

Who Fears to Write of Ninety-Eight?

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A review of

Andrew James, *The Nabob: A Tale of Ninety-Eight, notes and afterword by John Wilson Foster* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006), 178pp, ISBN: 1-85182-961-x

In the opening line of an often quoted John Kells Ingram song, the speaker, with an implicit challenge, asks: 'Who fears to speak of ninety-eight?' Writers, however, have tended not to be silent on the subject; if much blood was spilt in 1798, much ink was spilt in subsequent years in narrating and re-imagining the events in literary texts. This tendency was notable across Ireland but took a distinctive turn in Ulster, where the focus was often on regional identity and dialect, in contrast to the Romantic Nationalism of Yeats's Cathleen Ni Houlihan (1902), or popular balladeers. Soon after the rising the Antrim poet and radical, James Orr, composed a vigorous Scots narrative poem, 'Donegore Hill'; an irreverent and sardonic view of the calamitous engagement from the perspective of a United Irish participant. The now obscure Ulster novelist, James McHenry, brought the events of ninety-eight to the pages of the historical novel through Patrick (1810) and Hearts of Steele (1825) whilst later in the century W.G. Lyttle mythologised the story of Betsy Gray, or hearts of Down (1888). In the twentieth century the literary interest in ninety-eight continued; John Birmingham's Northern Iron (1907) is a notable text, whilst in the Troubles era writers such as Sam Hanna Bell and Scott Parker, amongst others, have returned to this period in their work. Fear has been undoubtedly been a conspicuous motif in these texts, but it is a fear that writers have felt compelled to confront in their literature.

One such writer was Andrew James, whose neglected collection of eight interweaved gothic tales has been repackaged as *The Nabob* for this edition. Andrew James was a pseudonym for Andrew Strahan, who John Wilson Foster tells us in the afterword, was a notable Ulster lawyer with a keen interest in local history. The tales were initially published individually in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine from 1907, before being collected in 1911. Like much literature in Scots from Ireland, the tales have fallen into critical obscurity, and despite a recent upsurge in interest in, and funding for, Ulster Scots culture, much of the best literature in the corpus remains out of print. In this context, the re-publication of *The Nabob* is a welcome development.

The first section of four tales is narrated in vernacular Scots to an anonymous editor, by an aged County Antrim schoolteacher whose father was involved in the action, which takes place in the build-up to and aftermath of the insurrection. These tales vividly evoke a dark and traumatised landscape, lacerated by internecine conflict and haunted by the victims of the brutal violence. Memorable and disturbing characters such as Galloper Starkie (the nabob of the title), the Last O'Hara, Davie Dunbar and the 'Rid Man' are evoked vividly and endowed with the almost supernatural charisma of folk devils or folk heroes. The complex social, political and cultural allegiances and divided loyalties that the period elicited are incorporated into the narrative to good effect. The final four tales, set sixty years later and narrated in Standard English, are ultimately less satisfactory aesthetically, although they are important in James's overall design.

The major achievement in this text undoubtedly lies in the opening four tales and the execution of the narrative of the schoolteacher, whose brooding, vernacular voice lends force to the horrific events that he recounts. James is certainly sensitive to local speech, in terms of lexicon, pronunciation and also the structure of oral delivery. For example,

the school teacher begins his narrations in mid-conversation, twice with the syllable 'No', which conveys the importance of accuracy for the narrator who seems to be correcting the inquisitive editor. James controls the digressive style and qualifying interjections of his narrator with skill. Much of the interest in these tales occurs in embedded commentary, opinion, reflection and anecdote which are often peripheral to the thrust of the central narrative.

John Wilson Foster's notes complement the text and provide useful historical background. In the afterword the reader is furnished with salient background information about this largely unknown author and useful interpretation of the tales. His insistence on reading the text through the prism of contemporary Northern Ireland, however, is the one problematic aspect of his commentary. It might be inviting to see the ghosts of ninety-eight resurrected in the bloodshed of Northern Ireland's dark recent past but in this instance it leads to unsatisfactory readings of the text. The idea of recurrence is undercut by the trajectory of the tales, which suggests progress. Thus the schoolteacher is an Ossianic figure, with dimming sight and a tendency to associate place with story. He is a repository of ephemeral local lore, and is poised on an historical threshold. Like Ossian, he is representative of a passing era and recognises the historical crisis he straddles. Commenting on cultural changes, he remarks that peoples' relation to their past is 'a' changed now, mair partecularly in the towns. Naebody there kens or cares who his great-grandfather was, or what he was' (46). The text, with a hint of nostalgia, suggests that the values, knowledge and dialect of the school teacher are becoming obsolete, but so too are the scars of ninety-eight fading. Consequently, James ultimately attempts to suggest an optimistic trajectory whereby the ghosts of ninety-eight are laid to rest and a natural order is restored with the ultimate return of MacDonnell in the second quartet of stories. The motif of return ultimately denotes resolution and closure rather than the incessant recurrence that Foster reads.

Despite the shortcomings of the second quartet of stories, the republication and repackaging of *The Nabob* is to be welcomed. With this publication Andrew James can take his rightful place amongst those Ulster writers who dared to write of ninety-eight. This project was certainly not without its difficulties, and we get the sense that James empathises deeply with the schoolteacher's father, who in telling tales of the horror of ninety-eight 'learned to thole it better; but ... till his dying day he couldna talk o' those awfu' times wi'out greeting.' (35)