

“Rotting Townlands”:
Peadar O’Donnell, the West of Ireland, and
the politics of representation in Saorstát na
hÉireann (Irish Free State) 1929-1933

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Introduction

Socialist writer Peadar O’Donnell’s literary representations of the West of Ireland’s natural and cultural landscapes as depicted in his 1929 novel *Adri-goole* and 1933 drama *Wrack* provide an insider’s perspective on the breakdown of community life and the struggle for existence which afflicted the townlands and islands of county Donegal during the formative years of *Saorstát Éireann* (Irish Free State). The West of Ireland has long been perceived as a *genius loci* of inspiration for Irish cultural and political identity. Prior to the establishment of the Free State, the natural landscapes and Gaelic communities located in this Atlantic hinterland sustained the geographical imaginations and political aspirations of a people dominated by the British colonial system and bounded by its imperial cartography. After the foundation of the Free State in 1922, the rural culture and landscapes of the West, served to anchor a nationalist genealogy and iconography.

O’Donnell’s literary perspective encompassed the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921) against Britain; the ensuing civil war (*cogadh na gCarad*, “war of the friends, relatives”) between “Treatyites” and Republicans during 1922-23, and the early years of *Saorstát Éireann*. For historical geographers such a perspective provides in the words of Carl Sauer an “ability to see the land with the eyes of its former occupants, from the standpoint of their needs and capacities.”¹ It must also be noted that “O’Donnell’s literary work and his political projects cannot be understood independently of one another: each is essential to an explanation of the other.”² Writing in a period during which “a whole class was vanishing off the face of the land, the statistics nearing a mute witness to the process,”³ O’Donnell’s works allow geographers to extirpate the idiom and vernacular of a dying culture and flesh out the social and environmental factors which precipitated the loss of agricultural labourers in Ireland “from 300,000 in 1911 to 150,000 in 1936.”⁴

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O'Donnell's origins in rural Donegal and his various roles as a teacher, union organiser, Irish Republican Army volunteer, writer and editor for *An Phoblacht*⁵ and *The Bell*,⁶ constitute the definition of an "organic" intellectual. Elaborating on a post-Soviet theory of proletarian revolution, the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) centred his work on the role of such a figure in his *Quaderni del carcere* (*Prison notebooks*). Written after his incarceration by Mussolini in 1926, Gramsci contended that such individuals played a part in contesting the dominant political and civil establishment of the state by providing new ideological basis for hegemony. Organic intellectuals were "linked to the social mass of country people and the town (particularly small-town) petite bourgeoisie, not as yet elaborated and set in motion by the capitalist system. This type of intellectual brings into contact the peasant masses with the local and state administration....Because of this activity they have an important politico-social function."⁷ O'Donnell's portrayal of rural life in *Adrigoole* and *Wrack*, served a Gramscian purpose by voicing the needs of the impoverished Irish countryside during the formative years of the Free State's existence. Before discussing the salience of this role, it is important to situate O'Donnell's writing within the broader political and economic landscape of the period, and to distinguish his works from other contemporaneous representations of the "West" of Ireland.

The Political Landscape of Saorstát Éireann (1920s and 1930s)

The Irish Free State emerged in 1922 and despite being retained by treaty as a member of the Commonwealth, its budget was dis-established from the coffers of the British exchequer. Facing this new economic reality, the first Irish head of State William T. Cosgrave, established a *Cumann na nGaedheal* government which produced a series of conservative budgets slashing social expenditure over the decade. Consequently "Irish poverty, especially in remote rural districts remained exceptional by contemporary Western standards."⁸ The assassination of Free State Justice Minister Kevin O'Higgins in 1927 by Republican dissidents provoked the question of whether a transfer of political power in the fledgling state, as it entered the 1930s, could be accomplished by peaceful and democratic means.

In March 1932, the question of Irish constitutional viability was answered when Fianna Fáil deputies led by Eamon de Valera, arrived at the parliamentary chambers of Dáil Éireann with pistols in their pockets after winning a majority of seats in the February election. The grass-root political base of the party comprised "a complex coalition of traditionalists, modernisers, visionaries, conservatives, radicals, cranks and optimists."⁹ Based on the structures of the IRA, Fianna Fáil membership attracted the vote of the marginalised small farmers and landless labourers depicted in O'Donnell's works. Having fought on the Republican side during the civil war, the newly elected party distrusted the democratic intentions of Cosgrave's administration, and doubted the loyalty of

the Free State Army. The fears of De Valera and his deputies proved naught; their pistols remained pocketed as they were installed as the new government. De Valera's emphasis on Catholicism, the Irish language and frugality reflected a "philosophy of politics based on the preservation of the small farmer and the social unit centred around him....[T]his type of society was essentially a conservative one. It did not understand or accept the maximisation of capital wealth as a principle object of state policy."¹⁰ De Valera's government instituted a withering economic protectionism, re-framed the 1937 Constitution's social clauses with a strong Catholic bias, and altered Ireland's external relations with Britain, removing the Free State from the Commonwealth and setting the foundations for the declaration of an independent republic in 1948. Despite these bold political strokes "emigration remained a central feature of the Irish experience in the 1920s and 1930s, making a mockery of much of the rhetoric of the pre-independence era, which had depicted it as solely a consequence of foreign occupation. Between 1926 and 1936, 72,563 males and 94,188 females [out of a population of 3 million] emigrated."¹¹ O'Donnell's portrayals of Irish rural life pointed to the social and economic factors behind this phenomena, placing his work in contrast to more picturesque and romantic representations of the "West" by urbane artists, intellectuals, politicians and academics of the period.

