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‘With a Heroic Life and a Governing Mind’: Nineteenth-Century Irish Nationalist Autobiography

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I

Irish nationalist autobiographies of the nineteenth century were shaped by two cultural imperatives in particular. One was the demand from nationalism for tales of representative men and women; the other was the wider Victorian demand for self-defining narratives, a symptom of what Thomas Carlyle called these ‘Autobiographical times’ (1896b: 75). In fact, autobiography emerged as a privileged genre in nationalist culture at the same time as it became a favoured form of self-definition in bourgeois culture generally (Gay, 1996: 103ff). In nineteenth-century nationalist Ireland the most influential and well-known autobiographies were those of Wolfe Tone, John Mitchel and Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa, but many of the leading figures of the Young Ireland and Fenian movements also published popular memoirs, including Charles Gavan Duffy, Michael Doheny, John O’Leary, John Devoy and Joseph Denieffe. Lady Morgan, James Clarence Mangan and William Carleton, literary figures on the fringes of the nationalist movement, also wrote autobiographies, though all were published posthumously. Anne Devlin, who played a crucial role in the Emmet rebellion, dictated an account of her experiences before her death, though the manuscript remained unpublished until 1960. Several autobiographical accounts of the United Irish rebellion were also published in the nineteenth century. The idea of making private self-examination and self-knowledge a matter of public scrutiny was not a nineteenth-century invention, however; indeed, the Western autobiographical tradition may be said to have begun with Augustine’s *Confessions* in the fifth century. That said, autobiographical publication reached a level of unprecedented growth in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that corresponds with other developments in the realm of social and political life: the increased secularisation of society,

the rapid growth of print culture and middle-class literacy and the ideological privileging of individual experience as the focus of knowledge. These events coincide also with the rise of bourgeois nationalism in Europe and North America, which itself gave new urgency to questions about the relations between private self and public duty, between individual and national identity and between individual agency and the determining power of history and culture.

Peter Gay has argued that 'the nineteenth century was intensely preoccupied with self, to the point of neurosis' (1996: 3). This preoccupation was itself partly a symptom of the apparent waning credibility of external sources of knowledge such as God, Scripture and medieval cosmology. In the post-medieval and post-theocentric world, with its rapid social change and ideological ferment, the search for stable foundations for moral and psychological knowledge turned inward, towards the self, rather than outward towards the divine, as formerly. In taking this turn, however, one risked opening up the troubling vista of moral and epistemological relativism, and the difficulty of authenticating any objective, impersonal, unchanging truth beyond the realm of subjective impressions. In these epistemological conditions, as William Spengemann argues, writers and thinkers of the early nineteenth century sought to locate a centre of reality 'in a place that was at once sufficiently mobile to keep pace with the changing shape of reality and sufficiently stable to provide some assurance that a principle of continuity and purpose underlies all change' (1980: 77). This 'place' was the personal self, the location of truths that were guaranteed by the laws of 'human nature'. As part of this shift, autobiography – the authentic representation of the self – became 'the prime instrument of Romantic knowledge' (Spengemann, 1980: 77). Autobiographies implied that the self was a fixed identity (the author's fixity is represented by a 'real name', an unchanging personality, or an apparently solid accumulation of experiences), while simultaneously acknowledging that selfhood is also a 'process' subject to contingency, historical accident and the forces of social and political life. To make a life into a narrative, as autobiography does, is to bring the apparently incoherent fragments of experience under the controlling structure of a story that has a beginning, a middle and an end. The anxiety produced by the sense that life may be essentially fragmentary, a disconnected flux of experience, is dissipated by the presence of a reflective autobiographical narrative voice. This voice has a comforting confidence in its ability to tell the truth and to discern the essential pattern or meaning of a life.

In addition to such changes in the perceived value of selfhood, the Romantic and Victorian periods also saw changes in the nature of historiography which encouraged the writing and reading of biography and autobiography. The nineteenth-century approach to history gave special attention to the question of how much the individual self is an agent of historical change. Opinions on the question swung from the determinism of Marx and

Engels, which stressed the subjection of the individual to larger historical forces, to the 'great man' theory of Carlyle, which stressed the power of the strong individual to shape the course of history. Carlyle's theory of history allotted great importance to biographical narratives by arguing that 'History is the essence of innumerable Biographies' (1896a: 86) and, even more reductively, that 'The History of the world is but the Biography of great men' (1993: 26). To study such biographies was not merely to become acquainted with the historical record; it had an even greater, ultimately ethical function: 'We cannot look, however imperfectly, upon a great man, without gaining something by him' (Carlyle, 1993: 3). On the other hand, European nationalists like Giuseppe Mazzini argued strongly against Carlyle's privileging of the mighty few on the basis that 'The shadow thrown by these gigantic men appears to eclipse [. . .] every trace of national thought of which these men were only the interpreters and prophets, and of the people, who alone are its depository' (Mazzini, 1887: 125). So where Carlyle sees individual will, Mazzini sees 'national thought' and 'the people' as the ultimate driving forces of history, a view in which the individual will is subordinated to the power of ideology and collective agency.

