

Myth, Land, and History in the Poetry of James Clarence Mangan and Ernest Jones

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Abstract

This essay discusses poetry associated with Irish nationalism and Chartism. Chartism's eventual *de facto* leader, Ernest Jones, was an admired and prolific poet; as Irish poets including James Clarence Mangan were helping to forge a new Irish cultural identity in support of Irish nationalism, Chartist poets including Jones were attempting a similar project for a radical British working-class readership. This article undertakes a brief comparative study of the poetry of Mangan and Jones, and finds the points where they converge and differ to be equally illuminating in terms of their mythic representations of the land and the past.

Key words: myth, history, poetry, identity, James Clarence Mangan, Ernest Jones

Much of the radical political poetry of the 1840s was steeped in mythic representations of history and the land. The attainment of an equitable future appeared predicated on the successful invocation of a past 'Golden Age', a realignment of the land and the landscape to a mythic vision. One of the functions of poetry within radical political movements was to mythopoeically embody the ethos of the oppressed community, and to present that community as a body worthy, through its cultural sophistication, of self-determination. This essay discusses poetry associated with Irish nationalism and Chartism, the early Victorian British mass movement which sought major reforms of the political system, including full enfranchisement for the working man. It is no accident that Chartism's eventual *de facto* leader, Ernest Charles Jones (1819–69), was an admired and prolific poet, nor that he and Feargus O'Connor (1794–1855) founded a journal companion piece to the *Northern Star* Chartist newspaper entitled the *Labourer* in 1847, which intended to place 'poetry and romance side by side with politics and history' (Jones, 1847: 1).¹ At the same time as Irish poets including James Clarence Mangan (1803–49) were helping to forge a new Irish cultural identity in support of Irish nationalism, Chartist poets including Jones were attempting a similar project for a radical British working-class readership. This article undertakes a brief comparative study of the poetry of Mangan and Jones (both of whom found a new political consciousness in 1846), and finds the points where they converge and differ to be equally illuminating in terms of their mythic representations of the land and the past.

By 1848 James Clarence Mangan and Ernest Jones were the most admired poetic exponents of their respective political affiliations. These radical movements, Irish nationalism and Chartism, simultaneously confronted a beleaguered London

government reeling from the implications of widespread industrial unrest, the horrific consequences of the Irish Famine, and the reverberations of democratic revolutions erupting across mainland Europe. Both Chartists and Irish nationalists were to feel the weight of government action in the wake of popular agitation in favour of their causes. Jones was imprisoned for two years for seditious speech-making in June 1848, just one month after the major Irish nationalist figure John Mitchel (1815–75) was tried and transported under similar charges, while Mangan died of causes including malnutrition in June 1849, during a period in which *The Nation*, which had published some of his later work, was being suppressed by the government.

The effect of radicalization on the poetry of both men was transformative. Prior to 1846, Mangan's poetry had been largely published in the nominally Unionist *Dublin University Magazine*. He was politicized by the effects of the Irish Famine, while Jones's sudden immersion in Chartist politics in 1846 was a more mysterious process, especially given his gentry background. When Jones's early poetry did touch on politics, it reflected a generally Tory outlook: his pre-Chartist work appeared in conservative London publications including the *Court Journal* and the *Morning Post*. Mangan's nostalgic visions of a mythic historical Ireland (sometimes allegorized through loose 'translations' from European poetry) became much more intensely focused after 1846: as Robert Welch observes, his more overtly nationalist poetry exhibited 'more personal fire and anger', though it was still 'distanced by the consistent use of mask and metaphor' (1988: 188). Jones's political transformation was more demonstrably dramatic, but his poetry retained the influences of British and German Romanticism; the latter absorbed during his upbringing as the son of the equerry to the Duke of Cumberland (1771–1851, from 1837 King Ernest Augustus of Hanover) in the Duchy of Holstein. In their different ways Jones and Mangan became poetic spokesmen for their causes once they entered into the field of explicitly radical poetry.

Given that Mangan was also heavily influenced by German Romanticism, it is tempting to see in this convergence of poetic interest between Jones and Mangan an interchange of mythic figures and narratives, between German Romanticism, British Chartism, and Irish nationalism in the mid-nineteenth century. But while the literary traffic between the German states and the British Isles might be imagined to have been largely one way (westwards, of course), there is evidence to support the contention that, between the radical poetics of Britain and Ireland, the interplay echoed the well-documented political discourse between Chartism and Irish nationalism at the time. It is significant with regard to Jones's engagement with Irish issues that his rise to prominence within Chartism, politically and poetically, coincided with the occurrence of the Irish Famine and the death of Daniel O'Connell (1775–1847), the leader of the Repeal Association. According to Malcolm Chase, O'Connell's death '[brought] to a close one of the most significant and turbulent careers in Irish politics but also open[ed] up a real possibility of co-operation

between Irish nationalists and British Chartists' (2007: 271). In a broader sense, this co-operation would have been a continuation of a previous trend. Paul A. Pickering has noted that 'the 1842 National Petition, which had been signed by millions of working people in England, called for the repeal of the Union as well as the implementation of the Charter' (1999: 119).

