6

Bringing It All Back Home: The Fluctuating Reputation of James Orr (1770–1816), Ulster-Scots Poet and Irish Patriot

Carol Baraniuk

The Gathering 2013 was billed as a celebration of Ireland, Irishness and of Ireland's people worldwide. In its essence a tourism initiative, it was rolled out with a vigorous call to the Irish diaspora, particularly those located in the United States, which was urged to participate in a great homecoming festival centred on the mother country in 2013. The project was criticised, famously, by former Irish cultural ambassador to the United States, actor Gabriel Byrne (BBC 2012) as an attempt to "shake down" Irish Americans for "a few quid" and more widely as a self-indulgent culture fest that, in resorting to hackneyed and stereotypical images of Ireland, excluded many whose cultural or confessional backgrounds did not easily fit with traditional models. This chapter originally offered as a paper for the conference *After The Gathering: Dissonant Voices in Irish Diaspora Studies* held in June 2014 at the Public Record Office of

C. Baraniuk (✉)
Centre for Robert Burns Studies, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

J. Devlin Trew, M. Pierse (eds.), *Rethinking the Irish Diaspora*, Migration, Diasporas and Citizenship, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-40784-5_6

Northern Ireland, posits a counter-narrative. Its subject is the Ulster-Scots poet, Irish patriot and Presbyterian radical James Orr (1770–1816), Bard of Ballycarry, Co. Antrim. The chapter will argue that Orr is not sufficiently known and appreciated in his native land, his legacy victim to a complex interplay of social and political forces that shape identity formation and nation building.

The term Ulster-Scots has sometimes been contested on the grounds that it is a form of nomenclature which dates from the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries; it has also been distrusted, or caricatured, as an artificial construct deployed to serve an aggressive form of Ulster loyalism. In fact, uses of the term have been recorded in official correspondence as far back as the early seventeenth century, as, for example, Sir George Radcliffe writing in 1640 that: "None is soe dim-sighted but sees the gen'rall inclination of the Ulster Scots to the Covenant" (Whitaker 1810: 209). Although here the term is used in an ethnic sense, it establishes an historic usage. However, the term has been employed in this chapter for two main reasons: first, it is an accurate descriptor of writers within Ulster such as Orr and his contemporary Sam Thomson (1766–1816), who possessed Scottish ancestral roots, employed Scots language (though not exclusively) in their writing and in their everyday speech, and whose work demonstrates "pre-existent poetic and linguistic patterns which prevailed in both lowland Scotland and in Ulster" (Akenson and Crawford 1977: 33). These poets wrote within the Scottish literary tradition which had been transported to Ulster by seventeenth century migrants. They developed it, and through it addressed Irish, British and global issues. In referring to his own sense of identity, Thomson himself wrote that he felt "every item Scotch within" (Thomson 1806: 87). Second, in academic literary studies a considerable body of scholarship has accumulated over several decades in which these eighteenth and early nineteenth-century writers are referred to as "Ulster-Scots poets."[1]

James Orr's home village, Ballycarry in County Antrim, nestles in a delightful location among the hills above Carrickfergus and Larne, where it enjoys fine views over Belfast Lough to the coast of County Down and eastwards across the Irish Sea to the Scottish hills. It was James Orr's home throughout his life, except for a brief period following the 1798 Rebellion when he was forced to emigrate to the United States. Villagers

past and present have always taken justifiable pride in his memory. In 1935 a committee of residents, including the local poets William Calwell, William Hume and Crawford Jenkins, succeeded in re-publishing Orr's two volumes of verse, which had been out of print for over a century. In his introduction Calwell commented:

> James Orr, the humble and gifted Ballycarry weaver, has long been classed with the Irish immortals. No collection of Irish verse, wherever published is complete without selections from his works. This reprint will bring back to local men and women a remembrance of Orr and will stimulate their pride in one, whose genius has shed an immortal lustre on his native village (Orr 1936: foreword).

Orr was a self-educated weaver, a Presbyterian and descendant of seventeenth-century Scots migrants to Ulster. A keen reader, he participated in the book clubs and debating societies popular among many people of all classes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Orr's radicalisation was partly effected through his reading of philosophers such as Locke and Hume, and the works of Thomas Paine, in particular *The Rights of Man*, a key text for the northern United Irishmen during the 1790s. He became a published poet and essayist, employing his creative gifts to highlight injustice and oppression wherever he observed them while articulating the grievances of the dispossessed and disempowered. It was perhaps inevitable that he should be drawn to the Society of United Irishmen, inspired by the perceived ideal of a more democratic and inclusive Ireland, and that he should be attracted to the social justice wing of the movement represented by his fellow Presbyterians Henry Joy McCracken (1767–98) and James (Jemmy) Hope (1764–1847).

Ballycarry, as Orr knew it, was a community set apart from the English-speaking, Protestant Ascendancy by its inhabitants' Scottish ancestry, their Presbyterian religion and their linguistic register—the Scots language, or vernacular, which was the normal medium of communication employed in daily life.[2] The greatest influx of Scots settlers into Ulster occurred during the plantations (both private and government sponsored) of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.[3] The planters spoke the Central Scots of the Western Lowlands and in the early days for

the most part came to Ireland to improve their economic prospects. Later in the seventeenth century, however, their numbers were swollen by Covenanter fugitives, who had resisted the authority of state over church in Scotland and who fled to Ireland to escape persecution from the government of Charles II in what came to be known as "the killing times."

