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CANALS, COMMERCE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF NATION IN SYDNEY OWENSON'S *O'DONNELL*

Nicola Lloyd



IN HIS 1812 *ACCOUNT OF IRELAND, STATISTICAL AND POLITICAL*, Edward Wakefield declared:

When I hear a strong desire expressed for commerce, and the construction of canals to create it [...] I greatly regret, that the Irish are so blind as not to perceive, that [...] were the people habituated to labour, agricultural produce, manufactures, commerce, a proper circulating medium, the representative of that industry, would all be the happy results of this primary cause.¹

Wakefield's disparaging comments are typical of discourses of Irish improvement in the years following the 1801 Act of Union. His references to canal construction and agricultural economy underscore the emerging focus on Irish geography in the post-union period, in which the Irish landscape became a contested national body repeatedly inscribed with narratives of possession and dispossession. More notable still is the way that these narratives are frequently articulated in terms of the eighteenth-century physiological discourse of sensibility, emphasising the importance of the 'proper circulating medium' of commerce in order to animate and invigorate the geographical body of Ireland. Narratives of sentiment are also a central component of the Romantic national tale, which sought to address political and cultural conflict through the domestic form of the novel. In its review of Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), the *Critical Review's* bemoaning of the intrusive nature of the author's 'disquisitions on the manners of the Irish' and their tendency to interpose just as 'the tear of sensibility is swelling in the eye of her fair reader at the woes and virtues of the interesting heroine' expresses the disputed nature of the overlap between discourses of sensibility and nationality in the period.² This article takes this overlap as its starting point in exploring sentimental formations of nationhood in Sydney Owenson's *O'Donnell: A National Tale* (1814). Owenson's national tale considers formations of geographical circulation in order to provide an extended critique of ascendancy schemes of improvement and narratives of sentimental assimilation. In its focus on the centrality of Ireland's contested geography in schemes of improvement, *O'Donnell* considers the importation and exportation of national and cultural identity in the post-union period. In doing so, it articulates anxieties about the ideological 'mapping' of the

Irish landscape and formations of international sentimental communities that threaten to destabilise and undermine individual national character.

Recent scholarship has emphasised the prominence of Irish geography in fictional and political discourses of the Romantic period. In her study of the cultural history of the Irish novel, Claire Connolly considers the various aspects of geography that shaped constructions of Irish cultural identity, particularly the way that Ireland's natural resources were increasingly revalued in terms of their potential for trade in the period. As Connolly points out, the positioning of Irish geography in this way locates it within an Enlightenment discourse of political economy, which finds its counter in the 'antiquarian' Romantic nationalism that emphasised ancient Irish culture. This creates, as Connolly puts it, a 'relationship between economic necessity and aesthetic value in the context of global power relations'.³ Geography becomes a site of cultural anxiety in the Romantic national tale, functioning simultaneously as a means of economic advancement and as a symbol of Ireland's complex history and national identity. This is never more apparent than in the emerging tendency in political discourse of the Romantic period to invoke 'Ireland's geographical location as irrefutable argument in favour of Union'.⁴ Speeches to the House of Lords in the period preceding the 1801 Act of Union configure Britain and Ireland as 'two sister Islands, not merely contiguous, but lying apart from the rest of Europe [...] in the very bosom and embraces of each other',⁵ referring to the Irish channel as merely 'that sea which now separates us only from friends'.⁶ The sentimental and familial imagery employed in these speeches implies a reciprocal sympathetic bond of shared interest but, as Connolly points out, geography was just as frequently used as an argument against union. She cites an article from the Irish newspaper *The Northern Star* which emphasises the "dangerous tho' narrow sea" and declares that "Nature by its situation points out, that [Ireland] should be an independent state, and that both islands may be united under one head: they are still separate bodies, each possessing its own heart and its own members".⁷ These discussions of union in terms of the sentimental body politic offer a neat demonstration of the troubled relationship between Ireland and England as 'united' or 'separate bodies': for Ireland, union with Britain had the potential to engulf it both physically and culturally.