Representing the "West"

It has been argued that following the plantation of Munster and Ulster by English and Scottish settlers during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the subsequent displacement of the indigenous Gaelic population to the Atlantic hinterland of the island, the "West" of Ireland was "effectively constructed between 1650 and 1840, when the limits of cultivation...rose from c.500 to c.900 feet, when the 'spade and the spud' conquered its contours and frontiers."¹² With the rise of cultural nationalism and the political mobilization towards Irish independence after the great potato Famine of 1845-1848, these isolated *Gaeltacht* (Gaelic speaking) communities, which had suffered a feudal landlordism, poverty and emigration, took on totemic significance in the various nationalist literary, visual and academic and political representations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Partition of the island under the 1920 Government of Ireland Act secured a Unionist majority for the six county British province in the north. The identity of Northern Ireland and particularly the rural landscape of the Lagan Valley of mid Ulster, strongly associated with the Protestant "settler" tradition, was countered by a nationalist appropriation of the West. In 1921 the writer Aodh de Blacám published a faith-based novel *From a Gaelic Outpost*, linking Irish identity to the Catholic heritage that existed in the Atlantic fringe of the island. After the foundation of the Free State in 1922 Daniel Corkery, a professor at University College Cork produced two works, *The Hidden Ireland* (1924)

and *Synge and the Anglo-Irish* (1931), arguing for an essentialist national literary identity based on religion, language and land. In 1926 a government report led to the establishment of Gaeltachtas districts in the West which received political and economic preference. Their idealised images were nurtured by DeValera and Fianna Fáil for the 1932 poll to boost the party's rural and republican credentials with an ambivalent electorate.

Most inhabitants of Gaeltachtas were perceived as stoic and enduring folk by the urban artistic and political gazes of the period. Paintings produced by Academic Realists Sean Keating, Maurice MacGonigal and Charles Lamb of Irish rural landscapes "served to embody the nationalist ideals of the new Free State,"¹³ and provided iconographic caricatures of their inhabitants. Paul Henry, a Belfast native, created panoramas embracing a style in which traces of human existence were often elided from his canvases: "most typically, he chose to portray landscape tableaux that frequently included the representation of a cottage in a landscape embracing the mountains behind and turbulent skies above, as seen in *Lakeside Cottages* (1929-32)."¹⁴

Robert Flaherty's 1934 film *Man of Aran* employed a similar artistic trope by cloaking a cast of Aran islanders in silence as they enacted daily rituals of island life for his camera lens. Verbal spontaneity was recorded later and edited to the soundtrack to provide ambience in scenes featuring the islanders shark fishing and riding out a storm in a currach. Lacking any formal dialogue, the film's narrative was driven and sign posted by captions. An Irish Tourist Association guide from 1939 praised the film as an "epic island story...shot' on the island, the actors being natives playing on Nature's own stage, with the Atlantic Ocean as a background."¹⁵

Social scientists also journeyed to the West in an attempt to capture the essence of "unreconstructed" Irish rural life. Studies in ethnography and anthropology such as Conrad M. Arensberg's *The Irish Country Man* (1937) and *Family and Community in Ireland* (1940) conducted with Solon T. Kimball appropriated a West Clare community and its environs as a picturesque social laboratory. Sponsored by Harvard University, the latter study presented a tightly knit community marked by rural self sufficiency and a belief system blending a pagan lore of fairies with traditional Catholicism. Other less "pastoral" features of rural life during the period were studiously ignored. The "existence of class consciousness [was] deemed not to exist in Irish rural communities,"¹⁶ and "little enough of the harshness, the poverty and the degradation of the life of many people in Ireland,"¹⁷ emerged from Arensberg and Kimball's fieldwork. Indeed "the darker side of life—drudgery, drunkenness, violence, ill health, exploitation,"¹⁸ seemed to fall outside the focus of their study. Collectively these political, artistic and academic framings of the "West" illustrated an urban and nationalist tendency to objectify the region as a cultural icon. By doing so they ignored the existence of rural poverty and its effect upon the small communities inhabiting the island's Atlantic hinterland. In contrast O'Donnell's experience

of life in the townlands inhabited by “tough mountain folk who live[d] in the Fenian tradition”¹⁹ served as a primary spatial lens through which the Donegal native focused his literary and political concerns.

Early Life

O'Donnell was born on February 22, 1893 in Meenmore, a townland located in the Rosses of north-western Donegal. His father, James Sheain Mor, leased acreage on the estate of the Marquis of Conyngham, an absentee landlord, who resided in Dublin. The family's holdings consisted of a five-acre plot surrounded by ocean, bog and mountain. Unable to secure a livelihood on his acreage, O'Donnell's father took part in the annual summer migration of farm laborers or “tatie hokers” to Scotland. His mother Brigid, a strong supporter of the seminal Irish labour leader James Larkin, was employed as a low paid worker in a local clothing factory. As a result, “he grew up in a strongly matriarchal community, where women bore the burdens while men were absent for half the year. His mother was a strong, progressively thinking woman who obviously influenced him greatly.”²⁰