Orr became connected with other radically minded young men through the writers' network that centred on the home near Templepatrick of his friend and mentor Samuel Thomson (1766–1816).[4] Henry Joy McCracken's name appears close to Orr's on the list of subscribers to Thomson's first volume of poetry. The inaugural meeting of the United Irishmen took place in Belfast in October 1791, with Wolfe Tone present, but the organisation had developed in the wake of Bastille Day, which was enthusiastically celebrated in the city in that year. The contemporary inspiration for the network, originally called the Irish Brotherhood, had come from Dr. William Drennan (1754–1820), an Ulster-Scot and son of the minister of the First Rosemary Street Presbyterian church, but its roots may be located in the radical programme of the Volunteer movement of the 1770s. Volunteer companies were formed in Ulster in response to threats of French invasion during a period when British troops in large numbers were required to fight abroad in the American war. By 1779, there were 40,000 armed companies throughout Ireland with half of them in Ulster where many included large numbers of Ulster-Scots Presbyterians. Their numerical strength and armed capacity made them a formidable force and they set about campaigning for a more independent and representative Irish parliament. Their largest, most significant demonstration, the Dungannon Convention, took place in 1782, after which the Whig government in London granted the Irish parliament legislative independence. However, the Volunteers did not succeed in achieving a more equal representation of all the people of Ireland within the Irish parliament, or of reforming the electoral process to make elections to the parliament free and fair. One might say that the United Irishmen were formed to deal with this unfinished business.

Other early or founding members of the Belfast United Irishmen were also Presbyterian and Ulster-Scots in background. They included Samuel Neilson (1761–1803), editor of the *Northern Star* newspaper, Archibald Hamilton Rowan (1751–1834), a landowner from Co Down, and once

again, Henry Joy McCracken and James Hope. Elaine McFarland (1997: 65) writes of the "Belfast principle"—the shared vision of these men—which was recognised by contemporaries as "an outward-looking and challenging blend of rationalist Presbyterianism and political liberalism."

Their early agenda could be characterised as more reformist than revolutionary. They aimed to achieve Catholic emancipation; improved representation in the Irish Parliament in Dublin for Catholics, Protestants and Dissenters; and strengthened legislative powers for the Dublin parliament. They were encouraged by successful revolutions in America (1776) and France (1789) as they set about working to establish a more inclusive Ireland which would enjoy greater independence of the metropolitan centre of government. They felt the Irish situation intolerable: "In the present great era of reform, when unjust governments are falling in every quarter of Europe … we have no national government—we are ruled by Englishmen and the servants of Englishmen" (Joy 1817: 358). Their newspaper, the *Northern Star* asserted their people-centred inspiration in its striking masthead motto: "The public will our guide; the public good our end." It was through this medium that Orr made his debut as a published writer and demonstrated his sympathy with the United Irish reform programme. In an early, wide-ranging, combative essay he argued for the freedom of the press and attacked the Penal Laws, which he claimed made the Catholic population "aliens in their own country" and subjected the fruits of Presbyterian industry to the depredations of a "rapacious hierarchy"—a reference to the loathed tax, or tithe, paid to the Anglican church.[5] Orr's piece, argued with erudition and with striking confidence for a man barely into his twenties, was perfectly in line with the audacity and the general thrust of many of the pieces that appeared during the paper's six year history. Another was the anonymous "Dialogue between an Aristocrat and a Democrat" which described the French Revolution as "the most glorious effort of mankind", deplored "men of titles and great wealth" who "pass their whole time in idle gratifications" and warned the latter of a day soon coming when they would be "made accountable to the Justice of the Nation."[6]

When Britain went to war with revolutionary France in 1793, radicals with French sympathies came to be regarded by the government as poten-

tially dangerous enemy agents and efforts to suppress them increased in strength, culminating in General Lake's imposition of martial law in Ireland in March 1797. Nevertheless, Orr contributed occasional pieces to the *Northern Star* until its demise on 19 May of that year when the Monaghan Militia smashed the printing presses. Perhaps because he saw such actions as evidence that the authorities would never facilitate the development of the type of Ireland he had advocated, Orr made the transition from articulate, outspoken radical to United Irish activist. Certainly, on 7 June 1798 he is known to have led a troop of men from Ballycarry to the mustering ground at Donegore Hill, County Antrim, in order to join with Henry Joy McCracken's forces in preparation for the Battle of Antrim. Here the United Irishmen suffered the first of their heavy defeats in the North during the Rebellion of 1798. With a price of 50 pounds sterling on his head, a massive sum at the time, Orr spent a period on the run with McCracken and Hope in the wild and barren Antrim countryside until he succeeded in escaping to America, whither many of his routed compatriots from within the United Irish movement had also fled.

Of Orr's time in the United States little is known. Other migrants from his own village settled there and prospered, including John Neilson (c.1770–1827), who was also implicated in the Rising (Hume 1999: 11–14). Neilson established himself in Philadelphia, became a successful architect and carried out work for presidents Jefferson and Madison with whom he developed personal friendships. There is no certainty regarding where Orr settled; because of a vivid account he wrote of a sea voyage from a port in the north of Ireland to Newcastle on the Delaware in his poem *The Passengers*, it has usually been assumed that he stayed, like other Ballycarry exiles, in the neighbourhood of Philadelphia (Orr 1936: 135–41). Occasionally one hears New York mooted as a possibility; an essay that appeared in *The Irish Shield and Monthly Milesian,* published in the United States in 1829, asserts that Orr briefly resided there (Pepper 1829: 55). The piece grates somewhat on the contemporary reader's ear being heavily adorned with overblown rhetorical flourishes but, more seriously, its accuracy is rendered highly suspect due to the author's evident ignorance of many established facts about Orr's life. For example, Pepper identifies him as the brother of William Orr of Farranshane, the

"Presbyterian martyr" hanged in October 1797 for allegedly administering the United Irishmen's oath to two soldiers. Contemporary accounts, however, identify James Orr as an only child, born in Ballycarry after his parents had been married for many years. Pepper additionally fills in or embroiders his narrative with unsubstantiated, even ludicrous, assertions, for example, that on his return to Ireland, Orr the former "red-hot republican" became "an ardent advocate of the 'divine right of kings'" (Pepper 1829: 57).

