

“ROUGHLY HAMMERED LINKS”: LADY GREGORY, IRISH BALLADS, AND POLITICAL MEMORY

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They shall be remembered for ever;
They shall be alive for ever;
They shall be speaking for ever;
The people shall hear them for ever.

— *Cathleen ní Houliban*

Ballads, like heroes, thrive in the Irish popular imagination. In the nineteenth century, the aftermath of the 1798 rebellion inspired hundreds of ballads, composed in both Irish and English. These ballads, set to familiar tunes, had an amazing capacity to travel and, as a traditional art form tied to Gaelic Ireland, seemed an appropriate vehicle for stimulating the public memory. They did not always include details of 1798 or other particular historical events, but often referred obliquely to those events in order to connect the past to the present in the minds of listeners. Ballads urged people to both remember the past and recognize it in the events of the present, an important objective during the 1898 Centenary and the years leading up to the 1916 Rising.

Irish political ballads became an important genre to the writers of the Irish Literary Revival. W. B. Yeats wrote many poems in ballad form; Douglas Hyde collected and published ballads in both their original Irish and in English. Ballads were central to Lady Gregory's work, both on and off the stage. However, she used ballads in a very different way than other writers of the Revival. Because Gregory was a nationalist, and because her gender and her position in the upper class required her to be somewhat circumspect about her nationalism, particularly in the years before 1916, she took full advantage of the subtly seditious quality of ballads. She used coded language, editorial posturing, and the seemingly innocent agenda of promoting Irish language and literature to express her nationalist sentiments in a way that would not damage her socially. By tracing her use of ballads from 1900 to 1926, Gregory's manipulation of her subject matter, as well as her disguised nationalist agenda, becomes obvious.

Gregory began collecting ballads in the mid 1890s, although she claimed a familiarity with the genre from childhood.¹ Gregory used ballads in many of her early plays. In *Cathleen ní Houliban* (1902), which she wrote with Yeats, the Old Woman sings ballads to persuade Michael Gillane to abandon his fiancée and join the fight for Ireland. The Old Woman sings “Fair-Haired Donough,” a ballad included by Gregory in her essay “West Irish Ballads,” and a second ballad before singing the famous lines which cause Michael Gillane to abandon his family and his fiancée in order to fight for his country (quoted above).

Gregory's *The Rising of the Moon* (1904) employs ballads in a similarly seductive way. The Rebel, disguised as a ballad singer, appeals to the Sergeant's emotional connections to

Ireland through ballads such as “Johnny Hart,” “Granuaile,” “The Shan Van Vocht,” and “Green on the Cape.” The ballad “The Rising of the Moon” serves as a signal between the Rebel and his rescuers (*Collected Plays 1*: 65). The powerful songs and memories of the “great spirit” the Sergeant had in his boyhood cause him to ignore his vows to the police force and allow the Rebel to escape; the Sergeant sacrifices a hefty reward and possibly his job for the cause of Irish freedom (64). In *Dervogilla* (1907), Dervogilla, an old woman, lives disguised in an Abbey, serving penance for her part in Diarmuid’s invitation to the English to enter Ireland. A wandering ballad singer condemns Diarmuid and Dervogilla in his song, eventually bringing about the death of an old man and Dervogilla’s disgrace before the people, who, despite her good deeds since that time, cannot forgive her for “the lasting trouble [her] unfaithfulness has brought upon the children of Ireland forever” (*Collected Plays 2*: 110). Gregory also uses ballads in *The White Cockade* (1905) to highlight the contrast between James II’s reputation as “The darling Caesar of the Gael, / The great Cuchulain of the War!” and his cowardly actions at the Battle of the Boyne (2: 233). All of these plays exploit the persuasive power of ballads on both the individual and the public memory. In *Cathleen ni Houliban* and *The Rising of the Moon*, ballads inspire heroic action. In *The White Cockade* and *Dervogilla*, ballads remind the people of their history and warn them never to forgive or forget the wrongs of the past.