The sentimental configuration of Britain and Ireland as 'sisters' or 'friends', 'never disposed to quarrel',⁸ reflects what Evan Gottlieb identifies as the formation of 'sympathetic Britishness' in the Romantic period. He argues that the politics of feeling consistently emphasised the politics of union, suggesting that 'the discourse of sympathy, as developed by the Scottish Enlightenment and then deployed and disseminated by a variety of writers was central to this new identity' of Britishness.⁹ This sympathetic construction of Britishness is frequently underscored by a focus on the potential for commercial activity to unite culturally disparate groups through the circulation of civility. Eighteenth-century commercial rhetoric frequently adopted the physiological analogy of the body politic of sensibility to denote circulation in trade and commerce was seen as possessing the capacity to effect a sentimental reformation of society, as the benefits of capitalism led to im-

proved standards of living and refined taste and manners. As Markman Ellis puts it, '[c]ommercial activity [...] is the legitimate activity of the ardent sentimentalist, since to aid communication, and to increase circulation, is to reform manners, and disseminate virtue'.¹⁰ This communication and circulation is closely linked to the vast modification of the transport infrastructure in eighteenth-century Britain as part of widespread industrial and agricultural reform. Canal construction had begun to create new geographical links owing to the increased demand for commercial transportation: in England, a commercial network in which major ports linked with inner counties through rivers was supplemented by canals providing connection to major industrial and agricultural regions, thus facilitating both a nationwide market economy and a process of sentimental reform.¹¹ Indeed, Richard Whitworth, MP and canal designer, argued that the 'rude and unpolished behaviour [of the lower orders of society] will be altered and soothed into the most social civility and good breeding by the alluring temptations of the beneficial advantage of trade and commerce'.¹² Likewise, major road improvements took place throughout the eighteenth century as the result of turnpike trusts, in which groups of local businessmen and landowners were granted Local Acts of Parliament to raise capital to for the construction or improvement of roads and to charge tolls.¹³

In Ireland it was agreed—among English commentators, at least—that 'to render the remote, mountainous part of the kingdom productive, they must be made accessible, and intersected with roads, that want of which contributes very much to retard the progress of civilization, and industry'.¹⁴ Henry Brooke, Anglo-Irish landowner and author of the novel *The Fool of Quality* (1765–70), had published a tract promoting construction of canals entitled *The Interests of Ireland* in 1759. The work outlines the centrality of geographical communication in facilitating national improvement through commerce, arguing that God created the sea, lakes, rivers and streams as 'Avenues of [...] beneficent Communication' so that 'Man [...] might, in Time, by the Effect of his own Skill and Labour, knit into one Family, and weave into one Web, the Affinity and Brotherhood of all Mankind' through commercial interaction.¹⁵ The unnavigable landscape of Ireland is 'like a Carcass whose exterior Parts are kept warm by outward Applications, while the Heart and Vitals are inanimate, that should naturally communicate both Action and Nourishment to the whole System'.¹⁶ Likewise, 'excellent roads' and 'navigable canals' 'should visit every part [of Ireland]; since by their means every part may convey its natural produce to the centre and *heart* of the whole. National intercourse is like the circulation of the blood in the body; it should extend to its remotest members; and the remotest members should return the fluid to the vital organs'.¹⁷ The landscape in this metaphor wants only the chords or nerves of canals or roads to animate and increase the circulation of the whole system of the body politic. Roads and canals, then, served to bind man to man in a geographical sense, but also to facilitate the transmission of the refined manners and sensibility that were perceived as the eventual outcome of commercial wealth.

The frequency with which the trope of roads and canals appears as an emblem of sympathetic union in eighteenth-century economic and political writing suggests parallels with Romantic national and historical fiction, given their focus on sympathy as a means of national cohesion and their engagement with ideas of historical progress and national improvement. Owenson demonstrates an emerging preoccupation with discourses of Irish geographical improvement in the letters she added to the 1812 edition of *St Clair, or the Heiress of Desmond* (1803). In terms that appropriate contemporary rhetoric about Ireland's geographical potential for trade, the Anglo-Irish protagonist St Clair writes to his father of 'their lakes, more numerous than in any other country in the world of the same extent, so important in a commercial view, affording, as many of them do, within a few miles of the sea, a free navigation'.¹⁸ In this case, however, the improvement of transport links in order to facilitate commerce is represented as a specifically English interest: St Clair tells his father that the Irish are entirely unaware of the geographical merits of their own country, which—in terms that recall Wakefield's condemnation of Irish 'blindness'—are 'unappreciated' and 'unknown by name' (I, 34). The implication here is obvious: the Irish people remain static and rooted in the ancient past but geographical improvement and exploitation of their 'national possessions' (I, 35–36) would set them on the path of historical progress through commerce towards modernity and civility.

