid, so by gathering halfpennies and pennies from thousands of people he not only found a way to finance his movement and his political career, he gave people a stake in that movement" (O'Leary, 2019). This sentiment is echoed by Felim Ó Briain who says that it is one of the main achievements of O'Connell first to have realized the importance of people power and then to have set about organizing them into a "democratic machine that aroused the attention and admiration of all Europe" (Ó Briain, 1947:259) and James C. Beckett says of O'Connell that his great contribution to the development of modern Ireland is that "he called into being, and organised for political action, the force of mass opinion - he taught the Roman Catholic majority to regard itself as the Irish nation" (Beckett, 1981 cited in O'Connell, 1975:109-110). Macken clearly sets out to accentuate such an achievement. In response to Cuan's insistence on the way of armed resistance, O'Connell replies:

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[35] In 1823 O'Connell founded the Catholic Association, which quickly became one of the most formidable mass movements in Europe. Its tactics included mass 'monster' meetings, the collection of a small subscription from each member and the organising of support for parliamentary candidates who endorsed Catholic Emancipation (Kinealy, 1997:26). Each person paid one farthing a week, or one shilling a year, to the rent which was collected at parish level. By this means O'Connell (who was earning £8,000 at the bar in 1828) could abandon the law and devote all his time to the cause of Catholic emancipation. When this succeeded, the same device was later used to support the cause of the Repeal of the Union (Macken: From the Historical Notes of *The Silent People*).

[36] Catholic emancipation involved reducing and removing many of the restrictions on Roman Catholics introduced by the penal laws among others.

[37] Daniel O'Connell's Catholic Association, founded in Ireland in 1823, was one of the most successful pressure groups of the 19th century. Its object was to persuade or force the British government to grant catholic emancipation, allowing Catholics to sit in Parliament. It organized petitions and engaged in large scale public protest by holding monster meetings (Cannon, 2009).

I have called a nation into existence, all of them, not a few here and a few there with pikes in the thatch, but a whole people. I will imbue them like yeast in a cake so that they will rise and swell, and become so peacefully big and cohesive, so morally strong, that they will have to be handed what they want.

Ó Briain argues that, following a century of penal laws which had planted a sense of apathy and hopelessness in the Irish people, O'Connell had managed to infuse a new spirit of optimism (1947:259). Previous bodies of protest such as the Catholic Committee[38] had limited success. Indeed, they represented mainly the nobility and prosperous merchants and relied mostly on petitions to exact concessions. O'Connell's system rested on the "fundamental basis of democratic action everywhere: that the opinion and will of the whole people cannot be permanently flouted" (1947:259). Roy Foster refers to the nature of such action as an "implicit threat of mass disobedience, of a unilateral withdrawal of allegiance," even of a universal "refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the state" (1988:298-299).

Macken tells us that there are only two ways of seeing O'Connell and there is "no in-between here,"

You thought he was an honest man and a sincere patriot and a truly pious Catholic, or you thought he was a deceiver, using public monies for his own ends, a demagogue, battering on the emotions of a volatile and uneducated people, an impious man using good for his own ends (SP, 121-122).

O'Connell's integrity is soon brought into question when he offers to share his food with Cuan and Dualta. Cuan responds abruptly that they had had already eaten "a mile or so back" in the home of one of O'Connell's "evicted tenants" (SP, 120). Macken clearly seeks to make reference to criticism of O'Connell's record as a landlord in County Kerry. In fact, such insinuations made their way into print in 1845 when Thomas Campbell Foster of the London Times penned a series of articles taking O'Connell to task for the alleged condition of his "wretched tenantry". Campbell Foster declared that "amongst the most neglectful landlords who are a curse in Ireland, Daniel O'Connell ranks first" (Foster, Letters on the Condition of the People of Ireland, pp.395, 396-97 cited in Morrow, 2008:650-651). John Morrow notes that Campbell Foster, in one series of reports written during a tour of Ireland in 1845, 'gleefully' remarks on the 'dilapidated' condition of O'Connell's estate and his 'role as a sub-dividing tenant of property owned by Trinity College.' Morrow also refers to the damaging impact that Campbell Foster's articles had on O'Connell's reputation. Indeed, Campbell Foster went as far as claiming that "the panacea of repeal was championed by one who had been exposed as a rack-renting middle man" and

[38] The Catholic Committee or Catholic Convention was an organisation in 18th-century Ireland that campaigned for the rights of Catholics and for the repeal of the Penal Laws. It dissolved itself in 1793.

he made reference to British historian Thomas Carlyle's accusation that the Great Liberator was "the most recent purveyor of lies and delusions that had long been the currency of Irish politics" (Morrow, 2008:650-651). While O'Connell himself challenged Campbell Foster's damning report, many historians have played down such accusations without fully exonerating O'Connell. Oliver MacDonagh described O'Connell as "a 'traditional' Irish landlord" who was "easy-going" but also "negligent and unimproving" (1988:189). He goes on to suggest that he was also very much an absentee landlord who gave "only the light of a genial presence on rare occasions in return for rents" (Ibid, 189 -190). It seems that Macken is reluctant to take a stand either way on such matters. He portrays O'Connell as remaining silent but unflustered in the face of Cuan's insinuation. It is as if Macken accepts that such accusations warrant acknowledgement but are not worthy of further consideration. Maybe Macken does not see this as being significant enough to detract from O'Connell's legacy. As Beckett puts it:

> *When all this concerning his defects has been said, he remains a man of transcendent genius, which he devoted to the service of his native land: no other single person has left such an unmistakable mark on the history of Ireland (Beckett, 1981 cited in O'Connell, 1975:109-110).*

Controversy surrounding O'Connell is not limited to Catholic Rent and his position as Landlord. A debate between Dualta, Cuan and O'Connell ensues and their differing views clearly highlight polarities in public opinion on O'Connell's handling of a number of other issues. While Dualta initially confronts O'Connell reminding him that up here he is "just another man chasing hares" (122), it is Cuan who adopts a hostile stance accusing O'Connell of reneging on the forty shilling freeholders. Macken is referring to the fact that in 1825 O'Connell let it be known that he was prepared to agree to their disenfranchisement in return for Catholic Relief (Foster, 1988:301). The British government felt that the electoral system in Ireland must be rid of the inconvenience of the freeholder. As Peel said, "the instrument of deference and supremacy had been converted into a weapon fatal to the authority of the landlord" (cited in Foster, 1988:301). Declining support from the Whigs, who were O'Connell's only real ally in Westminster, led him to accept that a change to a ten pound franchise would have to be ceded (MacDonagh, 1988:266-267). O'Connell's earlier assurance to the forty-shilling freeholders was quickly forgotten.

In defence of his position and much like Dualta had implied earlier, O'Connell claims that the forty shilling freeholders were "invented by the establishment to send fools into parliament" and "they went in droves like cattle and voted for the men they were told to vote for" (SP, 122). Cuan retorts that they were "braver people" than one might think (122). O'Connell does acknowledge this bravery, and even

admits that their disenfranchisement could potentially have derailed his campaign for emancipation. Ironically the bill for their immediate disenfranchisement was not passed by the House of Lords and their eventual participation in the Clare by-election of 1928 which O'Connell contested and won against Vesey Fitzgerald, a member of the British Cabinet, proved decisive. Victory here ensured his election to the British Parliament and was a crucial factor in convincing the British government to concede Catholic Emancipation (Mac Donagh, 1988:217-218). Despite such an acknowledgement, O'Connell goes on to tell Cuan that the relevance of the forty-shilling freeholders was no longer significant following the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1929. This is most likely to justify his concession which ultimately led to their disenfranchisement in 1929[39]. Foster adds weight to O'Connell's claim. Even though liberation for Catholics was accompanied by a drastic reduction in the county voters from 216,000 down to 37,000, he tells us that such a decline in the 'forty-shillingers' was not greatly noted at the time even among many Irish-Catholic activists who were "not particularly sorry" at their decline (Foster, 1988:302). This however, even in the context of securing Catholic Relief, was not enough for many to overlook the sense of betrayal. In fact, this accusation has been levelled at O'Connell many times over the years. Frank Ryan penned a pamphlet in 1929 called 'Emancipation' in which he suggested that Emancipation legislation merely opened new career paths for wealthy Catholics while actually disenfranchising the forty-shilling freeholders, thus taking the vote from those very tenant farmers who had supported O'Connell's campaign. This, he claimed placed the destinies of many Irish "in the hands of the landlords" (Ryan 1929 cited in Mac Donnacha, 2019).

Macken does acknowledge, albeit briefly, the limitations of Emancipation, how it did little for the poor and how it did in fact put many tenants at the mercy of their landlords. Tewson, the absentee landlord, returns to his manor three months before gale day[40] and the word is that he wishes to call in 'hanging gales.'[41] As the potatoes are not up, the corn is not harvested and the pigs are not prepared for market, his tenants, who are all in arrears, will have to find three month's rent on demand. Cuan says to Dualta accusingly: "Forty shilling freeholders were to be protected. Where are their votes? Dead. Where are the ones that were to be saved from eviction? They are evicted" (SP, 221). Cuan is suggesting that forty shilling freeholders suspected of not voting in accordance with the landlord's wishes were evicted. Dualta pleads with Cuan to act rationally and not resort to violence. Even Dualta

[39] The Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 contained one detrimental provision which O'Connell was forced to agree to. It raised the franchise in Ireland to £10 which immediately disenfranchised the forty-shilling freeholders who constituted the main strength of the Catholic Party (https://www.libraryireland.com/)

[40] Gale day was the day that rents were due to landlords. It usually occurred after harvests when tenants had the greatest capacity to pay what was owed.

[41] Six months credit was usually given for rent in arrears, after which if the rent was not paid, any cattle could be forcibly taken to be sold in order to pay off what was still in arrears. This was known as a hanging gale (https://www.libraryireland.com).

himself comes face to face with the consequences of freeholder disenfranchisement. He had become a forty shilling freeholder when he requested a lease on a derelict farm that was generating no revenue for its landlord. Ironically the farm was contracted from Tewson's representative Clarke, the one-time target of Dualta and Cuan. Such a commitment was another key moment in the life of Dualta. Moments after signing the lease he reflects: "While he felt pleased he also felt that a great burden was now placed on his shoulders. He thought that now he was at the beginning of being a common man" (SP, 180). Dualta manages to eke out an existence and generate some profit for Tewson for ten years. On the tenth year, Clarke tells him bluntly, "you will be a tenant at will [...] no lease [...] you have had your lease" (SP, 247). Dualta's rent is also increased to compensate for the tithes that have been put on the landlord. Effectively Dualta is now a tenant rather than the holder of a ten year lease meaning that he has lost his vote and defaulting on rent could mean immediate eviction. Macken seemingly wants to recognise the plight of the disenfranchised freeholders as well as the limitations of Emancipation. Four years after Catholic Emancipation O'Connell himself in an 1833 Address to the Irish people admitted that it was "principally useful to persons in rich or at least comfortable circumstances in life" (Mac Donnacha, 2019). Mac Donnacha suggests that far from addressing the legal, political, social and economic injustices suffered by the mass of the Irish people, "Emancipation simply opened more doors for wealthy Catholics, while leaving untouched the real conquest of Ireland by England on which the old Penal Laws were based" (Ibid). William Cobbett said in 1829 that Catholic emancipation did "nothing for the people at large" (1829:562-563). More condemnations and murmurings of betrayal followed. In his 'Labour in Irish History' (1910), James Connolly describes the O'Connell years as 'a chapter of horrors'. In this case, Connolly continues the narrative of betrayal by highlighting O'Connell's staunch opposition to trade unions. He accuses him of initially encouraging their support for his campaigns before turning against them once he had secured the support of the privileged in Ireland (cited in Mac Donnacha, 2019).

Before O'Connell can fully articulate his defence to the accusation of reneging on the forty shilling freeholders, Cuan interjects and further accuses him of hating the men of 1798[42]. It is true that O'Connell had always declared that he was opposed to physical force as a tactic and was loyal to the Crown (Kinealy, 1997:26). His perceived condemnation of the spirit of Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen made him unpopular in many circles. Kinealy tells us that although the 1798 rebellion failed,

[42] Against the backdrop of conflict between Britain and France, Wolfe Tone and a number of other leading United Irishmen resolved to take advantage of the situation. This culminated in an uprising in 1798, for which Tone had enlisted the help of French troops (who arrived too late to be fully effective). Although the United Irishmen and their supporters won a number of initial victories, overall they lacked coherence and co-ordination and ultimately failed (Kinealy, 1997:24).

it left a romantic legacy of revolutionary struggle, rooted in a 'physical force' tradition (Kinealy, 1997:24). This was clearly contrary to the pacifist rhetoric of O'Connell. Olivia O'Leary asks if it is "because of that very moral stance that Daniel O'Connell is often consigned to the dustier shelves of Irish history? Because he stands as a rebuke to all our bloody rebellions" (O'Leary, 2019). While O'Connell denies any resentment towards the men of 1798, he is unrepentant for his pacific stance:

> *It was a deplorable insurrection. It was instigated by Pitt. They fell for it. He wanted them too. It helped him to carry the Union. Who can forgive them for that? There should never be militia. There should never be ordinary people with arms in their hands. What can come from that except slaughter and rapine? (SP, 123).*

Ó Briain emphasises that O'Connell had no "faith in appeals to force." He suggests that O'Connell's experience in revolutionary France as well as the atrocities perpetrated in the suppression of the 1798 rebellion "strengthened his distrust of revolutionary methods" (1947:258). He once exclaimed: "Oh, Liberty! What horrors are committed in thy name! May every virtuous revolutionist remember the horrors of Wexford"[43] (O'Connell's Correspondence, Letter No 700, Vol II cited in www.Irishcentral.com). Macken refers to such a stance directly when Cuan accuses O'Connell of being a 'dreamer.' O'Connell replies defiantly:

> *It is the violent men who are dreamers. You are a violent man. When I was a student, I saw the result of violence. I was down with typhus down there in Carhen when Lord Edward Fitzgerald was arrested for death, and Wolfe Tone captured. These men should not have died. They were too talented. They should have lived for their country (SP,123).*

O'Connell himself wrote in his diary: "Nothing is politically right which is morally wrong[44]" (Dec 1796 cited in www.Irishcentral.com) and he gave a stark warning that the "altar of liberty totters when it is cemented only with blood, when it is supported by carcasses" (cited in Ó Briain, 1947:259 and Mac Donnacha, 2019). Indeed, in an Address to the people in 1833 he declares that "the only thing to impede the prosperity and freedom of Ireland is the folly and crimes of the people" (cited in Mac Donnacha, 2019). He is clearly making a direct reference to both the actions of 1798 and to the regular attacks on landlords and their property by Whiteboys and Ribbonmen who were protesting against landlord tyranny and the tithes (taxes) that the people were forced to pay for the upkeep of Anglican clergy (cited in Mac Donnacha, 2019). Yes, Roy Foster tells us that O'Connell's real achievement was in bringing about mass protest and unilateral disobedience while maintaining such a commitment to

[43] Some of the earliest battles and successes of Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen in 1798 took place in Wexford.
[44] Ironically, this quotation is also associated with William E. Gladstone who served as British Prime Minister four times and who would champion the cause of Home Rule in Ireland in the second half of the 19th Century.

pacific principles, but ironically he goes on to conclude that it is unlikely that these tactics could have been as effective "without the ominous precedent of Whiteboyism and Ribbonism" (1988:298-299). Maybe Macken's failure to fully condemn Cuan's beliefs and actions reveals some sort of implicit acknowledgement of the significance of both the men of 1798 and the secret societies in pre-famine Ireland without fully endorsing their violent methods.