Turning away from Gregory’s dramatic use of ballads to her non-fiction work, we find that her priorities shifted from highlighting a few ballads to cataloguing a range of ballads. Her 1900 essay “The Felons of Our Land,” her five essays on ballads in the 1903 volume *Poets and Dreamers*, and her original poem written in ballad form, “An Old Woman Remembers,” performed at the Abbey in 1923 and published in 1924, all reveal an undeniably nationalist agenda. However, Gregory either emphasized or repressed her agenda based on her audience. In suppressing her nationalist agenda, she deliberately protects herself from charges of nationalism in order to protect her social standing, the only real power available to a Victorian Anglo-Irish woman.¹

“The Felons of Our Land” appeared in *Cornhill Magazine* in May 1900. In this essay, Gregory notes two features of ballads which made the genre particularly appealing to her. Ballads take the place of an Irish history curriculum in the national schools, singing “the memory of each new movement, and of the men who guided it, into the memory of each new generation” (*Selected Writings 257*). Sometimes, she notes, a particular movement is celebrated, “the 98 rebellion above all.” But more important to Gregory is the role of ballads in honoring the names of “the ‘felons’ themselves, ‘the men who loved the cause that never dies’” (257-258).² Gregory explains in her essay that, in Ireland, a felon has come to mean one who has gone to death or to prison for the sake of a principle or a cause, someone who has committed a crime in the eyes of the law, not in the eyes of the people (255).

Gregory also found ballads useful for teaching the value of what Yeats calls “tragic joy.” All during the nineteenth century, England wrote songs of victory, while Ireland wrote songs of defeat. However, Gregory points out that

it is not a material victory that most needs interpretation in song. The newspaper placard that tells of it is enough to stir the blood, to swell the pride, of the passer-by. The song-writer, the poet, would find a better mission were he to tell of the meaning of failure, of the gain that may lie in

the wake of a lost battle. If he himself possessed the faith that is the evidence of things unseen, he would strive to give spiritual vision to trembling and discouraged men. (254)

Irish rebellions failed time and time again, but the spirit of the Irish people and the importance of fighting for freedom did not fail. Every defeat inspired another fight because faith and hope remained the strongest weapons that an oppressed society could muster.

As if to emphasize the inspirational value of the ballads, in terms of public memory and public spirit, Gregory uses this essay as a medium to reprint the lyrics to fourteen ballads, including “The Felons of Our Land,” “The Rising of the Moon,” and “The Smashing of the Van.” She also reproduces an unnamed ballad which lists the participants in the 1798 and 1803 rebellions, and then gives the reader the history behind some of the lesser known names, including Henry and John Sheares, Protestants and barristers who joined the United Irishmen and were executed in 1798 (259). She provides background for the ballad “God Save Ireland!” by detailing the tragedy of the Manchester triple execution, a result of the Fenian outbreak of 1867, and quotes at length from the last letter of one of the executed men: “I am dying an honourable death. I am dying for Ireland, dying for the land that gave me birth, dying for the island of saints and dying for liberty. Every generation of our countrymen has suffered, and where is the Irish heart could stand by unmoved?” (264). This is precisely the heroic ideal which Gregory described in her 1902 *Cuchulain of Muirbennne* and also in *Cathleen ni Houliban* the same year — the idea of the man of action, willing to sacrifice his life for his country, willing to add his name to the roster of failed heroes who will inspire the next generation. She notes that these sacrifices resonate strongly with the Irish Catholic, who has “always before his eyes, on his own cottage walls or in his white-washed chapel, the cross, the spear, the crown of thorns, that tell of what once seemed earthly failure, that tell that He to whom he kneels was led to a felon’s death” (268). Gregory specifically connects nationalist heroism to Catholicism, implying that the historic cycle of Catholic oppression and rebellion will eventually be broken by victory. Gregory provides an element of divine grace in her vision of suffering and sacrificing one’s life for one’s country; again, she uses Yeats’s poetic theme of tragic joy.

Towards the end of “The Felons of Our Land,” Gregory employs the metaphor which she will continue to connect with ballads over the rest of her career. She explains that the ballads have “a redeeming intensity and continuity of purpose even [in] doggerel verses . . . ; they are not without dignity if looked on as roughly hammered links in an unequally wrought chain” (265). This idea of the chain, linking generation to generation through memory and song, influenced Gregory’s work in other genres. She also used the metaphor to construct her essays on ballads, and eventually her own ballad. The roughly hammered links, the mixture of lesser-known names with well-known names described earlier, provided an opportunity to instruct the Irish public; this contribution to the public memory of tragic heroes was high on the list of Gregory’s objectives.