One of the central questions for Irish nationalism in the nineteenth century was precisely the one addressed by Carlyle and Mazzini: how to define and represent the relation of the individual to the movement of history and to collective forms of identity such as 'the nation' or 'the race'. David Lloyd has theorised more specifically the ways in which the genre of autobiography was used to answer these questions:

Biography, generically including autobiography, is intimately linked to the aesthetic politics of Romantic nationalism. The biography of the national hero is, in the first instance, a repetition of the history of the nation. [. . .] [T]he total identification of the individual with the spirit of the nation is a figuration of the total unity of the political nation that is the goal of the nationalist's labors. The nationalist hero is thus doubly productive: in the mundane sense, his political labors further the cause of national unification and liberation; in a secondary, but generally more significant, sense, his life story serves as an 'inspiration,' enjoining and mediating the identification of each individual with the nation to which all ideally belong and without which they are incomplete and inauthentic. (1987: 160)

The nationalist autobiography thus serves multiple functions. In place of the discontinuities and fissures of actual history, it offers reassuring stories of order, continuity and completion. As historiography, it gives a first-hand and attractively vivid account of the nation's history. As a narrative, it also provides a structure for understanding national history as a whole. The story of the individual hero becomes a synecdoche for the history of the

nation itself; for instance, a story of an honourable struggle against externally imposed injustice. Furthermore, in a more pragmatic way, the act of reading an autobiography allows the reader to make empathetic connections between his or her own life and the life of the hero, through the usual mechanisms by which narratives encourage identification and sympathy with characters and events outside one's own self. Autobiography is, in fact, precisely one of the ways by which the 'imagined communities' we call nations are constructed. It enables the national subject to participate in a communal identity and to imagine that participation as a fulfilling thing.

There is nevertheless a tension between autobiography's revelation of the individual's uniqueness and its assertion of the same person's typicality. This central tension in the autobiographical form takes on a special significance in nationalist autobiography, where the individual's uniqueness or eccentricity can pose a threat to the qualities that make the writer 'national' (and the autobiography valuable). Rousseau was able to justify the relentless exposure of what he believed to be his uniqueness – 'I am not made like any that I have seen; I venture to believe that I was not made like any that exist' (2000: 5) – by arguing that awareness of the *difference* between his unique life and the reader's uniqueness might actually be ethically useful: 'I should like each person, in order that he might learn to judge himself correctly, to have at least one other point of comparison; that he should know himself and one other person, and that other person will be me' (2000: 643). The politics of nationalist autobiography, however, require that the egocentric emphasis on uniqueness be subordinated to an emphasis on what makes the autobiographer's life paradigmatic or representative. In nationalist discourse uniqueness is a value displaced from the individual onto the idea of the nation itself. Every nation must be unique, but each authentic subject within that nation must be stereotypical. The sense of being simultaneously unique (compared to the world abroad) and stereotypical (compared to other Irish people) is a particular feature of nationalist consciousness. For Rousseau and other bourgeois autobiographers, what is common among people is common by the basic virtue of their being human. The complication of nationalism, however, is that what is held to be 'common' by nationalist discourse is normally defined as that which is shared only by a subset of humanity – the members of a particular nation. Thus the function of identification in nationalist autobiography is more limited than it is for bourgeois autobiography in general. An English reader, for example, may sympathise with, but is hardly expected to *identify* with, the struggles of the Irish nationalist hero. Of course, the non-Irish reader is not entirely excluded as an addressee of the text: as we shall see, it is a frequent self-justification in nationalist self-narratives that what they offer are corrective, objective truths about Irish history that have been obscured to Irish and non-Irish readers alike, all of whom will benefit from being told the facts.

