

The Moral Economy of the Irish Hotel from the Union to the Famine

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Sir Francis Head, in Ireland for a fortnight in 1852, was highly amused when his guide told him Dublin got its name “from a Double-Inn – two houses stuck into one” (15). For British and foreign travelers in the nineteenth century, the Irish inn served as both “a space of indigenous hospitality” and “a metaphor for Ireland itself” (James 3), crystallising in particular the differences between Ireland and the other nations of the United Kingdom. This chapter will consider the significance of the Irish hotel in the crucial period between the Act of Union of 1800, which supposedly cemented Ireland within a sophisticated modern democracy, and the catastrophic Great Famine of 1845–52, during which approximately a million Irish people – British citizens – died. The Irish hotel, a developing concept in a country with relatively little commercial or leisure travel prior to this period, encapsulated the strange combination of the familiar and the alien that visitors would encounter more widely in Ireland. Hotels were a source of comedy and contempt, and a refuge from or vantage point for viewing the excesses of Irish weather or Irish poverty. But hotels were also important institutions within their local communities: local landlords frequently founded or sponsored them, as part of a wider policy of improvement; they were a vital source of employment for those who worked within them, and for those such as the guides who offered their services outside; they provided begging opportunities for the poorest, who had previously been dependent on the charity of those almost as poor as themselves; and they were part of the political infrastructure, as venues for assizes, billets for the military, or for officials administering Famine relief.

In her novel *The Absentee* (1812), Maria Edgeworth represents Ireland’s potential for regeneration in the contrast between two Irish inns. Her hero, the Anglo-Irish Lord Colambre,

traveling incognito to investigate the true condition of his family estate, arrives in the town from which his title derives and finds:

a small but excellent inn, – excellent, perhaps, because it was small, and proportioned to the situation and business of the place. Good supper, good bed, good attendance; nothing out of repair; no things pressed into services for which they were never intended by nature or art. No chambermaid slipshod, or waiter smelling of whiskey; but all tight and right, and every body doing their own business, and doing it as if it was their every day occupation, not as if it was done by particular desire, for the first or last time this season. (125)

The inn-keeper explains that while Lord Colambre’s family, the Clonbronys, are absentees, living in London like many of the Irish gentry following the Union, the town is lucky to have a good agent who lives locally, and has “improved, and fostered, and *made* the town of Colambre” (126). Not so the town of Clonbrony, under the villainous agent Garraghty, who cheats Lord Clonbrony and racks the tenants. Again, the state of the town is represented in its inn:

Nobody to be seen but a drunken waiter, who, as well as he could articulate, informed lord Colambre, that “his mistress was in her bed since Thursday-was-a-week; the hostler at the *wash-woman*’s, and the cook at second prayers.”... Lord Colambre returned to the inn, where, after waiting a considerable time, he gave up the point – he could not get any dinner. (152-3)

The dysfunctional inn is directly related to the condition of the estate, and by extension to the Union, which had made Britain and Ireland also “two houses stuck into one”. Many of the travel-books on Ireland published between the Union and the Famine were an attempt to fill the “epistemological vacuum” Ireland represented for her fellow British citizens (Hooper 2). Reading the newspapers in the Shelbourne Hotel in Dublin in July 1842, William Makepeace

Thackeray exclaimed over the announcement of the consecration of the Bishop of Aureliopolis by the Pope: “Such an announcement sounds quite strange *in English*, and in your own country, as it were; or isn’t it your own country?” (*Irish Sketch-Book* 9). As Randi Saloman notes, “Questions of identity [are] naturally underscored in hotels”, spaces which are “neither wholly public nor wholly private”, and where the guest is “largely ignorant of and unknown to others” (3). This ontological instability is amplified for the British traveler in Ireland who is both home and abroad. The relationship between the traveler and the hotel is also made reflexive through the publication of accounts of hotels in travel-books; the alacrity with which inns were refurbished, or public rebuttals offered, in response to their depiction in travel-books, suggests a strong consciousness on the part of owners and managers of the Irish hotel’s symbolic status. A reviewer in the *Irish Penny Journal* refuted the American Nathaniel Parker Willis’s description of the Donegal Arms in Belfast, particularly of a bare-footed chambermaid:

Often as we have stopped at the Donegal Arms, we never had the good fortune to see the pink heels or bare legs of a chambermaid; and the moral economy of the house must be greatly changed also, when they allow the gentlemen to be called by the said bare-legged damsels; a duty which, in our visits at it and all other respectable hotels, always devolved on that useful personage called Boots. (20)

The “moral economy” of the Irish hotel was avidly monitored by travelers keen to investigate this uncanny country and its people, and by Irish commentators determined to defend the respectability of its institutions.

