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## **“Into the West”: The West of Ireland in the Writings of French Travellers**

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# “Into the West”: The West of Ireland in the Writings of French Travellers

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## Abstract

Through nine texts written between the late eighteenth and early twentieth century and representative of a far larger corpus, this study focuses on depictions of the west of Ireland by French travellers of that period. The west looks not Irish but Spanish (people's physiognomy, their clothes, urban and rural landscapes). For some commentators, the west is exotic but also “authentic” in its loyalty to old ways (religion and language, for instance). They deplore the homogenising power of encroaching modernity. Others lambast old ways as proof of primitivism and even degeneracy.

Keywords: Franco-Irish relations, travel writing, Connaught

## Résumé

*S'appuyant sur neuf textes écrits entre la fin du dix-huitième et le début du vingtième siècle et représentatifs d'un plus vaste corpus, cette étude analyse les représentations de l'ouest de l'Irlande chez les voyageurs français de l'époque. L'ouest est moins irlandais qu'espagnol (physionomie, vêtements, villes et campagne). Pour certains, l'ouest est exotique mais également « authentique » parce que fidèle au passé (religion, langue). Ils déplorent l'homogénéisation résultant de la modernité. D'autres fustigent l'attachement au passé comme indicateur de primitivisme et même de dégénérescence.*

*Mots clés : Relations franco-irlandaises, récits de voyage, Connaught*

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In *A Star Called Henry*, Booker prize-winner Roddy Doyle's 1999 novel, one of the characters castigates Irish nationalists in the following terms:

They hated anyone or anything from Dublin. Dublin was too close to England; it was where orders and cruelty came from [...]. Ireland was everywhere west of Dublin, the real people were west, west, west, as far west as possible, on the islands, the rocks, off the islands, speaking Irish and eating wool<sup>1</sup>.

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1. Roddy Doyle, *A Star called Henry*, New York, Random House, 2008 [1999], p. 212.

This essay focuses on depictions of the west of Ireland not among Irish nationalists but in the writings of French travellers throughout the long nineteenth century, a period bookended by two revolutions: the French Revolution and the First World War.

French travel writing on Ireland developed especially from the early modern period of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onwards<sup>2</sup>. However, it was arguably in the nineteenth century that it reached its apogee. Out of the wealth of existing material left behind by French travellers throughout this period, this study will focus on the depiction of the west of Ireland in nine representative texts, chosen as they afford us an accurate flavour of the vast and immensely varied corpus of material from that period. The writers in question were:

– Pierre-Nicolas Chantreau, alias le Citoyen Chantreau (1741-1808), historian, journalist, grammarian, lexicographer, teacher and civil servant with a particular interest in education<sup>3</sup>.

– Charles-Etienne Coquebert de Montbret (1755-1831), diplomat, mathematician, geographer, botanist, member of the Institut and of the Académie des Sciences, responsible *inter alia* for introducing the new system of weights and measures under the 1793 legislation. He spent much of his time as French consul in Dublin around the time of the Revolution travelling the country with his young son at his side<sup>4</sup>.

– Louis-Octave Fontaine, Jean-Louis Jobit and Jean Sarrazin, three leaders of the French expeditionary forces who landed in Killala Bay in 1798<sup>5</sup>.

– Pierre-Etienne-Denis Saint Germain Leduc (1799-18 ?). His numerous, wide-ranging publications include a contribution on Tuscany to Chateaubriand's guide to Italy, Sicily, Elba, Sardinia and Malta (1835-37)<sup>6</sup>.

– Felix Narjoux (1836 ?-91), an architect who had worked with Viollet-le-Duc<sup>7</sup>.

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2. See especially Jane Conroy, "Entre réel et imaginaire: les voyageurs français en Irlande, 1650-1850", Paul Brennan, Paul and Michael Dea, (eds), *Entrelacs franco-irlandais: langue, mémoire et imaginaire*, Caen, Presses universitaires de Caen, 2004, pp. 45-64.

3. Pierre-Nicolas Chantreau, *Voyage dans les trois royaumes d'Angleterre, d'Écosse et d'Irlande fait en 1788 et 1789*, Paris, Briand, 1792, vol. 3.