II

How did nineteenth-century Irish nationalists themselves define the role of autobiography? Thomas Davis laid out a template for nationalist cultural work that applied to autobiography as much as to any other form of activity: 'we must [...] try, by teaching and example, to lift up the souls of all our family and neighbours to that pitch of industry, courage, information, and wisdom necessary to enable an enslaved, dark, and starving people to become free, and rich, and rational' (1910: 83). In Davis's mission for liberty, solidarity, enlightenment and productivity, autobiography had a multiple role. In the first place, the very writing of it is a political act; thus the Young Irelander Michael Doheny was able to describe his autobiographical effort as 'my latest labour in [Ireland's] cause' (1920: vi). Secondly, as a text, it teaches and exemplifies what the nationalist subject is obliged to perform. Davis, for instance, recommends the reading of Wolfe Tone's 'glorious memoirs' as an important part of nationalist consciousness-raising, seeing them as both a primary source of historical information and a record of an exemplary life (1910: 222). Echoing Carlyle, Davis asserts the value of recognising 'the pressure of a great mind on his times, and on after-times' (1910: 90) – the value, that is, of the heroic model. Two generations later, Pádraic Pearse was to define the inspirational importance of Tone's memoirs in a more intensely charged manner by arguing that they were effectively the 'gospel of the New Testament of Irish Nationality' (1962: 168), as if to confirm Benedict Anderson's insight that nationalist discourse operates in ways analogous to religion (1991: 12). In fact, Davis himself took on something of the role of the exemplary reader of just such a gospel or inspirational tale. In a striking sentence from the manuscript of his own unfinished biography of Tone, held in the National Library of Ireland (MS 1791/2), Davis imagines a scene for the projected frontispiece of the book in which 'Liberty takes down the sword suspended from the ivied wall over Tone's grave and hands it to *me!*' Here the desired interrelation of national destiny, personal identity, attentive reading and patrilinear inheritance come together in a remarkable way.

One of the cherished practical projects of the Irish nationalism associated with Davis and the *Nation* newspaper in the 1840s was the publication of cheap, popular texts in a series known as the 'Library of Ireland', intended as a series of shilling volumes of biography, poetry and criticism which would, in the words of Charles Gavan Duffy, 'feed the national spirit or discipline the national morals' (1895: 230). Among the biographies written or projected for the series were Davis's life of Tone (never completed because of his early death); a life of Hugh O'Neill by John Mitchel; an account of the earls of Desmond by C. P. Meehan; and Thomas D'Arcy McGee's life of Art McMurrough, the fourteenth-century antagonist of Richard II. Less politicised biographies and autobiographies were considered useful too. The Young Irelander Thomas MacNevin, for example, suggested the organisation of a nationwide program of public readings stressing the 'biography of

self-sustaining energetic men' like Benjamin Franklin, whose autobiography MacNevin had been reading in public with great success (quoted in Lloyd, 1987: 159). Franklin's memoir is in fact an exemplary narrative of bourgeois autobiography. As the very model of a 'self-sustaining, energetic' man, he explains his life as one in which, through providence, individual integrity, discipline and ingenuity, he has 'emerg'd from the Poverty & Obscurity in which I was born & bred, to a State of Affluence & some Degree of Reputation in the World' (Franklin, 1986: 3). He describes the reason for publicising his successes in autobiographical form as not merely one of personal vanity, but as an educational one not dissimilar to that of the nationalist project: 'my Posterity may like to know, as they may find some of them suitable to their own Situations, & therefore fit to be imitated' (Franklin, 1986: 3). This basic structure of Franklin's story is one in which the narrator remembers the chief turning points of his life, progressing from a state of immaturity and lack of knowledge through a series of problematic encounters and obstacles that must be overcome, in the process establishing his credentials as an ethical being. He finally arrives at a plateau of maturity, integrity and success from which the relationship between self and world appears resolved, stable and secure.

What nationalism did was to adapt the structure of such bourgeois narratives to the story of the nation. The writer's initial environment is shown to be national as well as familial; the story's turning points in terms of action and maturation have to do with political events or education; and the concluding vantage-point from which the life is surveyed is one in which the individual's commitment to the national cause has been proven and personally vindicated, even if the ultimate political goal of national independence has not yet been achieved. He or she has also emerged as a fully realised ethical subject, not just by remaining true to the dictates of reason and human nature, but through sustained personal commitment to the nation. This pilgrimage through life mirrors the story of Ireland itself, which can be imagined as a story of a nation which, like a person, has an honourable pedigree (an ancient civilisation); is faced with a series of vicissitudes and injustices (invasion and colonial rule); awakens to a mature realisation of its innate dignity and capacity for action (the nationalist movement); and arrives at a moral, if not political, triumph in the present. Unlike earlier forms of chronicle, nationalist history imagines historical movement as an organic narrative; in nationalist discourse a nation, like an individual, has uniqueness, a linear history, a soul, a mind and a physical reality with geographic and political boundaries analogous to the limitations of the human body. Like many before them, Davis and his colleagues frequently described Ireland anthropomorphically:

[Ireland] is still a serf [...], but she is struggling wisely and patiently, and is ready to struggle, with all the energy her advisers think politic, for

liberty. She has ceased to wail – she is beginning to make up a record of English crime and Irish suffering, in order to explain the past, justify the present, and caution the future. She begins to study the past – not to acquire a beggar's eloquence in petition, but a hero's wrath in strife. (Davis, 1910: 83)

From here it is not difficult to imagine the coincidence of the destiny of the nation and the destiny of the individual national hero.