The Inn as a Signifier of Improvement

The Irish hotel in the years following the Union was intimately tied to the rhetoric of improvement, and in particular to the progressive attitudes of Irish landlords. The

development of Irish tourism was dependent on the willingness of local landlords to build and maintain the necessary roads and inns to cater for visitors (Williams 65). Tourist guides and travel books approvingly name landlords who have taken responsibility for the comfort of guests. Fraser's *Guide Through Ireland* praises the Marquess of Waterford's improvements to Dunmore, beginning with the building of a comfortable hotel, and comments pointedly: "it is to be hoped that the Earl of Fortescue, who owns a considerable portion of this delightful coast, will also co-operate in this praiseworthy undertaking" (67). Roads are "the basis of all improvement", and Mr Shirley of Carrickmacross, "who has improved his division of the property, has also built an excellent Inn, where good post horses and chaises can be obtained" (*Guide* 285, 437). Thackeray says of Westport that, "after Nature", Lord Sligo was most responsible for its attractions:

In the first place, he has established one of the prettiest, comfortablest inns in Ireland, in the best part of his little town, stocking the cellars with good wines, filling the house with neat furniture, and lending, it is said, the whole to a landlord gratis, on condition that he should keep the house warm, and furnish the larder, and entertain the traveller. (*Irish Sketch-Book* 231)

Novels such as Edgeworth's *The Absentee* point to the wider public debate about the role and responsibility of Irish landlords in relation to their tenants. For many tourists, the accommodation and transport links offered tangible evidence of the landlord's moral worth and general commitment to progress. In *Ireland Exhibited to England*, Atkinson suggested that "the lords of the soil" had a paternal duty to ensure the comfort of travelers, and indeed "should, by making their hotels a kind of *endowment, to be held during good behaviour*, give the holders of inns such an interest in their tenant-right, as (to use a provincial saying) would make them *not to be in a hurry to lose their place*" (2: 161). His use of the term "tenant-right" suggests an analogy with improvements landlords were supposed to be making to the

lives and security of their tenants – but also the ease with which both inn-keepers and tenants deemed not to be demonstrating “*good behaviour*” could be evicted.

The most notable example of the improving landlord as hotelier is Lord George Hill, whose *Facts From Gweedore* documented his attempts to transform a barren, poverty-stricken area of Co. Donegal, and attract visitors previously unaware of its existence. Thomas Campbell Foster, reporting from Ireland for *The Times* in 1845, pronounced the inn at Gweedore to be “as comfortable as any in England” – clearly the standard against which most Irish hotels were found wanting – adding that “this is to be attributed to the public spirit and liberality, and to the individual and personal exertions, of the present noble owner and his able agent” (100-1). Yet the people of Gweedore – described by Foster as “utterly ignorant and both mentally and physically degraded” – had initially been stubbornly and violently opposed to the hotel. Clearly sceptical that the hotel was designed to benefit the peasantry, or suspecting it might lead to evictions, they had sabotaged the building work, and had to be cajoled and threatened into accepting it (121-2). For visitors, the contrast between Gweedore and the surrounding neighbourhood was telling: James Tuke, in Ireland to distribute Famine relief on behalf of the Society of Friends, compared the “miserable and dilapidated” village of Dungloe with its “dirty little inn” to the comforts of Gweedore, adding that the wretchedness of Dungloe “must in part, at least, be attributed to the want of a resident proprietor” (*Transactions* 150). Hill’s hotel was symptomatic of his commitment to improve Gweedore more generally, yet it was forced on an unwilling people who perhaps did not see the need to provide accommodation more suitable to the English.

As the inn became a measure of the health of the estate and the moral quality of its landlord, to criticize the hotel was frequently seen as a personal attack on the landlord. Robert Russell, the head bailiff of the Marquis of Conyngham, complained that Thomas Campbell Foster had chosen to stay at “an inferior inn” in Glenties rather than at the hotel built by the

Marquis; this was clearly perceived as a slight, or an attempt to gather evidence against the Marquis, although Foster pointed out that he had not actually written “a single syllable” about the inn (262). Foster stirred a bigger hornets’ nest when he reported that the inn at Cahirciveen, “[Daniel] O’Connell’s own town”, was filthy and wretched, and that he had been wakened “at five in the morning by the incessant bellowings of a bull-calf that wanted its breakfast *in the room below me*” (403). This was resented as a slur on the Liberator, the hero of Catholic Emancipation and leader of the nationalist movement, and a reinforcement of stereotypes of the benighted Irish sharing accommodation with their animals. O’Connell claimed there were two inns in Cahirciveen, an excellent one run by his cousin, and a “‘cheap and nasty’ one”, deliberately chosen by Foster so that he could present O’Connell’s estate in a poor light. Foster accused O’Connell of “stating a falsehood”, challenging him to visit the inn with him and six gentlemen chosen by each of them, confident O’Connell would be shamed by the exposure (532, 460). Foster later returned to Cahirciveen and found the inn “so furbished up in consequence of the notoriety it had obtained that I scarcely knew it” (403), hinting at a cover-up. This episode, suggesting slighted honor and the threat of a duel, underlines the importance of the inn for the landlord’s moral reputation.