Orr's friend A. McDowell, who wrote a brief biography of him for a posthumous edition of his poetry, indicated that he did not find America congenial; he stayed there only a few months, taking the opportunity offered by an amnesty to return home as soon as he was sure it was safe, probably late in 1799. What appears to be an oblique reference in one of Orr's poems to this period of exile does little to shed light on his experience. He comments only that "With upright ends I sought a happier plain;/But was unfortunate where felons thrive" (Orr 1936: 90–91). If Orr's career in America fell far short of glittering, he did apparently manage to publish some of his work while there. McDowell quotes the commendation expressed by the editor of an American newspaper in which his verses were published, while unhelpfully neglecting to name the newspaper itself: "We understand the present production is by James Orr, an humble weaver from the North of Ireland. We could wish that his writings were better known" (McDowell 1936: 188). But it was in the north of Ireland, in his native village of Ballycarry and through the literary and journalistic opportunities offered in the nearby thriving industrial and mercantile centre of Belfast, that Orr really began to build a serious reputation as a poet and essayist of considerable skill, and again to address the condition of the island—"Erin" his "lov'd land"—in verse and in prose (Orr 1936: 316). By 1801 the Irish Act of Union was a *fait accompli*; the United Irishmen had been thoroughly routed; McCracken, his own commander, was hanged in July 1798. In this phase of his life, Orr resumed his attacks on injustice and deprivation through the printed media that soon became available to him.

So far we have observed Orr living out a succession of iconic, often romanticised, Irish identities—the rebel poet, the tragic emigrant, the returning exile. On his restoration to Ballycarry, however, he took prag-

matic steps to establish a "respectable" post-Rebellion persona, returning to weaving and acquiring a reputation as the village bard who celebrated local characters, customs and landscape in verse. But quickly his ambitions moved beyond his immediate environs. He wrote verse for the *Belfast News-letter*, the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle* and the *Belfast Monthly Magazine*, offering an astute and carefully nuanced perspective on local, national and global affairs—the latter within the contexts of post-Union Ireland, and Britain's engagement in the Napoleonic conflict. From this period, Orr's most famous work is *The Irishman*, a poem often unfairly derided for sentimental nationalistic enthusiasm. In fact it is a bold affirmation of Irish distinctiveness, published in the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle* during the era of the war with France, when loyalist verse endorsing Britain and Britishness became wildly popular.[7] Orr, by contrast, hints at his admiration for the leaders of the pre-Union United Irishmen's movement, many of whom paid with their lives for their adherence to the principles that had driven them to rebellion. He also deliberately avoids expressing the bullish, militaristic sentiments typical of much wartime poetry:

> Erin, loved land! from age to age,
> Be thou more great, more fam'd and free!
> May peace be thine, or should'st thou wage.
> Defensive war, cheap victory!

In January 1811, a poem titled *To a Red-Breast, my daily visitor* appeared in the *Belfast Monthly Magazine*, prefaced with the following explanatory note: "Written in 1798, while in a state of concealment. The writer succeeded in getting out to America afterwards." The piece records the thoughts of a wanted man in hiding, who derives comfort in his secret retreat from the regular appearance of a robin. While experiencing the isolation and insecurity of a fugitive, he elevates the bird into a symbol of liberty, inspired by his observation of the natural freedom it enjoys. The work is characteristic of many texts produced in the Age of Sensibility, which depict how "a sensitive interpreter stoops to ponder some humble object—mouse, louse, daisy—that has captured his eye by chance" and uses it "to set the speaker apart from the mainstream of normal sociabil-

ity" (McGuirk 1997: 7). An additional twist in this case, is that the speaker is set apart not only by his sensitivity but by his status as a man on the run. The poem, which throughout contrasts the freedom of flight enjoyed by the redbreast with the enforced confinement suffered by the fugitive, strikes a defiant note in its concluding lines, where the speaker remarks, "When tyrant's thunders cease to roar,/I'll share with thee, blest liberty." Liberty and tyranny were potent terms for radicals, signalling revolutionary sympathies or intentions. The government is clearly implicated in the reference to tyranny, and is depicted as a viciously roaring predator. But the speaker evinces a determined faith that the situation will eventually change:

> Repeat! repeat thy woodnotes o'er,
> Nor from this hallow'd mansion flee:
> When tyrant's thunders cease to roar,
> I'll share with thee, blest liberty.

The poem is anonymous and its authorship has never been definitively proven, but the situation of the writer, the note of defiance struck alongside the sensitive appreciation of nature, the privileging of the libertarian ideal and the confidence exhibited as the speaker draws a moral from the behaviour of a simple, natural creature, give reasonable grounds for speculation that its author may well have been Orr. The one-time exile was at the time of the poem's appearance a fairly frequent contributor of poetry, essays and letters to the *Belfast Monthly Magazine,* a publication edited by the poet, radical patriot and founding United Irishman, William Drennan.

An earlier piece of verse in Orr's native Scots is similar in tone and viewpoint: *To a Sparrow* was inspired by an incident in which he observed young hooligans robbing a bird's nest (Orr 1936: 71–3). In this case Orr focuses on the mistreatment of the bird in order to voice his abhorrence of cruelty towards all the poor and disempowered. He reserves particular disapprobation for "rich, rude ruffians" who taunt a helpless widow, rendered homeless with her children due to a heartless eviction. Orr urges that real courage shows itself in the extension of sympathy and compassion to the weak:

But still the brave will rapine, blood,
An guile bewaur o', ['beware'
An' spare the creature o' their God,
Tho' but a Sparrow.

That Orr was a realist as much as a romantic, however, is evident from an essay for the *Belfast Monthly Magazine* in which his reasons for abandoning an armed struggle in his quest for reform and social justice seem implicitly expressed. First he urges, "hazarding life becomes criminal whenever nothing valuable can be attained by the exploit" (Orr 1810: 27). Orr is on record as having prevented an atrocity being committed by some of his troop, so hatred of bloody violence, which he had observed at close quarters, was likely also a significant factor in his rejection of physical force. But his verse reveals a further reason. His great poem *Donegore Hill* records the bitterness of a narrator who observes half the troop that had marched to join McCracken's attack on Antrim deserting in disarray and panic at a key moment. The speaker is clearly a unit commander, as Orr was, and since he was present at the Donegore Hill debâcle, one must presume that in writing about it he has drawn on his own experience. He comments that the men he considers heroes—McCracken and all the others who endured "the nine-tail'd cat, or choakin' rape" [rope]—might have been successful in their enterprise, if only they had not been forsaken (Orr 1936: 36–7). In other words, he accuses a substantial number of the rank and file of betrayal, despite the oaths of loyalty they had sworn when initiated into the United Irishmen. Such experience has clearly fed his distrust of attempts to bring about a better world by armed revolution, and his narrative is thus disruptive of the traditional republican myth which imagines a harmonious gallery of revolutionary heroes.

