Last of their line: the disappearing Anglo-Irish in 20th-century fictions and autobiographies

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3. Last of their line: the disappearing Anglo-Irish in 20th-century fictions and autobiographies

Deirdre O'Byrne

Introduction

It is a truism that the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy class in twentieth-century Ireland declined in numbers, until they could more accurately be described as a Descendancy. They were unusually fecund in the charting of their own demise, producing an impressive range of fiction and non-fiction. Here, I explore a selection of their writings which are suffused with gothically atmospheric depiction of decaying buildings and dwindling dynasties, surrounded by paradoxically flourishing horticulture.

Gardens, Plants and Reproduction

Elizabeth Bowen was born in 1899, and Bowen's Court, a history of her Anglo-Irish family and their home, was published in 1942. A few years after the publication of Bowen's Court, Annabel Goff was born. She too wrote a history of her family, Walled Gardens: Scenes from an Anglo-Irish Childhood, first published in 1990. Like Elizabeth Bowen, Goff is a writer of fiction. It is interesting that these two Anglo-Irish authors, moved to produce histories of their families, both named their texts after actual built structures, as if to create tangible monuments to a fast disappearing sector of Irish society.

Gearóid Cronin notes that, in Bowen's fiction, 'the Big House, like an archetype or an obsession, haunts [her writing] as an icon and a spectre.... It is represented as a symbol... of the Anglo-Irish species' (Cronin, 1991a: 143-4). Annabel Goff does not directly refer to walled gardens as emblematic of her species, but makes the
connection with what is grown within those enclosures. She recalls at some length the exotic fruits, including figs, grown in her childhood home, and tells us that '[t]he greenhouses at Glenville were full of ... delicious things to eat. On the walls, peach trees were espaliered against the peeling white brick. . . . Vines grew opposite the peach trees. . . . [T]here was a sparse patch of Cape gooseberries'. Goff points out that the strange and exotic fruit typically grown by her parents and their peers can be read symbolically: '[a]s the period of affluence ended . . . the imported plants and shrubs were left to become . . . a metaphor for the new, drastically reduced and unprotected state of the Anglo-Irish' (Goff, 1994: 11,15).

In *The Irish Country House: A Social History*, Peter Somerville-Large reports that 'the Ascendancy. . . had always considered gardening to be a particularly Anglo-Irish occupation' (Somerville-Large, 1995: 348), and it is one which surfaces in both fiction and non-fiction. In Molly Keane's novel *Good Behaviour*, for example, the narrator's mother loves to spend time in the greenhouses 'which had once sheltered peaches and nectarines' (Keane, 1982: 10). In Jennifer Johnston's novel, *The Invisible Worm* (1992), Laura spends much of her time in the garden, a place redolent with memories of her Anglo-Irish mother. In Edna O'Brien's short story, 'The Connor Girls' (1983), Miss Amy, who had scandalised her family and neighbours by a love affair with a Catholic, takes up gardening in her later years. As the story begins with information about her father's horticultural pursuits, the implication is that she has returned to the fold, and become a typical Anglo-Irish spinster, upholding the traditions she once sought to spurn. Major Connor, we are told, plants trees 'for the important occasions of his life - the Coronation, the birth of his children, England's victory in the last war'. He plants quinces for his daughters, though the Gaelic-Irish narrator tellingly adds: 'What were quinces we wondered and never found out'
The parallel is obvious: the Anglo-Irish, like quinces, are transplanted from another country and culture. They are an incongruous feature of the Irish landscape, not quite fitting in, and, as we see in Edna O'Brien's story, regarded with curiosity by the Gaelic-Irish.

According to Annabel Goff, the growing of fruit and vegetables was an economic necessity, as few Anglo-Irish were in paid employment, and were therefore required to be self-sufficient (Goff, 1994). It is ironic, however, that their propensity for growth and cultivation in horticultural terms is paralleled by a lack of propagation of their own human kind. Terence Dooley reports that 'Down through the years … many landowners and their heirs… died unmarried or childless and caused … a dislocation of continuity' (Dooley, 2001: 125). Goff recalls that she grew up in 'an atmosphere of decay' (Goff, 1994: 39). In Jennifer Johnston's novel *The Invisible Worm*, Laura's Catholic, Gaelic-Irish father voices the death knell of his wife's lineage: 'They've lost. Your swanky lot. Lost. And about time too' (Johnston, 1992: 116), although, according to his daughter, he is attracted to Anglo-Irish women specifically because they possess the perceived 'glamour of being an endangered species' (121).