However, the commercial success of the inn could also reflect the decline of the Irish gentry and their traditions of hospitality. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, while resident Irish landlords were building hotels, the laws of hospitality meant they frequently deprived them of business. Hedges Eyre of Macroom Castle was in the habit of immediately inviting any genteel tourist who arrived at the inn to remove to the castle: “Since the death of the generous and hospitable gentleman, the inn has assumed a more stirring aspect, and is likely to have employment for both cook and housemaid” (Halls 1: 108). The English narrator of Lady Morgan’s *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806) is content with “all the comfortable unrestrained freedom of *an inn*”, but is informed by an Irish priest: “if you are at all known,

you may travel from one end of a province to another without entering a house of public entertainment; the host always considering himself the debtor of the guest” (180-1).

Thackeray even found the eagerness of the Irish gentry to accommodate him oppressive. He was forced to submit to the hospitality of his kinsman, Elias Thackeray, Vicar of Dundalk: “though I represented that to remain at the Inn would be much more convenient, where I could smoke my cigar and write my page in quiet, there was nothing for it but to shift my quarters to his old dingy Vicarage”. Of his stay with the Martins of Ballynahinch Castle, he wrote peevishly: “I find it is better and cheaper (economist!) to go to Inns than gentlemen’s houses. The 5 days at Martins I did not write a word, being forced into innumerable excursions that lasted all day till dinner” (*Letters* 2: 84, 76). The thriving inn is therefore suggestive of the neglect of these observances, or the absence of a resident gentry.

The change in status of the Irish landlord wrought by the Union, and later the Famine, also affected the Irish hotel. Many of the hotels in Dublin had formerly been the mansions of the Irish nobility, who became absentees following the Union (*Halls* 2: 290). The Famine plunged many of the gentry into poverty; the famously hospitable Darcys of Clifden Castle, who had also built two hotels in Clifden, were bankrupted (in part due to their generosity towards their tenants), and the property was sold in the encumbered estates court in 1849 (*McGuire and Quinn* 3: 45). Thomas Carlyle, staying in Roche’s Hotel in Killarney in 1849, pitied the genteel poverty of Shine Lawlor of Castle Lough, “a mighty man in these parts” but “reduced almost to extremities by the potatoe-rot” (*Letters* 134, 139), who could offer him neither a bed nor a car to take him to his castle: “The evident poverty of many an Irish gentleman and the struggle of his hospitality with that, was one of the most touching sights; – inviting, and even commanding, respectful *silence* from the guest, surely” (*Reminiscences* 132). The Martins, who had harassed Thackeray with their hospitality, lost their estate following the Famine; Thomas Martin died in 1847, having contracted fever following a visit

to his tenants in Clifden workhouse, and his daughter Mary ignored the huge debts on the estate, spending heavily in a desperate attempt to save her tenants from starvation (McGuire and Quinn 6: 397). In a final ironic twist, the Martins' Ballynahinch Castle is now a hotel.

The Inn as a Space of National, Religious, and Racial Difference

Irish hotels were strange for international travelers, such as the American William Balch or the Frenchman Gustave de Beaumont, but they were particularly uncanny for British travelers. "I am not able as yet to rate the good or bad qualities of an *Irish* inn; so different an appearance do they present in every respect to those of *England*", states Sir Richard Colt Hoare early in his tour in 1806 (20). Others warn that terms like "inn" and "hotel" were interchangeable in Ireland, and could be confusing to the English traveler: "In summoning before his mind's eye the 'head inn' of Scarriff, he must not figure to himself the Plough Inn at Cheltenham, or the York House at Bath, or any of the 'head inns' along the North Road," cautions "The Angler in Ireland" (1: 47). Irish inns presented an ideological problem: while the British traveler abroad could comment on the perceived inferiority of the foreign "secure in his knowledge that it had nothing to do with him or his country", the encounter with Irish poverty or primitiveness allowed "no such comfortable retreat" (Williams xiv). Many travelers emphasised the differences between "English" and "Irish" hotels, in uneasy acknowledgement that while the two terms were, for them, at opposite ends of the spectrum, both were contained within ideas of Britishness.