“The Felons of Our Land,” a bold nationalist statement meant to instruct and inspire the Irish public, did not go unnoticed. Gregory found herself being reprimanded by some of her late husband’s friends, men she hoped would some day be helpful to her son Robert in his career. In her diary of April 30th, 1900, she details one such admonishment:

My “Felons of our Land” had arrived, & de B[asterot] read it, & gave me talking to in the evening—complimentary as to style, but thinks I am going too far away from the opinions of my husband & my son — I told him I am convinced my husband would have been with me in all I have done so far — but that I had already determined not to go so far towards political nationalism in anything I write again as in the “Felons” partly because I wish to keep out of politics & work only for literature, & partly because if Robert is Imperialist I dont want to separate myself from him — so he preached to the converted — He winds up by saying in disgust that that sort of patriotic doggerel makes him seasick — . (*Diaries* 267)

This “talking to” did not dampen Gregory’s enthusiasm for either ballads or nationalism; it simply encouraged her to proceed with caution and subtlety. Rather than cataloguing heroic ballads, she began to use ballads to support the nationalist, but literary, Gaelic League and to promote the ancient tradition of Irish literature.

This new subtlety manifests itself in several essays published in *Poets and Dreamers* (1903). In her essay on Raftery, although she credits the poet with teaching history to the people of Mayo and Galway and quotes a nationalist song composed at the time of the Tithe War, she constructs her essay to concentrate on the less inflammatory topic of Raftery’s rivalry with the poet Callinan. She carefully describes Raftery’s nationalist sympathies, but adds that Raftery had a bad temper and occasionally wrote unflattering poems about those who crossed him. Gregory awards the title of best poet to Raftery, the wandering, bad-tempered, nationalist rascal, rather than to Callinan, who wrote some poetry in English and lived comfortably on a farm. If Raftery had been born a few decades later, she says, he would have based his poems on the formulas of English verse, instead of following Greek and Roman models. Gregory implies, but does not state, that Raftery thus avoids the taint of Englishness that would have ruined him as a poet. Instead, she quotes long passages from his love poetry, including one rather bawdy lyric on which she does not comment. She also condemns Cromwell’s invasion and the Famine as contributors to the decline in Irish poetry but does not mention England’s role in either event. In other words, Gregory learned to use the same sort of code that makes ballads such effective political tools. Just as the ballad poets used “1798” as shorthand for rebellion, bloodshed, pikes, and all of the other images associated with that long fateful summer, Gregory used English poetry, Cromwell, and the Famine to undercut the achievements of Callinan and lament the decline in Irish poetry. The essay ends with Gregory’s observation that a few wandering Irish poets still live, and she says,

I think these will be held in greater honour as the time of awakening goes on. But the nineteenth century has been a time of swift change in many countries; and in looking back on that century in Ireland there seem to have been two great landslips — the breaking of the continuity of the social life of the people by the famine, and the breaking of the continuity of their intellectual life by the shoving out of the language. (*Poets and Dreamers* 40)

Her nationalism is thinly disguised here behind a veil of support for the Gaelic League.

“West Irish Ballads,” also published in *Poets and Dreamers*, continues her lament for the decline of both the Irish language and Irish poetry by reiterating her idea that ballads are a link with the “great mass of traditional poetry that was swept away in the last century in the merciless sweeping away of the Irish tongue” and that the ballads which she has gathered from the people are the remains of a lyric tradition that thrived in Ireland before Chaucer’s birth (43). These ballads are more vital to Ireland than anything that can be found in the columns of nationalist newspapers, she argues, but then quotes from laments for drowned lovers and unfulfilled dreams as well as love songs. The one exception is the inclusion of the lament “Fair-Haired Donough,” which also appears in *Cathleen ni Houliban*. Gregory describes the subject of that lament as some Connachtman who was hanged in Galway, and states that “it is clear it was for some political crime he was hanged, by the suggestion that if he had been tried nearer his own home, . . . the issue would have been different, and by the allusion to the Gall, the English” (44). Again, Gregory’s emphasis in these two essays is more supportive of the language movement and the Gaelic League than of any particular political agenda, and she certainly offers no heroic ballads to enrich the public memory. Her focus, as she promised de Basterot, is on the promotion of Irish literature.