4. Parts of Coquebert de Montbret's fascinating Irish diary have been edited and commented by Sile Ni Chinneide; see especially Sile Ni Chinneide, "Coquebert de Montbret's Impressions of Galway City and County in the Year 1791", *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, Vol. XXV, n° 1 and 2, 1952, p. 1-14; "A Frenchman's Tour of Connacht in 1791 (part 1)", *ibid.*, vol. 35, 1976, p. 52-66; part 11, *ibid.*, vol. 36, 1977-78, p. 30-42.

5. See the edition of the writings of the French expeditionary leaders, Sarrazin, Jobit and Fontaine, by Pierre Joannon, *La Descente des Français en Irlande – 1798*, Paris, La Vouivre, 1998.

6. Pierre-Etienne-Denis Saint Germain Leduc, *L'Angleterre, l'Écosse et l'Irlande: relation d'un voyage dans les trois royaumes*, Paris, Levrault, 1838, vol. 3.

7. Félix Narjoux, *En Angleterre, Ecosse, Irlande. Les pays, les habitants, la vie intérieure*, Paris, E. Plon, 1886.

– La Marquise de Bois-Hébert, alias Marie-Anne de Bovet (1855-?), prolific author of novels, travelogues, literary criticism, chronicles and essays<sup>8</sup>.

– Charles Legras (1872-19?), journalist at the *Journal des débats* and Paris correspondent of the *Westminster Gazette*<sup>9</sup>.

– The unnamed author of a tourist guide, *Le Guide Joanne: Angleterre, Ecosse, Irlande*, published in Paris by mainstream publisher, Hachette, in 1912<sup>10</sup>.

– Marguerite Mespoulet, an *agregée* of English and Madeleine Mignon, an *agregée* of mathematics. Mespoulet and Mignon were in their early thirties when they visited Ireland in May-June 1913 with funding from philanthropist, Albert Kahn<sup>11</sup>. From the six weeks they spent travelling mainly in and around Galway they left a diary and approximately 70 remarkable colour photographs, the earliest extant colour photos of Ireland<sup>12</sup>.

These publications, spanning over one hundred and twenty years of intense political and social change in Ireland, and comprising written texts, drawings, maps, time-tables and photographs, afford us a rich and variegated account of the country as viewed through the eyes of visitors from our nearest Continental neighbour and age-old ally, France.

Direction is a topic that has arguably received insufficient attention in studies of Irish texts, despite a profusion of primary material in this area<sup>13</sup>. In the case of the West, early Irish texts such as *Immram Brain* depict pre-Christian Ireland looking westwards towards where the islands of the blessed were believed to lie. The West was also where the land of eternal youth, *Tír na nÓg*, was located in the story of Niamh and Oisín. The European “discovery” of America, that other “great land beyond the western waves” (as it is often called in the archives of the Irish Folklore Commission) is said in Irish folk belief to have been the work of a Kerryman, St Brendan. Centuries later, as Irish folk song reminds us, westwards was where the promised land and latter-day salvation might (or might not) be found, amid streets paved with gold, awaiting wave upon wave of Irish emigrants.

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8. Marie-Anne de Bovet, *Irlande 1889 : trois mois en Irlande*, Ar Releg-Kerhuon, An Here, 1997, originally published as *Trois mois en Irlande*, Paris, Hachette, 1891.

9. Charles Legras, *Terre d'Irlande*, Paris, P. Ollendorff, 1898.

10. *Le Guide Joanne : Angleterre, Écosse, Irlande*, Paris, Hachette, 1912.

11. Marguerite Mespoulet and Madeleine Mignon, *Irlande 1913: Clichés en couleur pris pour Monsieur Kahn* (preface by Jeanne Beausoleil, postface by Gilles Baud Berthier and Marie Bonnehomme), Paris, Presses Artistiques/Conseil Général des Hauts-de-Seine, 1988; all quotations in this chapter are taken from this edition. See also the facsimile of this work, Marguerite Mespoulet and Madeleine Mignon, *Carnet d'Irlande*, Paris, Musée Albert Kahn/Conseil Général des Hauts-de-Seine, 2005. It is now generally accepted that the travelogue and photos were the work primarily of Mespoulet.

12. See Catherine Maignant, ‘Les clichés photographiques en couleur pris en Irlande pour Monsieur Kahn (1913): regards idéologiques croisés’, in Catherine Maignant, ed., *La France et l'Irlande : destins croisés*, Lille, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2013, p. 115-132; Grace Neville, ‘À la recherche de l'Irlande perdue : Two French Photographers in Ireland in 1913’, *Études Irlandaises*, n. XVI-2, December 1991, p. 75-89.