Of course, nationalism was not the only form of political movement that deployed autobiography to such effect. Radical and working-class movements in England also produced such narratives, both as a way of bearing witness to oppression and as instruments for defining communities on a class basis. Even more influentially, Frederick Douglass's autobiography (the first version of which was published in 1845, not long before his visit to Ireland) told the tale of an individual's struggle against slavery that was structurally almost exactly like the tale Irish nationalism wished to tell. One nineteenth-century critic, George Ruffin, summarised Douglass's autobiography in rhetoric very similar to that of early-nineteenth-century Irish nationalism: 'Frederick Douglass was born a slave, he won his liberty; he is of negro extraction, and consequently was despised and outraged; he has by his own energy and force of character commanded the respect of the Nation' (Douglass, 1996: 467). It is interesting, too, that the opening of Douglass's final version of his life story describes the landscape and culture of his birthplace in terms of desolation and aridity that are strikingly similar to nineteenth-century nationalist accounts of post-Union Ireland:

[My birthplace was] a small district of country, thinly populated, and remarkable for nothing that I know of more than for the worn-out, sandy, desert-like appearance of its soil, the general dilapidation of its farms and fences, the indigent and spiritless character of its inhabitants, and the prevalence of ague and fever. It was in this dull, flat, and unthrifty district or neighborhood, bordered by the Choptank river, among the laziest and muddiest of streams, surrounded by a white population of the lowest order, indolent and drunken to a proverb, and among slaves who, in point of ignorance and indolence, were fully in accord with their surroundings, that I, without any fault of my own, was born, and spent the first years of my childhood. (1996: 475)

Compare this to Thomas Davis's biography of a representative Irish peasant of the 1840s, which similarly describes how the degradation of the environment and the individual are mutually reinforced by oppression:

In a climate soft as a mother's smile, on a soil fruitful as God's love, the Irish peasant mourns. [...] Consider his griefs! They begin in the

cradle – they end in the grave. Suckled by a breast that is supplied from unwholesome or insufficient food, and that is fevered with anxiety – reeking with the smoke of an almost chimneyless cabin – assailed by wind and rain when the weather rages – breathing, when it is calm, the exhalations of a rotten roof, of clay walls, and of manure, which gives his only chance of food – he is apt to perish in his infancy. [...] Advancing youth brings him labour, and manhood increases it; but youth and manhood leave his roof rotten, his chimney one hole, his window another, his clothes rags (at best muffled by a holiday *cotamore*) – his furniture, a pot, a table, a few hay chairs and rickety stools – his food, lumpers and water – his bedding, straw and a coverlet – his enemies, the landlord, the tax-gatherer, and the law – his consolation, the priest and his wife – his hope on earth, agitation – his hope hereafter, the Lord God! (1910: 194–95)

Such accounts throw into relief the scale of the task facing the nationalist hero who must overcome and transform these conditions. The potential reward, however, is great: the hero's personal redemption will coincide with the redemption of the nation.

Yet Irish nationalism also had to grapple with the inescapable tension produced by the uncertain relationship between individual agency and the effects of historical and ideological environment. How much of human motivation and action is self-generated and how much determined by forces beyond individual control? Even Charles Gavan Duffy, who played a major role in Irish nationalism over an unusually long life and who might well be entitled to narrate his life in terms of heroic personal achievement, urges in one of his autobiographical narratives that the reader recognise, in the spirit of Mazzini rather than Carlyle, that ideas more than individuals drive historical change:

The thoughtful reader will not fail to note that the narrative at bottom is not the history of certain men, but essentially the history of certain principles. Controversy, rather than meditation, is the nursing-mother of popular opinion; and to the controversies and conflict which I have undertaken to record may be traced back, for the most part, the opinions which influence the public mind of Ireland at present, or promise to influence it, in any considerable degree among the generation now entering on public life. (1884: viii)

At an ideological level, too, contradictions are visible. Bourgeois ideology assumes that individual uniqueness is necessary for one to exercise self-determination and agency, thereby achieving the status of a mature and ethical being. At the same time, too much individual autonomy threatens one's proper integration into the collective needs and responsibilities of the

nation. It is the deep-seated ideological privileging of the ideas of liberty and autonomy that produces this paradox, since the exercise of autonomy by the individual may not always serve the interests of the nation, especially in the latter's attempt to exercise its own supposed autonomy in relation to geopolitics. Thus, it cannot be always possible to reconcile the values of the autonomous individual with the demands of national subjectivity. With this complication in mind, it nevertheless remains true that bourgeois Irish nationalism ultimately found the narrative features of the individual life story to be powerful instruments for imagining and analysing the Irish past and present. Irish culture became an exemplary site for what Benedict Anderson identified as a widespread 'structural alignment of post-1820s nationalist "memory" with the inner premises and conventions of modern biography and autobiography' (1991: xiv).