If Orr's newspaper publications are evidence of his popular appeal in his lifetime, his reputation was enhanced and perpetuated by the publication of two volumes of his verse: one in 1804, *Poems on Various Subjects* which was supported by subscriptions from his friends and neighbours; the second, *The Posthumous Works of James Orr of Ballycarry*, a collection that appeared in 1817.[8] At the heart of his published *oeuvre* are his poems in Ulster-Scots, or "Braid Scotch" the term he himself employed for the Scots language as spoken in parts of Antrim, Down, North–West Derry and east Donegal. These have proved an invaluable resource for linguistic

scholars, social historians or researchers of folk culture.[9] However, they have not, or not until recently, had sufficient attention as a literary *oeuvre*. Understood as such, they may be appreciated for their excellent crafting, for their power to challenge and move, and for the unique perspective they offer on Irish experience, expressed through a dynamic exploitation of traditional Scots poetic genres. They demonstrate Orr employing characteristically Scots verse structures such as "standard habbie", the *Christis Kirk* stanza and *the Cherrie and the Slae* stanza to address pivotal events in contemporary experience and in Irish history. Though his work is frequently rooted in local settings, Orr writes not from a parochial or localist perspective, but with a full grasp of the global dimensions, the philosophical and political debates from which events such as the 1798 Rebellion emerged, and at times he has a prophetic eye to their long-term consequences. A sequence of outstanding poems in his first published volume is particularly significant and includes his wry eye-witness account of the rebellion and its aftermath.[10] In *A Prayer*, written in the strict form of a Scots Presbyterian metrical psalm, he wrestles with his conscience over whether it can ever be right to take up arms against the government or to take a life in pursuit of a cause, however just (Orr 1936: 47–8). This is a complex piece which evidences some of the breadth of Orr's reading; its phrasing here and there incorporates deliberate echoes of Alexander Pope's *The Universal Prayer* and of Robert Burns's *A Prayer, Under the Pressure of Violent Anguish* (Kinsley 1971: 17). *Donegore Hill* exploits the Scots *Christis Kirk* stanza, traditionally reserved for rollicking accounts of peasant brawling at fairs. Here Orr employs it to depict the farcical confusion, cowardice and perfidy that he observed among the insurgent troops before the Battle of Antrim. The text offers a searing critique of the disparity between human idealism and weak, self-serving human nature (Orr 1936: 33–7).

Of particular relevance to the theme of emigration, are two pieces he composed based on his personal experience of the voyage to America: *Song, written on the Banks of Newfoundland* expresses the grief and disorientation of the forced migrant, while *The Passengers*, a further essay in the *Christis Kirk* stanza, adopts a strikingly different tone and insists, in an acerbic Scots idiom, that even if routed by poverty or conflict Irish resilience will inevitably reassert itself (Orr 1936: 167–8; 135–41). Finally, in

a verse epistle to his friend and mentor Samuel Thomson, which expresses his relief at having returned to Ireland, he chooses the highly demanding *the Cherrie and the Slae* stanza in which to encode repentance for his rashness in taking up arms, though he still manages to sound a radical and insubordinate note (Orr 1936: 122–5):

> Th'inglorious rhymes o' *countra clouns* [unsophisticated country fellows
> Get plenty to degrade 'em,
> Wha wad reward wi' laurel crowns,
> Gif Kings or Priests had made 'em.
> Tho' vain folk, disdain folk,
> *We'se* sing the burns, an' bow'rs, [We shall
> O' *AIRLAN'*, our fair lan'—[Ireland
> *Deel tak' her faes* an' ours! [May the devil take

The 1801 Union may be a hard political fact but, he asserts, Ireland's fields, streams and shady nooks will always belong to her poets and to her people.

Within Irish literary heritage Orr's work represents a distinctive and a varied northern school of mainly Dissenter writers. Others in this tradition include Samuel Thomson (1766–1816) of Carngranny, Templepatrick, a fine landscape poet and instigator of an important writers' circle; Robert Huddleston (1814–87) of Moneyrea, who addressed the poverty and deprivation of Famine-era Ireland; Sarah Leech (c. 1809–30) the proto-feminist bard of Lettergull, Donegal and Sir Samuel Ferguson (1810–86), a cultural nationalist, Deputy Keeper of the Public Records of Ireland, and a major influence on W.B. Yeats.[11]

While Orr's best pieces offer revealing insights into the mind-set of the Presbyterian, labouring-class radicals of '98, they certainly deserve to be far more widely known and celebrated for their literary merit, which is considerable. This is especially true of his greatest work, *The Irish Cottier's Death and Burial*, one of the finest entries in the Four Nations literary canon (Orr 1936: 260–66). Executed in the difficult Spenserian stanza and published posthumously, it is an affectionate but ultimately tragic portrayal of a whole community on the edge of extinction. The poem highlights the dignity, faith and independence of the northern labouring-class folk with whom the writer is intimately acquainted. While depicting

their attendance at a deathbed and the ensuing wake and funeral he offers deft pen portraits of community members, rendering their individuality but subtly universalising their experience. The narrative lingers in the dying labourer's cottage with its companionable warmth and comforting fellowship, then portrays the characters exposed to atrocious, and typical, Irish weather as they follow the coffin to the graveside. Orr's conclusion confronts them, and the reader, with the harsh fact of human transience and the inevitable dissolution of body, personality and community:

> An' while the sexton earth'd his poor remains,
> The circling crowd contemplatively stood,
> An' mark'd the empty sculls, an' jointless banes,
> That, cast at random, lay like cloven wood:
> Some stept outbye, an' read the gravestanes rude
> That only tald the inmates' years an' names;

It is quite astonishing that knowledge and appreciation of this poem, one of the jewels in the crown of Irish literature, is still almost wholly concentrated among academics or language activists.