13. See, however, Christophe Gillissen, ed., *Ireland: Looking East*, Brussels, Peter Lang, 2010.

During the Celtic revival in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the west of Ireland cast its spell on a motley crew of writers, artists and revolutionaries, from Synge and Yeats, to Paul Henry, his wife Grace, and countless others including Patrick Pearse.

What about French views of this region, however? Throughout the period under discussion, the West was arguably the part of Ireland least visited by travellers, French or otherwise. Practical issues like the difficulty of travel, particularly the lack of a good transport infrastructure, no doubt go a long way to explaining that. A frequent circuit at the time was for travellers to arrive from Britain in Belfast or Dublin, then to proceed on an eastern sweep, taking in for instance Newgrange and Wicklow, before heading south to Cork and the newly developed tourist destination of Killarney and then travelling homewards. Thus, relatively few intrepid souls ventured west of the Shannon, across what Joyce memorably termed “the dark mutinous Shannon waves<sup>14</sup>”. Saint Germain Leduc says as much: “*Le Connaught est une partie sauvage de l’Irlande que les étrangers ne visitant jamais et les autres Irlandais eux-mêmes rarement. Une malédiction populaire est celle-ci: Go to hell and Connaught (allez au diable et en Connaught)*”<sup>15</sup>.

At one level, what they found there was not radically different from what they had witnessed elsewhere throughout Ireland: extreme poverty, dirt, laziness, beggars, tumbledown cottages in towns and well as in the countryside<sup>16</sup>. For de Bovet, writing in 1889, even the River Shannon is lazy (“*les eaux paresseuses du Shannon*”<sup>17</sup>)! However, at another level, they depict the west of Ireland as being quite different from anything they had witnessed east of the Shannon. That is not to say that they see the rest of Ireland as some undifferentiated reality. For instance, a constant trope is the contrast they establish between what they view as the hardworking north and the indolent south, neatly superposing this onto a map of Ireland with its Protestant north and Catholic south. However, there is more than a suggestion that there is something extreme about the west of Ireland. Even its geographic location is extreme, perched on the western rim of “*le vieux continent*”, as far west in Europe as it is possible to travel. Again and again, commentators refer to “*le far west irlandais*”<sup>18</sup>. De Bovet reminds us that the next port of call after Galway is 2,700 miles off in faraway New York and waxes lyrical about the next landfall being the New World: “[e]t devant soi toujours le grand Atlantique roulant jusque sur les grèves du Nouveau Monde ses flots d’un violet strié de

14. James Joyce, “The Dead”, in *Dubliners*, London, Penguin Modern Classics, 2000 [1914], p. 255.

15. Saint Germain Leduc, p. 264.

16. Grace Neville, “Poverty-trapped: French Traveller Accounts of Poverty in Irish Towns over the Centuries”, paper presented at the 31<sup>st</sup> annual conference of the SOFEIR, Université de Strasbourg, 16 March 2013 (publication forthcoming).

17. De Bovet, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

18. For instance de Bovet, *op. cit.*, p. 279, 301

*longues bandes vertes, et dans le lointain fuyant de l'horizon clair, le baiser infini de la mer et du ciel*<sup>19</sup>."

Geographical location is not the only form of extremism visible in the West, however. Social realities such as poverty are more intense there than anywhere else in the country. Superlatives abound. For de Bovet, "[n]ul part ce marasme commercial et industriel n'est profond comme à Galway. Nous sommes dans le Connaught, le plus stérile des quatre provinces et la plus abondamment peuplée"<sup>20</sup>. The Congested Districts merit a chapter-long analysis in Legras<sup>21</sup>. And while people throughout the country are forced to leave their homes in search of work, the problem is deemed, once more, to be more devastating still in the west<sup>22</sup>. Thus, the west often appears to be in a league or a province of its own, so different in so many respects from the rest of Ireland that it is well on its way to becoming something else.