III

Most of the nineteenth-century Irish nationalist autobiographies share a recognisable set of formal characteristics. Two such features to examine here relate to the purpose of the typical autobiography ('truth-telling') and to its narrative structure (the journey motif). Within these conventions there are interesting variations that allow us to glimpse the play of tensions described above. The first point to recognise is that all of the nationalist autobiographers agree that the prime function of their narrative is that of truth-telling. This purpose is used both to justify the writing of the memoir in the first place and to explain the narrative's concentration on public events. The precise task that the publication of the truth is required to perform sometimes differs, however. Some argue that they are writing to correct the misinformation about Irish history put about by English or politically biased writers. John Mitchel's *Jail Journal* (1854), for instance, is partly intended as a form of insurance against future attempts to distort the record of his imprisonment: 'I set down all these trifling particulars relating to my usage here because I foresee the worthy "Government" will have occasion to tell official falsehoods on the subject before all is over; otherwise, they are of no importance to me at all' (1996: 32). But not all truth-telling is aimed only at the pernicious stratagems of government and its propagandists. The truth-telling of Young Irelander Michael Doheny and the Fenian Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa is primarily directed at dissenting groups within the nationalist movement itself. Doheny's *The Felon's Track* (1849) was written in the immediate aftermath of the failed 1848 rising, in response to the 'fierce contest agitating, dividing and enfeebling the Irish-American population' (Doheny, 1920: xxviii) over the causes for the rebellion's failure. Doheny attempts to explain that the failure of the rising was not due to cowardice, stupidity or hubris – accusations that were being made against the rebellion's leaders. O'Donovan Rossa prefaces his *Recollections* (1898) with a promise to deliver

certain truths that previous nationalist accounts had failed to record: 'No true or correct history of the movements of my day was yet written, and though my book was to be a historical one, the story of my life-time is, if I can tell it properly, such a story as will tend to set right many things that many writers have set wrong' (1972: vi). To the plethora of second-hand accounts purporting to tell the story of Fenianism, O'Donovan Rossa adds his personal and therefore definitive witness.

Sometimes, too, truth-telling is not merely a matter of correcting erroneous historical information, but of responding to personal slander. Lady Morgan, in the spirit of Rousseau, explains that having been so often

abused, calumniated, misrepresented, flattered, eulogized, persecuted; supported as party dictated or prejudice permitted; the pet of the Liberals of one nation, the *bête-noire* of the ultra set of another; the poor butt that reviewers, editors and critics have set up – [I] may, perhaps, be pardoned for wishing to speak a few true and final words of [myself]. (1862: 1)

Gavan Duffy similarly used his *My Life in Two Hemispheres* (1898) to rebut the 'mis-statements and slanders' (1898: 67) of one-time friend and ally John Mitchel, whose *Jail Journal* had charged Duffy with cowardice in the aftermath of the 1848 rebellion. Nor is the purpose of truth-telling confined to autobiographers of the nationalist movement: Irish liberal unionists or political agnostics like W. Steuart Trench, Joseph Le Fanu and William Carleton also claimed that they wrote in order to give, as Trench puts it, 'a clear and truthful account of occurrences which virulent party spirit or local prejudices have [...] distorted through a false medium' (1868: vii). Trench, in his *Realities of Irish Life* (1868), imagines his audience as English, not Irish, readers, who need to be divested of prejudice before the Union between the two countries (of which he approves) can be made successful.

The rationale of truth-telling depends, of course, on the assumption that the author is a reliable witness and that the language and literary forms being used are adequate vehicles for the transmission of such truth as they possess. These assumptions were by no means unproblematic in nineteenth-century Ireland. The memoirists themselves frequently draw attention to the way events are constructed differently by the writings of others, and especially by the 'official' discourse of the government. Apart from *bona fide* errors of memory, there are dangers of bias, relativity and partiality of perspective, especially in a culture which so visibly fractured into competing sects, factions, classes and interest groups. The difficulty of achieving an objective or transcendent perspective on Irish life haunted Irish fiction in the same period and made writers themselves self-conscious about their search for forms adequate to the representation of the 'truth' of Irish experience. Maria Edgeworth recorded the frustration of trying to fit the truth of Irish life into the form of the novel – 'the truth is too strong for the fiction, and

on all sides pulls it asunder' (1820: 350) – and Terry Eagleton has noted the prevailing sense that nineteenth-century Ireland 'gives the slip to realist representation' (1995: 183). Thus the attempt to impose any written form on experience raises the possibility of distortion. Yet these anxieties are generally left unexamined by nationalist autobiographers. For that reason, two exceptions to the general rule are particularly interesting: Mitchel's *Jail Journal* and the poet James Clarence Mangan's *Autobiography* (written in 1848 and first published in 1882).