It was politically expedient for the Chartist movement to cast Ernest Jones as previously apolitical when he rapidly emerged as an influential orator and poet in 1846. In fact, in a three-poem series entitled 'Echoes', which he published in the *Morning Post* in early 1844, long before his Chartist 'conversion', Jones consecutively addressed the problems of Ireland, urban industrialization, and political agitation in rural Britain. The first poem of the series, 'The Golden Harp', which is absent from existing Jones bibliographies, is Jones's interpretation of the events of 1843, 'the Repeal Year', when some observers feared that increased political activity and agitation in Ireland had brought Britain close to civil war.² The poem celebrates the withdrawal of the threat of violence, but in terms of the contemporary issues affecting Ireland it is difficult to tell where the writer's political sympathies lie. This ambiguity is perhaps less a deliberate obfuscation than a result of the confusing use of multiple metaphors and imagery which Jones uses to approach his difficult subject. To be generous to Jones it could be suggested that the poem's ambivalence reflects the general strategic uncertainty of Britain's approach to Ireland. In the poem, 'a beautiful Spirit' (l.2) plays a 'golden harp' (l.14) in response to a thunderous storm in which are heard the shouts of millions, 'like the cry of a nation's despair' (l.13). This music has the effect of waking the people 'from their sleep of long years' (l.20), but there is no echo, a lack of response occasioned apparently by a lack of leadership: 'That *coward heart* shrunk at the storm it had called, / And the legions they *doubt*, for the leader's appalled!' (ll.28–9). The tempest passes and the beautiful Spirit is left to quench the flames caused by the lightning's blasts with her tears. She then gazes on a dull flower, identified as a shamrock, who declares that after the defeat of treachery 'the spirit of ERIN shall summon again / From her golden lyre a golden strain' (ll. 55–6). The shamrock then closes the poem with a pair of aphoristic couplets of a distinctly anti-revolutionary nature:

The sun shines but when tempests cease,
Freedom only lives in *Peace*.
It is not discord, fear, and ire
Can raise the *flower* or wake the *lyre*. (ll.57–60)

The problem with this poem, apart from liberal use of national and poetic clichés, is that the reader barely has time to establish the symbolic nature of one metaphor before another comes along to confuse the picture. The tempest is clearly emblematic of revolutionary fervour, but it is difficult to ascertain what the other images are intended to refer to. If the 'coward heart' is meant to represent Daniel O'Connell, the

leader of the Repeal Association, or perhaps the leaders of the Young Ireland movement, it is still difficult to determine whether the voice of the poet is speaking on behalf of the oppressed of Ireland, or crowing over the failure of nerve of an attempted insurrection. 'The Golden Harp' is important, however, in that it establishes Jones's early engagement with political issues, and indeed Irish political issues, almost two years before his involvement with Chartism.

The new-found political consciousness that infused the poetry of Jones and Mangan from 1846 was transformative as much in its effects on the reception of their work as on the production. Radicalism consolidated and gave focus to their particular mythopoetic visions but the sense of a receptive readership, and a narrowed poetic address towards that readership, fed back into their work and gave it a purpose and function hitherto absent. The important shift was that through the organs of the *Northern Star* and the *Nation* both poets became public property, radical laureates for political movements desperately in need of heroes. The association of poetry and literature with higher forms of culture necessitated the recognition of legitimising representatives within Chartism and Irish nationalism. If these movements were to prove themselves as viable alternatives to the status quo they had to mirror the cultural spectra of the established societal structures they set themselves up against. Jones and Mangan found themselves best placed to fulfil roles that may only have been taken by other poets had they not been there.

By the time Mangan published arguably his most famous Gaelic translation, 'Dark Rosaleen' (1846), he was utilising the power of myth to engage directly with political concerns. In this poem, the land is mystically personified as a beautiful female, the character of Dark Rosaleen (*Roisin Dubh*), who inspires confidence and awe:

O! the Erne shall run red
With redundance of blood
The earth shall rock beneath our tread
And flames wrap hill and wood
And gun-peal, and slogan-cry,
Wake many a glen serene,
Ere you shall fade, ere you shall die,
My Dark Rosaleen! (ll.73–9)

While much of the poem utilizes the sense of dislocation and yearning that traditional unrequited love lyrics express to represent the longing for a free Ireland, this stanza associates the figure of the woman with topographical land imagery. The invocation of the landscape contains a concentration of references to political unrest but the whole is incorporated into an erotic mythology built on a nation-specific archetype. Myth is used to simultaneously mask and enhance enjoined calls for political unity and action.