But let us return to William Calwell's 1935 claim that James Orr once had a place "among the Irish immortals." Was this simply wishful thinking in Orr's home village? The evidence suggests that it was not. In Templecorran Cemetery, Ballycarry, Orr lies buried beneath an imposing monument which honours him as "Poet, Patriot and Philanthropist." It was erected in 1831, at the then enormous cost of £9000 and testifies to the high regard in which he was widely held. Furthermore, George Pepper's 1829 essay in the journal *The Irish Shield and Monthly Milesian*, referred to earlier, indicates that Orr's reputation was acknowledged in the United States at a period of noteworthy developments in the history of Ireland. The journal's target market was the Irish migrant community, whose support was being canvassed in support of Daniel O'Connell's campaign for repeal of the Act of Union. Along with Pepper's essay, a small selection of Orr's standard register poetry is reproduced, including the moving *Lament for a Beloved and Affectionate Mother*, likely to tug at the heart-strings of expatriates, while recommendations are made for further reading. Orr's rousing anti-slavery piece *Toussaint's Farewell to San Domingo* is one of several texts which reveal Orr as a keen supporter of

the abolitionist movement.[12] Pepper concludes by acknowledging Orr as "one of the most gifted bards of green Ullin of sylvan groves and limpid streams" (1829: 457). Something of Orr's memory clearly lingered in America, for an American serviceman stationed in Ballycarry in preparation for the D-Day landings is reported to have read the words of *The Irishman* reproduced on Orr's monument and to have expressed amazement because he knew the poem well from his school poetry text-book, but had never expected to find himself walking in the lanes and fields which the poet had known as home (Fig. 6.1).[13]

Orr certainly appeared alongside other "Irish immortals" in canon-forming nineteenth-century anthologies, among them Charles Read's weighty *The Cabinet of Irish Literature: Selections from the Works of the Chief Poets, Orators and Prose Writers of Ireland* (Read and O'Connor 1879–84). This compendium emerged during the Home Rule era and includes a small selection of Orr's pieces, one of which is *The Irish Cottier's Death and Burial*. It is prefaced with a revealing editorial comment on the

Fig. 6.1 James Orr's Monument, Templecorran Cemetery, Ballycarry, Co. Antrim (photograph by the author)

community who it acknowledges were "with few exceptions of Scots descent": "They were … considered by the native Irish of the other provinces an alien race" (Read and O'Connor 1879–84, vol 2: 167). The idealistic pluralism of Wolfe Tone's Ireland of Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter is strikingly absent here, perhaps a casualty of sectarian bitterness generated during the Famine, the Land War and mounting opposition to Home Rule in Ulster itself. While there were always exceptions, ultimately the later Ulster-Scots cultural tradition became largely dissociated, certainly in public perception, from the sense of Irishness many within it had embraced during James Orr's lifetime. This tradition and its diasporic representatives appear not to have been acknowledged, still less to have been perceived as a target market worthy of address, in the course of *The Gathering* project of 2013.[14]

Unionist hostility to Repeal and later to Home Rule was rooted in two main objections: Ulster, with its developing industrial-based economy, was prospering within the British Empire, and many of Ulster's Protestants feared for their religious liberty in a United Ireland. The Reverend Henry Cooke (1788–1868), an influential Presbyterian minister with a formidable talent for oratory had expressed these objections following Daniel O'Connell's campaigning visit to Belfast in 1844:

> … look at the town of Belfast. … our giant manufactories lifting themselves on every side, our streets marching on … And all this we owe to the Union. No, not all-for throned above our fair town … I behold the genii of Protestantism and Liberty, sitting inseparable in their power … Yes, Mr. O'Connell, we will guard the Union as we will guard our liberties, and advance and secure the prosperity of our country. Were you to succeed in effecting Repeal, we know our liberties were strangled forever. … Look at Belfast and be a Repealer—if you can (McComb 1841: 10).

In 1868 W. E. Gladstone (1809–98) announced his intention to "pacify Ireland" and attempted to realise his dream in two Home Rule Bills (1886 and 1893). In opposing this policy, Unionist politicians in Ulster repeatedly played the Scottish "card" to remind the population of their ancestral, religious, and linguistic links to Scotland, and thus their close relationship with Britain and the Empire. Literature, journalism, and

public demonstrations were all employed to this end. Graham Walker argues that the active promotion of a sense of Ulster-Scots identity developed in this era because, "Ulster unionists sought to disrupt … the Irish nationalist view of Ireland as a nation, one and indivisible with an historic destiny to be self-governing" (Walker 1997: 93–4). This should not be interpreted as implying that "Ulster-Scots" is coterminous with "Ulster unionist", since there were significant voices within the Ulster-Scots communities, the poet Florence Wilson (1918), for example, who supported the nationalist position in the period 1916–21. However, the idea of an Ulster-Scots identity was useful, as Walker indicates, in disrupting the popular monist narrative of the Irish nation: it could be, and often was, employed by those taking a unionist position to emphasise Ulster's historic connection to Scotland and, therefore, to the wider British Empire. We see this strategy used by the journalist John Harrison, who wrote a series of articles for *The Scotsman* newspaper sketching the history of Scots settlement in Ulster. Harrison was an opponent of Home Rule, viewing it as a cover for a movement which really aimed to separate Ireland and Great Britain (Harrison 2009 [1888]: Preface). In his conclusion, Harrison makes much of the Scots cultural identity of the Ulster population, insisting that any Scotsman who visits Antrim or Down "cannot feel as if he were away from his own kith and kin" (Harrison 2009: 97–8).