Endangered they certainly were. In his book *Ascendancy to Oblivion: the Story of The Anglo-Irish* (1986), Michael McConville notes that, due to the exodus of Anglo-Irish after the setting up of the Irish State, membership of the Church of Ireland fell from 146,000 in 1926 to 10,000 in 1985, and most of those lived in Dublin. The sparsity of the population is particularly noticeable on Sundays. In Johnston's *The Invisible Worm*, Protestant Laura only goes to church when her Catholic husband Maurice is away, because, she says, 'It irks him to watch me going in there. I can see the irritation in his face. He doesn't have much time for failures and I think he reckons
the Church of Ireland to be some sort of pathetic failure' (Johnston, 1992: 64).

Maurice's judgement seems to rest on attendance: 'He looked at the six cars parked along the road by the gate' (148). In Edna O'Brien's short story, church attendance is even more sparse, her 'Connor girls' are two of only 'four Protestant souls comprising the congregation in a stone church which was the oldest in our parish' (O'Brien, 1983: 11). Goff's autobiography suggests that the very scarcity of Protestants led to their seeing church attendance as a duty, but it's a social obligation rather than a religious one. 'If you were Church of Ireland you went to church. The empty pews reflected lack of population, not lack of enthusiasm - that was taken for granted and not considered an excuse to stay at home', even though the 'churches were cold' and, not surprisingly, 'the Church of Ireland clergy were a depressed lot, badly paid and expected to have families' (Goff, 1994: 89, 90).

The pressure to reproduce was equally felt by the non-clerical members of the Anglo-Irish population. In Bowen's Court, for instance, Elizabeth Bowen, writing of her parents' marriage, tells us: 'When they had been married some years, Florence and Henry began to wonder why they did not have an heir'. They are not alone in wondering, as according to Bowen: 'Bowen's Court asked for an heir, who was to be called Robert' (Bowen, 1998: 403), thus characterising the building itself as a somewhat querulous ancestor vocally reminding the conjugal pair of their duty, and even having a name in mind for the tardy male incumbent-to-be. This personification of the ancestral residence is not unusual in Anglo-Irish writing. As Jean Lozes points out, 'in [Sheridan] Le Fanu's fiction, the Big House is not only a full persona but often the main character' (Lozes, 1991: 104). Despite the requests of the expectant Bowen's Court building, and the hopes of the pregnant Florence who fervently wished to comply with the surrounding architecture, the recalcitrant 'Robert' never materialises,
but Elizabeth does, to inherit her mother's procreative burden. Bowen describes her situation following her father's death in a short paragraph of clipped phrases: 'So, Henry VI died, and I as his only child inherited Bowen's Court. . . . I had changed my father's name for my husband's. We had no children' (Bowen, 1998: 448). In *The Invisible Worm*, Jennifer Johnston presents us with a novelistic version of Elizabeth Bowen's dilemma. Laura explains her reasons for marrying a man she did not love in similarly brief sentences: 'I wanted a child. I wanted to secure my line. Keep this house in the family' (Johnston, 1992: 59). The very syntax of the writing in both cases suggests the attenuation of the family line.

Wife of a baronet, Annabel Goff's mother is well aware of her obligations, and her daughter recognises the dilemma: 'a male heir was needed. My mother, I know, felt some pressure'. With a messianic turn of phrase, Goff reports that her brother, after three daughters, was 'born to great rejoicing' (Goff, 1994: 223, 244). The proud parents' marriage breaks down soon afterwards, as if, having fulfilled her propagatory function, the baronet's wife then departs.

Annabel Goff is explicit about both the duties and the difficulties entailed in matching and hatching if you were Anglo-Irish: 'We belonged to a stratum of society which was more than waning, it was facing extinction…. It was necessary to procreate. Some procedure for marriage followed by breeding was necessary for survival.' However, the 'procedures' were not simple: '[i]t was as though we had a lunatic obstacle course to run if we were to avoid breaking the genetic chain'. She describes their youthful gatherings as resembling 'a small bunch of lemmings running around in circles pretending not to see the cliff' (Goff, 1994: 195, 196).