Owenson is, in principle, supportive of such schemes of improvement. The need for commercial progress in Ireland is an implicit but central theme in her controversial work of travel writing *France* (1817), in which she, as Benjamin Colbert notes, 'perceived in the example of post-revolutionary France an image of social amelioration among the agrarian peasantry that contrasted sharply with her native Ireland'.¹⁹ This idealised depiction of the French peasantry is consistently associated with geography and transport links. The 'facility of land and water carriage for the transport of its products' allows the development of trade for social improvement, leading to a sentimental tableau of 'beautiful roads, crowded with fantastic groups, vibrating with cheerful sounds' in a 'scene of pleasurable animation'.²⁰ Owenson's praise of the role of improvements in transportation in aiding commercial activity was satirised in William Playfair's *France as It Is, Not Lady Morgan's France* (1819). Playfair objected to her portrayal of France as 'a modern Arcadia, where the *patriarchal peasantry* live as in the golden age' and argued that the 'terrible will be [the] disappointment' of the traveller who actually visits the country.²¹ He condemns Owenson's praise of French transport links, presenting a biting satire of her picturesque description of the public roads in France and declaring that 'the greatest part of the country is too far from the sea-coast to be commercial'.²² Playfair's suggestion that Owenson's intention in depicting the 'happy life of the peasantry' of post-revolutionary France was to 'excite a desire of imitation, and create discontent in Britain, where people formerly considered themselves more free and happy than in France' is telling.²³ The use of the term 'excite' recalls the eighteenth-century physiological discourse of sensibility but it is the word 'imitation' that is striking here, if we recall Robertson's contention

that imitation and similitude are central to the model of civilised European community.²⁴ Conservative anxieties about the circulation and redistribution of sensibility are evident in Playfair's narrative: for Britain to experience the potentially democratising and equalising effects of wealth from trade appears to be less than desirable.

If *St Clair* and *France* advocate the improvement of transport links to aid commerce and historical development in Ireland then *O'Donnel* problematises this point by highlighting the uneasy power balance associated with the model of creating an international 'Brotherhood of all Mankind'—to use Brooke's term—based on economic assimilation within the complex power dynamic of Britain.²⁵ The novel, through its depiction of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy as cosmopolitan travellers, provides an explicit critique of the discourse of Irish improvement prominent in the early nineteenth century and its attempts to address the troubling nature of what Katie Trumpener terms 'closed cultural economies' that persisted in 'resisting improvement'.²⁶ This process of improvement attempted to encourage imports and exports in both an economic and a cultural sense, opening up the Irish economy and culture to external influences. Contemporary discussions of the improvement process are rooted in the eighteenth-century ideals of benevolent and practical sensibility as a means of erasing difference, as by alleviating economic hardship a sentimental community of equality is created, which is precisely the root of Playfair's anxieties in his criticism of *France*. However, this appropriation of the Irish landscape in the name of improvement is highly problematic. In the words of the Reverend James Hall in his 1813 *Tour through Ireland* the prospect of union and 'amalgamation' with the 'great and powerful state' of Britain elicits a 'horror of annihilation' and 'an alarm for self preservation' in Ireland.²⁷ Indeed, Hall couches this 'annihilation' in specifically geographical terms, stating that the 'small nation is loth to abandon its separate existence, its identity, and be swallowed up as a stream in the ocean': by implication, schemes of improvement that attempt to modify the Irish landscape in order to incorporate it within the network of British political economy have the capacity to overwhelm and engulf Ireland's national identity.