Families in Meenmore participated in the collective activities of planting, harvesting, turf cutting and fishing, and the communal life of his townland became a “dominant motif in O'Donnell's reminisces and literature; within it he identified the raw materials of a future socialistic society.”²¹ He attended St. Patrick's Teaching College in Dublin, where he became influenced by the socialist revolutionary James Connolly and exposed to the works of Karl Marx. In 1913 he returned to teach on the Donegal coastal islands. In 1917 O'Donnell was elected teacher's representative for the Derry Trades and Labour Council. Soon after, he became a full-time union organizer for the Irish Transport and General Worker's Union (ITGWU) in Ulster. In 1919 O'Donnell organised strikes at the Monaghan Asylum and Caledon Mill which united Catholic and Protestant workers across the sectarian divide in the province. These industrial actions shook the occupying political establishment to its core: “the senior British official in Ireland, Lord French, regarded the emergence of a united labour movement as a greater threat than Sinn Féin and its campaign to repeal the Act of Union.”²²

The eruption of the Irish War of Independence and British trade unionism in Ulster marginalised O'Donnell's efforts and in 1920 he was appointed head of the East Donegal IRA. The ratification of the Anglo-Irish Agreement established the Free State in 1922, and he joined the Republican resistance at the Four Courts in Dublin which sparked the Irish Civil War of 1922-23. Consequently O'Donnell was imprisoned and with the constant threat of execution hanging over his head, he began writing in for a prison journal entitled *The Book of Cells*. In an epiphanal moment laden with Gramscian overtones, O'Donnell recalled realising: “I know that I know the insides of the minds of the mass of the

folk in rural Ireland: my thoughts are distilled out of their lives....If I could say their lives out loud to these remnants of the Irish of history until they would nod their heads and say 'this is us!'"²³ Accordingly, O'Donnell's fiction can be read in a Gramscian context as a dimension of his political activism. His novel *Adri-goole* contributed to raising public consciousness during the Land Annuities campaign of the late 1920s and *Wrack* served as a dramatic response to the criticism of Church and State aimed at his communist action group *Saor Eire* during the "Red Scare" of the early 1930s.

Adri-goole (1929)

O'Donnell based his novel on a newspaper article in the *Irish Independent* concerning an isolated family who after paying land annuities, starved to death in the townland of Adri-goole on the Cork-Kerry border in 1927. On the flyleaf of a 1929 edition O'Donnell inscribed: "I was in Mountjoy Jail when the O'Sullivan family were starved to death at Adri-goole [sic]. As I don't know that district I set the story in Tirconail, believing mountain folk to have a oneness of experience."²⁴ Their deaths fulfilled a prophetic warning by Patrick McGilligan a Free State government minister who as a member of the first Irish government from 1924 to 1932 grimly predicted "people may have to die in this country, and die through starvation."²⁵ Set in the western fringe of Donegal, the novel traces the life of Hughie Dalach, a migrant labourer who forced as a boy to seek work in the Lagan Valley of Ulster, later emigrates to Scotland. It witnesses his return and marriage to Brigid, a local woman from the Lower Hills. *Adri-goole* closes with Hughie's losing struggle against the bog, and his family's fatal estrangement from their townland neighbours in the impoverished years following the Irish Civil War.

Historical Background

O'Donnell completed *Adri-goole* after spending several years working on the Land Annuities Campaign, protesting Free State payments "amounting to well over £3 000 000 a year,"²⁶ to the British government. Levied upon small landowners, the annuities during the 1920s deprived households "about 10 percent of their net income."²⁷ Originating in the 1891 and 1909 Land Acts which provided tenants with cash advances to purchase small holdings carved out of larger estates, annuity payments were disrupted in 1919 by war. The Land Act of 1923 obligated the Free State to collect annuities in arrear and place them in a Purchase Annuities Fund. In 1926 a subsequent treaty stipulated the arrears would be paid directly to Britain. This provoked a meeting in O'Donnell's native townland, historically dominated by landlordism. The land annuity issue raised long-held Fenian sentiment and resistance: "Landlordism was a worn out, historical myth. It was binding nowhere, at least of all in Ireland. The land an-

nuity was only the other side of the rent penny. People should disown that too. Henceforth let no man pay rent for land. The people raised their hands and pledged themselves to practice and protect this freedom....[P]eople came to look on it that loyalty to the Republic was, somehow, involved in the repudiation of landlordism; as if it was an aspect of the refusal to recognize the British court.”²⁸ O’Donnell’s novel lent force to his “argument that breaking the law by withholding land annuity payments was preferable to starvation.”²⁹ Eamon De Valera adopted the issue for Fianna Fáil’s 1932 election campaign, and after assuming office halved the payments, but retained the amounts for the Free State and refused to pay the balance to the British government. Consequently the Land Annuities campaign, stoked by socialist activists such as O’Donnell, flared into the Economic War against Britain which took place between 1933 and 1938.