A constant observation is that, physically and ethnically, the people of the west do not "look Irish" (by which the travellers mean looking like the Irish observed elsewhere on their travels). Their physiognomy is different, and so too is their clothing, their housing and the surrounding landscapes, all of which seem somehow out of place. Ethnically, where do these people come from? The indefatigable, opinionated, widely-travelled de Bovet refers to a young Galway girl looking like "*une gitana*" and to the "*grands yeux de saphir fendus en amande*" of another<sup>23</sup>. She is even reminded of Mongols when she spots the capacious outer garment of a Galway cattle merchant, "*épais comme le feutre dont les Kalmouks font leurs tentes*"<sup>24</sup>. Most commentators, however, surmise that the people of the west come originally from somewhere south, somewhere around the Mediterranean. Even local fauna is different. Galway donkeys remind Mespoulet and Mignon of those seen in Syria<sup>25</sup>. Local flora is similarly distinctive: "*je sais qu'on y [Achill] trouve la bruyère méditerranéenne, inconnue, paraît-il, dans toutes les îles Britanniques, et même dans les petites Provinces du sud de l'Irlande*"<sup>26</sup>.

If the faces and clothing of the people of the west look exotic, so too do their townscapes. For de Bovet, Kilkeel is frankly "*une ville arabe*", and ruins are such a feature of Ballyvaughan that its inhabitants might just as well be "*des nomades du desert*"<sup>27</sup>. The surrounding landscape looks exotic – southern, perhaps. It

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19. De Bovet, *op. cit.*, p. 248, 231.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 248.

21. Legras, *op. cit.*, p. 147 ff.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 168.

23. De Bovet, *op. cit.*, p. 258, 260.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 261.

25. Mespoulet and Mignon, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

26. De Bovet, *op. cit.*, p. 299.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 228, 242.

reminds de Bovet of the Holy Land and of the desert in Spain: “*ce sont les plaines brûlées de l'Estramadure que rappelle cette couleur violente. Pas un arbre, pas un corbeau: l'aspect est celui d'un désert où aurait passé le feu du ciel*”<sup>28</sup>. In fact, as de Bovet remarks humorously, Clew Bay could be related geologically to the mountain range around Montenegro, a southern land mass somehow cast adrift under northern skies<sup>29</sup>. Similarities extend far beyond geology, however. Through their beliefs, the people of the west may be related to peoples far away. Travelling in Sligo in 1791, Coquebert de Montbret remarks that the mountain called Cnoc na Ré (Moon Mountain) was so called because the locals used to observe the phases of the moon from it, as people still did in Turkey<sup>30</sup>.

The Oriental links de Bovet imagines in Limerick streetscapes prompt her to muse on the nature of the Irish in general by comparing them with their alleged cousins in the Middle East:

*Et toujours, par échappées, cette vision d'Orient que donnent les façades basses, crûment barbouillées de chaux fraîche, s'allongeant le long des ruelles latérales. Il semble que des habitudes analogues d'incurie, de torpeur, de ce fatalisme dont est fortement entaché le catholicisme irlandais, impriment aux choses une vague ressemblance. Les enfants d'Erin se piquent d'être issus de navigateurs de Tyr et de Sidon; il est regrettable qu'en conservant dans le tempérament quelques vestiges de leur origine syrienne, ils aient perdu les vertus de labeur et le sens du négoce qui ont fait la prospérité de leurs ancêtres*<sup>31</sup>.

Coming closer to home, Italy features occasionally in these descriptions. Connemara marble is “*semblable au verde antico d'Italie*”<sup>32</sup>. Of the people of Galway, de Bovet notes: “*Le caractère physique est plutôt vénitien; le roux titanesque n'est pas rare à Galway et dans les montagnes du Connemara*”<sup>33</sup>.

However, from the vast bulk of references throughout these texts, it is clear that these French travellers see the people of the West and their world as fundamentally Spanish. Again and again, they contextualise this historically:

*Dès le moyen âge, Galway entretient des relations suivies avec les côtes d'Espagne. Les échanges entre les deux pays étaient continuels, et les marchands, les armateurs, les négociants irlandais faisaient, pour leurs plaisirs et leurs affaires, de fréquents voyages en Espagne. Ils en rapportaient des habitudes, des goûts différents de ceux de leur pays, en sorte qu'on est tout étonné*

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28. *Ibid.*, p. 241, 280.

29. De Bovet, p. 276.

30. Coquebert de Montbret quoted in Ni Chinneide, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

31. De Bovet, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 265.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 252.

*de trouver, sous le ciel froid et gris de l'Irlande, des maisons, des traditions qui rappellent un autre climat*<sup>34</sup>.