Mitchel's book is the most complex and self-reflective of nationalist autobiographies. In one remarkable passage, written on a prison hulk in Bermuda one month after his transportation, he explains his motive for writing as partly the preservation of a coherent sense of self under the pressure of disorientation and trauma:

Nothing ever happens to me. What have I to write? Or, if I write my nothings, who will ever read? May not the 'chief-mate' come in any morning and take away my log for his own private reading – or, if he think it worth while, deliver it to the superintendent, who may deliver it to the governor, who may deliver it to the prime minister? So it may even come to do me harm another day: for I am in their power.

Yet, notwithstanding all these considerations, I feel much inclined to jot down a page or two now and then, though it were but to take note of the atmospheric phenomena; or to praise or abuse some book that I may have been reading; or, in short, to put on record anything, whether good or bad, that may have occurred in my mind – if one may use so strong an expression as *mind* in this seaweed state. After all, in so very long a voyage, one might well forget from whence he set sail, and the way back, unless he have some sort of memoranda to refer to. This book will help to remind me of what I was, and how I came down hither, and so preserve the continuity of my thoughts, or *personal identity*, which, there is sometimes reason to fear, might slip away from me. These scrawls then will be in some sort as the crumbs which the prince (I forget his name) scattered on his way as he journeyed through the pathless enchanted wood. (1996: 71–72, original emphasis)

These problems of identity loss and the need for self-definition are recurring issues in Mitchel's autobiography and one of the ways in which they manifest themselves is in his preoccupation with the relation between language and identity, especially as registered by the act of naming. *Jail Journal* opens with a bold statement of Mitchel's 'proper' name, followed by the first of his new criminal names, a gift of the British legal system: 'On this day, about four o'clock in the afternoon, I, John Mitchel, was kidnapped, and carried off from Dublin, in chains, as a convicted "Felon"' (1996: 19). As the *Journal* continues over the course of many months, Mitchel is alternately amused

and perturbed by the power and truth-value of naming, and draws attention to the ways in which individual identity is continually redefined by both the self and the external agencies. Although they purport to identify one single individual, the various names and epithets applied to Mitchel himself do not necessarily add up to a coherent persona; rather, they show the individual as a spectrum of roles and characters. The spectrum ranges from the respectable 'gentleman' 'John Mitchel, sometime of Upper Leeson Street', to the felonious 'convict Mitchel', prisoner 2014 and a fugitive 'man of five feet ten, with dark hair' (1996: 65, 133, 51, 300). He records the various ways in which he is interpellated by the discourse of others: through a court verdict, through newspaper articles and parliamentary speeches, through police posters, through personal encounter. On board the hulks, he overhears a fellow convict identify him with a curse ("Blast his bloody eyes! What is he but a convict, like the rest of us – a damnation, bloody convict?" – *Meaning me*'), and at one stage is reduced to nothing more than an objectified 'body', for ownership of which the ship's captain takes a receipt (1996: 77, 52).

Furthermore, the hostile press treatment of Mitchel's close and mild-mannered friend John Martin, a fellow exile, leads Mitchel to recognise the degree to which identities are constructed in strategic ways to fit conventional narratives and stereotypes:

Who and what is this John Martin? A political adventurer seeking to embroil the state, in hope of somehow rising to the surface of its tossing waves? or a needy agitator, speculating on a general plunder? or a vain young man courting puffs, paragraphs and notoriety? or a wild Jacobin, born foe of order, who takes it for his mission to overthrow whatever he finds established, and brings all things sacred into contempt? (1996: 78)

In fact, Mitchel argues, the 'real' Martin is none of these. His argument in the *Journal* is that like the artificial versions of Martin found in the conservative press, his own criminal identities are actually false and superficial ones, based on a perversion of natural justice. Yet the *Journal* as a whole seems to acknowledge that the fluidity of identity, while deeply unsettling, is also inescapable, often pleasurable and sometimes necessary for survival. In one journal entry he makes a virtue of personal incoherence, gleefully splitting himself into two antagonists – a pompous 'Ego' and a cynical 'Doppleganger' – who conduct a half-serious, half-comic dialogue about the apparent inconsistency of his politics. In exile in Van Diemen's Land, he playfully imposes nicknames on his companions John Martin ('John Knox') and Kevin O'Doherty ('St Kevin'). Where false names have previously been a sign of persecution, here they are tokens of friendship and intimacy. Most importantly, his deliberate adoption of false names after revoking his parole ('Mr Wright' and then 'Mr Warren') proves necessary to his escape from the penal colony.