In the preface to *O'Donnel*, Owenson announced a new departure in novelistic style that would focus on the 'flat realities of life'.²⁸ As part of her newly realistic style, Owenson had initially taken for the model of her hero the historical figure of Red Hugh O'Donnell (1572–1602), leader of a rebellion against English government in Ireland in 1593 and one of the leaders of Irish forces in the Nine Years' War. However, her project of using history to 'extenuate the errors attributed to Ireland' (I, xi) for the 'purposes of conciliation' (I, x) was thwarted by the violence and bloodshed she uncovered in her research: instead, she acknowledged that she had 'advanced [her] story to more modern and more liberal times, and exchanged the rude chief of the days of old, for his polished descendant in a more refined age' (I, xii). This historical transposition had a transformative effect on Owenson's version of the national tale: *O'Donnel*'s vision of a 'more refined age' offers a fuller engagement with the contemporary context of Irish improvement

in the post-union period. The complexities of the novel's plot and its resolution in the marriage union between the cosmopolitan hero O'Donnel and the Irish Duchess of Belmont reflect its explicit political agenda: the promotion of Anglo-Irish conciliation and Catholic Emancipation. The dispossessed national hero O'Donnel is lately returned to Ireland from many years' service in the Austrian army in order to claim his birthright. On arrival, he makes acquaintance with a party of English travellers, which includes the enlightened absentee landowner Mr Glentworth, his opinionated and officious wife Lady Singleton and the sycophantic social climber Mr Dexter. The last descendant of the ancient Tyrconnel dynasty, whose property has been expropriated by the English, O'Donnel's status as a Catholic Irishman renders him disenfranchised and impoverished until his marriage finally marks the restoration of his property and land.

Given its self-proclaimed agenda of promoting Anglo-Irish conciliation, *O'Donnel* is remarkably ambivalent about the possibility of transnational unity. In the novel Owenson is preoccupied not only with the question of Irish improvement that featured so prominently in contemporary political commentary, but with the tendency of these discourses of improvement to appropriate Irish landscape and geography within a discourse of sentimental union. Francis Plowden's description in 1806 of Ireland as a 'shoot from the stem of Great Britain' which 'has brought forth fruit' but 'that, as a separate plant, [...] would bear not fruit for at least an hundred years' without being 'shaded by the British oak' serves as a striking example.²⁹ With the 'beneficial tendency' of union and the investment of English capital, however, Plowden argues that the feeble Irish landscape would be transformed:

The bogs would be converted into fields covered with smiling harvests; the barren mountains would be covered with cattle; mines would be wrought, and canals would unite the most distant parts of the country; the old sources of wealth would be extended; new ones would be discovered; and the inhabitants of Ireland, now poor, idle, and discontented, would be rendered rich, industrious, and happy.³⁰

Discontent and disharmony are subsumed within this sentimental vision of historical progress, which removes political and economic difference and produces—in the words of a commentator in 1801 who sentimentally termed himself 'a true friend to Ireland'—'a spirit of conciliation and affection between the lower and higher orders.'³¹ This sympathetic union would, he goes on to state, signal the end of the 'coercive system unavoidably adopted', meaning that 'the one class will get more enlightened and more obedient to the laws, and the other will be more respected and beloved'. Discourses such as this, couched in the terminology of Enlightenment sympathy and stadial historical progress, articulate an uneasy model of colonial power relations. For Owenson, schemes of improvement based on a seemingly benevolent appropriation of Irish landscape that will unify the different 'orders' of Irish society, despite their sentimental proclamations of friendship and familial union, lack a fundamental sympathy with Irish culture.

The character of Lady Singleton epitomises the British Enlightenment ideology of commercial and sympathetic colonial reform. A ‘traveller by *profession*’ (I, 3), she is intent on addressing what she calls the ‘semi-barbarous’ resistance to ‘innovation’ (I, 5) she perceives in Ireland, and on exerting her programme of ‘*radical reform*’ by ‘examining, changing, correcting, and improving’ (I, 8). Her ambitions are wide-ranging: the construction of canals (I, 5, 18, 85) is her primary focus but her plans also extend to renovating roads, enriching soil, cultivating bogs, erecting an aqueduct, establishing a ‘bobbin-lace manufactory’ (I, 213) and building schools. The majority of her schemes are modelled on principles of cultural assimilation or, to use Robertson’s term, imitation: her canal system is modelled on that of Newcastle, the soil enriching has taken place in Derbyshire and the school buildings are based on those of the London-born public education innovator Joseph Lancaster.³² While her husband Glentworth argues for the benefit of education in fitting a populace for civil duty, his wife goes further, making an explicit connection between commercial progress and educated civilisation: the Irish ‘want nothing but manufactories, commerce, and schools, to be a very clever people indeed’ (I, 213).

