

eDeposit Ireland

Unremembering the devotional revolution

Item Type	book chapter
Authors	Murphy, James H.
Citation	James H. Murphy, 'Unremembering the devotional revolution', in J. H. Murphy [Ed.] <i>Evangelicals and Catholics in nineteenth-century Ireland</i> , Society for the Study of Nineteenth Century Ireland, 9 (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005) pp 55-60
Publisher	Four Courts Press
Rights	Y
Download date	2026-04-20 21:40:31
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14765/98577

Unremembering the devotional revolution

JAMES H. MURPHY

Over three decades have now passed since Emmet Larkin published his groundbreaking article 'The devotional revolution in Ireland, 1850-75'.¹ The article makes four principal claims: that the Irish people only became practicing Catholics in the latter half of the nineteenth century; that the nature of religious practice among Catholics changed dramatically and became much more Tridentine in character; that the institutional church, under Paul Cullen, underwent significant reform; and, finally, that Catholicism supplanted the Irish language as a badge of national identity. The last of these points has been the most contentious, inevitably so, because it is a matter of historical sociology which must always remain somewhat speculative as the tools of the behavioural sciences are not available to the historian.

As for the other elements of the Larkin thesis, there is now little disagreement among historians that very significant changes took place within Irish Catholicism in the middle of the nineteenth century, though the roots of those changes may go back somewhat further than the 1972 article allowed. Even a scholar such as the late Donal Kerr who was uncomfortable with the claim that prior to 1850 the mass of the Irish people outside the north-eastern counties were not practicing Catholics admitted that 'Easter communion, rather than regular Sunday mass attendance, with the difficulties that such attendance involved, was probably regarded as the criterion of a practicing Catholic.'² At the very least he is here conceding that the definition of what constituted a practicing Catholic changed dramatically after the famine. My own work on parish missions, on the fiction of Catholic Ireland and on Irish education is deeply indebted to the devotional revolution thesis.³

This essay asks two related questions. Firstly, what happened to the memory of the devotional revolution and of the religious practice which predated it, that is to the memory of the time when the religious practices of the people were

¹ Emmet Larkin, 'The devotional revolution in Ireland, 1850-75', *American Historical Review*, 77:3 (1972), pp 625-52. ² Donal Kerr 'A nation of beggars?' *Priests, people and politics in famine Ireland, 1846-52* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), p. 319. ³ James H. Murphy, 'The role of Vincentian parish missions in the "Irish counter-reformation" of the mid-nineteenth century', *Irish Historical Studies* 24 (1984), pp 152-71; James H. Murphy, *Catholic fiction and social reality in Ireland* (Westport CT: Greenwood, 1997); James H. Murphy, 'A history of Castleknock College,' in James H. Murphy (ed.), *Nos Autem: Castleknock College and its contribution* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1996), pp 1-154.

different from what they subsequently became in the latter part of the nineteenth century? Secondly, why was it, to quote Sean Connolly, that 'the real history of Irish Catholicism, with its complex interaction of popular and official traditions, was obscured beneath a legend of long suffering but unwavering piety which it is only now becoming possible to dismantle.'⁴

In answer to the first question what I want to suggest is that the older pattern of religious practice may not simply have been forgotten, it may have been deliberately unremembered. Within the limits of this essay, I would like to adduce one piece of evidence to support this tentative assertion, albeit a significant piece of evidence. In 1894 the *New Ireland Review* published an article entitled, 'What Our Country Folk Read'. Referring to the parish libraries which were the main source of reading material for country people, it concludes, 'Time after time *Knocknagow* [by Charles J. Kickham] is recommended by one reader to another as the very best novel in the collection.'⁵ Kickham's biographer has noted that '[i]n the decades when the great figures of the Irish renaissance were attaining their finest achievements, the most consistently popular book in Ireland was *Knocknagow*.' It embodied 'the virtues that [...] society prized, the emotions that if felt, and the values that it exalted.'⁶

The people depicted in Kickham's novel, which was published in 1873, are all more or less practicing Tridentine Catholics. Perhaps more importantly the community itself is a practicing Catholic community. Thus the chief communal events in the opening chapters of the book are Christmas morning mass in Kilthubber chapel and a station mass held in the home of the principal family in the novel, the middle-class Kearneys. Mary Kearney's explanation of the purpose of the station mass to a visitor from England reflects its origins in the pre-devotional revolution practice of religious life, 'Catholics go to Confession and Communion at Christmas and Easter. And, in country districts, instead of requiring the people to go to the chapel, the priests come to certain houses in each locality to hear confessions and say Mass.'⁷