**Rationalising Decline**
Anglo-Irish writer Molly Keane voices a popular theory regarding the failure of her peers to reproduce themselves: 'A whole generation of men had been practically wiped out in the [First World] war' (Quinn 1990, 73). However, in *The Decline of the Big House in Ireland*, Terence Dooley disputes this version of events. He reports that 'almost three quarters of those from the 100 families who served, returned from the war', and that the 'idea of the "lost generation" seems to have grown in mythical proportions, becoming for some the primary catalyst in the decline of the big house' (Dooley, 2001: 125).

However, a crack had appeared in the veneer of the Ascendancy class before hostilities broke out. A letter from Charles Monck, heir to Charleville, makes it clear that joining up represented a means of escape from financial worries in Ireland. Monck never returned. He was killed in what could be interpreted as a fulfilment of his death-wish. Writing to his solicitor, he says: 'if I die today my difficulties and those of my family would to a great extent disappear' (Dooley, 2001: 124).

The prevailing myth that most of a generation of Anglo-Irish died out in the First World War is a psychologically understandable re-writing of their decline. Rather than an unflattering assessment of themselves as what Jennifer Johnston's Maurice would call 'some sort of pathetic failure' (Johnston, 1992: 64), it allows them to envisage themselves as heroic and self-sacrificing in a patriotic cause. Molly Keane writes that '[t]hey all died heroes' (Quinn, 1990: 73). This may to some extent be an unconscious effort to counteract or even emulate the dominant myths surrounding Gaelic-Irish Republican heroes. In Bowen's 1929 novel *The Last September*, for instance, the trench-coated man who, unawares, passes Lois in the dark, is imbued with an air of mystery and excitement entirely missing from the young men of her own circle. He is described as possessing 'a resolute profile, powerful as a thought',

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and Lois sees him as 'inspired' (Bowen, 1942: 34). Tom Garvin attests that during the War of Independence, '[t]he IRA man as a figure of popular glamour was born' (Garvin, 1996: 41). Republican leader Michael Collins was a native of County Cork, the setting of Bowen's Court. Photographs of Collins and fellow members of the IRA often show them in a military-style trench-coat (see for instance, Coogan, 1995), and folk-stories of Collins wandering the countryside incognito still abound in Ireland. At the time of Bowen's writing of The Last September, he had been assassinated (Connolly, 1998), and his 'glamorised image' (Lee, 1989: 66) and thus acquired overnight an air of romantic martyrdom. It is possible that the Anglo-Irish may have wished to claim a similar glamour for their own dead combatants.

The belief that an entire segment of Anglo-Irish society was killed may also be read as a patriotic wish to project an alliance with England in its time of trouble. Goff's father tells her, somewhat inaccurately, that 'The entire English upper class was killed in the First World War' (Goff, 1994: 105). Whatever the actual numbers of Anglo-Irish lost, the effect of that war was traumatic on their caste. Dooley comments that 'The First World War proved an important watershed in big house life. The casualty rate amongst the landed class, the loss of sons, relatives or friends, may not have had serious socio-economic consequences but it did have a psychological effect' (Dooley, 2001: 275).

Self-destruction, Rejects, Widows and Orphans

This may be one reason why death is such a pervasive presence in Anglo-Irish writing. The dominant tone is elegiac (Powell, 2004), and there is a recurring theme of self-destruction. Maud Ellmann notes this feature in the writings of Elizabeth Bowen, and opines that it is a matter of caste, referring to 'the self-destruction of her class, the
Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy' (Ellmann, 2004: 8). Consider the practice which Goff describes, not without humour, in her autobiography: 'Traditionally, unsatisfactory males were dumped in outlying areas of the Commonwealth (still thought of by those who consigned them as the Empire or, at least, the Colonies). I can safely say that for a long period of time the sun never set on the rejects of my family' (Goff, 1994: 134, parentheses Goff's).

Goff elaborates on the history of one such 'reject' in an account of her paternal grandmother's siblings: 'In addition to the five sisters, there had also been a brother, my great-uncle Charles. He was the fourth of the six children... and the eagerly awaited son'. Despite the eagerness, Charles disappears: 'I never heard my grandmother or great-aunts mention his name'. Goff subsequently discovers that as a 'classic black sheep, ...he'd been sent to Canada .... Drink, my father hinted, had been the problem'. Goff's mother 'also had an uncle who proved unsatisfactory', who pre-empted what Goff calls 'the classic formula' by taking himself abroad and committing suicide (Goff, 1994: 152, 154-5).