Despite the political references in her titles, her goal is very similar in the other essays included in *Poets and Dreamers*, “Jacobite Ballads,” “An Craoibhin’s Poems,” and “Boer Ballads” in Ireland. “Jacobite Ballads” relates the same information given in the play “The White Cockade,” namely that the public memory in the West of Ireland has little room for the Stuarts. She relates various amusing folk-stories of the cowardice of James II after the Battle of the Boyne, and concludes that the Jacobite ballads, which are mainly from Munster, are kept alive in the public memory to honor the poets who wrote them, rather than the King who deserted Ireland. Gregory also includes several versions of *aísling* poems, depicting Ireland as a beautiful young woman, and a ballad praising the bravery of Patrick Sarsfield. The ballads she includes are not overly nationalist or rebellious, although she notes that “the imagination of Ireland still tilts the beam to the national side; and the loyalty the poets of many hundred years have called for, is loyalty to Kathleen ni Houlihan” (61). Here, as in the play, she posits Patrick Sarsfield, the Irishman, as a hero far superior to James Stuart. She also turns to her favorite source, “the book of the people,” for her knowledge, proving that years of oppression and substandard English language literature have not diluted the public memory. The great traditions of Irish literature and Irish heroes are alive and well in the memory of the people.

The most noticeable line in her essay on Douglas Hyde is her coy confession that she might not recognize a political poem if she saw one. This statement directly precedes her translation from the Irish of what appears to be a blatant call for freedom, a poem with the refrain, “Can I not walk, can I not walk, can I not walk in my own fields” and the ending, “The day is coming as it’s easy to see, / When there shall not be among us the ugly like of you. / And each one shall be walking, and each one shall be walking, / Wherever shall be his will and his own desire” (66). As she has proved quite capable of identifying political poems in “The Felons of Our Land,” this editorial posturing can be seen as an attempt to veil her political agenda. Again, Gregory claims to be promoting only Irish language and literature; she avoids connecting these nationalist movements to anti-English sentiment or to a particular political agenda.

She tries a different tactic in “Boer Ballads in Ireland,” using literary criticism as an

excuse to print twelve ballads, most of which she refers to as “doggerel” since they were written in English and because the ballad, “more than another song, must have a long tradition of folk-thought and folk-expression behind it; and in Ireland this tradition does not belong to the English language” (72). Doggerel they may be, but they also urge Irishmen not to fight and die in English wars. She reprints ballads that praise Irish military prowess, even when they fight for the English. But because she establishes literary criteria for these ballads, she also includes some blatant anti-English verses under the pretext of showing their lack of literary quality:

Even the beautiful air of ‘The Wearing of the Green’ cannot give poetic charm to such verses as these, which, like the others that follow, have been sung and sold by ballad-singers in market-towns and at fairs, and at country race-meetings, during the last year:—

Oh! Paddy dear, and did ye hear
The news thats going round?
No cheers for brave Paul Kruger
Must be heard on Irish ground.
No more the English tourist at
Killarney will be seen,
Unless you join the pirate’s cause
And chant ‘God save the Queen.’

Or this other, sung during the siege of Ladysmith: —

And I met with White the General,
And he’s looking thin enough;
And he says the boys in Ladysmith
Are running short of stuff.
Faith, the dishes need no washing,
Now they’re left so nice and clean;
Oh! its anything but pleasant
To be starving for the Queen! (72-73)

The inclusion of such anti-English lyrics, particularly one that mentions starving Irishmen in connection with an English queen, is hardly innocent of nationalist motives. Gregory also includes several ballads that express sympathy between the Boer farmers and the Irish people, adding that she has collected these from broadsheets and translated one from Irish. Again, she presents her agenda as editorial and informative, rather than politically motivated. She presents the inclusion of these ballads as more of a public service than a nationalist statement; she says she is merely trying to explain to the public the difference between a good ballad and “doggerel.” It seems de Basterot’s “talking to” is still ringing in her ears. Gregory’s stage plays are much more directly nationalist at this time, and even there she drapes her Nationalism behind the curtain of history, writing about events in the past as if time has rendered them apolitical. Her reputation as an artist always takes second place to the goal of protecting her social status.

However, twenty years later, in 1923, after the Easter Uprising, the Black and Tan violence, the Civil War, and the death of her son Robert, Gregory finally took a firm

nationalist stance when she wrote about ballads. All of the energy and interest which she tempered in the early 1900s in deference to her late husband's friends and her teen-aged son was forcefully released.³ Some critics might argue that Gregory had nothing to lose by declaring her nationalism in the 1920s, but I believe that her nationalism is obvious from the late 1890s onward because of her work with ballads, essays, and plays.