Travelers also discovered that the Irish inn was a site of religious as well as national difference, and at times segregation. De Beaumont noted that religious difference was carved out spatially as well as ideologically: "In Ireland, the separation of the two parties is, in some degree, physical; in every town there are the Protestant hotel, and the Catholic hotel" (1: 134). Of Gorey, Co. Wexford, Henry Inglis commented: "There is a Protestant and a Catholic

inn – known by these names” (23-4). John Barrow, arriving in Gorey at night, was “glad enough to get housed wherever the coach might stop, and this happened to be at the Catholic hotel, situated about the centre of the town; we passed, it seems, the Protestant hotel at the entrance” (360). Just as travelers purported to detect Protestant virtues of industry in the landscape of the northern counties of Ireland, they suggested the same virtues in Protestant hotels. For the Halls (Anglo-Irish Protestants themselves), Protestant hotels had “neater, cleaner, and more orderly habits”: “it is easy to determine ‘which is which’ even by externals, but much more easy by the arrangement of the *ménage*” (3: 396). The American Asenath Nicholson was directed to a Protestant lodging-house in Birr, “because the Catholics knowing me to be one, generally selected this sort, supposing I should be better pleased.” However, she did not find the neatness and order the Halls expected of Protestant inns, particularly when “two enormous hogs which were snoring in an adjoining closet were called out to take their supper in the kitchen... When I went into my bed-room I felt like bursting into tears; everything looked so forbidding, and so unlike cleanliness about the bed” (163). Religious prejudice was not confined to Protestants; Leitch Ritchie was told that while Protestants were indiscriminate about the religious faith of inn-keepers, a Catholic would “rather submit to take his refreshments in a whisky-cabin than put a shilling into the pocket of a heretic” (1: 80).

While the separation of religions seems to have been common, the American abolitionist and escaped slave Frederick Douglass was impressed by the absence of racism in Irish hotels. Douglass’s lecture tour of Britain, which began in Ireland in 1845, was pivotal in the making of his public reputation, and he frequently compared the welcome offered to him in Ireland to his exclusion at home (Sweeney 25-6). His tour began controversially, when on departure from Boston he was denied a first-class cabin on board the *Cambria*, and forced to travel steerage; Douglass was used to such treatment from American hotels, but he had

expected the British-owned Cunard company to be more enlightened (Barnes 45-6). However, his experience in Ireland seems to have been wholly positive; not only did he experience no difficulty in staying in Irish hotels, but he was a fêted guest, with public dinners in his honour held in hotels in the major cities. In Cork, “Under the Imperial Hotel’s chandeliers of Waterford crystal”, the former slave “firmly grasped scores of eager hands and looked deeply into appreciative Irish eyes” (McFeely, 125), while in Belfast, Mr Hall of the Commercial Hotel provided a public breakfast for Douglass, attended by more than 250 people, most of them ladies, “and, considering that the company was far more numerous than had been counted upon, by which some slight inconvenience was experienced, the arrangements were highly creditable to the caterer” (*Belfast News-Letter*). In a letter to the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, written from the Victoria Hotel in Belfast on 1 January 1846, Douglass describes his sense of liberation in Ireland:

I can truly say, I have spent some of the happiest moments of my life since landing in this country. I seem to have undergone a transformation. I live a new life... I gaze around in vain for one who will question my equal humanity, claim me as his slave, or offer me an insult. I employ a cab – I am seated beside white people – I reach the hotel – I enter the same door – I am shown into the same parlor – I dine at the same table – and no one is offended. No delicate nose grows deformed in my presence. (73-4)

In an interesting counterpoint, in 1841 Caesar Otway (evangelical clergyman and founder of the *Christian Examiner* and the *Dublin Penny Journal*) recorded an anecdote about an inn in the far west of Connaught in 1798, where an Irish farmer encountered a party of sailors on holiday, one of whom is black. The farmer, who “had never seen a negro before”, was dismayed to find he could not get a bed “unless he slept with blacky”. He reluctantly agreed, and while he slept the sailors blackened his face with burnt cork; in a stupor the next

morning, he saw his face in the mirror, and was convinced they had woken the wrong man: “Don’t you see it’s the black-a-moor that you’ve called up instead of me; so, that being the case, I’ll just go lie down and take a sleep until the proper time comes for *myself* to get up” (*Sketches* 221-22). Otway (Irish himself) manages to be casually offensive about both black people and Connaught farmers, but the incident does suggest that even in the remotest inns in Ireland racism was confined to the ignorant, whereas religious segregation was widespread.