It is worth noting here that Macken's commitment to telling the history of Ireland from the point of view of the common man means that he does not shy away from controversy. While Macken does not always offer a commentary on the actions of O'Connell, he also does hide from many of the accusations that have been directed at him over the years. It is as if O'Connell's legacy does not depend on these less fortunate events and decisions. The story of O'Connell just like the story of the Irish people must be told warts and all.

7.2 Emancipation, Repeal and the Clergy

'I didn't think a priest would use the altar for politics,' said Clarke. 'Since he has and I am a member of this church, I have the same right. A priest may be a good guide to heaven but he can't claim to be a good guide to the House of Commons. Priests should stick to their prayer-books' (SP, 195).

Macken clearly seeks to acknowledge the role of the clergy in the politicization of the Irish people. He shows their participation as being equally as decisive as the forty shilling freeholders in achieving Emancipation and he further recognises their role in the push for the repeal of the Act of Union. The extent of the role of Catholic clergy in Irish politics has always been a much debated and controversial issue among historians. While much has been written about their support of the United Irishmen in the 1798 rebellion, Fergus O'Ferrall suggests that their role in the rise of Irish democracy took on greater importance in the 19th Century with the increased significance of the 'Catholic vote' and the growing agitation of the 1820s (1981:308). Oliver McDonagh echoes and expands on this sentiment by suggesting that there were three clear phases in the radicalisation of the Catholic clergy and hierarchy in the 1800s (1975:38). While the first, 1808-15, refers to the "overt opposition" by the hierarchy to both "the papal and the British governments," it is the second phase, from 1824-9 when the church committed itself more deeply to both "liberal principle" as well as supplying "the chaplaincy and the junior officers of the fighting force" (1975:38). He is referring specifically to O'Connell's campaign for Emancipation. In fact, MacDonagh adds that it was O'Connell's political activity, more than any of the other factors, which forced the hierarchy into secular politics in Ireland, and determined the role which it was to play (38-39). MacDonagh argues that in the third phase, 1839-43, the majority of the Irish

hierarchy and the great body of the subordinate clergy "threw themselves into a campaign whose objects were professedly extra-religious and politically radical," namely the campaign for the Repeal of the Union. Step by step, "the main body of the church had been harnessed to a nationalist agitation" (1975:38). Interestingly, O'Ferrall adds to this discussion by asking if perhaps Maynooth education was a key factor in explaining such "readiness and willingness" of both priests and Catholic hierarchy to become political activists and embrace Emancipation and Repeal (1981:308).

Macken touches on each of these phases and even refers, albeit indirectly, to the influence of Maynooth College in the radicalization of the clergy. Father Finucane's disagreement with the elderly Father Melican is suggestive of the debate that went on within the church between those more conservative elements and the emerging more politically conscious members such as Father Finucane and his Maynooth educated superior and friend Father Pat. Father Melican pleads with the headstrong Father Finucane to stay out of such affairs:

> *It's nothing to do with us...It can do nothing but bring trouble and confusion on the whole country. It will excite men to foolish dreams and turn tenants against their landlords...we are here to care for men's souls...do you think we should be like the Wexford priests, leading men with pikes in their hands to death and destruction (SP, 186).*

Macken tells us that Father Melican had been ordained on the continent where he had been "indoctrinated with the terrible lessons of the French Revolution" (186) hence his protestation at the clerical involvement in the events of 1798. Father Finucane retorts:

> *I do not agree with you. Ninety per cent of the people want to live quiet and peaceful lives...They are wary of violent men. Of seven million people at least two thirds are living in wretched conditions of poverty and hopelessness. This man has risen. He doesn't want their blood. All he wants from them is courage and resolution. If he can get seven million people to say Yes, altogether, just peacefully saying together, We want change, then change will have to come...We must not stop them. We must be with them...He is the yeast in the mass of dough (SP, 187-188).*

With a tone of resignation, Father Melican tells Father Finucane to do whatever he wants. He then requests Bridie to tend to the fire which is going out, much like his own (188). Macken seems to be implying that the conservative non-confrontational church is on the wane to be replaced with a more progressive and politically active church. Indeed, this was increasingly the case during the second phase, 1824-9, when the hierarchy and the priesthood "moved virtually en bloc into political agitation

and organization" (MacDonagh, 1975: 42). Mac Donagh notes that before 1824, individual priests did on occasion work for certain parliamentary candidates, but it was still "widely assumed that clerical and political activity was incompatible" (Ibid). This changed greatly with Daniel O'Connell and his Catholic association which he founded in 1823. It was structured in such a way that it relied heavily on parish organisation. The parish system, which included the weekly mass, could be used, "immediately and unchanged, for the formation of the political branches, the raising of revenue which was O'Connell's initial objective and the promotion of public meetings and demonstrations of numerical strength" (MacDonagh, 1975: 42). The Clare by-election of 1828 marked a key moment in the transformation of the role of the clergy and consequently serves as a clear example of how effective the parish system could be and how crucial the clergy were to prove in mobilising the masses. Much was down to the issue at stake as O'Connell had made it clear that his manifesto was grounded in securing Catholic Emancipation, but the motivational role of the clergy cannot be underestimated. Father Finucane tells us of the eighty seven voters he offered to lead into the valley who would have to fight their fear (SP, 191). Such fears were real and failure to adhere to voting wishes of the landlord could have dire consequences. As Clarke tells the gathered mob on the eve of polling day:

> *O'Connell's come and go but the families of Vesey-Fitzgerald go on forever…You will do what you are told. Let any man listening to me who is on a hanging gale tremble in his shoes…If you want to live without fear you will follow me. If you don't, you can look out for the results (SP, 195-196).*

In spite of such threats Dualta and his fellow forty shilling freeholders stayed true to their convictions, as did the majority of those from other estates, and O'Connell prevailed with an overwhelming majority. This victory owed much to the support of the clergy. Father Finucane's sermon at Sunday mass is indicative of how the clergy rallied support for O'Connell:

> *You have a measure of freedom now, but not in law. He will make your freedom lawful. You must pay for all good things. Nothing good can be gained without sacrifice. You are afraid. You must conquer your fear and do what is right. Many elections there have been no contests. Powerful men have come together and said: Such a one will be the member for Clare. And so it has been. Now there is a vote. You have the privilege of exercising your vote, eighty seven of you. You can be eighty seven heroes, honest men, able to live with yourselves whatever the consequences, or you can be eighty seven weak men who will have to live with the knowledge that you have voted against history. We will start the march for Ennis tomorrow. It is a sacrifice… I will lead whoever is going to vote for the Catholic candidate (SP, 194).*

Such motivational sermons were crucial to success as was the moral support that was provided by leading the voters into Ennis where the final canvassing and voting would take place, but the role of the clergy went beyond this. Ensuring that there would be no trouble on the days surrounding the election was essential for a successful outcome. This they achieved, much the surprise of landlords and authorities - Macken refers to the 63,000 expected in town and the possibility of excessive drinking and faction fights which could lead to voters being thrown in jail and thus unable to vote (206).

> *There were bands and banners and waving branches. There was laughter and song and wild shouting that should only have come from a drunk people. But they were not drunk (SP, 206).*

The clergy equally ensured that the majority of the sober voters remained steadfast in their commitment to O'Connell come voting day. "There were many who didn't. Poor men under the spell of fear and free men who did what they thought was the best thing to do and did it fearlessly" (SP, 208). But there were many others who stayed strong with the encouragement of Father Finucane and many others like him. "The priests, and there were scores of them in Ennis for the occasion - preached a species of jihad, successfully conflating the racial, the tribal and the religious appeals" (MacDonagh, 1975:42-43). O'Connell emerged victorious and Dualta revelled in his victory. "There could never be a time like it again. It was the joy of a people who threw off their chains for however a short time" (SP, 206).

This is not the last we hear of O'Connell or the Catholic clergy however. The year is 1843 and Father Finucane is in Maynooth College to visit his friend Father Pat. Father Pat is "filled with O'Connell" (SP, 257) having recently been to hear him speak at a 'monster meeting'[45] at Tara.

> *'Yes, I was at Tara,' he said. 'And it is true about the crowds. If you said a million people you would be near the mark. There wasn't a coach or carriage or four-footed beast left in Dublin. If you could stand on the mound at Tara, you couldn't see a blade of grass with the bodies of men, women and children.' (SP, 257)*

Seemingly contrary to initial guidelines by the Catholic hierarchy, the Catholic clergy supported the repeal campaign en masse and Macken makes this point strongly. In fact, the clergy played a key role in the mobilisation of the people for these meetings. Dunning and Dunning tell us that all the peasantry "within the radius of several days journey attended in companies marshalled by their priests" (1895, 273-274). This had seemed unlikely only a few years earlier. Thomas Brown tells us that the huge

[45] The most spectacular public gatherings in Irish history were the more than fifty-plus 'monster meetings' held across the three southern provinces during the summers of 1843 and 1845 to demonstrate support for Daniel O'Connell's campaign to repeal the Act of Union. These gatherings were arguably the largest mass phenomena in modern Irish history. In the contemporary nationalist press, almost all of them were said to number over 100,000; many were reported at between a quarter million and a half million; and one of them, the famous gathering at Tara Hill in mid-August 1843, was put at over one million (Published in 18th–19th - Century History, Features, Hedge School, Issue 1, Spring 1994, Volume 2. www.historyireland.com).

numbers of tenant farmers, small-town traders and journeymen, whom O'Connell had rallied to the cause of Emancipation, did not respond in a similar fashion to his lead on the more abstract proposition of Repeal, and neither did the Catholic gentry or middle classes. (1953:435-439). Once the Relief Act was passed, the church had decided against further political engagement. In a joint statement of I830 drawn up by Bishop James Doyle, the bishops "counselled all clergy to keep aloof from political activity of every kind" so at the outset it seemed that there was no significant clerical support for O'Connell's Repeal Association[46] and subsequent Repeal agitation of 1830-1 (MacDonagh, 1975:44). Many at the time doubted that O'Connell could simply redirect the political machine that was the Irish clergy, "fashioned for the achievement of emancipation, to another, an unbounded and an amorphous conflict" (Ibid, 44). MacDonagh tells us that "the ecclesiastical involvement of the late I820s had been complete, but also narrow and confined." It now remained unclear how the priests could be re-engaged into work "which lacked a catholic coating" (1975:44). Macken however is keen to highlight a new wave of support within the church for O'Connell. He clearly strives to show that there was a very real re-engagement and indeed this was confirmed by commentators at the time. Fergus O'Ferrall refers to two important political observers of the 1830s, Gustave de Beaufort and Alexis de Tocquevile who support such a claim - they both identified the Catholic clergy as a key democratic influence in Irish politics once again (1981:308). Why this was so is open to debate. O'Ferrall points to the importance of Maynooth College in the education of politically active priests. When reminiscing on time spent together in the old college, Father Pat and Father Finucane speak of the "fire of fervour, the heated dialogues" and the "desire to convert the world overnight" (SP, 257). O'Ferrall goes on to state that Maynooth education was not however a prerequisite for political activity. He suggests that many of the more political priests belonged to a younger age group than those who were less political and less active (1981:308). James Reynolds echoes this stating that generational factors and the changing socio-political context were as important determinants of political activism amongst the clergy as place of education. (1954:47-48). Macken's portrayal of Maynooth educated Father Finucane and Father Pat seems to reflect both sides of this argument and most importantly it is also consistent with the observations of Beaufort and de Tocquevile.

[46] The Repeal Association was an Irish mass membership political movement set up by Daniel O'Connell in 1830 to campaign for a repeal of the Acts of Union of 1800 between Great Britain and Ireland. The Association's aim was to revert Ireland to the constitutional position briefly achieved by Henry Grattan and his patriots in the 1780s—that is, legislative independence under the British Crown—but this time with a full Catholic involvement that was now possible following the Act of Emancipation in 1829, supported by the electorate approved under the Reform Act of 1832. Wiki

While the role of the clergy cannot be underestimated in the initial success of the movement for Repeal, Macken seeks to show that it was primarily down to the appeal of O'Connell the man and the organic response of the people from both sides of the divide:

> *Standing up there his voice reaches out to the horizon. He plays tunes on the spines of people, like a great fiddler. He tells them this is the year of Repeal. We will get Repeal. We will get our own parliament back where it belongs, the one that Pitt stole from us forty three years ago. They believe him (SP, 258)*

Macken is also keen to tell us that, unlike Emancipation, the Repeal movement was a national rather than a Catholic demand. He stresses that it was not based upon the wishes of Catholics or of Protestants, but of Irishmen. In a sense, the rights O'Connell had already secured for the Catholics were merely a first tentative step toward the effective assertion of the rights of the whole Irish nation. Dunning and Dunning suggest that it is this idea of a nation united in a common cause that distinguished the Repeal agitation from that which had preceded (1895:272). They claim that O'Connell devoted every effort to the extinction of ancient prejudice between the rival churches and that, in evoking the spirit of nationality, the cause of Repeal aroused a power which O'Connell himself could scarcely control (Ibid, 1895:272-273). It is this spirit of Irishness, of oneness, a spirit which has its roots deeply embedded in the past, which Macken so clearly wants to transmit. Father Pat tells Father Finucane:

> *O'Connell is ruling Ireland. Such a master of symbols. Tara of the Kings. It belonged to the High Kings. They feasted there, called the great fairs there for hundreds of years....As far as the people were concerned he was their descendant, crowned and all. And Clontarf! You see. That was where Brian Boru won his great victory over the Northmen. This is where Daniel O'Connell is going to win his great victory over Peel and the Englishmen (SP, 258).*

Macken also gives great importance to the fact that such a victory would be based on the "moral pressure of a million people" without the need to resort to violence. Father Pat exclaims proudly:

> *I am a fairly cold analytical man, and there at Tara I felt myself burning, and all without bloodshed. That will be his great triumph if he succeeds, that he succeeded without bloodshed.*

While never venturing far from his distinctly nationalistic stance, Macken's unwavering support of O'Connell, even when he comes under criticism for his tactics, is consistent with his ever-increasing shift to the side of non-violent passive resistance. Such criticism of O'Connell and his 'moral force'

tactics emanated from those inside his own Irish Repeal Party who favoured a more militant and separatist approach to Repeal (Quigley, 1970:99). Many historians have subsequently added force to this criticism. Kennedy Roche claims that O'Connell's "faith in the power of moral force was excessive, since Repeal could only be obtained by the military defeat of the British Empire" (Roche, 1948:112). The dissenters within his own ranks, included Thomas Davis, John Mitchel, John Blake Dillon and Charles Gavan Duffy and became known as the Young Irelanders. Roy Foster speaks of the roots of the movement as being "culturally separatist, essentially Anglophobic and increasingly sectarian" (1988:313). Macken acknowledges this political rift through the recounting of an incident between Father Pat and one of his students who calls O'Connell a "bluffer". The student asks Father Pat indignantly:

> *Who wants a parliament back as it was before? [...]What good was it to the people only to pass laws repressing them, and feathering their own nests? A bunch of unprincipled scoundrels is all they were, social criminals [...] O'Connell is gone soft in the head [...] The Young Irelanders are the ones for me, building a national ideal with power instead of blather(SP, 258-259).*

He goes on to claim that Davis is a better man than O'Connell. The student is referring to the claim that O'Connell's Repeal discourse is suggestive of a reinstatement of the Irish Parliament as it was in the years before the Act of Union rather than a complete separation from Westminster. Roy Foster does acknowledge that "Repeal for O'Connell probably meant, first, a recognition of the illegitimacy of the Union; and then negotiation of an alternative mechanism of government" (1988:308). This suggests that O'Connell was still conscious of the need "for some kind of connection" (Ibid). Indeed O'Connell did say that "a parliament inferior to the British parliament I would accept as an instalment" (in a speech to Dublin Corporation, 1843, cited in Foster, 308). This contrasts with the "simple Repeal" which called for nothing less than an independent legislature, as advocated by the Young Irelanders.

The next day, Father Finucane goes to Dublin where he meets Father Phil and Father Matthew. "I am here for Clontarf," says Father Finucane brimming with excitement. "He is the greatest Irishman that ever lived," said Father Phil (SP, 260). At that moment, word reaches them that Dublin Castle, on the orders of British Prime-Minister Peel, has issued a proclamation banning the Clontarf meeting scheduled for 7 October 1843 and threatening the use of military force should the directive be ignored. Such a directive was inevitable. Sir Edward Sugden, Lord Chancellor of Ireland, wrote the "peaceable demeanour of the assembled multitudes is one of the most alarming symptoms" (Parker, 1899:49) of the monster meetings. Woodham-Smith recounts that "an Irish people united and controlled was an

ominous spectacle, and the British government seized with something near panic, began to prepare as if in hourly expectation of civil war" (1962:17). Rather than risk the possibility of violence O'Connell calls off the meeting. Roy Foster argues that O'Connell's decision was correct but admits that his image was "badly dented among a public nurtured on extremist rhetoric" (1988:313). Oliver MacDonagh goes further by suggesting that the same O'Connell who had "blazed a trail at Westminster" before 1843 and who had involved the church in his "political enlightenment" of the masses, had "failed ingloriously" (1968:48). Macken however fully endorses O'Connell's decision not to go ahead with the meeting. He strives to show that O'Connell's retreat was based on genuine concern for his followers in the face of an imminent violent onslaught:

> *They have brought in thirty-five thousand troops. The Martello Towers are fortified. There are three men-of-war in the Bay with their guns cleared. On Clontarf they have the 60th Rifles and the 5th Dragoons; the 54th and the 11th Hussars are on Conquer Hill. They have the Royal Horse Artillery with four six-pounder guns unlimbered and ready for action' (SP, 262).*

Macken also endorses O'Connell's creed that "human blood is no cement for the temple of liberty" (O'Connell apud Woodham-Smith, p.17). Furthermore, Macken refers to O'Connell's emphatic claim that he would not jeopardise the welfare of those who had chosen to follow him to secure his legacy:

> *'I am an old man,' said O'Connell. [...] 'In a terrifyingly short time to come I am to meet God. It would be easy to be a hero!' [...] I could say: 'Come! And they would come. They would walk into the mouths of the cannon. I could die with them. It is a wonderful picture. I would live forever. It is a great temptation. [...] But I won't face God with the blood of innocent people on my hands' (SP, 262).*

Felim Ó Briain claims that O'Connell did the only logical and possible thing open to him which was to obey the proclamation issued by the Lord Lieutenant to Ireland. Ó Briain states that even if his policy had ever been armed resistance, there was no possible justification for resistance then. He goes as far as suggesting that no-one questioned the surrender of O'Connell to the inevitable or counselled resistance to the British troops (1945:267). Other political commentators have reproached him for his "insincerity and timidity when threatened by the British government" (Quigley, 1970:99). MacDonncha (2019) questions O'Connell's character stating that the British government had the measure of him and called his bluff in 1843 knowing that he would concede. He even suggests that O'Connell had created among the masses a "total political dependence on himself and on the wealthy Catholic laymen and clergymen who marshalled his movement" thus effectively denying the people the ability to defend

themselves when the need arose. While Macken stops short of criticising O'Connell, he does refer to the debate on passive versus active resistance and the polarising effect of his ultimate decision to retreat from Clontarf.

> *It's a bluff,' a tall thin man with a fierce moustache shouted at him. 'There are Irishmen among those soldiers. They will never fire their guns on other Irishmen. They will not kill their own.'*
> *'They have killed their own before this,' said O'Connell. 'They will do it again.'*
> *'You must not call off this meeting,' the man said*
> *'He cannot get away with it,' they were saying. 'They daren't fire. We can match them!' (SP, 261-262).*

These differences in opinion inevitably became more pronounced as a result of O'Connell's retreat at Clontarf. Christine Kinealy (2009) tells us that the seeds were now sown for a battle between the two main sections of the Repeal movement (2009). Disillusion among those who had previously been motivated by O'Connell's rhetoric of defiance had led to a split within the Repeal ranks:

> *'So Peel has won the victory over you,' said the tall one with a terrible taunting.*
> *'He may have won the battle,' said O'Connell, 'but he has lost the war.' [...]*
> *'He had the greatest opportunity of any man in history,' said Cuan, 'and he rubbed his name out of the history books talking like a pious old woman. Even if a thousand had been killed wouldn't it have been worth the sacrifice?' [...]*
> *Flan McCarthy added: 'He was not the voice. How can you raise a million people to the stars and then dash them down? He was not worthy.' [...]*
> *'There has to be something to fill the vacuum,' said Father Finucane. 'There are angry voices writing in The Nation. They say they are Young Ireland.'*
> *'Their voice has a truer appeal,' said Cuan (SP, 262-263).*

Gavan Duffy said at the time, "Ireland was won at Clontarf and Ireland is going to be lost at Clontarf" (Duffy, 1884:136). Macken seems to acknowledge that such a prophecy had indeed become reality. Father Finucane utters despondently, "O'Connell is in jail...When he comes out he will die. He has left too much undone, unravelled. Explosive" (SP, 263). While O'Connell's actions were generally applauded by the Church, as can be observed by the support of both Father Finucane and Father Phil, the fact that O'Connell backed down was a bitter and humiliating blow to his movement and "proof that the tactic of non-violent mass mobilisation could go no further for fear of bloodshed" (Dorney, 2011). Henry Boylan notes that O'Connell had effectively deprived himself of his most potent weapon, the

monster meeting, and with his health failing, he had no plan to appease the ranks of the Repeal Association (1998:306). Woodham-Smith tells us that for the movement "the psychological moment had passed: the iron of Repeal had cooled and O'Connell himself was a changed man, while in prison he had lost his nerve (1962:18). Father Finucane does not deny the criticism levelled at O'Connell by both Cuan and Flan but he still holds on to the belief that O'Connell still has some power of persuasion over both the people of Ireland and the British government. Ó Briain refers to the editorial disapproval in The Nation[47] at O'Connell's stance but acknowledges that, at some level at least, the people still trusted in the wisdom of O'Connell's leadership (Ó Briain 1945:267).

We meet O'Connell one final time and once again Macken does not seek to protect him from criticism. This time the potato crop has failed and many regions in Ireland are facing starvation. The nauseating stench of decay is matched only by the silent desperation of the people. Father Finucane urges Dualta to go to O'Connell. "He would listen to you," said the priest. "You must tell him to talk louder...He must go to the place where his voice will reverberate....He must drag himself on one leg" (SP, 277). Dualta arrives in Derrynane to meet a man whose health is clearly in rapid decline. O'Connell hints that he will do something but there is an air of resignation in his words:

> *If we had a parliament in Dublin, they would not let an ounce of food leave the country. You see. All for Repeal. I will get Repeal. I will get it. Without it we are dead. Like now. If we had Repeal would the oats be leaving the country while the Indian meal was coming from America? Socialism. You must not give something for nothing. I will make them see. (284)*

O'Connell makes reference to an earlier failed attempt to secure some food relief. On 3 November 1845, a deputation, of which O'Connell was a part, urged the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Heytesbury, to adopt measures to avert calamity. The proposals which had been drawn up by O'Connell called for "the immediate stoppage of the export of corn and provisions, the prohibition of distilling and brewing from grain" and the request that the "ports should be opened for the free import of food and rice and Indian corn imported from the colonies" (Woodham-Smith, 1962:48-49). The initiative was all but rejected. In 1846, Daniel O'Connell again pleaded with the British government to give prompt assistance to what he believed was becoming 'a death dealing famine' (Kinealy,1997: 69) but once again his efforts were to prove futile.

[47] The Nation was an Irish nationalist weekly newspaper, published in the 19th century. The founders of The Nation, Charles Gavan Duffy, Thomas Davis, and John Blake Dillon were members of Daniel O'Connell's Repeal Association, which would later be known as Young Ireland (O'Sullivan, T. F. (1945). Young Ireland. Published by: The Kerryman Ltd).

The image that Macken portrays of O'Connell is of one who is increasingly helpless in the face of great need. In O'Connell's reply to Dualta, Macken juxtaposes this sense of impotence to affect any real change with a defiant, albeit futile, challenge to those who can further the cause of repeal which he sees as Ireland's last real hope.

> *I am in a grave. Before they close this grave, they will come and spit into it. The others and my own too. These rash young men. They are wanting in guile. They are wanting in wisdom. They will not learn. Let them listen to me. I held back the tide. With my arms. I held back the red tide. I am building barricades of peace. You have to see this. Repeal is the last gap. If this is filled then there is peace....I have baked a cake. Where is the leaven now? (285-286)*

There is however a real sense of desperate resignation in Dualta's parting thoughts as he leaves O'Connell's house in Derrynane.

> *He was sorry he had come. There was no hope. Now the people were really on their own. The voice was silent. It was weak and dying, it was ten, twenty years too old, and the black horseman could ride unrefined (SP, 286).*

On 8 February 1847 O'Connell stood for the last time before the House of Commons in London in a bid to save Ireland from impending disaster:

> *"She is in your hands—in your power" he said. "If you do not save her, she cannot save herself. One-fourth of her population will perish unless Parliament comes to their relief" (cited in Kinealy, King, Moran, 2018:25).*

"It was the appearance of the Liberator rather than his spoken words which bothered those who listened to his speech" (Kinealy, King, Moran, 2018:25). He was suffering from a degenerative brain disease at this time. On Christmas Eve 1846, Dualta had already predicted the inevitable about O'Connell's last stand in the Commons:

> *He will have no command. They will greet him with a great silence. His thoughts will not be incisive. His magic will be gone. His enemies will gloat and the hearts of his friends will quail. (293)*

And this is how it was. O'Connell's feeble words were largely lost on those present and his awful prediction would become reality. The British Government's only immediate concession was to open soup kitchens in 1847, which did temporarily alleviate the situation, but these were closed again a few months later in September that same year (Murphy, 2020).

While Dualta deeply regrets that O'Connell could do no more, he stops short of calling him a failure. Yes, he feels bitterly disappointed with the fragmentation of the Repeal movement and utter despair at the powerlessness of O'Connell in the face of impending starvation, but there is no blame, only reluctant resignation of the situation and regret that things could not have been different. For Macken, O'Connell has succumbed to illness, old age, bad luck and an establishment's refusal to budge, but his integrity as a man and as one of Ireland's great leaders remains very much intact. He would certainly subscribe to Olivia O'Leary's subsequent claim that his great public meetings "shook the nerve of the British government, and the sobriety and self-discipline he inspired in those crowds shook the establishment even more" (2011). O'Leary adds that his greatest achievement was that he raised the Catholic Irish up off their knees. For a people who had been "systematically reduced by the Penal Laws to poverty and ignorance by having their land, their possessions, their religion and culture, and their access to education taken away from them, raising one's head was a risky business, but Daniel O'Connell gave them courage." (2011). This is very much what Macken ultimately seeks to transmit.