Kickham, however, is keen to present the station mass as being a custom which is in harmony with a supposedly immemorial Tridentine practice, rather than in competition with it. For example, when Fr Hannigan addresses the people after the station mass he tells them that it is acceptable to go beagling on Sundays, 'As long as ye are sure not to lose Mass, I won't say anything against the beagles [...] And if ye meet after Mass – mind I say, *after* divine service – I don't see much harm in it.'⁸ This statement assumes that everyone attends Sunday mass. In *Knocknagow* attendance at the station mass is not a substitute for weekly mass

⁴ Sean Connolly, *Religion and society in nineteenth century Ireland*, Studies in Irish Economic and Social History 3 (Dundalk: Dun Dealgan, 1985), p. 60. ⁵ *New Ireland Review* 1 (1894), p. 67. ⁶ R.V. Comerford, *Charles J. Kickham: a biography* (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1979), pp 209–10. ⁷ Charles J. Kickham, *Knocknagow, or, The homes of Tipperary* (1873; Dublin: Anna Livia, 1988), p. 26. ⁸ Kickham, *Knocknagow*, p. 68.

attendance in the local 'chapel'. It is not an indicator of the existence of an alternative mode of Catholic religious practice to Tridentine orthodoxy.

In fact, the station mass was seen as one of the principal 'abuses' which the Tridentine reformers, only a decade or two before the writing of *Knocknagow*, had sought to correct.⁹ In his original devotional revolution article Emmet Larkin draws attention to two accounts from the 1840s which are critical of station masses.¹⁰ The criticisms can be divided under a number of headings: that mass is celebrated in unworthy, squalid settings; that the greedy clergy use station masses and the celebration of the sacraments to charge exorbitant fees; that the host family for the occasion is obliged to offer lavish hospitality to the clergy; and that confessions are heard in cramped and confused circumstances in which the penitent can be overheard by others and in which the priest is unconstrained from offering proper counsel. Larkin summarizes the situation thus, 'The complaints of the reformers, who were concerned about the abuses attendant on the system, had mainly to do with the exorbitant "offerings" extracted by the clergy for the administration of the sacraments and the undignified if not unholy celebration of sacred rites in profane places.'

None of these abuses is present in Kickham's description of the station mass in *Knocknagow*. However, the thorough Tridentinism of religion in *Knocknagow* and the impression that the novel gives that things were ever thus is I believe not simply because Kickham knew no different or because he had forgotten that things had changed but because he was actively seeking to unremember that the past had been different. His unremembering though bears the imprint of the very past he is seeking to forget. The station mass in *Knocknagow* is thus attended by concomitant virtues to the vices with which station masses were once historically associated.

What I want to suggest is that the unreformed practices of the station mass are not simply absent, they are demonstratively absent in Kickham's account. In other words, Kickham's description, in its keenness to forget the past, draws attention to it by highlighting the absence of abuses, especially those which Larkin's analysis showed to be of central concern to reformers: clerical avarice and the undignified celebration of the sacraments. The memory of the older pattern of religious practice is thus paradoxically present through its pronounced absence.

In *Knocknagow* the station masses is conducted with decorum and piety. There is a detailed description of the hearing of confessions.¹¹ Far from being

⁹ In the 1840s, according to Donal Kerr, Easter communion was accepted by the clergy in the diocese of Cashel in Co. Tipperary as the criterion of Catholic practice. See 'A nation of beggars?', p. 319. Though it was one of the targets of the reformers, the station mass was to survive into the twentieth century in parts of the south and west of Ireland, albeit in a more Tridentine form as in *Knocknagow*. ¹⁰ Larkin, 'Devotional revolution,' pp 635–6. ¹¹ Before the station mass at the Kearneys house confessions are heard with propriety. Three priests hear confessions, two in rooms in which the priest is alone with the penitent. The third hears

avaricious, the parish priest Fr McMahon is someone who when he dies 'will not have as much money as will bury him'.¹² Station masses are part of the great 'amount of labour an Irish priest has to go through.'¹³ And when the conversation turns briefly to an isolated and regretted case of clerical avarice in another parish it only serves to emphasize the piety and lack of avarice which have characterized the station mass at the Kearneys' home. In sum Kickham's detailed account of the conduct of confessions and repeated return to the topic of clerical avarice in his description of a station mass within a Tridentine religious system indicate, in my view, the influence of the memory of the vices that had once been associated with station masses and which his description is seeking to unremember.