Owenson’s depiction of Glentworth—whose name recalls the protagonist of Maria Edgeworth’s *Ennui; or, Memoir of the Earl of Glenthorn* (1809)—evokes the Edgeworthian archetype of the absentee landlord returned to his property in a spirit of paternalistic benevolence. Owenson, however, offers a brutal critique of Edgeworth’s model by investing Glentworth with bounteous liberal feeling but making him entirely inadequate in practice. Visiting his Irish estate for the first time, the ‘liberal and enlightened, benevolent and temperate’ (II, 60) Glentworth is alert to the neglect and dispossession of the Irish people, stating that ‘I have always felt an interest for this country, for which, it has been truly said, “*God has done so much and man so little*”’ (II, 59). His initial condemnation of the inequality in Ireland marks him as a potentially beneficial influence on the Irish people, capable of erasing difference and promoting equality within the framework of sentimental sociability. He argues that the importance of education is ‘to fit us for the enjoyment of *civil rights*, by moulding us to the performance of *civil duties*’ (I, 207–08) and his vision of an improved and civilised Ireland is one of sentimental similitude, a constitution which ‘free from exclusions by equal laws, equal protection, and equal privileges, engages every member of the community in the interests, defence, and preservation of the whole’ (I, 210–11). He is also acutely aware of the implications of political inequality in Ireland, in which ‘ascendancy is claimed by one tribe or cast, over others, subsisting under the same government, [and] there is little chance of internal union’ (II, 212). Owenson’s hero O’Donnel is equally aware of the challenges of union, urging Glentworth not only to break with the tradition of absenteeism himself, but to influence other landowners to do the same:

[R]emain amongst us. Extend your pacificating influence to the utmost verge of your sphere; and encourage by the success of your example our other great English landholders, who draw their ample

revenues from our plenteous soil, to visit, to know, and to acknowledge us.' (II, 60)

This plea envisages a reversal of the cultural assimilation implied by the stadial model of historical progress, in which advanced nations export their polished values to promote civilisation. Here, O'Donnell proposes an exportation of Irish cultural identity to England through Glentworth's influence, in order to encourage sympathy with the smaller nation. His plea also constructs a sentimental economy that merges geography and sympathy, in which the 'revenues' deriving from the 'plenteous' Irish landscape can be traded for understanding and compassion.

Lady Singleton and Glentworth offer a specific model of Enlightenment improvement that links geography and sympathy: in order to for Ireland to develop—or, in other words, to reach the final stage of civility in the stadial model of teleological historical progress—the landscape must submit to external cultivation or, as Lady Singleton puts it, “examining, changing, correcting, and improving” (I, 8). In Lord Grenville's words,

is it not true that whilst Great Britain has gradually advanced in civilization of manners, and in every art, science, and improvement, which can give happiness, honour, and security, to nations and individuals; Ireland possessing the same climate, a fruitful soil, and excellent ports, and a numerous people [...] has nevertheless been at all times involved in comparative disorder, poverty, turbulence, and wretchedness?³³

Ireland, in other words, lacks the improvements that Britain has undergone and must submit its natural and geographical resources to the same process. In the same way, Owenson's depiction of the Irish landscape is focalised through a discourse of navigation that articulates questions of colonisation in which the failure of the English travellers to construct a democratic politics of union is represented though their inability to negotiate Irish geography.