No doubt this export of recalcitrant males was regarded as a protective measure, and may even have been seen as keeping the genetic strain purer by weeding out unwanted stock. Given the dearth of men, however, this culling process seems less like pruning and more like wanton waste of potential breeding material. It is tempting to conjecture that the high expectations placed on an inheriting son, especially if combined with indulgence, could result in the so-called 'unsatisfactory' nature of these young men. In the case of Elizabeth Bowen's father, who wished to make law his career instead of running the family estate at Bowen's Court, paternal disapproval was immense, and, in Elizabeth's opinion, the 'struggles against his father' contributed to

This tendency towards self-destruction seeps into the fiction. In Jennifer Johnston's *The Invisible Worm* (1992), Harriet O'Meara kills herself, but she had at least married and produced a child, albeit a daughter. In Molly Keane's *Good Behaviour*, the only son Hubert is killed in a car accident (Keane, 1982), and his sister, hopelessly infatuated with her brother's lover Richard, does not marry. In Edna O'Brien's short story 'The Connor Girls', the Major's only son is also killed in a motoring incident, though O'Brien imbues this apparent chance occurrence with sinister undertones: 'It was said that the accident was due to his father's bullying of him, always urging him to drive faster since he had the most expensive car in the neighbourhood' (O'Brien, 1983: 9). Once again, we see parental pressure to perform as a hindrance, and a factor in subsequent obsolescence. In Jennifer Johnston's *How Many Miles to Babylon?*, the doomed Alec Moore tells us: '[t]hey all wanted me to become a man. I found it hard to grasp what this entailed' (Johnston, 1988: 124). Alec's closest relationship is with another man, and he dies childless.

The atmosphere which pervades Anglo-Irish writing, both fiction and non-fiction, is moribund. As David Burleigh comments in an article significantly entitled 'Dead and Gone': '[i]n the world Jennifer Johnston sets before us, there are a great many elderly men, whom we usually encounter in the advanced stages of decrepitude' (Burleigh, 1985: 1). Although her fiction, especially in later years, also depicts many female characters, they also tend to be of melancholic nature and prone to nostalgia. Jennifer Johnston acknowledges the influence of her Anglo-Irish heritage and of 'rather crumbly country houses' on her writing: '[e]ven though my parents were not immediately "big house" people, that was their sort of background and there were
always undertones of that background in my life and ultimately in my writing' (Quinn, 1990: 59). If Anglo-Irish characters are in a state of decrepitude, so are the houses. Virginia Woolf describes Bowen's Court as containing 'decayed eighteenth-century furniture and carpets all in holes' (Keane, 1993: ix).

Growing up in a succession of similarly crumbling edifices, surrounded by 'the weight of Anglo-Irish gloom which hung over the whole household' (Goff, 1994: 52), it is no wonder that Annabel Goff records a childhood beset by anxiety: 'I was afraid that my parents would die' (Goff, 1994: 43). She was also worried about ghosts, and, to her mind, '[l]ife was clearly full of dangers [and] fears' (44). This anxious morbidity may not be totally unfounded, as early death seems to haunt Ascendancy families. Elizabeth Bowen writes that 'Like all the Bowens whose dates are known, I had inherited before I was thirty-one' (Bowen, 1998: 446). Thomas McCarthy tells us that 'misfortune stalked the Bowens. Elizabeth lost her aunt to consumption and her younger uncle went down with the Titanic' (Bowen, 1998: xiv). Such tragedies may account in part for the strong Gothic tendency in much Anglo-Irish fiction, from the works of C. R. Maturin and Sheridan Le Fanu to the twentieth-century works of Aidan Higgins and John Banville (Genet, 1991).