In some Chartist poetry, action was more overtly and emphatically encouraged. Brian Maidment suggests in *The Poorhouse Fugitives* (1987) that threat is an important function of many Chartist lyrics beyond an attempt to 'create and extend group identity and political solidarity' (37). In Jones's Chartist work this threat is almost always directed towards the capitalist class or its perceived enablers in the Established Church or the government, but in the final stanzas of 'The Two Races' (1846) it becomes apparent that the imminent triumph of the working class will demand submission or allegiance from all political classes:

But another strain is sounding,
In music fresh and clear;
And the nation's hearts are bounding,
That glorious psalm to hear.

It tells, a race has risen,
Of more than knightly worth;
Forth-breaking from its prison,
In the dungeons of the earth.

And not by lance or sabre,
These nobles hold their lands,-
But by the right of labour,
And the work of honest hands.

And not for crown and crozier,
They till the sacred sod;
But the liege-lord of their holding,
Is the lord of nature:- God. (ll.89-104)

These stanzas take language traditionally associated with the aristocracy ('knightly', 'nobles', 'liege-lord') and apply it in association with the working class; a linguistic appropriation that both inverts traditional associative values ascribed to different classes, and pre-figures real social, and presumably economic, appropriation through political action. The usurpation of the dominant social position of the aristocrat by the industrialist class detailed by the early sections of the poem is now superseded by the rise of the working class—the work does not concern two 'races' but three. The poem begins to work on levels of multiple address: as an appeal to the aristocracy; as a threat to both the aristocracy and the industrialist class; and as an encouragement of the revolutionary or reformist ideals of the radical working class. The work ends with an increasing emphasis on control of the land, a divine justification for radical political action, and an invocation of natural justice: God is 'the lord of nature', the earth that is farmed by the workers is 'sacred', and the rise of

the working class is accompanied by a 'glorious psalm'. Indeed, the implication of the final lines is that the divine right of kings has been transmuted into the divine right of the working man. The divine approval of this predicted historical phase suggests that not only is it a return to the natural state of things, but that it is to be a state of permanence. By ending the poem with the emphatic monosyllable, 'God', preceded by a heavily indicated pause, Jones suggests an unarguable finality that reinforces the association of the divinity with the workers' right to control the land which they farm. 'The Two Races' was published at the height of support in the *Northern Star* for Feargus O'Connor's ambitious Land Plan.³

In contrast to Jones's poetic attempts to embed 'the people' and 'the land' into the same mythic space, themes of dislocation from the landscape pervade the poetry Mangan published during the Irish Famine. 'The Lovely Land' (1846) describes the speaker viewing a painting of an Irish landscape by Daniel Maclise (1806–70), but thinking at first that the landscape must be Italian or French. The authorial voice's shame on realising that he is looking at a pictorial representation of his homeland is altogether more personal and subjective than Jones's historicising tendency:

Shame on me, my own, my sire-land,
Not to know thy soil and skies!
Shame that through Maclise's eyes
I first see thee, Ireland! (ll. 33–6)

In terms of voice, the great difference between this approach to political poetry and that of Jones or most other Chartist writers is the intensely individual nature of Mangan's subjectivity. In this poem the speaker's relationship with the land is one of personal estrangement redoubled by the revelation that the land is 'first see[n]' in pictorial form. There is almost the sense that the land of Ireland cannot be viewed directly, that its perception must be mediated through cultural filters including paintings, or, in the case of 'Dark Rosaleen', love songs. Given the emotional register of these works it is possible to assume that the purpose of these mediations is at least in part analgesic. For Christopher Morash the difficulties faced by the poet writing about the Famine are due to linguistic, as well as emotional, tensions:

Famine, perhaps more than any other agent of change, forces the poet to make difficult choices; for while the sight of so many of his fellow creatures driven to the limits of existence cries out for some sort of response, famine does not sit comfortably in any of the established poetic idioms of the English tradition. Had the Great Famine taken place a half century earlier, it could have found expression in a native Gaelic tradition that embraced a long history of famine, exile and destitution.

(Morash, 1989: 18)

The steady decline of the Irish language throughout British rule had created a situation where middle-class or urban nationalist poets were writing in the language of their oppressors to represent a population whose peasantry was still largely Gaelic-speaking. This necessitated a hybridization of English and Irish poetic traditions that Mangan, who did not speak Irish but worked from literal translations provided by friends, embraced.