Many writers from within Ulster during this period reflected the Ulster-Scots community's growing consciousness of its distinctiveness. Archibald McIlroy (1859–1915) set a series of novels in the County Antrim town of Ballyclare, *Craiglinnie* in the stories. In one of these the opening description of the community brings out its Presbyterian character and some of its eccentricity, employing some characteristically Ulster-Scots expressions, such as "doon the water," "shilties" [small horses] and "whins" [yellow flowering gorse bushes] (McIlroy 2011: 1).

In the O'Connell era, Repealers associated their cause with Gaelic culture, and frequently with Catholicism. Christine Kinealy points out that O'Connell told his Repeal campaign managers to "be sure to have the approval of the Catholic clergy in every place you move to." He stated in 1840 that "The Catholic Church is a national church, and if the people rally with me, they will have a nation for their church." He remarked confidentially to a correspondent that "Protestantism would not survive

the Repeal ten years" (Kinealy 2009: 33–4). As the century progressed, nationalism increasingly identified with Ireland's Gaelic culture, for example, in the Gaelic League, founded in 1893 with the aim of restoring the Irish Language. In the field of literature, W.B. Yeats sought for something in English that was still characteristically and uniquely Irish, asking, "Is there no hope for the de-Anglicizing of our people? Can we not build a national tradition, a national literature which shall be none the less Irish in spirit from being English in language?" He felt this could be achieved "by translating and re-telling in English, which shall have an indefinable Irish quality of rhythm and style, all that is best in the ancient literature" (quoted in Kiberd 1995: 155).[15] The critic and literary historian Seamus Deane has amplified Yeats's purpose and motivation thus:

> Nationalism, as preached by Yeats or by Pearse, was a crusade for decontamination. The Irish essence was to be freed of the infecting Anglicizing virus … The Gaelic league pointed one way towards this restoration—the recovery of the Irish language and displacement, partial or total, of English …Yeats and Synge looked to the emergence of a new [Irish] literature in English vivified by the linguistic energies of an Irish civilization (Deane 1985: 94).

It must be obvious that James Orr's politically radical, Ulster set, Irish-themed, Scots language verse fits neatly with neither the Gaelic literary nationalist culture of Yeats nor with the pro-British, Unionist voices which frequently cited the Scottish connection to strengthen their case for maintaining the status quo. In the highly charged atmosphere of the partition era and its aftermath, the nuance and generosity of Orr's vision, and the sheer power of his poetry, seem to have attracted little attention across the island or beyond. The lack of focus on dissonant voices such as Orr's in Irish themed events such as *The Gathering 2013* surely reveals that the island still lies to some extent under the shadow of that aftermath.

The Ulster-Scots poets were largely dismissed as insignificant or as mere imitators of the Scottish bard, Robert Burns (1759–96).[16] In such circumstances, which pertained for much of the twentieth century, the re-publication of Orr by Calwell and his committee in 1935 represents a commendable determination not to permit a major Ulster and Irish liter-

ary figure to become wholly marginalised and forgotten. The *Collected Poems* of 1935 (reprinted 1936) represents a crucial milestone on the road to the recovery of Orr's reputation. Indeed, the mid- and late-twentieth century saw Orr's work eventually beginning to attract attention more widely. To what extent, then, may the poet and his reputation be said to have "come home" in the contemporary era? To answer this, we must briefly consider three separate but overlapping contexts, beginning with Orr's immediate locality.

Ballycarry, his home village, has undoubtedly kept faith with him. In 1922 an event called *A Reading and Service of Song* was held in his honour, then came the re-publication in 1935, while in recent years the very active Ballycarry Community Association has ensured his *oeuvre*, tolerant ideals and interesting life continue to be appropriately memorialised. James Orr Spring/Summer Schools were held in the village in 2003 and 2004, and an annual Bard of Ballycarry poetry competition has stimulated writers to engage with and continue the local verse tradition. Heritage Lottery funding has enabled the creation of *The Weaver's Trail*—six plaques around Ballycarry to highlight locations particularly associated with the poet.[17] In 2014, Orr's monument in Templecorran Cemetery was impressively restored and unveiled following a service of commemoration in the Old Presbyterian Church, where the poet himself would have worshipped. The financial support of the Brotherhood of Freemasons, of which Orr was an enthusiastic member, has also been crucial in the monument restoration.

More widely throughout the province of Ulster, John Hewitt, poet and committed regionalist, brought Orr's work to the attention of the public and of academics in the mid-twentieth century. He was in no doubt about Orr's skill and importance, noting that "*The Penitent* and *The Irish Cottier's Death and Burial* are far beyond the capacity of any other of our local rhymers, in firmness of structure and consistency of language, undoubtedly the major successes in scale in our vernacular literature" (Hewitt 2004: 94). Hewitt's work coincided with, and was underscored by, the research of major linguistic scholars such as Robert Gregg, Brendan Adams and John Braidwood, who researched and documented the uniqueness of indigenous Ulster speech, and the enduring Scottish influences it bears (Adams 1964). Experts in linguistics and social history took increasing interest in Orr's work from the 1970s onwards, but a further

landmark in the recovery of his reputation proved to be the publication of all his extant Scots verse within a collection selected by Philip Robinson and J.R.R. Adams in 1992. While reflecting that these poems are "a treasury of local information", Robinson's introductory essay draws attention to Orr's admiration for a key figure within the Scottish Enlightenment, the Moderate literary and divinity scholar, Dr. Hugh Blair, and he reminds the reader that Orr's poetry also dealt with "international issues and major historical events" (Adams and Robinson 1992: x, xix). More recently, Orr's published volumes were made widely available through a digitisation project undertaken by Ulster University. The same project included an outreach element, which permitted community engagement with Orr's poetry, and that of other Ulster-Scots poets, in a programme of workshops in libraries and schools throughout Northern Ireland.[18] The latter development has occurred in a post-conflict North, and in the wake of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement's endorsement of Ulster-Scots, which further developments have strengthened: the St Andrews Agreement of 2006, for example, committed the Northern Ireland Executive to a strategy for developing the Ulster-Scots language, including its attendant culture (St Andrews Agreement, Annex B).[19] This must, of course, include the literary tradition.