The Lower Hills

Ironically, *Adrigoole* commences in a bucolic frame, despite the impoverished landscape of bog and stone in which it is set: “*In the Lower Hills, clearing up the fields at the end of the harvest was the best loved task of the year. Once the basket of potatoes had disappeared into the barn, and the last stone or sod had been fixed on the fence round the stacks of oats, neighbourliness had new freedom.*”³⁰ Communal life is sheltered symbiotically within the natural features of a rugged landscape:

Around blazing fires old men and stories; women leaning wise heads towards live words and sipping strong tea; the tinkle of dancing knitting-needles. From the shelter of grey rock, where stars spoiled the shadow, the gurgling laughter of couples. A blue sky roofing a grey night. And behind it all the mountains of Donegal, sombre, muscular, massive, full-breasted with earthliness, leaning against granite headed Errigal, sharp-edged among the stars.³¹

The novel provides a genealogy of *Adrigoole*’s origins: “*The first man to come in to the Lower Hills was a Dalach. He married a woman of the Gallaghers.*”³² The novel’s description of the birth of the townland is consistent with indigenous settlement patterns on the Atlantic coast after the Scottish plantation of Ulster in the seventeenth century: “*One by one cottages sprang up, crops grew in warm pockets, a road came, a school house was built down at the bridge; school master and books followed.*”³³ The hinterland represented by O’Donnell’s “Lower Hills” region constitutes “some of the poorest and most inaccessible parts of western Europe and it is certain that [such regions] only experienced close and permanent settlement by farming people at a very late date and that these late colonisers were probably refugees evicted from adjoining more desirable regions.”³⁴

The Hiring Fair

O'Donnell's narrative gaze also frames the child labour markets of Ulster which operated until the late 1930s. The "Hiring Fair" of Strabane in County Fermanagh, was a place O'Donnell writes, "*where Gaelic servants and the planter masters,*"³⁵ met to "*bargain year after year, since the native power was broken in Ulster.*"³⁶ Within this quasi-feudal market, "*the folk from the 'back country,'*"³⁷ many of them children, were hired out at a pittance as a manual agrarian labourers and domestic servants to wealthy Protestant farmers from the Lagan Valley of mid Ulster. Hughie's experience of this sectarian space is fraught and tense:

he felt that even here the grown-ups were afraid. A buzz of hushed talk arose among the young folk, and instinctively it was in Gaelic. Round about the Gaelic whispers hung the heavy, solemn, Scotch accent of the stranger.³⁸

Donal A'Chailleach, "*who had a name for a short temper in the Lower Hills,*"³⁹ is the Catholic middleman, who acts as a broker between the Gaelic folk and the Protestant landowners. Donal, despite professing a feisty animosity against the Orange farmers: "*Damn on them; an' it's us should be up here in these lands; bloody lot o' thieves,*" is passive in the face of their aggression: "*Donal only grinned when a stocky, middle-aged man in side-whiskers shouldered him roughly out of the way.*"⁴⁰ Hughie and the other children line up, as one such farmer eyes them like cattle, and tells Donal: "*I could be doin' wi' a likely lump o' a lassie' he said. Is the big one yourn?'*"⁴¹ He in turn responds:

'She's that. Come over here, Ellen.' Ellen a girl of sixteen, came slowly forward, her head down. Mr. Craig put his hand under her chin, and tilted her face backwards 'She's a bit well-featured. I'd sooner hae a homelier face. I don't want men wastin' their time.'⁴²

Hughie is hired and commences a rite of passage common to many folk who migrate from the Lower Hills. The economic gateway of the Hiring Fair eventually takes him to Scotland, where an emigrant's ticket to America can be earned. O'Donnell's narrative finds Hughie as an adult returning instead to his native townland, where he will engage in a futile struggle against the confluent forces of an embittered community and an unforgiving and unsustainable landscape.

The Bog

Western bogs on the Irish archipelago were described by the "doyen" of Irish geography E. Estyn Evans as regions of "refuge," that provided "hiding places as secure as the mountain massifs."⁴³ On an environmental level however "the

modern west of Ireland landscape (so often visualised as 'natural')...can be seen as an ecological catastrophe on a large scale, represented graphically by the spread of blanket bog.⁴⁴ Its claustrophobic representation in *Adri-goole* mirrors this observation. O'Donnell's bog land is an "unkind environment,"⁴⁵ which "subjugates"⁴⁶ its inhabitants: "But the rocks were sharp-edged, deep-rooted, broad-faced; the patches of soil were twisted around granite boulders; there were no ploughs, only spades; no horses, only donkeys."⁴⁷ O'Donnell writes that Hughie's grandfather perceives the bog as a quagmire, rather than a place of refuge, and has predicted that this environment will eventually devour the ambitions of his progeny:

The grandfather looked at the empty, greyish bog...Only low-lived things could live in there; fat, bulbous, lazy frogs that come out of soft, lifeless, spongy spawn, and go out again in slimy, clammy death.⁴⁸

Hughie's grandfather believes that emigration is the key to the future: "He had no feeling that his grandson should be kept at home; out into the world sometime or deeper into the bog; not the bog; emphatically not the bog."⁴⁹ When Hughie does return to a farmstead above the Lower Hills, he is happy at first to be home: "Without friendly soil under foot Hughie was nothing. Scotland had taught him that; strength and greatness were in Hughie on the land only."⁵⁰

In time his grandfather's prescience comes to haunt him: "He did not know it was hereditary in him to have a feeling against bog. He worked to drive it deeper and to deepen the layer of life."⁵¹ Hughie tells his wife Brigid, whose uncle Neddy Brian owns the remote farm upon which the family lives: "It's the bog underneath, . . . it's hard to drive bog deep, an it sucks an' suck at any strong life above it."⁵² Hughie's attempt to wrestle a small crop from its grasp, becomes futile: "He could scarcely send his spade to the ears without touching bog. He tried to deepen drains, but he was flooded out. He cursed the mountain about him that day with its bellyful of water."⁵³ The Rising of Easter 1916 instigates the Anglo-Irish war of 1919-1921 during which IRA men are given shelter at the farm. This puts a further strain on the family's resources: "[at] night they whispered how quickly their supply of potatoes would be used up with all the traffiç."⁵⁴