Visually, Galway could be mistaken for a Spanish town:

*Le voyageur que la tempête aurait jeté dans le port de Galway, sans carte et sans boussole, par une claire journée ensoleillée, se demanderait un instant s'il n'a pas atterri sur une côte espagnole [...] Sombres façades percées de rares fenêtres, dont quelques-unes ont conservé leurs jalousies et leur grillage de fer forgé, massives portes basses et cintrées de judas, cours en façon de patio, passages voûtés s'ouvrant sur les rues étroites par une arcade vaguement mauresque*<sup>35</sup>.

Leduc goes further : for him, Galway must originally have been a Spanish settlement: "*Galloway a été construite principalement par les Espagnols, et quelques descendants des familles primitives existent encore, ainsi que plusieurs maisons remarquables de cette époque*<sup>36</sup>."

References to the Armada abound, "*et les gens rêvent depuis trois siècles des galions enfouis au sein des eaux*<sup>37</sup>". Another kind of under-the-surface Spanish presence is Spanish blood which, according to the indomitable de Bovet, has helped to rejuvenate Galway blood over the centuries<sup>38</sup>. Little wonder, therefore, that the people of the west wear their Spanish origins on their face, their sallow complexions proving for Mespoulet and Mignon that they are indeed descendants of "*anciens colons espagnols*<sup>39</sup>". Similarly, for Narjoux, "*le teint olivâtre des hommes [complète] l'illusion et [fait] rêver d'un ciel plus chaud*<sup>40</sup>". The brightly coloured clothes in which Galway women take such delight are further "proof" of their Spanish origins. The following striking account by de Bovet heralds similar passages in Synge, just a generation later:

*N'y a-t-il pas encore une marque d'origine méridionale dans le fait que les femmes aiment le rouge, dont elles mélangent volontiers les diverses nuances: ainsi deux jupes superposées, l'une grenat, l'autre écarlate, avec un châle grossier, et sur la tête un mouchoir cerise; par-dessus, une mante de drap grossier gros bleu, en forme de poncho chilien. Souvent c'est un vieux cotillon qui fait office de châle ou de mantille*<sup>41</sup>.

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34. Narjoux, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

35. De Bovet, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

36. Leduc, *op. cit.*, p. 265.

37. De Bovet, *op. cit.*, p. 237; see also Legras, p. 154, 176.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 252.

39. Mespoulet and Mignon, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

40. Narjoux, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

41. De Bovet, *op. cit.*, p. 284.



The travellers welcome these perceived signs of difference, with de Bovet ecstatic that the scarlet clothes of the Galway girls makes them look like poppies<sup>42</sup>. Indeed, for Legras, the bright colours of the flora of the west, with its fuchsia and rhododendrons, reminiscent of Western clothing, are a welcome reprieve from the black and whiteness of the rest of the country<sup>43</sup>. As late as 1912, the message that Galway women dress like Spaniards was still being spread by the Hachette guidebook to Ireland, *Le Guide Joanne: Angleterre, Ecosse, Irlande : "à Galway [...] penchant marqué pour les couleurs vives dans les costumes des femmes; mélange très marqué de sang espagnol dans le type de la population"*<sup>44</sup>. Unsurprising, then, that the whole atmosphere in Galway strikes the visitors as quintessentially Mediterranean and specifically Spanish: on the day of the Galway races "*on se croirait dans une ville d'Espagne ivre de la surexcitation des taureaux*"<sup>45</sup>.

At the same time, a second, widely rehearsed trope is that the west of Ireland is somehow more archaic and thereby more authentic – and by that the travellers mean more Irish – than the rest of the country. For de Bovet, Galway is "*la capital de l'Ouest sauvage, de la primitive Irlande*"<sup>46</sup>. Evidence of Irish as a living language links this region firmly to the past. For Coquebert de Montbret, Irish is not simply ancient: with its forty words for a ship and as many for a horse, it is more compact, imaginative and lyrical than the language that ousted it<sup>47</sup>. What they hear but what they also see, the very landscape all around, bears witness to a strong, unbroken relationship with the past, stretching back to pre-Christian times. Of islands lying off Achill, Legras states: "*quelques-unes de ces îles portent au dos des dolmens, des menhirs, des cromlechs, toutes ces pierres sacrées qui furent presque des dieux*"<sup>48</sup>. Their gods and heroes are indeed pre-Christian ones, like the oft-cited Maedhbh. Even their more recent gods and heroes, like sixteenth-century pirate queen Grace O'Malley, would not have been out of place in a pagan saga. Key social rituals like those surrounding death hark back to pagan times:

*Plus souvent que dans le reste de l'Irlande, on fait ici des enterrements à l'ancienne mode, c'est-à-dire précédés de ces veillées mortuaires, ces lamenti qu'on nomme wakes [...] une femme entre, mystérieuse et tragique, s'approche du cadavre et entonne l'Irish wail. C'est presque la même lamentation que Mérimée avait entendue dans les cabanes corses*<sup>49</sup>.