8. MACKEN'S MISSION

8.1 Seanchaí, Chieftain and Voice of the Poor

Following that first coincidental meeting with a younger O'Connell who is out chasing hares on the hills, Dualta and Cuan continue their journey towards County Clare, where they will seek out and punish 'middleman' Clarke. They make steady progress as Cuan is anxious to once again set foot in his homeland. As they approach some dimly lit homes on the hillside, they meet Colman Daxon, a young boy out tending sheep. Colman is the son of illegal whiskey distiller 'Bottle' Daxon. Colman enquires as to their identity? Cuan replies that he is called McCarthy. Colman immediately asks if he is a relation of Flan 'File' McCarthy and Cuan acknowledges that he is his brother. Colman informs the visitors that many of the locals are not to be seen as they have gone to visit the home of Miss MacMahon. "Father Finucane got this new teacher and he got the people to build a house," Colman tells them. (SP, 128-129). Cuan asks about the priest and Colman tells them that "he is a young one, a man in place of the parish priest" (129). Eventually, they reach the valley and they make their way down to the house of Flan McCarthy. Flan gives them a cold welcome and begrudgingly offers them food and board. Flan suddenly takes a bunch of manuscripts from his pocket, selects two pages and hands them to Dualta who starts to read:

> *Grim and dark the plight of the Gael in his own land. Blame then be on his own head and heart, that has all forgot the beginnings –*
> *The Thomond chieftains that lost sweet blood on the fair south of the Eiscir Riada.*
> *Of Connaill Cutra, great Aengus of Aranmore and Fiacra of the Flowing hair;*
> *Of Connall dying under the geasa sword of Cuchulan and covered with his carn [...]*
> *Of the great warriors who died defending hearth and board against Turgesius, the foul Dane.*
> *There were men then who sang them and stout people who cried them sore-*
> *From the bardic schools of kings and chiefs poured forth their tender songs [...]De Danann and Firbolg and Formorian, they were the children of kings, the sons of Milesius;*
> *A race of songsters... (SP, 141).*

At first, Dualta says that he doesn't get it and this irritates Flan:

> *'What's wrong with them?' said Flan. 'A nation of thick headed louts? How many of them can go back three generations? They have lost their beginnings so they are sunken in poverty and meanness of mind. It happened the day they abandoned the bards.' (SP, 142).*

Dualta stands his ground:

> *'Times change,' said Dualta. 'The bards brought their fate on their heads, because they sang above the heads of the people. Now instead of dead dreams you should sing of the flowers on the stalks of the potatoes, the suffering of the evicted, the dreams in the hearts of children' (SP, 142).*

Dualta is so consumed with his own reality and the reality of others like him that he fails to see the significance of the poetry of the bards, the poetry of Flan McCarthy. The discussion ends with a still defiant Dualta:

> *'I read you,' said Dualta. 'Brilliant, intellectual, interior rhyming vowels, that stir the beauty hidden in the heart, but for nobody but yourself and the few who can understand you, when you should be singing songs that will raise the people from their knees, fill their hearts with hope and beauty, instead of songs of dead heroes, whose dry bones are rustling.'*

Dualta has come a long way since he first fled his native Galway in the dead of night with his uncle Marcus. It has been a journey of growth, of self-discovery and of coming to an understanding of the complexities of life in pre-famine Ireland. While Dualta initially fails to realise its significance, his meeting with File McCarthy is a key moment on this journey. Flan 'File' McCarthy seeks to preserve the link between past and present and his work is a representation of that which defines him and his people. Macken brings Dualta face to face with truth and tradition in the form of the written word of the bards but he is not quite ready to take that next step - the layers of identity that permeate McCarthy's verse are as yet beyond him. Making that leap step must come from within himself.

The three men are surprised by an unannounced visitor. It is Father Finucane. He has come with a warning:

> *'I have discovered that two strangers are expected to come into the valley and that a certain man will suffer. Many people will applaud his suffering. I will not because I am a Christian and he is a Christian and I do not think that this is the way.' [...]*
> *'I am not a stranger,' replies Cuan. 'I am one of the people' (SP, 144).*

Cuan is left with no choice but to abandon the mission meaning that Dualta is now free from his promise. Dualta bids farewell to Cuan and to his brother Flan. "Come again, ignorant fellow," said Flan. "Somewhere you have a brain. If you drink at the well more often, it might awaken" (SP, 146). Flan McCarthy speaks in jest but much like O'Connell's words, they strike a chord with Dualta. As he leaves Flan's house he declares to Father Finucane that he wants to be "one of the people" The priest adds

that if he becomes "part of the people" then, he "must add to them, not take away from" (SP, 147). Father Finucane goes on:

> *When the old chieftains were being inaugurated in this place there was always a block of stone in which were imprisoned the footsteps of the first chieftain. They set their feet in these footprints and with a white wand in their hand they swore to uphold the Brehon laws*[48] *and the laws of the people and to give rather than take away. Sometimes the oaths were empty, but sometimes not (SP, 147).*

The message of Flan McCarthy suddenly takes on new meaning. This is Dualta's first tentative step in assuming the role of 'chieftain' and modern day seanchaí. In the words of Flan 'File' McCarthy, he will be the "voice" that will "strike the brass" and allow the common people of Ireland to "erupt" from their "hidden caves into the light of new-born day" (SP, 5,222). He openly assumes such a position when he calls to the house of school teacher, Miss McMahon:

> *I am going to be part of the people [...] You have to know themselves individually, the poet and the storyteller and the singer and the carpenter, the drunken ones and the sober ones anf the hypocritical ones and the pious ones. You must get a hint of the culture they carry that goes back thousands of years [...] You must go to the wakes and weddings and funerals. You must shout God Save Ireland, and grumble about the landlords. You must shout Up Daniel O'Connell, and Freedom, and watch the boys hurling in the fields and the girls dancing at the cross-roads. You must get behind the curtain they draw between the stranger and the one like themselves (SP, 165).*

Interestingly, Miss McMahon, runaway daughter of Landlord Wilcocks, has also made her own option for the people. In absconding and becoming a teacher, she has left behind all the trappings and privileges of the Irish aristocratic life. Macken recounts her first experience of market and 'gael day' which would normally be spent "sitting gracefully in a carriage" away from the maddening crowds (SP, 173). She gets to experience a "press of people" the like of which she has never experienced before. She gets caught up in them, "in the smell of them, of drink and new wool and polished boots, the smell of foetid breaths and milk and little bits of roasting meet" (173). Suddenly she finds herself in the middle of a faction fight between "these men she had been feeling good about, kindly people, respectful" but now they have become "faces squinting in hatred" with "low atavistic growls coming from their throats, the bright blood on their sunburned faces." Dualta questions her decision: "What use is it? [...] Can you hold back the sea? Can you bring the hills low?" (SP, 182). But Una McMahon

[48] The Brehon Law was the legal system that existed in Ireland before the coming of the Normans. These ancient laws were transmitted orally until literacy arrived with Christianity in the fifth century. The Brehon Law was evolved by judges (brithem) and reflected the complexity of early Irish society (Features, Issue 5, Sept/Oct 2011, Medieval History pre-1500, Volume 19).

remains steadfast in her decision. A commitment to the common people is an unconditional commitment to each and every one of them in all of their many guises.

8.2 Pre-Famine Poverty and the Abuse of Power

Through Dualta and Una, Macken takes on the mantle of seanchaí, chieftain and voice of those who have no voice. He has taken us into the homes of Marcus, Martin and Maire, Carrol O' Connor and others and he has given us snapshots of their lives but this commitment to them has now taken on a new meaning. Macken has made a conscious and unconditional option for those in the shadows. He explicitly leads the reader from a surface reading of people and events to a deeper understanding of history in all its rawness. The reality is that if you dig you will retrieve the pain and brokenness of the ordinary which can't be whitewashed from history. This is now Macken's stated mission.

Dualta returns to his life as a tenant farmer and Una continues her work as a school teacher and as adoptive mother to Colman. Following Daniel O'Connell's election victory over Vesey Fitzgerald and the subsequent granting of Catholic emancipation, Dualta and Una admit their love for each other and get married. Before the wedding festivities have come to an end, Cuan McCarthy brings them word that Tewson has called in the 'hanging gales'. Cuan seeks vengeance by upturning ten acres of Tewson's grassland but Dualta calls for restraint. Cuan reminds Dualta of the example of the forty shilling freeholders who should have been protected but have now been evicted following O'Connell's deception. Dualta insists that force by opinion and by being educated is the way forward. His pleas fall on deaf ears.

Dualta continues to toil on his meagre plot working the rocky land where his potatoes will be planted – cleaning, burning, fertilising with bog, mould, lime, dung and seaweed. He reflects on his position as a forty-shilling freeholder and how it would only take one crop failure or the loss of one cow to send him and Una into "beggary" (SP, 225). The tithes[49] which are due add to his worries. Tithes were a huge financial burden for subsistence farmers who were already struggling to make ends meet. "Is it fair that Catholics should have to pay for the upkeep of a religion that is contrary to all that they believe?" he asks Una bitterly (SP, 228). Dualta explains that Glasby the tithe valuator acting on behalf of Clarke (the tithe proctor), will come over to look at all he owns and he will set "one-tenth value" on everything he might sell...It all amounted to a sizeable sum. It took gathering" (SP, 227-228). Dualta is undecided. He tells Una that he does not want to pay, saying that in their valley only "the weak will pay." Even Daniel

[49] Tithes are for the support of the Church of Ireland, for the upkeep of Protestant bishops and ministers and for the erection and repair of Protestant edifices (SP, 228). This greatly increased the financial burden on subsistence farmers.

O'Connell told them not to pay (SP, 228). He wonders if he will be "among these weak" (SP, 229). "Now that I have something, I do not want to lose it. When I had nothing, I had nothing to lose" (228). Dualta reluctantly cedes to the pressure but there were many who were prepared to risk everything. After Emancipation in 1829, an organized campaign of resistance to tithes began. The movement gathered considerable momentum as it was confident that it would eventually bring substantial relief if not the total abolition of the whole tithe system (O'Donoghue, 1972:77). At first it had some success denting the financial position of the Protestant church, but in 1831 the government put together lists of defaulters and issued orders for the seizure of goods and livestock. Sporadic violence erupted in many parts of Ireland in response to this. Dualta refers to such violent events in Newtownmountbarry and Carrickmacross. The tithe war as it became known was supported by many priests and even by a significant number of the Catholic hierarchy (Connolly, 1998:574) so that those who had the nerve to participate felt justified and supported in their actions - Moran McCleary has a two year lease on his farm and therefore much to lose, but encouraged by Cuan McCarthy he stands up to Glasby and Clarke by refusing to pay (SP, 230). By law, if any of the tithe agitators were in default they became crown debtors, and consequently liable to imprisonment (O'Donoghue, 197:84). Clarke is sure that "Moran was behind the revolt in the valley" (230) and is determined to exact payment or justice. Moran resists and pays with his life. "A decent man was shot to death over a few shillings" (SP, 236). Macken goes on to tell us that: "He wouldn't get the benefit of a Coroner's Court. There was a Coercion Act in force. He was legitimately dead. He didn't matter. He wasn't even a footnote in history" (236). Feeling remorse for his encouragement of Moran, Cuan McCarthy vows to take care of Moran's wife Sabina and her children. Macken's portrayal of a contrite and penitent Cuan are in keeping with his stance against violent resistance however Dualta's obvious empathy with Moran and the predicament of all like him show that Macken implicitly endorsed Cuan's goals, if not his methods.

The years pass and it is gale day - Dualta's ten-year lease is up for renewal. He ponders his situation and the future of his small piece of land. "Men had said to him: Don't make it look pretty on the outside. You will suffer.....Let it look as poor as possible....It doesn't pay to be clean. He didn't listen" (SP, 241-242). As previously referred to, improvements made to holdings became the property of the landlord when leases expired or were terminated, without any compensation (Woodham-Smith, 1962:22). In actual fact, even a lease did not provide security due to the practice of the 'hanging gale' which allowed incoming tenants to leave their rent in arrears for six, twelve or eighteen months until such a time as they had the proceeds of their first harvest. This ensured that most tenants were permanently in arrears and consequently lost any security on their lease that they may have had

(Woodham-Smith, 1962:23). Edward Wakefield described the hanging gale as "one of the great levers of oppression" that kept tenants in "a kind of perpetual bondage" (1812:244 and cited in WS, 23). Macken is intent on showing that Dualta's decision to care for his land and his house, while noble, is foolhardy in the face of a system that is clearly stacked against tenant farmers. This does not mean however that Macken excuses the shortcomings of all those he seeks to represent. Dualta's earlier criticism of the 'weak' and 'lazy' Morogh Ryan is a case in point, as is his representation of Finola Mogue's father. Dualta stops off at the schoolhouse on gale day on his way to see landlord Clarke. Una has some disturbing news. "Little Finola is pregnant" she tells him (SP, 243). Macken seeks to highlight one of the more sinister sides of life in rural Ireland. These are "Flan's silent people" and most are good but there are also those who would "sell their daughters for the price of a drink in a tavern.... cruel, brutal, ignorant, illiterate, dirty, unscrupulous... wallowing in enjoyable wretchedness" (SP, 245-246). Una speaks of life for Finola, "of drink...and money passing... of funny men smelling who did things to her" (SP, 244). Aileen Lee notes that the 18th and 19th centuries are replete with stories of Irish children who suffered great cruelty. Some were the objects of sexual depravity and others were seen as "economic commodities — kidnapped and sold as indentured servants; stripped of their clothing; used as cheap labour; or physically deformed for begging" (2014). Elaine Farrell speaks of the role of the father in suspected cases of infanticide in Ireland in the late 19th century. (2012:990). Many of these children would have been deemed illegitimate. Child pregnancies such as that of Finola Mogue were not rare.

Enraged at what has happened, Dualta makes his way to Mogue's house. Macken juxtaposes the squalor of the "dirtiest and most smelling house" (SP, 252) with the filth of the actions of he who dwells within. Mogue lives among the poorest of the poor yet he stands apart as one of flawed character. Macken has chosen to be a voice for the common man and this must be inclusive even of those on the social margins such as Mogue. At no stage however, does Macken use Mogue's life situation as an excuse for his actions. "Are you human?" Dualta asks him. "You take her away and sell her body to a tinker for the price of a glass of whisky," he shouts accusingly. While Macken clearly indicates that depravity and debauchery are not the preserve of any one social class, he does acknowledge that the drudgery and hardship of life as a landless labourer potentiated social ills such as chronic alcoholism. Mogue is one of a huge number of landless labourers. Technically these people were unemployed. The Poor Enquiry of 1835 stated that three-quarters of the labourers in Ireland existed without regular employment of any kind. Potatoes were cultivated for twenty weeks of the year meaning that some 2.5 million people were without employment for thirty weeks of the year (Woodham-Smith, 1962:32). By

May or June, landless people like the Mogues would have no potatoes. The potato could not be stored for more than a year however supplies generally ran out long before this. Roy Foster notes that the period between "the exhaustion of stores and the reaping of harvest was increasingly precarious" meaning that these months of going without could be especially difficult (1988:319). They would thus "take to the roads during what men called the hungry meal months" (SP, 244). They lived in "squalid suburbs near the towns where they erected makeshift shelters" (244). Dualta had to weave his way around these shelters in order to get to the dwelling of Mogue. "The houses were thrown at one another," he observed. "The dirt ways between were muddy and smelled viley of pigs and the dirt of dogs and the leavings of humans...many children sucked thumbs as he passed. Very poorly dressed, almost naked, extremely dirty" (252). "Whose fault?" Dualta asks. He does not answer his own question but we are left with the impression that these people are trapped by a system that serves only to perpetuate this cycle of poverty and misery.