Yet one feels that in the present, Orr is not sufficiently known and appreciated. In Scotland, it would probably be impossible to find anyone unable to identify Robert Burns as an iconic national bard, or to name some of his best-known pieces, such as *To a Mouse*, or *Auld Lang Syne*. In Northern Ireland, at least in popular culture, James Orr still inhabits a type of shadowland, from which he is occasionally permitted to emerge as the subject of a radio discussion or a TV documentary. Notable examples include *Weaving Words,*[20] *The Hamely Tongue*[21] and *Minding our Language*.[22] Yet it is puzzling that a poet of Orr's skill and significance, born and raised in County Antrim, whose work offers unique insights into Irish people's experiences during the Rebellion-Union and Napoleonic eras has no official place within the school curriculum in Northern Ireland and that the public examination system, which routinely incorporates the study of English and Irish poets as challenging as Chaucer, Pope, Edward Thomas, Heaney and Kavanagh, includes not a line of James Orr.

More widely throughout the island of Ireland Orr's name has, however, become familiar to citizens within both its jurisdictions who hold Irish passports. In 2013, the Irish government released details of a newly designed passport which includes an extract from Orr's poem *Song, written in winter*—a haunting evocation of the landscape in the dead season, and of the privations endured by the poor within it. In response to a query from the present writer concerning the reasons for the addition of Orr's name and verse, the following reply was forwarded:

> Ulster Scots is a language spoken on the island of Ireland and is part of our common heritage. James Orr, known as the Bard of Ballycarry, is one of the so-called Ulster Weaver Poets. A United Irishman, he fought in the Battle of Antrim and fled to America in its aftermath before returning under amnesty. He and his poetry are included as they represent a number of important strands of Irishness, encompassing amongst other things, the Protestant tradition, the written word and rural life. The specific lines selected were "The hedge-hauntin' blackbird, on ae fit whyles restin, Wad fain heat the tither in storm-rufflet wing."[23]

This appearance on an official travel document which carries Orr's verse from Ireland to abroad and back again seems symbolic and resonant, demonstrating a nuanced understanding of the multi-faceted nature of Irish identity that appears to have been absent from the vision of *The Gathering* project. Orr's inclusion on the Irish passport is at the very least an encouraging development, and one for which the recognition of his poetry within the school curriculum in Northern Ireland would provide an appropriate complement.[24]

Orr's best work is local in setting and voice, global and timeless in its range. The rising generation throughout the island of Ireland, and especially in the northern part that he knew best, deserves to know about its author's passion for his country's beauty and history, and about the hand of fellowship he extended to all. *The Penitent*, a long poem in broad Scots which modulates into English for its final stanza, encapsulates the vision of home and homeland that he wished to share:

> May my wild brethren turn to wisdom's path
> An' grace poor Erin, plagu'd with want and dearth!

And banish from her shores religious wrath,
Desponding sloth, and dissipated mirth!
May sun-like Science from the poor man's hearth
Chase Ignorance, the owl that haunts the stys!
So patriots brave, when we lie low in earth,
"Harmless as doves, and yet as serpents wise,"
Shall follow Truth and Right, and guard the land they prize. (Orr 1936, 179–80)

Notes

1. See, for example, Liam McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical* (2002), particularly the chapter entitled, Burns and the Ulster-Scots Radical Poets, which discusses Orr and Thomson. There are also two significant volumes of essays—*Cultural Traditions in Northern Ireland: Varieties of Scottishness* (Erskine and Lucy 1997), and *Ulster-Scots Writing: An Anthology* (Ferguson 2008)—and more recently the special issue of *Etudes Irlandaises, vol. 38, no. 2* (2013): *Ulster-Scots in Northern Ireland Today: Language, Culture, Community*. The author has also taught a modular course entitled, The Ulster-Scots Literary Tradition: 1750–2000, at Ulster University during 2013–14.
2. For a detailed account of Orr's life and work see Baraniuk (2014).
3. Attempts at "planting" or settling parts of Ulster with colonists from England and Scotland included the Essex plantation in County Antrim in the 1570s; Hamilton and Montgomery's plantation in Counties Antrim and Down in the early 1600s; James I's Plantation of Ulster, inaugurated in1609.
4. See Jennifer Orr (2012) for Thomson's correspondence and Jennifer Orr (2015) for the significance of his writers' circle.
5. The *Northern Star*, 12 January 1792.
6. The *Northern Star*, 4 April 1792.
7. *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 1 July 1805; poem dated 26 June 1805. See, James Orr (1936: 316–17).
8. Both texts have been digitised and are available on the Ulster-Scots Poetry Project website, at http://arts.ulster.ac.uk/ulsterscotspoetry/ (accessed 20 January 2016).
9. See, for example, Gray (1993: 249–75).

10. A detailed analysis of this poetic sequence and a full assessment of its significance may be found in (Baraniuk 2014: 123–42).
11. For digitised texts from these and a further wide range of Ulster-Scots writers, see the Ulster-Scots Poetry Project, at: http://arts.ulster.ac.uk/ulsterscotspoetry/ (accessed 12 February 2016).
12. See also Orr (1936: 291–2 and 225–7) for these texts.
13. The present writer is grateful to members of the Ballycarry community for the report of this incident.
14. A discussion of Ulster-Scots culture as a means of allowing Ulster Protestants to be "Irish on their own terms" may be found in Baraniuk (2012).
15. Both Yeats and Douglas Hyde, first president of the Gaelic League, came from the Protestant (Anglican) tradition.
16. See, for example, O'Donoghue (1895: 20–22).
17. See Ballycarry—Co. Antrim—Home of Poet James Orr, at: http://www.weavers-trail.co.uk/a-modern-legacy (accessed 10 February 2016).
18. See the Ulster-Scots Poetry Project, at: http://arts.ulster.ac.uk/ulster-scotspoetry/ (accessed 12 February 2016).
19. See *Agreement at St Andrews*, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/136651/st_andrews_agreement-2.pdf (accessed 12 February 2016).
20. *Weaving Words*, BBC Radio Ulster, available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00y47c2 (accessed 12 February 2016).
21. TG4, 2006.
22. BBC Northern Ireland, 2015.
23. Email to the author from Robert O'Driscoll, Private Secretary to Charles Flanagan T.D., Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, 28 November 2014. The quoted lines mean: "The hedge haunting blackbird, standing (keeping) from time to time on one foot would love to heat the other in its storm ruffled feathers (wing)."
24. A detailed discussion of the absence of Ulster-Scots poetry from the Northern Ireland school curriculum is to be found in Baraniuk (2013: 55–73).