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42. *Ibid.*, p. 262.

43. Legras, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

44. *Guide Joanne : Angleterre, Ecosse, Irlande*, p. 308.

45. De Bovet, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 249.

47. Coquebert de Montbret in Ni Chinneide, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

48. Legras, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

The West is not just different, however. More than anywhere else in Ireland it is somehow poised half way between this and another world, with its land being shared between human and otherworld creatures. Leduc refers to the isolated mountain of Castle-Hackett as being "*hantée par les fées*"; he compares a local woman to "*une dame du lac*" and "*une sorcière*", and actually witnesses her uttering "*certaines paroles mystiques*"<sup>50</sup>. Near Lough Arrow in County Sligo, Coquebert de Montbret points without further commentary to a field where otherworld creatures are said to have clashed in battle. Off the Mayo coast, he notes, the island of eternal youth, *Tír na nÓg*, is said to appear and disappear<sup>51</sup>. While not sharing such peasant beliefs, French travellers such as Leduc, Legras and Coquebert de Montbret clearly look on them with interest and respect.

For these French commentators, the people of the West enjoy – more than their compatriots elsewhere – a particularly beneficial advantage: the unique scenery in which they live. Mespoulet and Mignon rhapsodise on the impact that the western landscape with its huge skies and vast horizons has on the imagination of the locals<sup>52</sup>. For de Bovet, the innate nobility of the people of the West, poor as they are, is explained by their proximity to the immense ocean<sup>53</sup>. In a revealing comparison, she depicts the westerners looking out over the majestic Atlantic like Napoleon gazing on the pyramids of Egypt, face to face with something powerful and awe-inspiring<sup>54</sup>.

The anti-modern stance of many of these commentators is striking. As Ireland slides into modernity which is encroaching from Continental Europe and from England through Dublin, the only remaining beacon of 'Irishness' is to be found west of the Shannon<sup>55</sup>. Authenticity shrinks in the face of the unstoppable and levelling advance of modernity which, for them, comes in the form of industry, the English language, and alienation from one's roots and from one's home place prompted by the search for work elsewhere. All this they lament. In Galway in 1913, sadness tinges the observations of Sorbonne-educated Mespoulet and Mignon: machines are replacing handwork as modern means of cloth production oust old ones; women no longer wear the scarlet costumes that had so bewitched and bewildered the likes of Synge: these clothes seem to have been not simply forgotten but deliberately rejected: a certain vehemence tinges the declaration that women not only no longer want to wear them but no longer even want to hear about them. It is as if the clothes themselves had become a kind of symbol

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50. Leduc, *op. cit.*, p. 257, 269, 270.

51. Coquebert de Montbret, quoted in Ni Chinneide, *op. cit.*, p. 64, 57.

52. Mespoulet and Mignon, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

53. De Bovet, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 294.

55. See Paul Brennan (ed.), *L'Irlande: Identités et modernités*, Lille, Presses de l'Université Charles de Gaulle – Lille 3, 1997, special edition of *Etudes Irlandaises*.

for the past that people are now, as with their language, deliberately casting off<sup>56</sup>. And just as people no longer make the clothes they wear, they no longer cut the turf that had kept them warm for centuries. Thus, the importation of coal from England to replace locally cut turf further serves to further alienate the people of the west from their roots<sup>57</sup>.

Tourism is being developed, newly built coastal hotels are attracting visitors from America, England and France. Indeed, so numerous are they that the local train is always full of tourists<sup>58</sup>. The western coastline is fast becoming like any other western coastline. For de Bovet, the seaside resort of Kilkee is “*le Biarritz de l’Irlande*”<sup>59</sup>. This leaves an unspoken question somehow hanging in the air: why would any French person bother travelling all the way to Ireland to experience what is readily available to them back home?