Dualta visits Clarke. Comparatively speaking his situation seems better than these landless labourers yet he is not without his own problems. In fact, he too is to become another victim of the system. Clarke revokes his plea to renew his ten year lease despite the improvements he has made to his holding, thus turning him into a tenant at will. His ambition and hard graft have served for nothing. In fact, they have worked against him. Being a tenant at will offers no security of tenure meaning that he could be turned out whenever the landlord choses to do so (Woodham-Smith, 1962:22). Dualta is also asked to pay an extra five pounds and ten shillings annually instead of the tithes that he used to pay. "So we lost the battle of the tithes," Dualta asks. "No, you won," replies Clarke. "Parliament has abolished the tithes. They have put the burden on the landlords." "Who put the burden on us," Retorts Dualta (SP, 248). Officially, tithe payments had ceased to exist. During the 1830s, O'Connell's successful alliance with the ruling Whig Party resulted in various reforms within Ireland - an Ecclesiastical Commission was established which recommended Church reform including the abolishment of the tithe (Kinealy, 1997:27). In 1838, parliament introduced a Tithe Commutation Act for Ireland. This reduced the amount payable by the tenant by about a quarter and the remainder was to be paid in rent to landlords. Landlords were in turn to make payment to the authorities. The reduced tithe payment was to be added to a tenant's rent payment. This partial relief together with the end of confrontational collections all but ended the Tithe War (Moody and Martin, 1967:375). The burden on tenants such as Dualta did not end here however. Unofficially the obligation to pay tithes to the Church of Ireland remained - full relief from the payment was not achieved until the 1869 Irish Church Act (Stewart, 2001:21) and payments to landlords were effectively increased.

Despite the loss of his lease and the added payments, crop failure remains Dualta's greatest fear. Woodham-Smith tells us that, despite being the most universally useful of foods given its nutritional value and its versatility, the potato was the most dangerous of crops. The whole social infrastructure – the minute subdivisions, the closely-packed population existing at the lowest level, the high rents, the frantic competition for land, had been produced by the potato and consequently the conditions of life in Ireland and the existence of the Irish people came to depend on the potato entirely and exclusively (Woodham-Smith, 1962:35). There are different theories used to explain why this was so with the theory of overpopulation receiving the most attention. The reliance on the potato and the starvation that accompanied the blight was seen by some at the time as the "price paid by the reckless Irish for their high nuptiality and their large families" (Ó Gráda, 1989:48). While Macken certainly recognises the role played by population in the growing misery of the peasant classes and their ever increasing dependence on the potato, there is never a sense that they should shoulder the blame.

Whatever the reasons, Dualta and those like him have become trapped in a system not of their own making and they have become overly dependent on a single food source that is at best unpredictable. Even in a good year, dependence on the potato created hardship. It did not keep, nor could it be stored from one season to another. As a result, every year nearly two and a half million labourers such as Mogue and his neighbours who had no regular employment literally starved during the summer months when the old potatoes had run out and the new ones had not come in. June, July and August were the aforementioned 'meal' months as meal, bought at exorbitant rates, was their only source of nutrition (Woodham-Smith, 1962:35-36). Interestingly, and in contrast to popular perception, alongside the potato economy a large commercial corn sector existed, which in the years leading up to the Famine was exporting sufficient corn to England to feed two million people. This earned Ireland the title of 'the granary of Britain', "whilst it was being simultaneously depicted as a peasant economy" (Kinealy, 1997:5). There could be no question of resorting to corn however, should the potato fail (Woodham-Smith, 36). This would become one of the great paradoxes of the Famine.

On the day that Dualta learns that he is to be a father, his worst fears become reality. "Going to the town he had remarked on the potato fields. He said it to the men. What a great crop there would be this year...you could hear the tubers growing beneath the ground" (SP, 265). On his way home however, he was disturbed by an odd smell. "It seemed to be rising from the ground with the mist. He sniffed around him. It was the smell of decay, like an unburied animal...but there was nothing dead under the hedges of fuchsia and blackberry!" (SP, 265-266).

9. THE GREAT HUNGER

9.1 The Brown Corruption

He examined the crop. He didn't want to believe it. He had passed this way in the morning after all. It was a potato field then with blooming flowers. Now it was nothing. It was a brown soggy mass of corruption. The whole field...everywhere there were potato fields the brown corruption was resting... (SP, 266).

For many, this was totally unexpected. The appearance in 1845 of a mysterious disease which would go on to destroy almost half the Irish potato crop heralded a prolonged crop failure the human consequences of which were without parallel in modern Europe (Kinealy, 1997:41) but yet all the earlier indications were that it would be a bumper harvest (Woodham-Smith, 1962:38). Phytophthora infestans or 'late blight' a disease caused by a fungus, of possible Mexican origin, was first observed on the potato crop in the United States in 1843 but it was still unknown in Europe (Daly, 1996:27). In 1845 however blight was noted on a significant number of potato crops in Belgium, France, Germany and Switzerland having been transmitted to mainland Europe, possibly by ships carrying manure (Kinealy, 1997:52). At the beginning of August, Sir Robert Peel received a letter from the Isle of Wight reporting that the disease had appeared on the potato crop there (Woodham-Smith, 1962:39). It was now only a question of time before it appeared in Ireland and on September 13, in a publication of the *Gardener's Chronicle, Dr. Lindley, its editor,* made the announcement:

We stop the press with very great regret to announce that the potato Murrain has unequivocally declared itself in Ireland. The crops about Dublin are suddenly perishing...where will Ireland be in the event of a universal potato rot? (Gardener's Chronicle and Horticultural Gazette ,16 September 1845 cited in Woodham-Smith, 1962:40 and Kinealy, 1997:52).

The unreliability of the potato in Ireland was however an accepted fact "ranking with the vagaries of the weather, and in 1845 the possibility of yet another failure caused no great alarm (Woodham-Smith, 1962:38). Indeed, potato crop diseases were not new in Ireland. The 'curl' had been in evidence from the 1760s and 'taint' or 'dry rot' since the 1830s (Austin-Bourke, 1993:27-29). According to the Census of Ireland Commissioners report of 1851 there had been twenty-four crop failures dating back to 1728, including near nationwide failures in 1836, 1837 and 1839 (Woodham-Smith, 1962:38). The British government showed no real concern about the potato crop of 1845. "It was the problems arising from Ireland's perennial rebelliousness and from the swarming, poverty stricken 'surplus' polulation as it was called, that absorbed the attention of parliament (WS, 36). Woodham-Smith notes however that

there were official voices "crying in the wilderness" referring to the Devon Commission Report of 1845 which issued a stark warning on the perilous state of Ireland (WS, 36). In fact in the years after the Union there had been some 114 commissions and 61 Special Committees prophesising disaster - "Ireland was on the verge of starvation, her population rapidly increasing, three quarters of her labourers unemployed, housing conditions appalling and the standard of living unbelievably low" (Marquess of Clanricarde, 1845:1197 cited in WS, 36). It is within this reality that Dualta first catchest sight of that 'brown corruption'.

The blight takes hold and most of the potato crop is lost. "It takes only three weeks to starve. This is for the poor" (SP, 268). Dualta takes stock of his situation. Some people would have some oats growing as well as their potatoes but he recalls that "you can only harvest one quarter of that, or draw one quarter of your turf from the bog...until you have paid your rent in September...the landlord requires a mortgage on your ability to pay" (SP, 268). Having sold three quarters of his oat crop as well as his only calf, Dualta is able to pay his rent. Landlords were not in the habit of making concessions even in the midst of a crop failure. His struggle for survival continues fuelled by the desire to find some seed for the planting of the new crop of potatoes the following year. If they could hang on, somehow they would be alright (SP, 269). Many have given up hope and are making their way to the workhouse[50] in Ennis "hoping their strength would stay with them until they reached it" (269). Dualta, Una and their unborn child still manage to keep starvation at bay. With the potato crop inedible, resourcefulness is the key to survival child and everything can be considered a source of nutrition:

> *Mashed turnips mixed with the roots of fern or dandelion...boiled crushed roasted leaves of dock sorrel. Put in nettles and you had an exotic tasting dish. You could go at night and steal a pint of milk from the udder of a richer man's cow or nick a vein in an animal's neck and extract a quart of blood...then you could turn to the sea for the fruit of the shore, seaweed and shellfish and later on, as the sources dried up, you could cook snails, frogs, hedgehogs baked in clay, and after that crows or blackbirds which you picked from the hedges at night with a light to blind them (SP, 269).*

This is exactly how it was throughout that autumn and winter of 1845. Initially the slaughter or sale of pigs was very widespread as without potatoes as a foodstuff, animals had become competition for food. Once they were gone however, other food sources became more difficult to access. As Dualta noted,

[50] The workhouse was introduced into Ireland as part of the English Poor Law system in 1838. The British government believed it to be the most cost effective way of tackling the desperate state of poverty in Ireland. Some English politicians also believed that it would prevent the Irish destitute from swamping England. Workhouses were not designed for Famine conditions. By 1845, 123 workhouses had been constructed, one per district or Poor Law Union. The cost of poor relief was met by the payment of rates (a tax) by owners and occupiers of land and property in that district. Each Poor law union was overseen by a Board of Guardians which consisted of elected members, magistrates and justices of the peace. Conditions of entry into the workhouse were very strict and entry was seen as the last resort of a destitute person (Reed, 2019. https://www.theirishpotatofamine.com/).

the bleeding of cattle was widely practised and the tails of bullocks were also stolen and then roasted (Póirtéir, 1995:59). The theft of ducks, geese, sheep and other livestock was also initially commonplace until farmers employed men to guard their fields. The search for alternative foods became increasingly difficult and desperate: birds, frogs, rats, dogs, cats, snails, nettles, weeds, seaweed and even ice and grass were eaten (Kinealy, 1997:81). Póirtéir notes that the eating of grass contributed to the "folk memory of people dying with their mouths stained green" (1995:85-99). Dualta makes reference to foraging along the shoreline but in reality this did not prove as viable as one would think. Christine Kinealy points out that people combed the shores for shellfish or seaweed to eat but neither of these items provided a substantial diet and some people became sick from eating shellfish which had not been properly treated or cooked. She also notes that fishing was not adequately exploited as a source of food. The most potentially rewarding was deep sea fishing but "fishing tackle had been pawned to pay the rent in the previous year of shortages" and what they still had was in a primitive state" (1997:82). Quakers who visited the west of Ireland at the time noted:

> *So rude is their tackle and so fragile and liable to be upset are their primitive boats or coracles, made of wickerwork over which sail cloth is stretched, that they can only venture to sea in fine weather, and thus, with food almost in sight, the people starve (Report of the Society of Friends on Distress in Ireland, National Library of Ireland cited in Kinealy, p.82).*

This would be one more paradox of the Irish Famine.

Dualta makes his way to the house of Carrol O'Connor's daughter Sheila and her husband Tom to deliver one of the remaining sacks of grain. Despite showing all the signs of malnutrition they inform Dualta that they can still make it to Galway to get a ship to America. Dualta has not given up hope for the future and tries to talk them out of it. "Things will change. They won't change if everybody goes away...Just hold out until next year" (SP, 271). They ignore his advice. Emigration was to become one of the most important strategies for survival for those who had the energy or resources to leave the country (Kinealy, 1997:118). In fact, to remain was certain death for many. The autumn of 1845 was the start of a mass exodus that Woodham-Smith suggests was one of the most significant events of the Famine (1962:206). It was the Famine emigrants fleeing Ireland "with hatred in their hearts for the British and the British government" who built up communities, above all in the United States, where the name of Britain was "accursed" and whose descendants continued to be "Britain's powerful and bitter enemies" (Ibid, 118). It is estimated that anywhere upwards of a million Irish crossed the Atlantic to the US, and an even larger number crossed the Irish Sea to Britain (Ibid).

Dualta continues on to the house of the Mogue's. He knocks but there is no reply. He turns and goes to a house where smoke is coming from the chimney. "Where are the Mogues?" he enquires. "Go away," calls a woman from within. "We have the fever" (SP, 271). Macken intentionally brings to light the issue of fever and disease which seemed to go hand-in-hand with malnutrition. Indeed, Mokyr and Ó Grada remind us that most famine victims did not die of literal starvation, but rather of infectious diseases. The diseases themselves varied in type and intensity but were, for the most part, deadly for the malnourished. Basically, the victims succumb to "nutritionally sensitive diseases brought on by impaired immunity, or to poisoning from inferior foods that would have been discarded in normal time" (2002:339-340). Mokyr and Ó Grada refer to evidence that famished people ate decomposing carrion as well as nettles, carrageen moss, and corn-weed noting that such substances could "mercilessly attack the digestive system and cause a variety of diseases which would become fatal in conjunction with the weakened immune systems" (341). Helene O'Keeffe adds that such famine-related diseases thrived due to the unsanitary and cramped living conditions of the poor. 'Famine fever' was carried by lice and spread through close contact. Temporary fever hospitals were erected but many who were turned away returned to their 'gloomy, ill-ventilated, over-crowded abodes to disseminate contagion once again in their districts (Freeman's Journal, 20 May 1847 cited in O'Keeffe, 2021). Others took to the roads in search of relief ensuring that the lice found new hosts at soup kitchens, public works and in the country's prisons and workhouses (O'Keeffe, 2021). Dualta eventually gains entry to the Mogue's house only to find all four of them dead, "faces yellow and purple" reminding him of his experiences of famine in his youth - "fever, dysentery, scurvy, Irish ague or 'bloody flux' with all its symptoms and its smells and its appalling terror" (SP, 272).

Ignoring the risk of contagion, Dualta carries the bodies of the Mogue's outside and lays them side by side. He manages to source cheap coffins and Father Finucane gets graves dug. In the dead of night, Dualta drives the funeral cart and the priest walks in front saying prayers saying prayers from his book....It wasn't an Irish funeral (SP, 273). It turns out to be one of the last funerals that Dualta is to partake in. The inability to bury the dead is to be a defining feature of the Famine. A.M. Sullivan notes that "the first remarkable sign of the havoc which death was making was the decline and disappearance of funerals" (1878:92). For Macken, this is one of the most dehumanising characteristics of these years. As time passed and the hunger took hold "neither coffin nor shroud could be supplied" (Sullivan, 1872:92). Sullivan recalls his experiences of the winter of 'Black 47':

In our district it was a common occurrence to find on opening the front door in early morning, leaning against it, the corpse of some victim who in the night-time had ''rested'' in its shelter. We raised a public subscription, and employed two men with horse and cart to go round each day and gather up the dead. One by one they were taken to a great pit at Ardnabrahair Abbey, and dropped through the hinged bottom of a ''trap-coffin'' into a common grave below. In the remoter rural districts even this rude sepulture was impossible. In the field and by the ditch-side the victims lay as they fell, till some charitable hand was found to cover them with the adjacent soil...To come within the reach of this contagion was certain death... Whole families perished unvisited and unassisted (Sullivan, 1878:92-93).