Recollections, a stark picture of the exiled and diasporic nature of his own family is generalised to the point where it seems constituent of Irish identity itself:

And that is the story of many another Irishman of the old stock. Families scattered in death as well as in life; a father buried in Ireland, a mother buried in Carolina, America; a brother buried in New York, a brother buried in Pennsylvania, a sister buried in Staten Island. The curse that scattered the Jews is not more destructive than this English curse that scatters the Irish race, living and dead. (1972: 6)

Such narratives of exile allow the nationalist autobiography to carry considerable emotional and moral power. Wolfe Tone's memoirs illustrate this particularly well. The emotional register of his diaries fluctuate between the pain of separation – 'There is one thing which I have had occasion to remark tonight, and a thousand times before, since my arrival in France, viz. "*That it is not good for man to be alone*"' – and his stoic determination to carry through his political project of raising French support for an invasion of Ireland: 'Nothing on earth could sustain me now but the consciousness that I am engaged in a just and righteous cause. For my family, I have, by a desperate effort, surmounted my natural feelings so far, that I do not think of them at this moment' (Tone, 1998: 735, 668). Each emotional pain and strategic setback that he suffers as a result of his exile provides the reader with proof of his supreme unselfishness and dedication to principle, without losing sight of his endearing qualities as an ordinary, human, caring individual. This ability to integrate opposing qualities is conventional for the nationalist hero, representing as it does the ideal unifying power of the nation itself. Tone's case in particular appealed to Thomas Davis, who eulogised his capacity to unite 'feminine' heart and 'masculine' intellect: 'For in him the heart of a woman combined/With a heroic life and a governing mind' (Davis, 1910: 333). *Jail Journal* contains similar passages that record the pains of exile, though where Tone's exile is self-imposed Mitchel's is forced upon him. Initially he can even feel some excitement at the prospect of the journey, as if it were a freely chosen adventure:

But for the thought of those children and their mother, and what temporary inconveniences they may suffer before arrangements can be made for their leaving Ireland – but for that I should feel absolutely jolly to-day. There is something independent in setting forth on a voyage of three thousand miles, with an old brown coat on my back, and a few shillings in my *tricolor* purse. (Mitchel, 1996: 33)

As the narrative progresses, however, Mitchel records an incident of uncontrollable weeping, feelings of loneliness, thoughts of suicide and the agonies

of chronic asthma. In Van Diemen's Land, exhausted by the struggle and despairing of the future, he almost decides to relinquish his political struggle and settle down to the life of a Tasmanian farmer. In the end, however, he rouses himself to continue his journey. Where Tone's journey (though not his autobiography) had ended with his return to Ireland and death, Mitchel's *Journal* ends with something less final: his arrival in New York, which is figured as a kind of surrogate homecoming, as he is greeted by his mother, brother and former Young Ireland companions. He has achieved his freedom, though his exile remains unfinished.

Michael Doheny's journey, as recorded in *The Felon's Track*, is a somewhat different one to Tone's and Mitchel's. Doheny's book records an internal exile and is almost an ironic response to Davis's earlier call for Irish people to visit the nation's spectacular scenic spots as a matter of pleasure, education and patriotic economics (Davis, 1910: 200–204). With a reward on his head for taking part in an attack on a police barracks in 1848, Doheny goes on the run with James Stephens, travelling from Tipperary through Cork and into west Kerry, sleeping rough, sheltered and fed by peasants and farmers, noting local customs, plotting to kidnap the British prime minister and visiting famous beauty spots, including Carrantuohill, Ireland's highest peak, and the romantic lake at Gougane Barra. The resulting text is an unexpected mixture of political argument, social commentary and travelogue, all framed by the suspense of being pursued by the armed forces of the state. Finding themselves in west Kerry, Doheny decides to add the role of tourist to his roles as lawyer, patriotic journalist and insurgent:

In either alternative which our fate presented, there was no hope of ever beholding these scenes again, and we could not omit this last opportunity of minutely examining and enjoying what was grandest and loveliest in our native land. We resolved, therefore, to leave no glorious spot unvisited, whatever toil it cost, or risk it exposed us to. (1920: 247)

Climbing up to view the lakes of Killarney, his rhapsody is brought to an abrupt and somewhat amusing halt by the intrusion of political reality into his tourist's gaze: 'Standing on that green hill, it is impossible to divest the mind of the idea, that the scene is one of pure enchantment. But we were destined not to realise it. There was a police-station immediately on our way' (1920: 248). Doheny's journey, like Mitchel's, is completed by escape to the 'new Ireland' of the United States.