Works Cited

Adams, Brendan, ed. 1964. *Ulster Dialects: An Introductory Symposium*. Belfast: Ulster Folk and Transport Museum.

Adams, J.R.R., and Philip S. Robinson, eds. 1992. *The Country Rhymes of James Orr: The Bard of Ballycarry (1770–1816)*. Bangor: Pretani Press.

Akenson, D.H., and W.H. Crawford. 1977. *Local Poets and Social History: James Orr Bard of Ballycarry*. Belfast: PRONI.

Anon. 1811. To a Redbreast, My Daily Visitor. *Belfast Monthly Magazine* 6 (30): 54.

Baraniuk, Carol. 2012. 'Irish on Their Own Terms?' Reviving the Revival, or the Progress and Implications of Some Current Strategies for Ulster Scots. *The Drouth* 42: 77–86.

———. 2013. Poetic Justice: Ensuring a Place for Ulster-Scots Poetry Within the School Curriculum in the North of Ireland. *Études Irlandaises* 38 (2): 55–73.

———. 2014. *James Orr, Poet and Irish Radical*. London: Pickering and Chatto.

BBC News. 2012. Gabriel Byrne: The Gathering Ireland 'Seen as Scam' by Irish Americans. November 6. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-20218856. Accessed 26 May 2016.

Deane, Seamus. 1985. *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880–1980*. London: Faber and Faber.

Erskine, J., and G. Lucy, eds. 1997. *Cultural Traditions in Northern Ireland: Varieties of Scottishness*. Belfast: QUB Institute of Irish Studies.

Ferguson, Frank, ed. 2008. *Ulster-Scots Writing: An Anthology*. Dublin: Four Courts Press.

Gray, Jane. 1993. Folk Poetry and Working Class Identity in Ulster. *Journal of Historical Sociology* 6 (3): 249–275.

Harrison, John. 2009. *The Scot in Ulster: Sketch of the History of the Scottish Population of Ulster*. Belfast: Ullans Press. [Original publication: Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1888].

Hewitt, John. 2004. *Rhyming Weavers and Other Country Poets of Antrim and Down*. Belfast: The Blackstaff Press.

Hume, David. 1999. The Story of John Neilson c. 1770–1827. *The Broadisland Journal* 5:11–14.

Joy, Henry. 1817. *Historical Collections Relative to the Town of Belfast: From the Earliest Period to the Union with Great Britain*. Belfast: G. Berwick.

Kiberd, Declan. 1995. *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Kinealy, Christine. 2009. *Repeal and Revolution: 1848 in Ireland*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Kinsley, James. 1971. *Burns: Poems and Songs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McComb, William. 1841. *The Repealer Repulsed*. Belfast: McComb.

McDowell, A. 1936. A Sketch of the Author's Life. In *Collected Poems,* ed. James Orr, 185–191. Belfast: William Mullan and Son. [Repr. of 1835 ed.].

McFarland, Elaine. 1997. Scottish Radicalism and the Belfast Principle. In *Cultural Traditions in Northern Ireland: Varieties of Scottishness*, ed. J. Erskine and G. Lucy, 65–89. Belfast: QUB Institute of Irish Studies.

McGuirk, Carol. 1997. *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era*. East Linton: Tuckwell Press.

McIlroy, Archibald. 2011. *The Auld Meetin'-Hoose Green*. Belfast: Ullans Press.

McIlvanney, Liam. 2002. *Burns the Radical: Politics and Poetry in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland*. East Linton: Tuckwell Press.

O'Donoghue, D.J. 1895. Ulster Poets and Poetry. *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 1 (1): 20–22. (Second Series).

Orr, James. 1936. *Collected Poems*. Belfast: William Mullan and Son. [Repr. of 1835 ed.].

Orr, James (O., Ballycarry). 1810. On the Disasters and Deaths Occasioned by Accidents. *Belfast Monthly Magazine* 5: 24–27.

Orr, Jennifer. 2012. *The Correspondence of Samuel Thomson (1766–1816): Fostering an Irish Writers' Circle*. Dublin: Four Courts Press.

———. 2015. *Literary Networks and Dissenting Print Culture in Romantic-Period Ireland*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Pepper, George. 1829. Literary and Biographical Notices of Irish Authors: No. XII, James Orr. *The Irish Shield and Monthly Milesian: A Historic, Literary and Dramatic Journal* 1 (12): 449–457.

Read, Charles A., and T.P. O'Connor, eds. 1879–84. *The Cabinet of Irish Literature: Selections from the works of the chief poets, orators and prose writers of Ireland.* 4 vols. London: Blackie and Son.

Thomson, Samuel. 1806. *Simple Poems on a Few Subjects*. Belfast: Smyth and Lyons.

Walker, Graham. 1997. Scotland and Ulster: Political Interactions Since the Late Nineteenth Century and Possibilities of Contemporary Dialogue. In *Cultural Traditions in Northern Ireland: Varieties of Scottishness*, ed. J. Erskine and G. Lucy, 91–109. Belfast: QUB Institute of Irish Studies.

Whitaker, Thomas Dunham, ed. 1810. *The Life and Original Correspondence of Sir George Radcliffe, Knight, the Friend of the Earl of Strafford*. London: John Nichols and Son.

Wilson, Florence. 1918. *The Coming of the Earls and Other Poems*. Dublin: Candle Press.