"The Old Woman Remembers" is Gregory's own attempt at a roughly hammered link, her contribution to the genre of heroic ballads. The poem was begun on July 10th, 1921, the day after the truce was proclaimed, inspired by the thought that peace had finally come to Ireland. Gregory says "an old idea came to mind of making a poem about the rebellions from century to century, an old woman lighting a candle for the leader of each" (*Collected Plays* 2 360). The poem uses the metaphor of hurling throughout, portraying Ireland as a playing field on which great men have struggled for the prize of Irish freedom. The poem also takes the form of a requiem mass, with the old woman telling out the names on her beads and lighting candles for the dead. Each name, then, also becomes a roughly hammered link in the chain of Irish heroism: Donall O'Brien, Phelim O'Connor, Art MacMurrough, Hugh O'Neill, Patrick Sarsfield, Wolfe Tone, Lord Edward Fitzgerald, Robert Emmet, the men of Easter 1916, Kevin Barry, and Terence MacSwiney. Again, it is typical of Gregory to mix in lesser known names with those well known; she means to educate the public memory. She notes that these are just some of those "whose names are sung or said / Through seven hundred years of days / The silver beads upon the thread" (359). All of these men have played some part, large or small, in the centuries-old resistance to England.

Gregory changes her emphasis even while writing this ballad. The endings differ; the performed version of 1923 ends with the lines:

The barren shadow-weapons fall,
The bitter battle-angers cease;
And so God give to them and all
The blessing of His lasting peace. (360)

The published version of 1924 ends by replacing images of war with the symbol of the rosary, emphasizing even more strongly the idea that peace had finally come to Ireland:

This is our Rosary of praise;
God make us worthy all our days
Of those who gave up life and ease
To win us a long day of peace! (361)

She also shifts from a third person pronoun to more inclusive first person pronouns, directly connecting herself and her readers to those Irish heroes of the past. Neither version is great poetry; Gregory seems all too capable of turning out the sort of doggerel she was criticizing in 1903. However, even in 1903 she included the less-than-literary ballads in their rightful place on that "chain of unequal workmanship" which links ancient Ireland to contemporary Ireland through the continual celebration of heroes.

Gregory's 1926 edition of *The Kiltartan History Book* included a new section entitled "Some Broadsheet Ballads of the Wars." She offers no editorial comment or literary

criticism; she simply prints the lyrics to eighteen ballads, including such nationalist classics as “The Croppy Boy,” “Father Murphy,” “The Men of Easter Week,” and “Kevin Barry.” At the back of the volume, she mentions that she has added these ballads, even though they are “far from having the wildness and beauty of the passionate outcries made in earlier years in the native language, [because] they are as I have called them elsewhere, ‘roughly hammered links in a chain of unequal workmanship’ that stretches back to the time when Spenser advised Queen Elizabeth to harry the poets out of Ireland” (*Kiltartan* 149). The need for a literary pretext has vanished with the declaration of the Irish nation; Gregory is back to her original methodology of cataloguing. Her purpose here is the same as her purpose throughout the years, to educate and inspire the public memory by supplying a steady stream of nationalist ballads.

To conclude, Gregory’s ballad work in the twenties is more obviously nationalist than any non-fiction work since the “talking to” of 1900. However, she used ballads throughout her career, at first subtly and later overtly, to enhance and educate the public memory, constantly calling attention to the fact that ballads had always been used in this way. As a genre, they fit her “great man” theory of history as they celebrate both the heroes, the men of action, and the poets, the men of words, in a continuous line from the ancients to the present, all links in the chain of tragic joy that is Irish history.

NOTES

1. In the first chapter of *Seventy Years*, Gregory remembers spending the sixpence earned by repeating Bible verses correctly:
standing on tiptoe at the counter of the little Loughrea book-shop [I] would purchase one by one the paper covered collections of national ballads, *The Harp of Tara*, *The Irish Song Book*, and the like. It was perhaps because of the old bookseller calling attention to this by saying in his shop one day, “I look to Miss Augusta to buy all my Fenian books,” that led to a birthday present of *The Spirit of the Nation*, a shilling copy, bound in green cloth, from the sister next in age...with Dr. Johnson’s sarcasm written in it “Patriotism is the last refuge of a Scoundrel.” (13-14)
2. Gregory explains in her essay that, in Ireland, “a ‘felon’ has come to mean one who has gone to death or to prison for the sake of a principle or a cause, someone who has committed a crime in the eyes of the law, not in the eyes of the people” (255).
3. The six articles Gregory published in *The Nation* (1920-1) on the Black and Tan violence around Coole are equal to “The Felons of Our Land” in terms of nationalist sentiment, but they are published anonymously.

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