Each of these journeys of exile, for all their differences of detail, serve the same structural and ideological function: they prove the degree to which the nationalist hero has integrated his personal desires and responsibilities with those of the nation itself. This is all the more clear when we consider those autobiographies that do not quite fit the pattern. The autobiography of Anne Devlin, Robert Emmet's assistant and housekeeper, articulates her

perspective on the events of 1803. Her nationalist credentials are established early in the framing narrative provided by a Brother Luke Cullen, who took down Devlin's oral account in the late 1840s. The Devlins were important United Irishmen in Wicklow and Anne's involvement in nationalism is thus seen to be rooted and natural. Her achievement as representative national heroine is proven by her devotion to Emmet and her refusal under torture and grief to betray the names of the other conspirators. Her particular heroic qualities also draw upon established conventions of politicised femininity: deferential personal loyalty, passive resistance, quiet courage (Ryder, 1992/93). Yet considered in terms of the nationalist journey motif, Devlin's life story is much more problematic. Cullen's account tells the reader that he discovered Devlin living in dire poverty, grieving for her dead children and husband, forgotten by the nationalist movement she had helped create, and grown bitter. For Anne Devlin, there was no public moral triumph, no martyr's death, no heroic exile, only a decline into obscure and impoverished old age (Devlin, 1968).

Mangan's autobiography, though unfinished, also charts a journey that defies nationalist convention. Its hysteric misery, paranoia and self-pity belie the narratives of personal growth and forward progress that characterise the life journeys of Tone, Mitchel, Doheny and others. Mangan imagines his autobiography not as an instruction manual for how to link one's destiny with that of the nation, but rather as a cautionary tale in the tradition of De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821), with the stated aim of demonstrating human frailty and acting as a moral 'warning to the uneducated votary of Vice' (Mangan, 2004: 417). His story does not progress beyond the passive endurance of personal and familial disaster and therefore cannot move forward into self-directed recuperation or restorative relation with either family or nation. It is only in a negative and cautionary sense, as Mitchel's 'type and shadow' comment suggested, that Mangan's life and Irish national history can be made analogous. Furthermore, the analogy can only be useful to nationalism insofar as Mangan's trauma is seen to represent the Irish past rather than the national present or future.

It is also interesting to note the effect of the diary form in autobiographical accounts. The immediacy of the diary entry, as found in parts of Tone's *Memoirs* and in Mitchel's *Jail Journal*, allows the reader to perceive the hero's journey as more contingent, accidental and vulnerable than is the case in retrospective autobiographies. The narrator of a diary entry has not yet formulated the overall pattern of his or her life and thus appears more spontaneous in judgement and expression. Varieties of tone, mood and style become possible, accentuating all the more the tension between the uniqueness of individual experience and the political requirement that the individual's life be aligned with national destiny. The ways in which these two aspects of the life are to be reconciled appear less certain in diaries than in autobiographies proper, and perhaps because of this unpredictability

diaries can be all the more engaging for readers. The retrospective voice of conventional autobiography does not, of course, guarantee a tight narrative structure. O'Donovan Rossa's *Recollections*, though written in 1898, wanders randomly across time and intersperses personal memories with poems and lengthy quotations from letters, the narrative coherence being maintained only by the eccentric movement of the narrator's mind. Seán Ó Lúing rightly compares Rossa's method to that of a *seanachie*, concerned to tell an entertaining story rather than lead the reader on a linear path from past to present (O'Donovan Rossa, 1972: viii).

For the present-day reader, conditioned to expect intimate self-revelation from memoir, the autobiographies of nineteenth-century Irish nationalists may seem excessively political, convention-bound and emotionally reserved. Many would doubtless echo Virginia Woolf's complaint about memoirs in general: 'They leave out the person to whom things happened. [...] [T]hey say: "This is what happened"; but they do not say what the person was like to whom it happened' (1985: 65). Yet in many ways this twentieth-century critique misses the point of nineteenth-century nationalist autobiography. It may be true that for the most part these works do fail to probe the inner consciousness of the subject, as indeed did many other bourgeois autobiographies of the time, but what they do instead is image in quite pragmatic ways the relationships between self and society, between personal identity and national history. In the process they illustrate the problems as well as the possibilities of those relationships at a politically charged moment in Irish history when such questions had a pressing urgency.