In Ulysses, James Joyce refers to the "starvation, paralysis, homelessness, and the desecration of the dead by dogs and rats" but it is the inability to bury the dead that remains his most haunting image of the Famine" (Ulin, 2011:29-30). Julieann Ulin notes that the trauma of being unable to mourn properly or to bury the dead surfaces repeatedly in musings by Simon and Stephen Dedalus. "The Famine dead refuse to be buried, and remain 'famished ghosts' alongside the textual specters of Rudy and Paddy Dignam, casting a dark shadow over Bloom's musings on metempsychosis" (Ulin, 2011:29-30).

9.2 Failings of Government and Landlords

Dualta continues to work his plot of land. "He felt that if the ground was turned up to the frost, and not left until the spring, the blight in the earth would be turned away." He goes on to admit however that "no man knew where it came from" (SP, 274). Inevitably it was to return with a vengeance in 1846. Father Finucane comes to see Dualta fearful that the unfolding situation will result in catastrophe. "We are at the end of our own resources" he declares. "If we do not get help then we will all die" (SP, 278). He is clearly concerned with the lack of a coordinated government response. Oliver MacDonagh notes that the "ordinary people in a parish usually regarded their priest as their shield against extraordinary injustice" (MacDonagh, 1947:288) and Walter Macken portrays Father Finucane as fulfilling this role to the very last. He has sold all that he has in support of his people and he now takes to writing letters to "the papers, to the Grand Jury, to the magistrates, to the landlords" (SP, 278). His efforts fall on deaf ears. "There is a relief Committee," he comments, "but no priests are allowed on it, so how is the true tale to be told?" Established in November 1845, this Relief Committee, dubbed the 'Starvation Commission' by political opponents was one of the main components of British Prime-Minister Peel's administration's official response to the failure of the potato crop (O'Keeffe, 2020). It would act as a supplement to the Poor Relief Act of 1838 and its primary goals were to advise the government as to the extent of potato loss and distress around the country, oversee the storage and

distribution of Indian corn and meal and direct, support and co-ordinate the activities of local relief committees (https://www.nationalarchives.ie/topics/famine/relief.html). Macken is critical of all aspects of the functioning of this committee. First and foremost, without the input of the clergy, he questions how the real situation in Ireland can be ascertained. Fr. Finucane speaks of a newspaper report which alludes to British Government members' misrepresentation of the Irish and the crisis they face:

> *In the Government, they speak of us. One fellow says that the famine is not as bad as the Irish members make it out to be, that they are shamelessly exaggerating for low political purposes. Here is what a royal duke says: "I understand that rotten potatoes and seaweed and even grass, properly mixed, afford a very wholesome food. We all know Irishmen can live on anything and there is plenty of grass in the fields even if the potato crop should fail (SP, 277).*

Even Sir Robert Peel in a letter to Home Secretary Sir James Graham stated that there was always a tendency to exaggeration in Irish news, despite having previously declared that he found the early accounts of crop failure 'very alarming' (Woodham-Smith, 1962:42). Fr. Finucane is also sceptical of the Government's intentions to provide food relief in the form of cornmeal shipments. "They cannot sell the meal until all local supplies are used up," he tells Dualta. "Then it must be sold at the price prevailing in the district" (SP, 277). Macken is clearly making reference to the laissez faire economic policy that was promoted in Ireland by Whig and Tory alike as well as to a shipment of Indian cornmeal bought secretly by Peel from North America for £100,000. The policy of laissez faire meant that individuals were allowed to pursue their own economic interests with little or no interference from Government (Woodham-Smith, 54). Woodham-Smith points out that the flaw in Peel's plan was the underdeveloped state of the food and provision trade in a large part of Ireland. Most people rarely bought food at all as they grew and lived off potatoes. Shops and places of retail only existed in larger towns meaning that where relief was needed most "the means by which it was to be supplied seldom existed" (1962:55). The first shipments of the Indian corn arrived in Cork in early 1846 but, in order to control food prices, it would be stored in large depots until 'the hungry months' of May and June. Increasing levels of hunger in the spring, however, forced the authorities to open the first depots at Cork, Clonmel and Longford as early as March (O'Keeffe, 2020). By the time it reached Galway it would be, as Fr Finucane points out, subject to the price of the market – invariably prohibitive for all but the wealthiest of peasants. "Where will the people get three shillings for a stone of meal?" he asks in exasperation.

Despite the apparent inadequacy of Peel's plan, Woodham-Smith argues that in its essence it was "far-seeing and ingenious" in that he intended to use the Indian corn "as weapon to bring prices down" as it would not interfere directly with private enterprise given that no trade in Indian corn had ever existed (WS, 55). She goes on to explain that the possibility that a situation would arise in which "no food of any kind was offered, at prices extortionate or otherwise, and that the government's Indian corn would become the only food available was not foreseen, even by Peel" (WS, 55). Maybe it is for this reason that Macken seems to stop short of condemning Peel's government outright for the initial shortcomings of relief. "They don't seem to care," utters Father Finucane but in the next breath he acknowledges that "governments move slow" (SP, 276). Macken's apparent non-condemning stance does not involve an exoneration of the actions of those in a position to affect meaningful measures of relief especially as the Famine worsened. In fact Macken explicitly echoes the sentiment of *The Freeman's Journal* of 4 November 1845 which heavily criticised the seeming inertia of the government in the face of the impending crisis (O'Keeffe, 2020). Indeed Peel's package of traditional short-term relief measures, which had all the hallmarks of a strategy based on a belief that this would be no different to previous temporary food shortages, was inadequate (Ibid). "If you own any land, you are not supposed to be poor," exclaimed Fr. Finucane, suggesting that relief was only necessary and available to those who were actually destitute (SP, 277). And such relief was clearly inadequate:

> *The poorhouses are crowded. They are dying like flies there. You cannot get into the poorhouse if you are a tenant of the land." The Board of Works are setting up task jobs. When will they be here? 'Soon, soon, they say.' (SP, 277).*

This is a clear reference to the aforementioned Famine Relief Committee and Poor Law of 1938. Woodham-Smith argues that the Poor Law had been passed not so much to mitigate the suffering of the Irish poor as to prevent them from coming over into England. Kinealy notes that the Poor Law reflected the long held belief that poverty in Ireland was the fault of the individual and therefore should not be treated too sympathetically (1997:46). This idea is furthered by Helene O'Keeffe who suggests that "policy makers believed that Irish poverty derived from the innate moral failings in the Irish character and that any new relief mechanism should contribute to social improvement and encourage self-reliance" (O'Keeffe, 2021). This led the British government to come to the decision that "the property of Ireland must support the poverty of Ireland, and a menace to England must be removed" (Woodham-Smith, 1962:37). As a result, the British government began to put some blame on landlords for the economic backwardness of the country indicating that they should take more responsibility for the

consequences of Ireland's underdevelopment (O'Neill, 1971:133 and Kinealy, 1997:47). The Poor Law of 1838 which thus came into existence was limited in nature; Ireland was to be divided into Poor Law Unions, in which the destitute would receive poor relief in the form of entry to a workhouse (of which there were 130 spread around the country) or outdoor work relief, and it was to be funded locally which meant the introduction of a system of local taxation. This measure angered local landlords and appeared to make them less willing to contribute privately to relief (Kinealy, 1997:47). Additionally, "the government refused to allow its relief administration or the workhouses to be used to provide extraordinary relief, on the grounds that they wished to keep the permanent (and limited) system of poor relief separate from any measures needed to help short-term distress (Ibid). Christine Kinealy argues that the new Poor Law was the "legislative embodiment of an ideological hardening of attitudes towards poverty." She notes also that the intellectual context of relief had also changed as the ideas of economists Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus and others helped "to shape the philosophy of political economy, with its preference for little and cheap government" (1997:48).

Macken makes reference to the inadequacy of Peels's package of relief measures following the initial crop failures which clearly reflected such conservative thinking. Peel rejected demands from Ireland for an embargo to be placed on exports, ports to be closed and distillation to be stopped, measures which had proved successful in previous years of crop failure. He also rejected a proposal from the Mansion House Relief Committee that a tax be placed on absentee landlords. Instead, Peel opted for a strategy that combined short-term, temporary relief (which included the aforementioned import of Indian corn) with the longer-term goal of repealing the Corn Laws (Kinealy, 1997:60). O'Keeffe argues that he seized the opportunity to use, what he perceived to be, a temporary food crisis as the catalyst for permanently repealing the Corn Laws. He based this on the premise that the crisis in Ireland was the result of a paucity of cheap grain rather than the more immediate failure of the potato harvest" (2020). Noteworthy too was the unusual step to give the treasury a key role in overseeing the distribution and expenditure of relief funds in order to keep a tight rein on budgeting (Kinealy, 1997:60). It is within this spirit of 'providing limited relief at minimal cost to a people supposedly responsible for their own predicament' that Charles Trevelyan, assistant secretary to HM Treasury, came to prominence. Detrimentally for the starving millions, his policies were resolutely grounded in a determination to limit the levels of state intervention and, as he informed Sir Randolph Routh, the Chief Commissioner of the Relief Commission, in January 1846:

The landlords and other ratepayers are the parties who are both legally and morally answerable for affording due relief to the destitute poor The efforts of those persons are to be stimulated, directed and supported, but not, if it can possibly be avoided, to be superseded by the direct agency of the offices of the Government cited in (Kinealy, 1990:158)

Such was Trevelyan's belief in minimal intervention that he actually proved a hindrance to many on-going relief initiatives around the country lest they impinge in any way on the finances of the treasury. During the spring and summer of 1846, a significant number of committees for raising relief funds were formed. These procured almost £100,000 in donations to which the Lord Lieutenant to Ireland added a further £65,914. There was however a concerted attempt by the central Commission and the Treasury (headed by Trevelyan) to hinder the committees' ability to administer this relief - a seemingly deliberate tactic to limit demands on the resources of the treasury. There was limited objection to Trevelyan's actions given that he was actively removing all those people who opposed him (Kinealy, 1997:62). There were many such instances of intentional interference in relief efforts. In 1831, a Board of Works had been set up in Dublin for public works which assumed responsibility for the provision of relief works in the wake of the crop failures of 1845. These works were also seen as a good way of encouraging Irish landlords to make improvements to their estates and were encouraged by the government through a system of 'half-grants' and loans. Once again Trevelyan sabotaged the initiative by "insisting that the grant system be made less accessible to landlords, on the grounds that they were using 'the pretext of scarcity' for their own benefit (Kinealy, 1997:63). Eventually, all expenditure came to require sanction by the Trevelyan controlled Treasury: monies to be spent on famine relief, expenses of the Relief Commission, grants for Poor Law, public works and medical services (Woodham-Smith, 1962:58).

Months pass and the situation turns increasingly desperate for Dualta and Una. The new crop is still a long way off but sustenance of any source is now very scarce. Woodham-Smith notes that it was not until five or six months after a crop failure that real famine began, "after every scrap of food, every partially diseased potato, every fragment that was conceivably edible by human beings, had disappeared" (1962:61). Sir John Graham, the Home Secretary had warned Peel back in October, 1845 that the extreme pressure from want would not take place until the month of April or May (Cited in Woodham-Smith, 62). Dualta and Una have now reached that point and to make matters worse they are not entitled to any of the limited relief that is available.

The Poor Relief Act was in force but not for people like Dualta. Owing to a fellow named Gregory, may his name be blessed, there was what men called an exterminating act in the clause (SP, 298).

Macken is referring to the 'Gregory clause' to the Poor Law Bill that became law at the height of the Famine. It essentially meant that starving families on holdings of a quarter-acre or more would not receive relief, or be admitted to a workhouse, unless they abandoned the tenancy (Burke, 2020). The first Famine historian, Canon John O'Rourke described it in 1874 as "the never-to-be-forgotten quarter-acre Gregory clause," and said that "a more complete engine for the slaughter and expatriation of a people was never designed" (cited in Burke, April, 2020). Famine historian John Kelly maintains that "Mr Gregory's name entered Irish history as a curse" (Ibid). Despite this clause, Dualta and Colman later manage to gain access to outdoor work relief which allows them to survive the end of the winter. The engineer responsible "was expected to ask how much land they owned, what was their rateable valuation; were they in receipt of meal under the Poor Relief Act? Many questions...but he just asked their names and gave them tickets" (SP, 311). It seems to be Macken's intention to show that relief initiatives lacked organisation, were ineffective and were open to abuse. The two find themselves building a road which "seemed to be starting nowhere and going nowhere" in return for the sum of" ten pence a day, if they could supply their own implements" (SP, 311). Macken also makes reference to the expensive bureaucracy which permeated every part of the system and which drained funds from where it was most needed.

> *There were many men in charge of the work, gaffers and gaugers and clerks. These were ex-policemen or men appointed by the bailiffs or the javelin men...Dualta thought the staff was top-heavy, but this was to be understood in all government work. It was patronage. It was all right. It was part of life. They were well paid, these men... He hated the pay clerk. He was a short white-faced man with a pinched mouth who came with the money tied on his horse. Sometimes he didn't come with the money. There was a shortage of coins, or the order hadn't come through, This happened two or three times. One time they waited three weeks for their wages. (SP, 311-12).*

While Macken is not overtly critical of The Board of Works, which incidentally is a subordinate board to the Treasury under the direct orders of Charles Trevelyan (Woodham-Smith, 1962:79), his reference to the surplus of over-paid administrators and the corrupt clerks who abused their positions to the detriment of the labourers such as Dualta and Colman clearly suggests that he recognises the role that these people played in the suffering of their fellow countrymen and women. In fact, Macken seems intent on identifying all those that played a part in exacerbating this suffering. Few escape scrutiny. Even Éamon the shopkeeper is highlighted for refusing to give any more credit. "Things are very bad with us", he complains to Dualta: 'And if they start giving out free Indian meal, where will we be? Don't

we have to live too as well as the poor... We are up to our ears in debt. Everyone wants credit. We have to pay for the things we buy' (294-95). Indeed, life was difficult for all but Macken makes his point.