The civil war that follows independence causes "a caesura across Irish history, separating parties, interests and even families, and creat[es] the rationale for political divisions,"⁵⁵ which remain etched on southern Ireland's political landscape to this day. Holding Republican sympathies during the civil war, the Dalachs are ostracized by the Free State shop-keepers, clergy and Gardai of Adri-goole: "The lack of trust in Hughie in his farm was growing; it was becoming a nightmare with him that the bog was rising."⁵⁶ O'Donnell's bog metaphor conveys a counter-*idyllic* impression of Irish historical geography laden with post-colonial overtones: "a treacherous site of instability, the bog unleashes dark and recidivist forces....Sodden grounds sustain a primeval past, operate as sites of agrarian and political strife, and seem to promise or, in some cases, threaten a future be-

yond colonial constraint.”⁵⁷ Hughie is forced to emigrate and find work as a navy in Scotland. Land arrears in the form of a “*terrible plague of Civil Bills*”⁵⁸ issued by the Free State begin to arrive to the small isolated farmers, as Hughie contracts typhoid fever in Glasgow. His wife rushes to nurse him, and upon returning to Adrigoole they discover the illness has further isolated the family: “*Will neighbours never be neighbours again?*” Brigid mused.⁵⁹ Out of a sense of desperation, Hughie joins a neighbour’s illicit poteen brewing operation, but the still-house is raided and he sentenced to prison. On the journey to Dublin, a prisoner and a garda engage in banter which O’Donnell leavens with social criticism:

The sergeant said the poteen was the curse of any district....Donal defied the sergeant to tell him a case of a well-to-do man that ever made poteen. And the sergeant defied Donal to tell him of a man that made poteen ever coming to anything...barring he left the district. And Donal demanded the name of any poor man, or anybody belonging to a poor man, that ever became anything, barrin’ he left the district.⁶⁰

The subtle shading of the preceding passage teases out the existence of class conflict and the underground economy elided from many representations of rural Ireland during this immediate post-colonial period. After his release from prison, Hughie returns to his destitute farm above the Lower Hills and is greeted by a grim tableaux of death, which causes him to go mad:

The woman, Brigid, she was dead. The child face down on the hearth was dead. Wrapped in the straw at the back of the door there was a body; little Sheila. When the straw was moved stench rose. In the bed somebody stirred and they turned eagerly, Nancy was sitting up. They lifted her out. Donal grumbled; Eoin cried weakly; faces without flesh or colour; only eyes.⁶¹

Inspired by the actual deaths of the Sullivan family, O’Donnell transposed their story “as a voice out of life I know”⁶² upon his familiar Donegal landscape. Their struggle of existence, made precarious by the breakdown of “neighbourliness” afflicted many regions in the Atlantic hinterland of the island in the politically turbulent and economically impoverished years following Irish independence.

Wrack (1933)

In November 1932, O’Donnell’s drama *Wrack* (published in 1933) premiered at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. The play’s six acts were set upon a Donegal coastal island and the surrounding Atlantic Ocean on a cold winter evening. The drama’s dialogical spaces invoke a barren, wind swept topography, and the

power of sea and landscape to affect the dispositions within the social milieu of a dwindling, isolated fishing community.

Historical Background

Wrack was written in the atmosphere of the “Red Scare” of the early 1930s during which O’Donnell was labelled by the Free State and the Catholic Church as “a very dangerous individual.”⁶³ Irish Catholic bishops had issued a pastoral letter in 1931 linking *Saor Éire*, O’Donnell’s political action group to Stalinist Russia, due to its call for a “nationalisation of banks, industries and large landed estates.”⁶⁴ O’Donnell’s play countered this xenophobia: “They said Russian Gold was the cause of the unrest. I said such things as the slapping of wet skirts against people’s legs. Therefore *Wrack*,”⁶⁵ and noted: “The Irish bishops were playing havoc with the rural minds which would naturally, if left free to themselves, sympathise with those they were being incited to destroy.”⁶⁶ As a consequence of the Blasket Island biographies of Tomás O’Criomhthain’s *An tOileánach* (*The Islandman*) (1929) and Maurice O’Sullivan’s *Fiche Blian ag Fás* (*Twenty Years A-Growing*) (1933), “island communities emerged into the national and...international spotlight,”⁶⁷ during the 1930s. But statistics reveal O’Donnell’s depiction of island life was more prescient: “In 1911 there were 124 inhabited islands off the Irish coast...by 1991 there were only 21 inhabited with a population of just 3,055.”⁶⁸ With its strongly matriarchal voice as a counter to the patriarchal tone of the bishop’s letter *Wrack* elicits a last rite for the dying remnants of Ireland’s island communities.