The strategy of viewing Ireland indirectly is a continuation from pre-Nationalist, early works that Mangan claimed were translated from languages including Turkish ('The Karamanian Exile'—*Dublin University Magazine*, 1844) and Arabic ('The Time of the Barmecides'—*Dublin University Magazine*, 1839, 1840). In fact, though he knew German, Mangan did not speak either of these languages, and the 'translations' were poetic hoaxes which, according to Henry J. Donaghy, used 'a mythic golden past to visualize a supposedly similar golden past of Ireland's' (1974: 35). Both Mangan and Jones use their own visions of the past in order to defamiliarize the present, but Mangan occasionally adds an exoticism with his strategy of geographical, as well as temporal, dislocation:

Then youth was mine, and a fierce wild will,
And an iron arm in war,
And a fleet foot high upon ISHKAR'S hill,
When the watch-lights glimmered afar,
And a barb as fiery as any I know
That Khoord or Beddaween rides,
Ere my friends lay low,- long, long ago,
In the time of the Barmecides,
Ere my friends lay low,- long, long ago,
In the time of the Barmecides.

(‘The Time of the Barmecides’, ll.11–20)

The first two lines of this stanza bear a striking resemblance to the first stanza of Ernest Jones's translation for the *Court Journal* of 'The German Boy's Song'⁴ by Count Friedrich Leopold von Stolberg (1750–1819):

My arm grows strong, my spirits soar!
Give me a sword to wield!
Father! Despise my youth no more;
I'm worthy of the field. (ll.1–4)

This may not be a result of direct influence between the two poets; Mangan was also a translator of German literature. David Lloyd has noted that:

Mangan's translations from and articles on German literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries constitute the greater part of his

literary output. [...] The material he translated is remarkably various, ranging from the work of familiar figures such as Goethe, Schiller, Jean Paul, Novalis, and Heine to lesser known writers including Justinus Kerner, Cristoph Tiedge, and Friedrich De La Motte Fouqué.

(Lloyd, 1987: 129)

Mangan also translated poems by Ludwig Uhland, Friedrich Rückert and Ernst Moritz Arndt, the providers of the originals of some of the other works Jones translated for the *Court Journal* in the early 1840s. Both poets draw from their exposure to the literature of German Romanticism an association of youth with patriotic or even revolutionary fervour, even if these youthful figures are not warlike. The youth of Mangan's 'Kathleen Ny-Houlahan' is reinforced by the rather curious insistence that she is 'not a ghastly hag'; Jones utilized youthful figures of visionary radicalism including the speaker of 'The Blind Boy's Song' (*Northern Star*, 15 January 1848). Both writers employed the association between youth and a new political beginning, with its connotations of potentiality and lack of a corrupting memory of previous regimes and political systems.

In terms of content and register, Jones's poetry displays more directness, more overt political muscularity than Mangan's. He is, perhaps, the less subtle writer. But it could be argued that for a political movement with a pre-existing political aesthetic and an ostensibly single, easily definable function (the attainment of the vote for the working man), such directness was appropriate. Jones wrote for a very wide and varied readership and, in terms of literariness and even literacy, he had to take account of the lowest common denominator. Mangan's case was more complicated on both counts. The Irish Famine re-focused nationalism and created in Irish poetry a sense of urgency and almost hallucinatory disbelief: Mangan's poetry became more relevant precisely because of its dark colours and occasional semantic opacity. In terms of readership, Mangan was writing for a smaller, more literate audience for whom the Irish Famine and its attendant trends of mass emigration precipitated the need for increased efforts to establish a solid national identity.

The separate causes of occupation and industrial urbanization produced similar recognitions and representations of geographical dislocation in the poetry of Jones and Mangan. The audiences they wrote for, and to, were similarly alienated from what was perceived as their birthright. Both poets drew on rich storehouses of mythic national history to invoke a radical nostalgia that was conversely conservative in its essential nature: a more just future necessitated a form of return to the past. Adapting examples partly provided by their shared influence of patriotic German Romantic poetry, Jones and Mangan presented visions of histories that were cyclical, recoverable, and existed to justify present political action. But beyond immediate political goals, the poetry of these writers reflected the ultimate ambition of both Irish nationalism and Chartism: the creation of cultural identities worthy of the political self-determination they respectively sought.

Notes

1. For further discussion of Chartist poetry's function of cultural justification see Sanders, 2009: 85.
2. Anne Janowitz makes reference to the second poem in the 'Echoes' series, 'The Cornfield and the Factory', in *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* (1998: 177), but only identifies it as a stand-alone poem republished in the *Northern Star* in June 1846.
3. The Chartist Land Plan was intended to provide viable agricultural plots and residences for urban workers through a subscription scheme. Much of the pastoral vision of Jones's early Chartist poetry is informed by the Land Plan's policy to return urban workers to the perceived smallholding traditions of their forefathers.
4. Jones, 'The German Boy's Song', translated from Count Friedrich Leopold von Stolberg. Cutting from *The Court Journal* (no date), Ernest Jones Manuscript Poems, Manchester County Record Office, MS. f281.89 J5/95.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.5920/idp.2015.1257>

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