Lady Singleton, as an experienced traveller, arrives in Ireland equipped with 'maps, gazetteers, and geographical grammars' and 'at once decided on making a circuitous tour by the coast, because somebody else had proposed making the journey shorter by avoiding it' (I, 64), setting in motion a process of meticulous preparation involving 'cutting pencils, pointing compasses, and displaying maps' (I, 76). Connolly makes an important distinction between 'land as map' and 'land seen as landscape' in her discussion of the Irish novel: while maps are deeply enmeshed within networks of power, 'landscape' implies a more romanticised geography.³⁴ Owenson explicitly locates the English travellers in *O'Donnell* within the politicised context of mapping: their approach to Irish topography is abstract and disengaged and the route of their 'circuitous tour' is entirely arbitrary and completely detached from authentic Irish culture. The party of travellers are blighted by the perceived inadequacies of the Irish landscape from the very start of their tour. The terrain is described as 'a flat and tiresome expanse', populated with a 'treacherous bog', 'deep pools [...] concealed by rushes' and 'deeper ruts covered by moss' (I, 247); the road is 'rudely put together for the mere purpose of

drawing turf, and therefore not calculated to sustain a heavier vehicle than those used for that purpose' (1, 247).

Bent on pursuing the planned route of the tour but 'annoyed by the increasing badness of the rugged roads, or busied in invectives against their overseers', Lady Singleton 'at length became insensible to the peculiar features of the scenery, nor did prospects, however consonant to the fantastic genius of a Salvator Rosa, or the wild and gloomy imagination of an Ossian, compensate the travellers for jolts which almost dislocated' (1, 114). The picturesque qualities of landscape as, in Connolly's words, 'an expanse of territory already conceived in painterly or aesthetic terms', are entirely lost here: the sublime and imaginative qualities of Rosa or Ossian are subsumed within a politicised discourse of improvement.³⁵ This lack of aesthetic appreciation of landscape is also linked to a lack of sympathy as the travellers become entirely 'insensible': the reality of Ireland—in contrast to their idealised preconceptions—renders them unfeeling and unsympathetic. The 'beautiful inland views afforded by glens and mountains' and the 'romantic promontory of Garron' are matters of indifference in comparison to their own comfort and civility; Lady Florence Grandville declares "'if you have a mind to charm me with a prospect, shew me the chimney tops of our inn.'" (1, 115). While the desire of contemporary commentators was that the geographies of Britain and Ireland could withstand the political turmoil of Europe 'like two rocks in the sea, unmoved and unaffected by storms or tempests', inciting them to 'join heart and hand' in adopting 'kind and even generous measures towards each other', landscape in *O'Donnell* has entirely the opposite effect.³⁶ The unnavigable geography of Ireland promotes discord and individualism: as the travellers attempt to cross a 'flat and tiresome expanse' of 'treacherous bog' (1, 247), 'they proceeded towards the mountains, in the true egoism of *their cast*; wholly bent on –self-preservation, to the exclusion of every thought for those who followed (1, 248).

Owenson's notes offer a wry commentary on this lack of aesthetic appreciation. After the party have found the Giant's Causeway 'an object of disappointment' and the 'unrivalled phenomena of nature' (1, 239) has failed to charm them, they are restored to imperial comfort at Lough Swilly in the 'large and commodious house'—a 'deserted mansion of an absentee'—occupied by Commodore Grandville, the husband of Lady Florence (1, 239, 241). This house 'united in its prospect all the most romantic features of the most opposite style of scenery; the sea, lakes, and mountains – glens, valleys, and smiling plantations' (1, 241), offering a commodified and abstracted version of the Irish landscape, seemingly designed to charm the travellers. Here, Ireland becomes romanticised and aestheticised 'scenery' for the pleasure of the English spectator, as opposed to a lived and experienced space. In her note, Owenson comments that '[a]lthough the banks of Lough Swilly [...] exhibit many dreary tracts of mountains in a state of the rudest nature', 'some of the most beautiful seats are to be seen in a high state of cultivation and improvement' (1, 241): the travellers are only able to appreciate Ireland in its cultivated state, where its 'smiling plantations' recall Plowden's account of the 'smiling harvests' of an idealised improved Ireland and its 'smiling garden of plenty'.³⁷ Owenson's

virtual mapping of the Irish landscape in her sweeping topographical scan from the high mountains to the 'low grounds' also maps a trajectory from a 'savage' and uncultivated land to a tamed civility. This recalls contemporary descriptions of the unenlightened Irish people, 'awakened by England from their slumber of savage barbarity and rude nature', linking aestheticised and politicised experience in which Ireland's geography is perceived as part of a trajectory of civilization and historical progress.³⁸