The Island

The curtains of O’Donnell’s drama open upon the interior of a stone cottage inhabited by Hughie and Brigid Boyle, a young fishing couple in their thirties. Lamenting the endemic dampness that pervades the island, Brigid tells her visiting neighbour Mary Jim: “*I hate the slapping of wet skirts on my legs. I hate all this pulling and driving and mean living; it’s making me a kind of risen. And there’s more like me. Look at the way we’re wearing out.*”⁶⁹ Mary Jim has just returned from scavenging on “*the carrigeen moss strand*”⁷⁰ and is brooding as well: “*I would as soon look for milk out of the rotten udder of the dead cow the dogs are tearing at in the Point, as go down to the sea these days for anything.*”⁷¹ A drought of herring has left the islanders “*hiding and juking,*”⁷² their “*guts from roaring with hunger*”⁷³ and reduced to combing for “*carrigeen, sloak, dilsk; everything that’s dead and clammy*”⁷⁴ on the rocky shoreline. Mary Jim’s assessment is bleak: “*There won’t be herrin’ anymore. The sea around this island is dead.*”⁷⁵ She mourns: “*What life can people have on an island when the life goes out of the sea?*”⁷⁶ Though the island women are filled with despair, Brigid’s husband Hughie praises his environment: “*Isn’t the sea the most natural thing in the world? You never see that right till you*

go to a ravelled up place like a city.”⁷⁷ Brigid, however, articulates the social malaise infesting a community on the edge of starvation:

If it's not the silence it's a spill of talk, and the silence is the same as talk; a cover to hide one mind from the other. Is there a house on the island with two women on the floor but there's tightness and sharpness and silence? Is there a houseful of childer but they're nagging and scratching at one another? Isn't the whole island in fidgets? And what is the root of it all? I'll tell you, its hunger; aye it is, hunger.⁷⁸

An impending storm bringing a run of herring is soon recognised by an elder named Kitty Cormac: “*Cobwebs on the grass is rain. Cormorants is birds I never heard heed put in.*”⁷⁹ Excitement and fear mingle as the shroud of enmity and despair is lifted temporarily from the islanders and their milieu.

The Sea

Fishing crews set out by launching their string of boats under “*the glow of the lanthorn.*”⁸⁰ Peter Dan, the island's top fisherman calls out “*there's a strong fresh smell of fish in the wind here*”⁸¹ and the crews soon reach a place on the fishing grounds where “*the water is a broth of fowls.*”⁸² The islanders cast their nets, and as the storm rises, O'Donnell plots the cruel trade of fishing by juxtaposing the old fisherman Johnny Anthon's calls for “neighbourliness” in the face of disaster, against merciless lines intoned by a faceless “voice,” in a quest to return to the island with a ballast of herring. As Johnny's boat grapples with a full net on the swelling ocean, the “voice” celebrates: “*Heavens we have them. Ho-ho me whistlers! Three cheers for old Ireland.*”⁸³ However, Johnny hears a shout for help from Peter Dan and Hughie's boat, and raises the alarm to his crew. The “voice” replies: “*What heed would you put in a shout...the dogfish will be tearing our nets and spoiling the fish,*”⁸⁴ to which Johnny replies: “*Always put heed in what might be the shout of a neighbour wanting you.*”⁸⁵ Their craft begins to founder and Johnny orders the net of herring to be cut loose: “*It's a hard word to say, but it's a word must be said: come on, now, it's murder, but we must do it -out with your knives.*”⁸⁶ The “voice” protests “*we have our fish, and we'll take them in or sink,*”⁸⁷ to which Johnny pleads: “*But by God, man, you heard Peter Dan.*”⁸⁸ The response of the “voice”: “*To hell with Peter Dan,*”⁸⁹ is cold and heartless like the roiling sea which surrounds the boats.

An Caoineadh (The Keening)

After a night spent on the coastline waiting for Hughie's return, Brigid returns to her cottage at dawn and finds Paddy and Kitty Cormac, rosaries in hand. Urged to offer devotions Brigid scathingly replies: “*If I open my mouth to pray I'll SCREECH*”⁹⁰ She is admonished for her despair by the elderly couple:

"Peter Dan's crew battering their way through the sea, its on your knees you should be."⁹¹ With the storm still raging the clairvoyant Fanny Brian enters the cottage with blood on her arm, crying out: "Our men is lost, Brigid Hughie!"⁹² Raising the "caoineadh"⁹³ (*keen; crying weeping*), Fanny Brian laments: "The thick thighs of the waves crushed the life out of our men, for I saw it."⁹⁴ Giving evidence for Kitty Cormac's judgement that "yon sea is not human"⁹⁵ Fanny recalls: "I saw a big coffin drifting helpless in the sea, and a sail peeling itself off a mast and winding itself around the bodies of dead men. It was Peter Dan's boat."⁹⁶ Responding to the horror of this vision Brigid cries out "I fixed the holy water bottle in the bows-a coffin'....Hughie knew."⁹⁷ As the surviving crews return, Johnny Anthon is helped into the cottage only to be met with Fanny Brian's fury: "my curse on you for an island. My thousand curses on the hungry belly of the sea."⁹⁸ Brigid then "dashes to the door and pulls it open; a gust of wind puts out the lamp. There is a struggle around the door."⁹⁹ Kitty Cormac's "voice alone sounds in the rosary in the darkness"¹⁰⁰ as the curtains draw upon an empty and forsaken cottage. *Wrack* illustrated to urban audiences *Saor Éire's* concerns about "the absolute destitution of the coastal fishermen."¹⁰¹ Lauded critically, the *Irish Times* praised the drama: "As a picture of life in the most desolate parts of Ireland it has its merit. The outlook and speech of these people, as depicted by the dramatist, have the ring of truth about them."¹⁰²