Given the unfolding calamity Father Finucane implores Dualta to seek out O'Connell and plead with him to take action. "O'Connell would listen to you...you must go to see him," he urges. "Before the new crop of potatoes comes in next July...most of us will be dead," he tells Dualta. "There is no help for us. The Bradishes have locked up and fled. Clarke has pulled into the big house. You cannot approach them" (SP, 277-278). Macken is adamant that the landlords must shoulder some of the blame for the plight of the peasants in the face of such devastating crop failure although, once again, he stops short of outright condemnation. He acknowledges that many like the Bradishes were "hopelessly insolvent" and were powerless to help despite the desperation of their tenantry (Woodham-Smith, 1962:63). Indeed, "the extravagance of their predecessors, the building of over-large mansions, reckless expenditure on horses, hounds and conviviality, followed by equally reckless borrowing" had led many to financial ruin (Ibid). There were others who had simply neglected the management of their estates for extended periods allowing them to "be parcelled out by their immediate lessees among many smallholders" or failing to prevent them from becoming "the haven and home of large numbers of squatter tenants" (T.P. O'Neill, 1961:162). Macken fails to indicate which of these groups the Bradishes belong to but what is clear is that they found themselves faced with such insurmountable problems that they chose to flee leaving their tenants to starve. Clarke on the other hand stays and rent is still due to him. Having sold everything in his possession to pay the exorbitant price demanded for seed potatoes to plant in the approaching spring, Dualta finds himself short come gale day. He begs for some time to pay what is due:

> '*No,' said Clarke. I cannot let it hang. Do you know the state we are in? How many have not paid their rents? Where do we find money to keep going ourselves? Free meal. Who pays for it? We do. The Poor Relief is only loans. For us it is poor rates and cess and tax. Where are we to find it? Aren't half the people of Ireland eating off the poor rates? Where are they coming from? Who is paying for the poorhouses and the infirmaries and the extra doctors?' (304).*

Clarke is stating categorically that the burden of famine relief placed on landlords with the introduction of the Poor Law Amendment Act is unfair and will eventually lead to their insolvency. Christine Kinealy maintains that a "disproportionate burden of taxation" had indeed fallen on landlords "especially those whose estates were greatly subdivided" (2006:348). T.P O'Neill adds that many estates had been over-run by a large population of starving people and the poor law decreed that the poor rates levied on the

estate should support them. O'Neill goes on to claim however that these land owners then set about "clearing their estates with a ruthlessness which is as discreditable as any in history" (1961:162). Macken seeks to show this heartless side of the landlord class. While he recognises the implications of Trevelyan's policies for Clarke, he still portrays the ruthless stance Clarke takes with tenants in arrears. Dualta recalls that there were notices everywhere. "If the rents on the estate were not paid, drastic action would be taken" (SP, 304). Woodham-Smith notes that throughout the winter and early spring months evictions were increasing weekly. With the failure to pay rents "a swarming population was likely to become unprofitable" meaning that landlords were intent on clearing their properties of non-paying tenants (1962:71). T.P. O'Neill points out that large-scale clearances took place in many parts of the country. Toomevara in Tipperary, Kilrush in Clare, the Strokestown estate of Major Mahon in Roscominon were among the most notorious (1961:162). Dudley Edwards notes that the provisions of the Poor Law actually encouraged a clearance policy on estates subdivided between pauperised tenants. "Landlords were directly responsible for the full rate on occupied properties with a valuation of less than £4, so that they had a direct financial interest in ejecting tenants from the small marginal holdings" (1994:177-178). With most tenants struggling to pay their rents it is easy to understand why evictions continued unabated and at an alarming rate.

Macken's portrayal of an increasingly unfeeling Clarke would seem to be an accurate representation of the changing nature of landlord-tenant relations as the famine worsened. The death of Fiacra McCleary from typhus allows Clarke to terminate the lease on his holding and evict his family. Following the eviction, he looks at the vacant dwelling. "It was a good sound place. It was worth four times what the McCleary's had been paying for it. It was too good for them, he thought" (SP, 327). Clarke considers his day's work:

> *Sir Vincent (Tewson) will be pleased with me, he thought. Bit by bit I am improving his property, making it successful. He thought of the uneconomic holdings that had been taken over, the filthy cabins destroyed. The famine had been a help. You had to admit it was a calamity but...it was the best thing that ever happened to the country to get them off the bits and pieces of land...there was a certain hardship involved admittedly, but it was all for the eventual good...why would the good God have permitted it all to happen like this, if it wasn't meant to be? You couldn't be sentimental. There was too much sentiment...The fittest would have to survive. When it was all over, it would be a tranquil country. It would have been cleansed of the parasites (SP, 327-328).*

Macken is alluding to the belief among a number of political economists at the time that Phytophthora Infestans was some sort of blessing, or at the very least a necessary evil, sent to reduce the population of a people fully deserving of their miserable existence. In 1798 Thomas Robert Malthus had predicted that "short-term gains in living standards would inevitably be undermined as human population growth outstripped food production, and thereby drive living standards back toward subsistence" (Sachs, 2008). Not only did this prophecy come to pass but it was exacerbated by crop failure to such an extent that Roy Foster came to describe the Famine as a 'Malthusian apocalypse' (1988:318). Indeed, those same political economists who heralded the outbreak of famine subsequently argued for less government intervention and more free trade despite the mass mortality (Kinealy, 1997:4).

Clarke's mention of a "good God" might also be Macken's reference to the words of Trevelyan who, when writing his own account of famine relief in his 1848 book *The Irish Crisis*, described the unfolding catastrophe as a "a direct stroke of an all-wise and all-merciful Providence" (1848:201) on an a lazy and undeserving people, a people who liked to "make a poor mouth...to conceal their advantages, exaggerate their difficulties, and relax their exertions" (1848:184). There is a real sense in his words that the people must atone for their short-comings. In fact, he once famously claimed that "the real evil with which we have to contend is not the physical evil of the Famine, but the moral evil of the selfish, perverse and turbulent character of the people" (cited in O'Keeffe, 2013:145). The famine, he declared in *The Irish Crisis,* was "the sharp but effectual remedy" for such transgressions (1848:201). As early as 1846 when the Famine was still in its infancy, he had stated in a letter to the Times, that if the potato famine in Ireland "were to continue five years longer, it would prove a greater blessing to the country than any that has ever been devised by parliamentary commissions from the Union to the present time".

Macken embarks on his journey to seek out O'Connell. He finally reaches the house of the ageing and now visibly frail political activist and member of the British parliament. "Dualta was shocked as the pale almost yellow face turned to him ...before he went to jail he hadn't looked like this.' They talk about the deteriorating situation in the country. "I do what I can. I am emptying my granaries," says O'Connell. Macken is reminding us that O'Connell is a landlord as well as an elected representative. While Macken seeks to represent the role of the landlord class accurately, it can be argued that notwithstanding this brief acknowledgement of O'Connell's efforts for his tenants, he fails to fully recognise the great number who did their utmost to help those on their estates and who ran grave risks of infection among the sick around their demesnes and gave generously of their money and time in the

provision of relief (O'Neill, 1961:162). Even though a large number of responsible landlords were unable or unwilling to subscribe money to be spent by committees in which they had no confidence, "many did what they themselves considered necessary for their tenants" (Woodham-Smith, 1962:69). Dualta pleads with O'Connell to use his influence in London. 'All for Repeal,' O'Connell replies. 'If we had a parliament in Dublin, they would not let an ounce of food leave the country'. 'I will make them see,' he insists. But to Dualta's eyes 'this great man, this O'Connell had what the people called the smell of earth about him. He was due for death. The very vague hope in Dualta's heart withered away' (SP. 284-285). Inevitably, O'Connell's efforts were to prove fruitless and Cuan later gives a stark reminder of this fact. Indeed, even when on his deathbed with fever he contends that O'Connell must shoulder responsibility for the unfolding disaster:

> *'About him, O'Connell,' said Cuan. 'Spoke the wrong things. He should have called them out. Clontarf. Before. Millions to fight with their bare hands. They would have done so. He held them. He had the power. Now you see. They could not have killed millions. Clean death and victory. Not like this, the way. By the roadside. In the ditches. Smelly stinking death. What came of peace? This. All this came of peace. Turning away wrath.'(SP, 329)*

Dualta does not reply, nor does he reflect further on the matter. While Macken clearly does not subscribe to such a point, what is noteworthy is that he does not shy away from acknowledging the roles played by O'Connell, and indeed other Irish leaders, in failing to prevent the Irish Famine.

Leading on from this, we can say that Macken's political stance in *The Silent People* is not immediately obvious. His novel spans almost forty years and is set within the context of the Act of Union indicating that he sees the Famine not as an event in itself but rather as part of something much more profound and deep-seated. Cynthia Smith refers to the view that all the "wretchedness and misery" associated with the famine can, without exception, be traced to a "single source - the system under which land had come to be occupied and owned in Ireland, a system produced by centuries of successive conquests, rebellions, confiscations, and punitive legislation" (1993:469-470). This takes us back to Heaney's idea of an 'unsolicited and unwanted act' whereby the male oppressor towers over the weaker female Ireland. Macken would seem to endorse such a view that the story of Ireland is a story of Ireland's struggle against British domination and in this he is distinctly nationalist. On the other hand, he does not point the finger exclusively at any one group. Yes, he refers to the part played by the British government but, as noted previously, he also acknowledges the roles played by landlords, merchants, local shopkeepers, public opinion, the press, the Catholic Church, the failures of O'Connell

and even the more radical Irish nationalists. Interestingly, Christine Kinealy points out that, as more research is carried out on these groups, a more textured and nuanced view of the Famine is emerging. She also notes that a number of core questions (and possibly answers) remain (Kinealy, 1997:6). Perhaps we can say the same of Macken. Yes, he leaves some questions unanswered but he also raises many key and often side-stepped issues and he unashamedly views controversy from many sides. Indeed, Heaney had emphasised the importance of revisiting, of going back to a story that is never fully written. Looked at in this way, *The Silent People* is decidedly less nationalist than it first appears. It is beyond the scope of this project to evaluate historiographical leanings and Macken himself never labelled his position with regard to the Famine but we can argue that he inadvertently produced a novel with many of the hallmarks of that emerging post-revisionist narrative as identified by Kinealy.

9.3 The Silent People

> *While Dualta rode the long road home, he was impressed by the great silence. No dogs barked. People did not eat their dogs. They drowned them. They had to do this, because in their hunger the dogs became vicious, or they started to eat unburied corpses (SP, 286).*

The spring of 1846 was particularly difficult as a "wave of hopelessness swept over the Irish people" (Woodham-Smith, 70). It was now six months since the blight had struck and those that had survived the winter were now eating "anything that could conceivably be devoured, food that stank, diseased potatoes...which no Englishman would give his hogs" (Lord Monteagle, 1846 cited in Woodham-Smith, 70). Such was the fear of disease and fever that the land was strewn with decaying bodies. Desperation changes people. Dualta admits that even the "sorrow has gone out of death...that it can become so commonplace that you cannot share in the sadness of your friends.... I look at Carrol and my heart is cold. I think of Bercan, and I do not cry. Isn't that a terrible thing to happen to us?" (SP. 293).

Dualta and Una survive the winter and the particularly long spring. The new crop is in the ground and the signs are good:

> *No plant in the world was watched with greater care or got more attention than the potato plant of this year. Each separate plant was moulded and re-moulded with devotion, its colour commented on. They were all of a good colour (SP, 310).*

The heat of the early summer months of 1846 meant that initial trepidation had turned to anticipation and hope. "Soon now, the plants would be in flower and their troubles would be at an end" (SP, 310).

The new crop would bring an end to hunger and the scourge of disease. "When bellies were full the fever would lose its force and die away...And the sturdier stalks grew and the greener was their colour, the lighter the hearts of the people became" (SP, 310).

Dualta and Colman set off for work. It is a particularly wet day. As they make their way along that road "going to nowhere" their thoughts are suddenly interrupted:

> *Even above the whistling of the wind they heard a cry on the other side of the mountain. They looked, wiping the rain from their faces, and there was a man standing in a field with his arms to the sky looking like a figure dressed to scare the crows. And he was crying...the strong stalks and the broad leaves were lying like brown muck on the grass, and the same smell was with them that had been there last year (SP, 314-315).*

Dualta runs back to his own fields behind his small house. "It couldn't be true. Not now! After all the sacrifice! After all the pain! After all the beggary! Not again!" But it was true. "They were blighted to death. Every single stalk" (SP, 315). The anticipation of those warm July evenings was replaced by the horror of the "blackened fields and torrential rain" of August (Woodham-Smith, 1962:93). Galway parish priest Fr. Theobald Mathew recounts that fateful day:

> *On the 27th of last month (July), I passed from Cork to Dublin, and this doomed plant bloomed in all the luxuriance of an abundant harvest. Returning on the 3rd August, I beheld with sorrow one wide waste of putrefying vegetation. In many places the wretched people were seated on the fences of their decaying gardens, wringing their hands and wailing bitterly at the destruction that had left them (Fr. Theobald Mathew, 1846, cited in Adelman and Pearse, 2005).*

"There was a silent wail that went up from the valley that would have drowned the highest wind, if men had the strength to shout it" (SP, 315). Phytophthora infestans had returned and this time in in an even more virulent form. The crop failures in 1845 had been localised but in 1846 it was reported to have affected the potato crop in every part of Ireland (Kinealy, 1990:159). *The Times* of September 2, 1846, spoke of 'total annihilation' (cited in Woodham-Smith, 1962:93). Woodham-Smith notes that the crop failure was such that nothing at all was even remotely edible:

> *The once fine-looking tubers had become a stinking mass of corruption...All specifics, all nostrums were useless. Whether ventilated, dessicated, salted, or gassed, the potatoes melted into a slimy, decaying mass; and pits (1962:44,47).*

Seamus Heaney makes direct reference to Woodham-Smith's imagery in his poem *At a Potato Digging (noted in O'Grady, 1990:49)*:

Stinking potatoes fouled the land,
pits turned pus into filthy mounds:
and where potato diggers are
you still smell the running sore.

The general situation was much worse than it had been the year before. "Every rag had been pawned to buy food, every edible scrap had gone" (Woodham-Smith, 92). "How could you live until another harvest a year away when you had expended everything you possessed for this one?" Dualta asks (SP, 316). The national press confirmed the despair of the nation and alluded to what was to come:

On this very day a cry of Famine, wilder and more fearful than ever, is rising from every parish and county in the land. Where the new crop ought to be, there is a loathsome mass of putrefaction: the sole food on which millions of men, women and children are to be fed is stricken by a deadly blight before their eyes; and probably within one month those millions will be hungry and have nothing to eat. Last year government had to bethink themselves how to provide against a very general deficiency; this year they will have to consider how a starving nation is to be fed (Eyewitness accounts in The Nation, 15 August 1846 as cited in The Irish Times article – 'Disaster looms as relief' by Brendan O'Cathaoir, Sat, Aug 17, 1996).