The Shared Bed

In fact, a lack of segregation of *any* kind was a more common complaint. A guest in an Irish inn could not ensure the privacy of his own rooms would not be breached. Even more disturbingly, he could not be confident of the peace and security of his own bed. For Anthony Trollope, who wrote his first novels while living in Ireland in the 1840s and 1850s, the unwillingly shared bed of an Irish inn is a recurring scene of the confrontation between Irish ideas of hospitality and English notions of exclusive ownership. The English narrator of Trollope’s “Father Giles of Ballymoy” (1867), Archibald Green, believes that the “grand touchstone of civilisation” is “that every man shall have a bed for himself”, a standard unmet in the wilds of Connaught, where he is newly arrived (149). When Green wakes in the night to find a strange man in his room, he is convinced “that big man was going to get into my little bed” (159), and indignantly shoves him from the room, inadvertently tumbling him down the steep stairs, an action he regrets but continues to justify: “Let any man ask himself the question, what he would do, if he supposed that a stout old gentleman had entered his room at an inn and insisted on getting into his bed?” (161). In fact, the stranger is the much loved parish priest. Far from seeking to molest the Englishman, the priest had kindly offered to share his own room, the inn being full. There was also a second bed in the room, overlooked by Green, exposing his prejudices, given his association of “a bed for himself”

with civilization. Green is likely to be lynched as the potential murderer of the beloved Father Giles, and has to be taken to the local police station for his own protection. All ends well, with Father Giles's swift recovery and readiness to be amused by the Englishman's misunderstanding, but the contrast of English notions of private ownership and Irish communality might have led to Green's undoing, as Father Giles points out: "They are not so strict here in their ideas of meum and tuum as they are perhaps in England; and if you had broken my neck for so small an offence, I don't know but what they'd have stretched your own" (172). In Trollope's *The Macdermots of Ballycloran* (1847), the hotels in Carrick-on-Shannon are packed to the rafters during the assizes; "Happy the man at such a period, who enjoys a bed-room which he can secure with a key", for without that luxury he was likely to return to find "rough-looking strangers", jurors or witnesses from the trial perhaps, spilling porter on his bed-sheets: "Some huge farmer with dripping frieze coat will be squatted on his pillow... and his carpet-bag, dressing-gown, and pantaloons chucked unceremoniously into a corner, off the chairs which they had occupied, to make way for the damp friends of the big farmer, who is seated on the bed" (504-5).

It seems to have been not at all unusual for guests in Irish hotels to discover they were expected to share a room with another guest or a member of the family, or for inconvenient guests to be evicted in favour of the more promising paying incomers. Otway retreated aghast from an apartment on seeing a pair of legs – male or female he never discovered – protruding from the bed (*Sketches* 5); Belton was glad to miss the inn at Fermoy "where the only bed-room that I could hear of was to have been shared with a corporal!" (2: 222); and Head, in a packed hotel in Westport, was shown by a chambermaid into a room with two beds, "one of which she said I could have" (151). Osborne entered his "private sitting room" in his hotel in Ennis, to find on his "private sofa", "a fellow mortal, in bed undress, with a nightcap of some magnitude, the tassel of which hung gracefully down over his nose, as he lay on his back, in

the happiness of deep sleep”. Hotels in Ireland, particularly in the west, Osborne notes, have many such “little customs and omissions in their economy, which at first take an Englishman by surprise”, but as he had been asked at a previous hotel to “admit a gentleman to sleep on a shakedown, on the floor of my bedroom, and actually found all prepared, in anticipation of my cheerful acquiescence”, he was better informed than most (36-7). Nicholson, who tended to seek out cheaper lodgings in cabins, was astonished to find herself expected to share rooms with men: “What harrum?” wondered Molly Vesey, keeper of the lodging-house on Achill, bewildered by her objection (434). The private bedroom functions as a key marker of cultural difference, viewed by travelers as a necessity of civilized life, and by Irish inn-keepers as an unnecessary extravagance and inexplicable unsocialibility.

The View from the Window

As well as the bed, the hotel window offered valuable evidence of the state of Ireland. Thackeray suggested that “a person with an allegorical turn might examine the entire country through [the hotel] window” (*Irish Sketch-Book*, 19), not just by looking *through* it, but also *at* it. Thackeray stayed at the Shelbourne Hotel in Dublin, which he described as “a respectable old edifice” but one which partook of the national characteristics of Irish hotels. His “queer little room” being rather dirty, he went for a walk while the chambermaid cleaned it, and on his return he was much amused by the window, so much so that he drew a picture of it from outside:

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

I fancy there is a sort of *moral* in it. You don’t see such windows commonly in respectable English inns – windows leaning gracefully upon hearth-brooms for

support... Is it prejudice that makes one prefer the English window, that relies on its own ropes and ballast (or lead if you like), and does not need to be propped by any foreign aid? or is this only a solitary instance of the kind, and are there no other specimens in Ireland of the careless dangerous extravagant hearth-broom system!