Ann Owens Weekes points out that 'the orphan is a common symbol for the Anglo-Irish', who felt 'abandoned by the natural parent, England' (Weekes, 1990: 196). I would add to this another preponderant stereotype, that of the childless woman, and especially, the childless unmarried woman. Such a figure occurs again and again in the fictions and non-fictions about the Anglo-Irish. For instance, in Aidan Higgins' 1966 novel Langrishe, Go Down, four unmarried Langrishe sisters inhabit Springfield House, and, as Imogen reports: '[o]ffers of marriage had not come' (Higgins, 1993: 48). In The Story of Lucy Gault, William Trevor creates a character who seems trapped
in a tragedy of mythical, fairy-tale dimensions, but without any happy-ever-after ending to reprieve her, or us as readers. Lucy is an only daughter. Her love for Ralph is unconsummated, and she remains unmarried and childless. Her household is seen by the family solicitor as 'something petrified…. Lucy was stilled too, a detail in one of her own embroidered compositions' (Trevor, 2002: 139). The similarity to Tennyson's 'Lady of Shalott' (Tennyson, 1971) is inescapable - Lucy is trapped in a world of mirrors and shadows, a world which bears much resemblance to that inhabited by Laura in Johnston's *The Invisible Worm*. The unmarried daughter also occurs of course in Molly Keane's work, most memorably in Aroon, the monstrous narrator of *Good Behaviour*. In that novel too we meet the unmarried and childless Crowhurst sisters, known as Nod and Blink (Keane, 1982). Keane is obviously drawing from life in her depiction of unwed females, though her portraits are tinged with comedy. In interview, she is more sympathetic. She recalls that 'when [she] was growing up there was an extraordinarily high proportion of marriageable young women to men. It was a sad time for some of those women; a great deal of them did not have much chance of marrying' (Quinn, 1987: 74-5).

A previously rich source of potential husbands, the English Army, disappeared with Independence, taking the officers with it. Growing up a few decades later, Annabel Goff is amusing on the topic of the shortage of young men:

hostesses were sometimes forced to resort of desperate measures such as including the occasional larger schoolboy who could find a dinner-jacket that fit [sic] him. This kind of behaviour was considered unacceptable, but the condemnation always had an implied "there, but of the grace of God, go I" modification. (Goff, 1994: 196)
Goff puts the lack of eligible men in rather more contemporary language than that of Molly Keane. Obviously influenced by her later years in The United States rather than her formative years in Anglo-Irish Waterford society, Goff wryly recalls that 'It was clear to me that no one was going to get laid in the Republic of Ireland; not if she were Anglo-Irish, at least' (Goff, 1994: 93).

**Marrying Out, Fading Away, Leaving Ghosts**

Given the dearth of men, it is unsurprising that some Anglo-Irish choose to defy convention and marry outside their religious group. Goff's father, she reports, 'took a philosophical view. . . . "I have four children. . . . The odds are that at least one of you will marry a Catholic"' (Goff, 1994: 65). His was an unusual attitude, as his daughter is aware. She writes:

> Both Catholics and Protestants were violently opposed to what we called 'mixed marriages'. . . . It was, regardless of any money or social standing involved, considered a disaster by both sides. For the Catholics, immortal souls were in danger, and for the Protestants there was the crossing of social and cultural barriers and the further erosion of the shaky rock on which they had built. (65)

The Catholic hierarchy's *Ne Temere* decree that children of 'mixed' marriages had to be brought up as Catholics was, according to Phyllis Harrison Browne, 'one of the[ir] cleverest ideas [and] was possibly the final reason for the almost complete disappearance of the Church of Ireland congregations'. Born in 1920, she comments on the lack of eligible males in her courting years: 'the number of suitable young men for young Protestant girls to marry were becoming fewer and fewer' (Murphy and Adair, 2002: 35). Lady Augusta Gregory in her journal recalls that her daughter-in-law worries that 'the children will marry peasants' (Pakenham, 2000: 181). Such prejudices
are fictionalised in Edna O'Brien's short story, 'The Connor Girls', as the narrator tells us that her mother is firmly against the romance between Anglo-Irish Miss Amy and her lapsed Catholic boyfriend: '[s]he could not abide it, she said that Catholics and Protestants just could not mix. . . . Her mind was firmly made up about the incompatibility of Catholics and Protestants' (O'Brien, 1983: 15). Miss Amy's father, Major Connor, is similarly against the match: 'the postman who was a Protestant said that the Major would not travel one inch to see his daughter marry a Papist' (16). The engagement is subsequently broken off, apparently due to 'a clash of family interests' (17). The Protestant postman, we are told, 'was pleased with the outcome' (17). Phyllis Harrison Browne's recollections of childhood rhymes show that Catholic children noticed the smaller families of their non-Catholic peers: 'Proddy, Proddy on the wall, half a loaf would feed you all' (Murphy and Adair, 2002: 34).