It is clear that for many of these French travellers, cultures are implicitly ranked in a kind of hierarchy in their minds, with authenticity (however ill-defined) being valued above change and modernity. Thus, many of them had come to Ireland seeking to experience some kind of fixed, immutable past. All too frequently, they come away disappointed... except, occasionally, from west of the Shannon. At a personal level, their disappointment is understandable: they have made the journey all the way from continental Europe to Ireland only to discover, just like de Tocqueville (1805-1859) in America around the same time, that they have somehow narrowly “missed the boat” as this remote and even occasionally exotic country is fast losing what they see as its authenticity<sup>60</sup>. It is becoming something else: a pale imitation of its powerful neighbour to the East.

Not all French travellers react like this, however. For some, old ways revolving around realities such as religion, far from representing interesting examples of archaism and authenticity, are lambasted as proof of degeneracy and of intellectual backwardness. Writing in 1792, the self-styled Citoyen Chantreau, presents the population of the “*anciens Irlandois*”:

[Elle] se trouve plus communément répandue dans la province de Connaught et à l’intérieur de l’Irlande [...] Elle n’offre que des hommes ignorants, grossiers et superstitieux, souffrant impatiemment l’injustice ou l’injure, implacables dans leurs haines, et extrêmes dans toutes leurs affections<sup>61</sup>.

In their miserable mud cabins, “*la famille [...] couche pêle mêle et sans distinction de sexe*”. In an adjoining room are their animals, a juxtaposition that he

56. Mespoulet and Mignon, *op. cit.*, p. 58, 24.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

58. Legras, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

59. De Bovet, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

60. See especially, Alexis de Tocqueville, *Quinze jours dans le désert*, Paris, Gallimard, 2012.

61. Chantreau, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

seems to find appropriate and significant. Binge-drinking, lack of education and the tight grip held on these people by religion/superstition mean that they could hardly be more different from Europeans of the Enlightenment:

*La plus pauvre et la plus grossière de cette portion des habitants de l'Irlande, est celle qui, livrée à l'influence de ses prêtres, s'adonne à toutes sortes de superstitions; ne connoît de livres que les légendes, et de faits historiques que les miracles de leurs saints; leurs facultés physiques sont aussi arriérées que leurs facultés intellectuelles*<sup>62</sup>.

Specifically,

*[e]n conservant le langage de leurs aïeux, ils ont conservé aussi beaucoup de leurs usages, que l'on retrouve principalement dans leurs festins, dans leurs noces et dans les cérémonies des funérailles. Lorsqu'un des leurs est mort, ils l'exposent devant leurs portes pendant deux jours; sur la bière est un grand bassin où l'on oblige tous les passans à mettre quelques pièces de monnoies; ces derniers se font d'autant moins prier que leurs prêtres leur ont fait accroire que, de refuser à mettre dans le plat mortuaire, c'étoit un péché qui les exposoit à être tourmentés pendant la nuit par des revenans*<sup>63</sup>.

The venality of these priests, with their focus on this world, unfrocks them as men not of God but of Mammon: "[I]l est bon d'observer, qu'après l'enterrement, le prêtre, mett[a]nt en poche les deux tiers des deniers qui se trouvent dans le plat." Même son de cloche in the writings of some of the leaders of the French expeditionary force that landed in Killala in 1798<sup>64</sup>. The west of Ireland peasants they were sent to liberate, with their paganism and superstition, appal these sons of the Enlightenment. Abandoning notions of liberté, égalité and fraternité, they come to view the locals as noble savages or as children unable to grasp the big picture. Their observations bristle with well-rehearsed tropes: the women of the West are debauched; like South Sea islanders, the people of the West are mesmerised and excited by sights from the wider world such as the French fleet sailing into Killala; like children, they are frightened by the noise of cannon fire and run away; like children, they love dressing up (in French uniforms) and get drunk all too easily on unfamiliar alcohol. The French commentators appear frankly embarrassed to be associated with them. Some details suggest that the French regard the locals more as animals than as fellow human beings: they establish order among them not by talking or reasoning with them (as this would be pointless) but, as

62. *Ibid.*, p. 193.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

64. See Grace Neville, "Frères ennemis? French Writers on the French Expeditions to late Eighteenth-Century Ireland", Christine O'Dowd-Smythe (ed.), *Littératures francophones: la problématique de l'altérité*, Waterford, WIT School of Humanities Publications, 2001, p. 127-144.