Dualta is overcome first with grief and then with anger. "Wasn't one year enough? Were there not enough of us eliminated from the face of the earth like muck scraped off with a shovel?" (SP, 315). When he sees the pay clerk waiting for them at the end of their day's work, he is suddenly reminded that their predicament is to get worse. "They were to be paid off. The task-work was over. The harvest was in. It was ready to be garnered. That was the law" (315). Macken is referring to Trevelyan's plan to close the Board of Works which he had deemed a failure (Woodham-Smith, 1962:90). In fact, government policy was to add considerably to the hardship. Christine Kinealy points out that the perceived successes of Peel's government in dealing with the food shortages in the first year had inadvertently raised "false expectations" about how far government was prepared to intervene to combat food scarcities in the autumn of 1846. She also notes that the situation was further exacerbated owing to general food shortages across Europe (1997:66). At the same time, the Peel's Tory government had been replaced by a "Whig administration dominated by political economists and free traders". While this government was at first welcomed by many Irish MPs, this was short-lived. The

government's decision not to intervene in the import or export of food from Ireland was to prove detrimental to the starving millions. As a consequence, huge amounts of food were exported from Ireland to feed the population of Britain. In fact in the winter of 1846–47, food exports actually exceeded food imports to Ireland, resulting in a 'starvation gap' in supplies (1997:66). Again, this was to become one of the great ironies of the Famine.

It can be argued that 1845 was a mere precursor to what was to come. The Great Hunger took on a new dimension in the autumn of 1846. Thomas Power O'Connor, who was to greatly influence James Joyce in his representation of the Famine in Ulysses and other works, describes a scene from the South of Ireland in 1846 (Ulin, 2011:28-29):

> *A terrible apathy hangs over the poor of Skibbereen; starvation has destroyed every generous sympathy; despair has made them hardened and insensible, and they sullenly await their doom with indifference and without fear. Death is in every hovel; disease and famine, its dread precursors, have fastened on the young and the old, the strong and the feeble, the mother and the infant; whole families lie together on the damp floor devoured by fever . . . the same rag covers the festering remains of mortality and the skeleton forms of the living, who are unconscious of the horrible continuity; rats devour the corpse, and there is no energy among the living to scare them from their horrid banquet. (O'Connor 1889:38 cited in Ulin, 2011:28-29).*

Scenes like this were to be commonplace all over Ireland for the following six years. In reality, the Famine had only just begun. Dualta and Una consider their options and decide to pawn every remaining possession for tickets for the 'coffin ship' to America. Eventually however they give the tickets to Colman and Finola opting to return to Galway instead to take their chances. Macken does not tell us what happens to Dualta and Una after 1846.

9.4 Where Hope and History Meet

Human beings suffer
They torture one another,
They get hurt and get hard.
No poem or play or song
Can fully right a wrong
Inflicted and endured.

History says, Don't hope
On this side of the grave...
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,

And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
And cures and healing wells.

That means someone is hearing
The outcry and the birth-cry
Of new life at its term.
It means once in a lifetime
That justice can rise up
And hope and history rhyme. *(Excerpts from The Cure at Troy by Seamus Heaney, 1991)*

It was never Macken's intention to give closure to his story just as it was never his intention to represent the Famine in its totality. This is not to say that his story or his representation of the Famine feel incomplete. Macken has allowed us to partake in the lives of those who are most often forgotten in history. We get to live their history in all its guises. Yes, the Famine's destructive path continues unabated bringing unimaginable suffering but we are still left with a perceptible sense of hope. Dualta and Una and many of those that they meet along the way show us that hope can triumph in those very situations that threaten its very existence. Macken lets us be witnesses to the stoic courage of the people. We get a sense of that unflappable spirit. Courage stays resolute to the last. Dualta and Una will not be subdued. Despite the shackles of the system, hope allows them to take their destiny into their own hands. They become architects of their own future.

Hope lies also in the belief that their testimony, the testimony of those with no voice, will live on. In Disappearing Island Heaney speaks of the need to protect and preserve that which defines us. Father Finucane echoes this sentiment. He speaks of the "ideas and thoughts" that Una helps to instil in her students that "one day would be fruitful." At first he fears that "all is gone, wiped out" before realising that "they [her students] will be fruit...Let there be one gleam of light in the midst of all this death and decay and hunger and pestilence" (SP, 308).

Flan McCarthy too fears the futility of his work. "Just words on paper. Visions and dreams, beyond the understanding of men" (SP, 331). But Dualta pleads with him:

'You must keep them and put them on paper... Someday they will be understood... You must give me some of the papers...I will learn them, I will teach them to the young ones who will carry them in their heads, and mingle them with their own dreams' (SP, 331).

Dualta recognises the importance of the written word in preserving that which defines them. This takes us back to Heaney's idea that poetry and literature must be born of commitment and courage to revisit and confront those ancestral ghosts so that others can conceive of that world. Macken assumes this mantle.

10. CONCLUSION

Walter Macken, actor, director, playwright and novelist, had a unique interest in Irish culture and Irish history and he had a unique literary vision - to write the history of his own people from the viewpoint of the little man, the common man (Peggy Macken, 1988). Macken set out to do this at a time when Irish scholarly research was going through something of a transition from overt nationalism to what is collectively referred to as a 'revisionist' interpretation of Irish history (Kinealy, 1997:2). At its core this reinterpretation of Irish history aimed at being "totally research-driven, objective and value-free" to explicitly contrast with the 'nationalist' interpretation, which it viewed as politically inspired or judgemental - the very antithesis of what the revisionists were trying to achieve (Boyce and O'Day, 1996). Christine Kinealy notes however that the concept of a value-free history," whilst noble in its intentions, is flawed in its execution" (1995:30). Revisionism "in its attempts to demythologise Irish history in the middle years of the nineteenth century, and its conscious debunking of nationalist myths, imbued Irish Famine revisionists with a particular set of alternative values, which coloured their judgement on the sources and material" (Kinealy, 1997:2). Macken thus found himself writing in the midst of this on-going conversation between a now frowned on nationalist rhetoric and a 'value-free' yet, according to Kinealy, inherently flawed revisionist rhetoric. Additionally, and despite the abundance of documentary evidence relating to the Famine years, historians have identified a definite historiographical silence from the 1930s to the 1970s (Ó Ciosáin, 1995:7-10). Whether Macken deliberately put pen to paper to address this silence or whether he was prompted by the on-going nationalist/revisionist debate is difficult to say, but he clearly set out to do something unique and something that would add a new perspective to Irish history, particularly the history surrounding the Irish Famine.

In her work *Literature and the Great Famine, 1845-1919*, Melissa Regan suggests that Macken may indeed have gained some inspiration from Woodham-Smith's work *The Great Hunger* (2002:30). While this would seem unlikely given that both books were published in the same year, it is highly coincidental and somewhat ironic that both works should appear simultaneously in the middle of such a literary silence. In her 2008 article "The Historian is a Haunted Man: Cecil Woodham-Smith and *The Great Hunger*", Christine Kinealy tells us that reading that book proved both "heartrending and enlightening" and she speaks of Woodham-Smith's "emotional engagement" with her subject matter. Historian Paul Bew refers to one of the major achievements of some of the emerging histories on the Famine (which could loosely fall under the umbrella of post-revisionism) which is that much greater emphasis is placed

on the perspective of the victims (1997:21). Woodham-Smith clearly puts these victims centre-stage in her work. Kinealy also goes on to say that "after only a few pages, it was obvious this book went against the prevailing orthodoxies about the Famine, which lay at the heart of the revisionist interpretations (2008:134). While it is beyond the scope of this project to critique revisionist and subsequent theories of the Famine, it is obvious that Woodham-Smith did not fully subscribe to emerging views relating to the role of population, the potato, the land system, endemic poverty, Anglo-Irish relations and the reaction of the authorities to the impending disaster. While Woodham-Smith's *The Great Hunger* is a historiographical account of the Famine years and Macken's Silent People is a work of fiction, they have obvious similarities with the most noteworthy being that they both seek to put the victims centre stage. Macken too is "emotionally engaged" with his subject matter and his story also deviates from the prevailing orthodoxies and emerging revisionist rhetoric about the famine and the surrounding years. Kinealy acknowledges that Woodham-Smith's book has its faults and limitations, although she goes on to suggest that some of these flaws have been exaggerated by those who regarded *The Great Hunger* as undermining the dominant revisionist interpretation which, since the 1930s, had sought to challenge and destroy the "myths" of Irish nationalism (1995:135). Macken's *Silent People* clearly has its own limitations, but much like Woodham-Smith's *Great Hunger* it has made its own indelible contribution to Irish History.

Despite their similarities, there is however a fundamental difference between the two works. As a historian Woodham-Smith is able to go places that Macken obviously can't but the opposite is also true. The historical documentation of events by its very nature presumes a scientific, quantitative approach and yes, key moments in history must, up to a certain point, be analysed in verifiable, empirical data. This is the case even in Woodham-Smith's more personal take on events. The fact that such a vision of events is limited to a distant overview - that aforementioned kaleidoscope of contour and detail, cannot be overlooked. Reminding ourselves of Eagleton's words – there is indeed something missing! Seamus Heaney was critical of a superficial and distant homage to the famine and its victims which recurs "mindlessly as autumn" (At a Potato Digging, 1966). Macken's *Silent People* allows us to close that distance – to get more intimately involved. It actively encourages the type of atavistic immersion in the events of pre-Famine and Famine Ireland that Heaney calls for.

The "foul rag and bone shop of the heart" is where story must begin. It is where Macken begins. Truth doesn't come from that multi-hued yet distanced and non-descript vision of the historian but rather it comes through the "old kettles, old bottles and that broken can" that Yeats refers to. There is

ordinariness to the human story that is not perceptible unless we actually open ourselves up to it. To fully appreciate the plight of a people one has to be drawn into their story. Macken's *Silent People* brings us beyond what is ostensibly verifiable, and it leads us to the rawness and brittleness of the human condition. It enables us to walk in those shadows, to walk with the people. Yeats suggests that great poetry comes out of the ugly, the ordinary and the downtrodden, and this is where the poet must return to find new inspiration (Tearle, 2019). This is clearly where Macken finds his inspiration.

So Macken puts a spotlight on the ordinary people and their struggle. He brings us into their homes and into the rawness of their existence and their poverty. These ordinary people could so easily have been forgotten, dismissed or overlooked but Macken makes it his mission to put them centre-stage, to preserve their stories. He allows them to live and breathe and to speak their own truth without commentary. For Macken, history and story are inextricably linked. In his account of the mystical voyage of St. Brendan in *Disappearing Island,* Heaney alludes to this primordial need to protect and preserve that which defines us as a people. John Banville refers to it as "an elemental, urge which springs, like the stream, from a desperate imperative to encode and preserve things that are buried in us deep beyond words" (2019:28). This idea is developed in *Bogland* where Heaney looks at literature in the context of the natural bogland of Ireland. The bog can hide remnants of an unknown past. In taking the skeleton of the Great Elk out of the peat, a remnant of an Ireland that Heaney knows nothing about, is being unearthed. Just like literature, the bog preserves bits of a distant and mysterious past. The bog itself is made up of layers of decomposed matter but yet it is capable of both concealing and preserving. In *The Silent People*, Macken sets out to take the reader from a surface reading to a deeper understanding of history. He helps us to navigate the layers to arrive at core truths. He leads us to a place beyond which our assumptions would never allow us to go. In a sense he helps the reader to enter into a space that they couldn't travel on their own. A superficial or quantitative glance at history would dismiss the forty shilling freeholders as sheep, the Whiteboys as nothing more than violent political activists, the absentee landlords as ruthless, uncaring, faceless people, the rural tenants as eternal victims but Macken helps us to view them from a new vantage point. He seeks not to condemn or condone but rather to take us beyond our assumptions. What sets Macken apart is that he prioritizes the integrity of each person's story without over-simplifying or over-politicizing.

Just as Dualta toils with the spade to eke out a miserable existence, so too does Macken toil to unearth a forgotten or overlooked past. For Heaney the act of 'digging' has archaeological as well as agrarian connotations. He refers to his spade as a literary digging tool - a means of unearthing the past,

of “excavating the roots of his people's existence” (Niel, 1986:36). Heaney exalts the simplicity, honesty and integrity of the daily struggle of his father and grandfather with their humble spades and he seeks to walk in their footsteps with the pen. This too is the mantle that Macken takes on. He becomes a digger and an excavator hoping to unearth what Heaney once referred to as ‘shards’ of identity. A ‘shard’ implies a fragile broken segment hidden beneath the ruins. It can be trampled on without even knowing that it is there. By dismissing or over-looking the shards we are dismissing a section of history. The reality is that if you dig, you will retrieve the raw broken truth – the pain and brokenness of the ordinary. This is what Macken sets out to do. There is vulnerability in his writing. Macken leads us into the most vulnerable and most fragile part of our being in order to connect to the person at the deepest level. When we go on this journey, we find a reflection of our true selves. It is as if he wants us to feel the pain and suffering of a people whose plight could have been our own – to become witnesses to an unfolding story that is essentially ours.

Walter Macken did not have an obvious political agenda when he put pen to paper and The Silent People is not overtly political. This however is not to say that Macken intentionally avoids taking a stand or that he circumvents controversy. On the contrary, in seeking to respect the integrity of the people of Ireland he finds himself increasingly questioning his position and ultimately, as Heaney would say, nailing his colours to the mast. In *Station Island*, Heaney partakes in a type of introspective confrontation with his moral subconscious. As a pilgrim communing with “Christ’s stations” on Station Island, Lough Derg, he confronts ghosts from his past prompting him to question his own ideologies as well as those of his community which ultimately leads to a reassessment of his own position. There is no doubt that Macken hears his own voices and he too is led to a re-evaluation of his own nationalist beliefs. Just as Heaney feels “an uneasiness with his disengaged stance toward Northern Irish politics” (Breslin, 1996:340) so too does Macken sense an uneasiness with his own disengaged stance regarding people and events in pre-Famine and Famine Ireland.

As a result of Macken’s reassessment of his own beliefs, can we say that *The Silent People* is a political history of Famine Ireland? No, absolutely not! But it never claims to be. In fact it doesn’t claim to take a definitive stand on any of the major issues relating to the famine. But this does not automatically imply neutrality or a hesitancy to choose between two sides. The stand he takes is the protection of the inalienable rights of any human being regardless of their creed or background. This leads him to write a history that everyone might not agree with. Yes, there are glaring omissions and some might say that he has glossed over key events but it is his vision. When it comes to human

suffering and injustice he does not sidestep any issue - injustice in its rawest form screams from every page. The reader is no longer a spectator to history but has a vested interest in the well-being of those who are marginalized, ostracized and trampled on. *The Silent People* gives a unique perspective on history in that it is told through the medium of story. Macken reclaims the truth of the reality of what happened to the people – the suffering they endured and their resilience in overcoming it. It could be said that Macken's Silent People truly embodies the spirit of a nation. Yes, we can say that it goes some way towards filling that 'gaping hole' that Margaret Keller refers to.

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