Conclusion

The political, economic and social blight afflicting the West of Ireland following the establishment of the Irish Free State caused O'Donnell to observe regarding his own county: "We saw townlands of white cottages rot. New houses might arise on the sites of the old but the old neighbourliness did not arise. A way of life was gone forever."¹⁰³ The depictions of Irish rural life in *Adrigoole* and *Wrack* address a primary concern of Carl Sauer's who argued that researchers attempting to extirpate the historical geographies of a region needed "to place one's self in the position of a member of the cultural group and time being studied."¹⁰⁴ O'Donnell shaped his characters, their dialogues and sense of place from the townlands and topographies of his native landscape: "You have an environment, and if you want to run a theme through it, you call up people out of that environment to live out your theme."¹⁰⁵ The desolation which colors the end of *Adrigoole* came to O'Donnell in 1924 as he was on the run in the hills of Donegal: "I was more aware now of the weakness of this economy. My eyes were sharper. I noticed how the heather ate its way into land that had fallen into feeble hands. It saddened me that the mountains should renew their grip on fields that had been won from them by desperate, hopeful men. I often walked alone in the shadow of the hills. It was then that the sense of gloom and doom in my novel *Adrigoole*, entered my mind."¹⁰⁶ At *Wrack's* debut in the Abbey Theatre in 1932, O'Donnell stated that he "just wanted to draw aside a window-curtain

in a cottage on an island,"¹⁰⁷ and later reflected: "I intended it to be a glimpse of an island dying; the island I had in mind has since died."¹⁰⁸ His works reflected the reality that for many rural dwellers in 1930s Ireland "living conditions were basic; families large; emigration and tuberculosis part of life."¹⁰⁹

O'Donnell remarked in 1933 that "my pen is just a weapon and I use it now and then to gather words into scenes that surround certain conflicts."¹¹⁰ *Adri-goole* coupled with O'Donnell's agitation, exacerbated class tensions in rural Ireland setting the stage for De Valera's Economic War with Britain. *Wrack* a product of the "Red Scare" of 1930s, which provided the government with "a climate for new, terrorist legislation,"¹¹¹ allowed O'Donnell in Gramscian terms, to draw upon pockets of rural resistance to further his political and literary work: "The Church-burning, anti-God Reds, when arrested, turned out to be neighbours' sons that grew up among them. Their commonsense began to work again."¹¹² As a result he was elected to the Irish Academy of Letters after its foundation by W.B. Yeats and AE Russell in 1932. O'Donnell continued to disown the "official culture" of Free State Ireland with its "idealization of the west, [and] valorisation of peasant life."¹¹³ In regards to Irish rural communities he declared "the best step towards a new cultural life [was] a sharp rise in the standards of living"¹¹⁴ and dismissed the Irish state's idyllic pretensions towards its rural heritage: "I hate to see spinning-wheels, thatched cottages, small farms and handicraft kept alive to make a show."¹¹⁵

O'Donnell's work entwined the literary and the political to contest the hegemony of Church and State, expressed in the Free State as a form of Catholic nationalism. He attempted unsuccessfully to foster a counter-hegemonic revolution in this region of Ireland and lamented: "A powerful, vital folk they are but too blasted patient; muling along carrying manure on their backs, draining bogs, blasting stones, while out beyond was their inheritance."¹¹⁶ In conclusion, O'Donnell's works illustrate that for the West of Ireland, landlordism and colonialism had been replaced after the foundation of the Irish state by economic and political marginalization, nationalist objectification, and most tragically by the breakdown of neighbourliness, a social compact which for hundreds of years had sustained rural communities in the face of institutionalised poverty, famine and emigration.

Notes

1. Carl Sauer, "Foreword to Historical Geography," *Annals of the Association of Geographers* 31:1 (1941): 10.
2. Richard English, *Radicals and the Republic: Socialist Republicanism in the Irish Free State 1925-1937* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994): 274.
3. Joseph J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989): 159.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *An Phoblacht* the official paper of *Sinn Féin* (the political wing of the Irish Re-