It is now time to return to the second question posed in this essay and to attempt to answer it at least in terms of *Knocknagow*. Why was this happening? Why does Kickham actively wish to bury the memory of the past? The novel, indeed, provides an answer to this question though it is an unsurprising answer. Inappropriate behaviour is unrespectable and respectability in the eyes of others is of prime concern. During the confessions at the station mass at the Kearneys' a humorous minor fracas develops as one woman tries to overtake others at the head of the queue for confession. Henry Lowe, the Kearneys' English visitor, witnesses the incident. Mildly rebuking the woman concerned, the confessor Fr Hannigan says, 'There's a strange gentleman from England looking at ye; and what will he say of the Island of Saints when he goes back, if this is the way ye behave yourselves.'¹⁴

Henry Lowe, however, is 'struck by the fervour of the people' at the station mass.¹⁵ In fact the station mass marks the conclusion the novel's early concern to establish the general respectability of Irish Catholicism through Henry Lowe's experience of it. He is presented as being a fair-minded Englishman and is an example of a literary type which is found throughout nineteenth-century Irish fiction and whose function is to vindicate Irish respectability in the face of the unfavourable stereotypes of the Irish which were prevalent in Britain.

Chapter one of the novel focuses on the Christmas morning mass at the local chapel but does so from the perspective of Lowe who attends with his

confessions in the kitchen and has to erect a barrier of chairs to keep the line of penitents at a sufficient distance for confidentiality. This is said to be 'by his own choice (Kickham, *Knocknagow*, p. 40), meaning presumably that the Kearneys had planned to furnish him with a more suitable room. One minor, humorous incident of rowdiness occurs. The offering of the mass itself is not described, perhaps because there has been a description of mass in chapter one. ¹² Kickham, *Knocknagow*, p. 26. ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 27. ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41. Kickham has Hannigan go on hold up the behaviour of the local men as an example to the women, 'Look at the men, how quiet and dacent they are.' Later he criticises the men for being drunk at a funeral. However, this is after they had carried the remains of the deceased for thirteen miles through teeming rain to fulfil his dying wish to be buried with his wife and children, p. 69. ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

hosts, the Kearneys. He and they take their seats in pews in the gallery where middle-class proprieties obtain, as Lowe feels awkward at sitting beside someone to whom he has not been formally introduced. By contrast the ordinary people, down in the main body of the church where there are no pews, become almost a collective entity. Thus they stand and press forward together towards the altar to hear the sermon.

The sermon by Fr McMahan seemed to Lowe to be 'a torrent of barbaric eloquence, which rose into a kind of gorgeous sublimity, or melted into pathos, sometimes homely, sometimes fancifully poetical.'¹⁶ During the more lyrical passages in the sermon describing the plight of the Virgin Mary in search of accommodation in Bethlehem 'a cry burst from the congregation, and the sobs were so loud and frequent that the preacher was obliged to pause till the emotion he had called forth had subsided.'¹⁷ The conclusions which can be drawn from this description are that Irish Catholicism maintains a proper sense of social hierarchy and that it encourages docile child-like qualities of wonder and awe of among its adherents in the lower classes of society. Kickham is presenting Irish Catholicism as a force which tends to reinforce a Victorian respectability.

This impression is confirmed later in the novel when people are under severe pressure from the evils of the land system. During mass Fr McMahan denounces the 'damnable government' and a woman from the workhouse becomes agitated when she learns of her husband's death. Describing the latter event to a friend in a letter Mary Keaney writes that it was 'a very affecting incident' which turned the people's 'anger into pity, though one would think it ought only to incense them all the more against their rulers.'¹⁸ Here indeed is a religion of exemplary respectability. At a time when priests and the middle classes are roused to anger, it continues, in the world of *Knocknagow* at least, to foster docility and compliance among those of its members who could be considered most prone to social discontent.

Early on in the novel, Catholicism's respectability at both social and personal levels receives Henry Lowe's stamp of approval: 'in spite of his prejudices the evidently earnest devotion of the worshippers impressed Mr Lowe with a respect for their form of religion which he never had felt before.'¹⁹ Devotion thus earns respect for Irish Catholics. That which prevailed before the age of Tridentine devotion is unremembered.

There are of course well-known perils in dealing with fiction as a source for social history. What applies within the pages of Kickham's novel may not apply beyond them. At the very least though *Knocknagow* is suggestive about the reasons why the religious changes of mid-nineteenth-century Ireland were lost to the popular memory.

This essay has been about historiography. Emmet Larkin's devotional revolution thesis was and is a shaping factor in the twentieth-century historiogra-

phy of nineteenth-century Ireland. The historiography, especially the popular historiography, of the nineteenth century itself is a subject which would repay greater investigation.²⁰ This essay has attempted to read *Knocknagow* as one piece of evidence in the popular historiography of what Emmet Larkin has called the devotional revolution. That it is an historiography of apparent absence does not diminish its significance, for historiography is surely just as concerned with what is forgotten, and how and why it is forgotten, as it is with what is remembered, and how and why it is remembered.

²⁰ Of particular note are the tropes of nineteenth-century popular history such as the wild geese and the penal laws. See James H. Murphy, 'The Wild Geese', *Irish Review* 16 (1994), pp 23-8 and Murphy, *Catholic fiction*, pp 137-42.