(Irish Sketch-Book 19)

The window is symptomatic of Irish carelessness, but there is also a suggestion here of a challenge to Irish claims of colonial exploitation in the age of Repeal: England, unlike poverty-stricken Ireland, is self-reliant, not needing “to be propped by any foreign aid”. The makeshift window prop and its allegorical significance recurs in several texts. The first hotel John Forbes stayed at during his tour of Ireland in 1852 was Rathbone’s Hotel in Kingstown, a large and, on the whole, an excellent establishment, – yet constantly reminding us, by sundry little intimations, that we had got into a less nice and more careless country than we had left on the eastern side of the Irish Channel. In a very good bed-room, for example, the bell-rope had been broken and was not yet repaired; the window-blind was crippled and would not work;... and the sole resource against being stifled in a hot night, was to keep the window up by the poker, there being no pullies to the large and handsome sashes. (1: 2)

In an incident “somewhat characteristic of the new people we had come among”, when the maid was asked for some twine to tie up a parcel, she “coolly went to the sideboard drawer, and taking thence the cord of a window blind, complete with all its brass pullies, (perhaps the very one wanting in my bed-room,) cut off as much of it as was needed, and therewith did up my parcel in a trice” (1: 3). Thomas Carlyle complained of the public room in Roche’s Hotel, Killarney that it “has no window that will come down in it, and to shove any up (or support it up) you must have a stick” (*Reminiscences* 131).

These windows, however precarious, offered opportunities to view Irish poverty from a comfortably elevated and safe distance. Inglis comments on “the surprise which an Englishman would feel, if, without the intermediate journey, he could be at once placed in the window of the hotel at Galway”; looking out of the window of his inn at Cashel, he saw “a sight such as I never saw in any other part of the world – a lad twelve years of age, and upwards, naked in the street” (213, 65). The Halls, reading at the window of the Imperial Hotel in Cork (“which for elegance and comfort may vie with any hotel of the kingdom”) were disturbed by a whining beggar importuning passersby to “Lave us a ha’penny for God’s sake; for the lone widdy and her five fatherless children”; she later changed it to *seven* fatherless children (1: 9). From his window at Monaghan’s inn, Ballinrobe, Sir Francis Head became fascinated by the ragged garments of a group of men and boys loitering outside:

Their clothes formed a species of dissolving view... The trowsers, usually of dark cloth, literally and without exaggeration, looked as if they had been borrowed for half an hour by somebody who had filled them with rats that had then been baited with Skye terriers, who, to get hold of the vermin, had not only bitten pieces out of the garments, but in many instances had literally torn them to atoms... (125)

Sometimes the window offered a disturbing moment of counter-surveillance. In 1838, Lady Chatterton, cooped up in her rooms in a hotel in Dingle by awful Irish weather and amusing herself by watching “groups of wretched beings” across the way, became uncomfortably aware that they were “peering up towards the windows of the Inn, envious of the better fortunes of its sheltered inmates” (1: 162-3). In Skibbereen in 1847, at the height of the Famine and in one of the worst affected areas, Lord Dufferin and George Boyle saw from their hotel window the “frightful sight” of “pale eager faces staring up at us, uttering all manner of entreaties”. They attempted to distribute bread to the crowd, but fearing a rush to the door, threw it from the window instead:

One can never forget what followed; the fighting, the screaming, the swaying to and fro of the human mass, as it rushed in the direction of some morsel, the entreaties and gestures by which each one sought to attract our attention to herself, and above all the insatiable expression of the crowd as it remained unsatisfied and undiminished at the exhaustion of our loaves – for what were they among so many! (22)

Hotels, particularly during the Famine, came to resemble besieged fortresses to which the horrified wealthy onlookers withdrew to watch the catastrophe from relative security. The window of the Irish hotel offers both symptoms of and safety from the threat of chaos.

Inside the Hotel and on the Threshold

While the hotel was often associated with the moral reputation of the resident landlord of the estate, his lowlier counterpart, the hotel landlord, was frequently an absentee from his premises. Thackeray complained that he “does not appear after the honest comfortable English fashion, but lives in a private mansion hard by, where his name may be read inscribed on a brass-plate, like that of any other private gentleman” (*Irish Sketch-Book* 6). Hotel-keepers’ social pretensions were often mocked. One of the few landlords Thackeray actually encountered was Mr Cruise of Cruise’s Hotel, Limerick, for typically “these gentlemen... prefer riding and the hounds, or manly sports, to attendance on their guests”, while their wives play the piano in the parlour “for who can expect a lady to be troubling herself with vulgar chance-customers...?” (*Irish Sketch-Book* 147). At Dunmanway, “the landlord, as is usual at country inns, walks about with his hands in his pockets... evidently desiring to be thought anything rather than an innkeeper” (Halls 1: 128). The landlord of the Maam Hotel, Mr Rourke, had been a waiter at Gresham’s Hotel in Dublin, and “is, consequently, not above his business, which he “condescends” to look after himself – a fact equally uncommon at inns in Ireland” (Halls 3: 480).