- publican Army) was founded in Belfast in 1906 as *The Republic*. O'Donnell edited the publication between 1931 and 1934.
6. *The Bell*, a literary journal, founded by the Irish writer Seán O'Faolain in 1940, and edited by O'Donnell from 1946-1954. The journal promoted a cross-cultural perspective, which encompassed social, political and literary traditions and heritages from the north and south of Ireland.
 7. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, ed. & trans. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1998): 14.
 8. Roy Foster, *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972* (London: Penguin, 1989): 519.
 9. Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland: 1900-2000* (London: Profile, 2004): 359.
 10. Desmond T. Williams, "Conclusion" in Francis MacManus, ed., *The Years of the Great Test: 1926-39* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1967): 173-183.
 11. Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland*: 330.
 12. David Pierce, *Light, Freedom and Song: A Cultural History of Modern Irish Writing* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2005): 194.
 13. Elizabeth F. Martin, "Painting the Irish West: Nationalism and the Representation of Women," *New Hibernia Review/Iris Éireannach Nua* 7:1 (Spring: 2003): 35.
 14. *Ibid.*, 31-44, 42.
 15. *Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Tourist Association, 1939): 195.
 16. Kevin Whelan, *A Geography of Society and Culture in Ireland since 1800*, Unpublished PhD dissertation, (Dublin: University College Dublin, 1981): 185.
 17. *Ibid.*
 18. *Ibid.*, 188.
 19. Peadar O'Donnell, *There Will be Another Day* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1963):110.
 20. Donal Ó Drisceoil, *Peadar O'Donnell* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001): 129
 21. *Ibid.*, 4-5.
 22. *Ibid.*, 13.
 23. Peadar O'Donnell, *The Gates Flew Open* (London-Toronto: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1932):167.
 24. Flyleaf, Peadar O'Donnell, *Adrigoole* (London-Toronto: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1929), in the Early Printed Book Collection, Trinity College Dublin Library.
 25. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972*, 520.
 26. Lee, *Ireland: 1912-1985*, 178.
 27. *Ibid.*
 28. Quoted in English, *Radicals and the Republic*, 87-88.
 29. Peter Hegarty, *Peadar O'Donnell* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1999): 167.
 30. Peadar O'Donnell, *Adrigoole* (London-Toronto: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1929): 11.
 31. *Ibid.*, 11-12.
 32. *Ibid.*, 13.
 33. *Ibid.*
 34. Jones T. Hughes, "Society and Settlement in Nineteenth Century Ireland," *Irish Geography* 5 (1965): 79-96.
 35. O'Donnell, *Adrigoole*, 54.
 36. *Ibid.*
 37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*, 53.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*
43. E. Estyn Evans, *The Personality of Ireland* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1992 [1973]):35.
44. Kevin Whelan, "Settlement Patterns in the West of Ireland in the Pre-famine Period," in Tim Collins, ed., *Decoding the Landscape* (Galway: Centre for Landscape Studies, 1994): 63.
45. Peadar O'Donnell, *Adrigoole*, 13.
46. *Ibid.*
47. *Ibid.*
48. *Ibid.*, 27-28.
49. *Ibid.*, 26.
50. *Ibid.*, 231.
51. *Ibid.*
52. *Ibid.*, 239.
53. *Ibid.*, 279.
54. *Ibid.*, 236.
55. Foster, *Modern Ireland*, 511.
56. Peadar O'Donnell, *Adrigoole*, 268.
57. Catherine Wynne, "The Bog as Colonial Topography in Nineteenth-Century Irish Writing," in Terrence McDonough, ed., *Was Ireland a Colony? Economics, Politics and Culture in Nineteenth Century Ireland* (Dublin: Academic Press, 2005): 309-325; 310-311.
58. Peadar O'Donnell, *Adrigoole*, 272.
59. *Ibid.*, 266.
60. *Ibid.*, 287.
61. *Ibid.*
62. Hegarty, *Peadar O'Donnell*, 169
63. Ó Drisceoil, *Peadar O'Donnell*, 57.
64. Michael McNerny, *Peadar O'Donnell: Irish Social Rebel* (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 1974):116
65. Ó Drisceoil, *Peadar O'Donnell*, 69.
66. Hegarty, *Peadar O'Donnell*, 198.
67. Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland*, 379.
68. *Ibid.*
69. Peadar O'Donnell, *Wrack* (London-Toronto: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1933): 18.
70. *Ibid.*, 11.
71. *Ibid.*, 19.
72. *Ibid.*, 12.
73. *Ibid.*, 14.
74. *Ibid.*, 19.
75. *Ibid.*, 18.
76. *Ibid.*, 18.
77. *Ibid.*, 49.
78. *Ibid.*, 16.

79. *Ibid.*, 24.
80. *Ibid.*, 75.
81. *Ibid.*, 76.
82. *Ibid.*, 77.
83. *Ibid.*, 82.
84. *Ibid.*
85. *Ibid.*
86. *Ibid.*, 83.
87. *Ibid.*
88. *Ibid.*
89. *Ibid.*
90. *Ibid.*
91. *Ibid.*, 91.
92. *Ibid.*
93. *Ibid.*
94. *Ibid.*, 92-93.
95. *Ibid.*, 86.
96. *Ibid.*, 92-93.
97. *Ibid.*, 93.
98. *Ibid.*, 95.
99. *Ibid.*
100. *Ibid.*
101. Hegarty, *Peadar O'Donnell*, 197.
102. *Ibid.*, 198.
103. Peadar O'Donnell, "Afterword," in Séamus Ó Grianna *Cith is Dealán* [*Sunshine and Shower*], referenced by Philip O'Leary "The Donegal of Séamus Ó Grianna and Peadar O'Donnell" in *Eire/Ireland, Sambrad* (Summer, 1988): 149.
104. Sauer, "Foreword to Historical Geography," *Annals*, 10.
105. Hegarty, *Peadar O'Donnell*, 167.
106. Peadar O'Donnell, *There Will Be Another Day*, 22.
107. Grattan Freyer, *Peadar O'Donnell* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1973): 105.
108. Peadar O'Donnell, *There Will Be Another Day*, 129.
109. Foster, *Modern Ireland*, 537.
110. Ó Drisceoil, *Peadar O'Donnell*, 128.
111. Peadar O'Donnell, *There will be Another Day*, 126-127.
112. *Ibid.*
113. *Ibid.*, 2.
114. *Ibid.*
115. *Ibid.*
116. Peadar O'Donnell, *The Gates Flew Open* (London-Toronto: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1932):167.