Both Edna O'Brien and Jennifer Johnston's fictions represent intermarriage as a hoped-for resolution which actually resolves nothing. In Johnston's *The Invisible Worm*, Protestant Laura sleeps in a separate bedroom from Maurice, her Catholic husband, and they have no children. Laura, who is a keen gardener, tells her friend Dominic of her failure to reproduce her own genes: '[a]ll those seeds were rejected' (Johnston, 1992: 4). Laura's grasp on the present is shown to be impaired by her focus on the past, and, she says, the 'future has no reality for me' (Johnston, 1992: 83). This perceived lack of a future is another constant motif in Anglo-Irish writings. Commenting on the departure of many Ascendancy families at the birth of Irish Independence, Goff attests that those who left were 'not driven out - but aware that the future held little for them in Ireland' (Goff, 1994: 37). Not all memoirs are as lenient on the sectarianism in Irish society; Robert Ernest Armitage reports that his 'family had suffered threats, and the family business was robbed and unjustly boycotted in the
early decades of the twentieth century' (Murphy and Adair, 2002: 23), which almost led to their emigration.

In both Bowen's and Goff's autobiographical works, the focus is very much on preceding generations, even though Bowen herself had certainly lived a noteworthy and interesting enough life to warrant more attention on herself and her achievements, and has been the subject of several critical and biographical works, for instance those by Patricia Craig (1986), Maude Ellmann (2004) and Victoria Glendinning (1993). Bowen did write accounts of her own life, for instance, *Seven Winters* (1943) and *Collected Impressions* (1950), but they are much shorter texts than *Bowen's Court*.

Jose Lanters writes that '[t]he past is important in all [of Jennifer] Johnston's novels… and many of her characters find themselves disturbed by ghosts of the past' (Lanters, 1989: 209). *The Invisible Worm* is certainly haunted. The big house which Laura has inherited is full of an 'air of history' evoked by 'crests on the spoons, book plates, family portraits, all those museumlike objects collected down through the years…. We use those artefacts every day, we live … with the ghosts of the past' (Johnston, 1992: 121). She tells her friend Dominic: 'I guard this house, this mad museum. I am the curator of my ancestor's folly' (24) and says: 'I am tired now of meeting the dead wherever I turn. I am tired of hearing their voices' (159). Annabel Goff describes one childhood home, Glenville, as composed somewhat paradoxically of 'empty rooms, full of ghosts and treasures', and recalls that she and her sister 'saw a ghost in the stable attic' (Goff, 1994: 254). Elizabeth Bowen writes of Bowen's Court: 'With each death, the air of the place had thickened: it had been added to. The dead do not need to visit Bowen's Court rooms ... - we had no ghosts in that house - because they already permeated them' (Bowen, 1998: 451). This strikes me as an even more
alarming abode than one inhabited by a single ghost. Bowen conjures up her home as a sort of spectral soup, 'thickened' by the addition of each dead inhabitant.

This sense of being haunted by one's predecessors is also strong in Edna O'Brien's short story. The Connor family inherit a Big House on whose walls hang portraits 'glum puffy dark-looking ancestors' (O'Brien, 1983: 18). The air of decrepitude is pronounced. Their local church is described as follows: 'Moss covered the stones and various plants grew between the cracks so that in the distance the side wall . . . was green' (11 - 12). The Connor family vault is 'smothered in creeper' (9). When the Major's death eventually gives the locals a chance to investigate the Big House on the inside, we discover: 'It was much more simply furnished than [previously] imagined and the loose linen covers on the armchairs were a bit frayed' (18). The fraying covers metaphorically represent the disintegration of the façade of gentility which characterises the Anglo-Irish as a class.

Conclusion

As I have pointed out, many writers have used metaphors to convey the decline of the Anglo-Irish: exotic fruits, walled gardens, frayed covers. I will end on a similarly metaphorical note. If the Anglo-Irish failed to reproduce themselves as a race, they have succeeded in producing a compensatory fruitful harvest of artistic endeavours. As Gearóid Cronin notes: '[p]aradoxically, the Big House, although having undergone a total demise in Irish history, has not experienced a parallel demise in Irish literature; rather, it seems to have been given a new lease of life' (Cronin, 1991b: 215). Valerie Pakenham commends the 'indefatigable' habit of the Ascendancy in memoir-keeping (Pakenham, 2000: 6). By taking us inside the Big Houses and their walled gardens,
writers achieve, between the covers of their books, what the structures themselves could not; they preserve a fascinating if vanished way of life for posterity.

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