one commentator recalls, “*je les dispersai à coups de sabre*” as if they were animals. The 1,200 Irishman who had thrown in their lot with the French are “*la canaille du pays*”<sup>65</sup>. As for the peasants the French met on their way:

*Les Irlandais, qui en grande partie professent cette religion avec un fanatisme sans égal [...] Presque tous ces demi-sauvages sont catholiques et d'un fanatisme qui fait vraiment pitié. Quand nous passions devant leurs dégoûtantes chaumières, où nous n'entrions jamais que pour y jeter un coup d'œil, comme on jette sur un objet répugnant, ils se précipitaient au-delà de nous, se prosternaient à nos pieds et la tête dans la boue, récitaient de longues prières pour nos succès. Tous, hommes et femmes, portent suspendu [sic] à leurs cous, de larges, sales et crasseux scapulaires, ainsi que des chapelets ou rosaires*<sup>66</sup>.

Among these sons of the Revolution, there is little trace of any sense of shared humanity or brotherhood. Instead, in their accounts carefully crafted for an audience back in Paris, they scapegoat the Irish for their failure of their expedition, their robust vocabulary translating their sense of anger and disbelief: is this what they have come so far and risked so much for? For the French commentators, the story ends not too tragically: it ends in Dublin, in defeat, admittedly, but at least in a European urban centre, far away from the mud and misery of the west of Ireland, among their own class, fellow officers whose regrettable Englishness is more than outweighed by their admirable ability to speak some French.

For some French visitors, the west of Ireland is, above all, a land of emotion, of wildness and of strong links with the past. In this, the sixteenth-century pirate queen from Clew Bay, Grace O'Malley, comes to embody her home province of Connaught as she emerges from these commentaries<sup>67</sup>. Her confrontation with Elizabeth I can be declined in a series of binary opposites: emotion versus reason, heart *versus* head, wild<sup>68</sup> versus tame, rural versus urban, past versus future. Like O'Malley, these western people march to their own beat, even devising local systems of government in the Claddagh<sup>69</sup> and on the islands off Mayo<sup>70</sup>. In other words, within the different region that is Connaught, there are places that are more different still. This clearly appealed to many of the French visitors, given their unconventionality and sense of adventure. However, even for sympathetic French visitors, over the period under analysis, the West increasingly appears as a region being colonised not just by England but, even worse, by the colony of England that the rest of Ireland had by now become. For others, the West is a

65. Jobit, in Joannon, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

66. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

67. *Inter alia* in *Le Guide Joanne: Angleterre, Ecosse, Irlande*, p. 310.

68. See Mespoulet and Mignon's description of a Claddagh woman as “*farouche*”, p. 32.

69. Mespoulet and Mignon, p. 25, de Bovet, p. 297.

70. De Bovet, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

throwback to earlier, more primitive times, hopelessly distant from the Enlightenment, from *l'Europe des Lumières* with which they so strongly identified.

The specificity of the west of Ireland, as perceived by these French travellers, is a *topos* that fascinates down to our own time. Among the many contemporary writers who explore it, returning again and again to search out its hidden depths, are Edna O'Brien (with the dichotomy she establishes between her home place in rural Clare and her later homes in Dublin and London), Hugo Hamilton (whose powerful 2003 memoir, *The Speckled People*, depicts his father trying with catastrophic results to reproduce his idealised version of the west of Ireland in suburban Dublin<sup>71</sup>) and Dublin-born Paul Durcan (whose poetry, to be fully appreciated, has to be set against the majestic landscapes of his native county, Mayo). Then, in another medium, there are artists like Hughie O'Donoghue, born in Manchester in 1953, yet forever mesmerised by the haunting landscapes of his Mayo family. One might even cite Joyce's Galway wife, Nora Barnacle, so different in so many ways from her lifelong companion, the Jesuit-educated Dubliner, Joyce, a lively, unorthodox woman of little schooling but of keen emotional intelligence without whom, as Brenda Maddox has powerfully demonstrated, the great writer could never have survived<sup>72</sup>. Thus, whatever about western islands being packed with people speaking Irish and eating wool, this theme of the specificity of what Roddy Doyle jokingly refers to as the "west, west, west" looks set to run and run.

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71. Hugo Hamilton, *The Speckled People*, London, Harper, 2003.

72. Brenda Maddox, *Nora*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1988.