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

Otway's story of "Sir Thomas Cuffe", the innkeeper at Kilbeggan, knighted by a drunken Viceroy of Ireland and refusing the next morning to acknowledge it had been a mistake (*Tour* 49-50) epitomises the sense of the airs and graces Irish hoteliers typically assumed. Their daughters were also subject to scrutiny. Thackeray compares the fine daughters of Mr Wheatley at the inn at Roundwood, whose only function was to write out his bill "in as pretty and fashionable a lady's hand as ever was formed in the most elegant finishing school at Pimlico", with a landlord's daughters in a country inn in England, who would lay out the cloth and attend to the guests (*Irish Sketch-Book* 261-2). The daughters of inn-keepers became tourist attractions, with tour-book authors scrambling to follow each other to hotels where a particularly luscious daughter resided, to pass their own judgement; as Williams comments, they might have been "describing heifers" (24).

The servants also disrupted the social hierarchies many guests expected, seeming inattentive, inquisitive, and openly mercenary. Fraser suggested budgeting 1s. 3d. to 1s. 6d. per day for gratuities, warning: "Porters and ostlers, when not specially employed, are not entitled to any gratuity, although it is the constant practice of these people, even under the eye of the innkeeper, to ask for money when no necessary services have been rendered" (*Handbook* 1844 vii). William Balch described the staff at Irish hotels as "the source of much unpleasantness", particularly when they discovered the guests were American and "at once begin to 'calculate their chances'"; at the Royal Hibernia Hotel Balch tipped the chambermaid, but infuriated the waiter and boots, who "had looked at us. Must they not be paid for it?" (173-4, 176). An advertisement for the Royal Victoria Hotel in Killarney in *Murray's Handbook* (1864) points out: "No GRATUITIES allowed to Drivers, Boatmen, Guides, &c., as they are paid ample Wages by the Proprietor", perhaps in response to complaints from previous guests.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

Servants in Irish hotels were frequently jacks-of-all-trades: Lady Chatterton's waiter, a "good-humoured man of all-work", also drove the jingling car, and acted as interpreter (1: 215-6). Mary, the chambermaid at the inn at Dunmanway, was lady's maid to the landlady, nurse to the children, acted as waitress, and was, she said, "everything but the boy that minded the horses and claned the shoes" (Halls 1: 129). For the Halls, the English waiter is typically "well-dressed, well-behaved, orderly", obsequious to the wealthy and curt to the commercial traveler. The Irish waiter is "lively and erratic, shrewd and observing; anxious, according to human nature, to get the most they can; and yet, in accordance with Irish nature, willing to give all they can in exchange"; "too familiar" by half, "his grand occupation is finding out the business of his master's customers" (1: 317-8).

[INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE]

While Atkinson warns of the "*civil things*" Irish landlords permit "their old followers (in the shape of hostlers, waiters, and postilions) to say to you" (2: 162), others enjoyed the informality; the waiter of the hotel at Westport drove Otway and his friend to Croagh Patrick, "I believe for the pleasure of the excursion" (*Tour* 310), while Thackeray ended up in the kitchen of the inn at Skibbereen, dandling an infant and half-forgiving the cook and waiter he had gone in search of, who had ignored his bell in their absorption in the child (*Irish Sketch-Book* 100).

Waiters and chambermaids were often useful (if not entirely reliable) sources of information, and may have served as Irish "types" for their English guests; Thackeray ruefully admitted his observations on regional accents had been drawn "after profoundly studying a Northern and a Southern waiter at the inn at Armagh" (*Irish Sketch-Book* 306). During and after the Famine, hotel staff, relatively insulated from the worst horrors, offered poignant evidence of the traumatic effect of witnessing the devastation, and the loss of

security that led many to think of leaving. Harriet Martineau said the car-drivers and waiters were eager to talk to guests about the possibilities of emigrating, and “look wistfully in our faces, as in some hope that we might possibly help them away” (194-5). The landlord of the inn at Belmullet assured Tuke of the destitution of the people there, telling him that six people had died in the streets in the past few nights (*Transactions* 207). The servant at Roche’s Hotel in Killarney told Balch of the horrors he had seen, including dead bodies lying unburied in houses, on the highways and in the fields; his testimony was corroborated “in still stronger terms” by Mr Roche, “the gentlemanly proprietor” (87-8). Nor were the hotels and inns untouched; a priest staying at the Royal Hotel in Westport confided that after the Famine priests were never charged as much as other guests in hotels: “When the cholera raged we were at their bedsides. We charged them nothing, and they appreciated it. In return they never charge us as much as others, but we never say a word for it” (Head 158). A decade after the Famine, a waiter in Galway made Samuel Hole ashamed of his comfortable dinner by relating what he had seen:

“the poor cratures come crawling in from the country with their faces swollen, and grane, and yaller, along of the arbs they’d been ating. We gave them bits and scraps, good gintlemen, and did what we could (the Lord be praised!), but they was mostly too far gone out o’ life to want more than the priest and pity. I’ve gone out of a morning, gintlemen,” (his lip quivered as he spake), “and seen them lying dead in the square, with the green grass in their mouths.” And he turned away, (God bless his kind heart!), to hide the tears, which did him so much honour. (46)

This sympathy with the poverty of the local community extended to a general tolerance by hotel-keepers and staff of the hangers-on who lurked in the kitchens or by the doors of inns, begging or seeking employment as guides. Even the poorest inn had its “ragged vassals”; there was always “a Tim or Mike loitering hard by, ready to run on a message, or

carry a bag”, and a tacit acknowledgment on the part of both hotel and loiterer that they had “a sort of right to be there” (Thackeray *Irish Sketch-Book* 41-2). Hotels and inns seemed to inherit the moral economy of the Irish castle or Big House, where beggars had customary access to the kitchens. Forbes described the doors of Irish hotels as the “great haunt of beggars”, observing the “marvellous tolerance” of innkeepers in allowing them to remain: “Only think of the landlord of an English inn submitting to a nuisance so clearly detrimental to his interests, while there was a poorhouse or a policeman in the land!” (1: 56-7). In Trollope’s novel *The Kellys and the O’Kellys* (1848), the kitchen of Mrs Kelly’s Dunmore Inn is always full of “loungers and idlers”, attracted by the fire and scraps from the table, and trying to be useful: “the chances are that Billy Bawn, the cripple, or Judy Molloy, the deaf old hag, are more likely to know where to find the required utensil than the cook herself” (54).

While most guests would not have ventured into the kitchen, they were all too aware of the wretched by the doors of their hotels, and many lacked the tolerance of their hosts. Rev. John East, in Ireland at the height of the Famine, was harassed and disgusted to be confronted “in the vestibule of every hotel...by persons of all ages, vociferating or howling out the most dismal tales” (6). Balch described the men and boys appealing for work outside hotels as “starved leeches” (121), while Hole presented his encounter with Limerick laceworkers selling their wares in front of his hotel as a comical battle:

No sooner did we emerge from Mr. Cruise’s very excellent and extensive hotel, than we were attacked and surrounded by the lace-girls [...]. At first, we recklessly resolved to cut a way through with our umbrellas, or perish in the attempt, but the utter hopelessness of such a fearful step induced us finally to capitulate, *the Siege of Limerick* was raised, and commercial relations peacefully established between the besiegers and besieged. (124)

The offended sensibilities of travelers used to the protection of their privileges and privacies underlines the challenge the Irish hotel faced in meeting both the commercial expectations of its guests and its traditional social duty not to exclude the poorest within the local community.

[INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE]

Conclusion

Part of the reason why Irish hotels and inns in the early nineteenth century seemed excessively and promiscuously public to many of their guests was that they had always had a public role beyond accommodating travelers: they were often also shops, bakeries, and post-offices for the local community, venues for assizes and public meetings, and billets for military officers and civil servants. This non-leisure role was to increase during the Famine. The future Chief Secretary for Ireland (1880–82), W. E. Forster, distributing Famine relief on behalf of the Society of Friends in Westport in 1847, found his inn surrounded by a mob of the starving, begging for work – it was also the headquarters of the road-engineer and pay-clerks for the public works scheme (*Transactions*, 153). Some hotels acted as unofficial distribution centres or soup-kitchens. The resort hotel at Milltown Malbay, Co. Clare, even found itself accommodating some unexpected guests: Martineau warned in 1852: “Travellers had better not go there now in expectation of a bed, for this house is at present a workhouse” (161). However, in the 1850s, the new Railway Hotels in towns such as Galway and Killarney, under the auspices of companies rather than individuals, promised a change in the moral economy of the Irish hotel. Their location close to the terminus offered guests a swift transition from train to hotel, “rescuing them from many annoyances with which they are inflicted” (Fraser *Hand Book* 1854 302), most obviously the clamouring guides and beggars, to whom the hotel had previously allowed an opportunity for a livelihood, and a visibility at times deeply inimical to the traveler’s peace. But as the advertisement for the Royal Victoria

Hotel (Figure 3) complains, railway hotels sought to impose a monopoly that damaged indigenous hotels, promoting their “*Touters*” to the station platform and excluding servants from the hotels on the lake, who were forced to wait by the door. Even with its new-fangled gas lighting “manufactured on the premises” and royal patronage, the Royal Victoria Hotel could not promise a wholly sanitized experience. The Irish hotel was being recast in the mould of its British counterparts, as a respectable, rather impersonal commercial enterprise, whose responsibilities were solely to the comfort and privacy of its guests, rather than its deprived local community.

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