A clear sense of the conflict between politicised and aesthetic experience is provided in the scene that introduces the novel's hero, O'Donnel. The iconography of the Irish landscape has, until this point, been remarkably detached from its inhabitants, giving no indication of lived experience outside of the abstracted commentaries of the travellers' *road book*' (I, 177). When, shortly after they have met, the party begin to speculate on his identity, Lady Singleton declares that she believes him to be 'a *surveyor of the roads*, or some sort' (I, 139). Mistaken in this belief, she takes the opportunity to "rate him soundly for the shameful state in which we have found the roads" (I, 140). Opening her diatribe by questioning him about the geological strata of the landscape, she goes on to declare that "your roads are as bad as if you were totally ignorant of the materials with which these shores furnish you to repair them" (I, 141). Lady Singleton's attempt to incorporate O'Donnel within her abstract project of imperial mapping as she endeavours to bring the Irish landscape to order is thwarted by his knowledge of the local geography, which is soon revealed to be far superior to the superficial information Lady Singleton has gleaned from her travel guides and gazetteers.

In her depiction of O'Donnel, Owenson offers a striking conflation of what Connolly terms 'painterly and political perspectives'.³⁹ O'Donnel is alert to the richness and depth of Irish culture, offering a perspective that integrates topography, geography and history. When the travellers ask him for advice about their intended route, he offers it 'with promptitude; and in detailing the objects best worth attention, unaffectedly exhibited an intimate acquaintance with natural science, and a very correct taste for the picturesque and grand styles in the order of landscape' (I, 176). Mr Dexter's suspicions of O'Donnel's manner of "talking by rote something he has read in a *road book*" (I, 177) captures Owenson's sense of the incompatibility of discourses of navigation in the post-union period. While the English travellers persist in mapping Ireland through a discourse of improvement informed by political commentary and travel writing, O'Donnel provides a genuine sense of an Irish landscape rich with the history of individual lives.


Lady Singleton and Glentworth extol their schemes of improvement in a discourse of historical progress and civility in which the harnessing of the Irish landscape for its natural riches will bring about a process of refinement and civilisation. Yet, their abstracted theories of topographical improvement remain detached from the Irish landscape itself, unable either to navigate it in a practical sense or to appreciate it aesthetically. From the point of view of the English travellers, the 'rude rocks and hanging bridge' at Carrick-a-Rede offer a stark contrast to their theorised experience of Ireland through travel guides, for 'though it would have

afforded a beautiful feature in an imaginary landscape, exhibited a frightful image in a real scene' (1, 221). In reality, the Irish landscape is described as hostile and unnavigable: the coast is rendered 'one vast expanse of massy darkness' and Carrick-a-Rede 'seemed to have been wrenched, by the rage of some elementary convulsion, from the main-land cliffs, and separated from them by a frightful chasm of unfathomable depth' (1, 222). The distinction made by Owenson here between 'imaginary landscape' and 'real scene' captures the tensions inherent to contemporary representations of Irish geography as a picturesque spectacle in travel writing.

The 'light hempen bridge, for the purpose of facilitating the business of the fishermen [...] was not to be viewed without a sensation of dread and horror' by the travellers (1, 223). This depiction of sublime experience is common to travel guides to Ireland, such as this description of Turk Lake in Donegal in which the writer states that to 'behold the lake thus convulsed by a tempest, may become the source of sublime reflections to a contemplative mind, delighted with the spectacle of nature's wildest disorder'.⁴⁰ The ideological implications of such narratives are revealing: not only do they contribute to the broader construction of Ireland a land beyond the boundaries of civilisation, but they also represent sympathetic detachment. To experience the Irish landscape as a picturesque spectacle means, as William Williams observes, that the spectator may not 'really "see" through those organizing metaphors of painting'.⁴¹ Perhaps even more disturbing, though—given the importance of sympathetic identification in the process of national union—is that these modes of perception mean that the spectator also fails to feel or, in other words, to sympathise with the genuine plight of the Irish people. Owenson makes this failure of sentiment explicit: while the English travellers delight in sublime sensation, O'Donnel is shown as being in complete harmony with both the landscape and its people. While they see the bridge as an abstracted and aestheticised spectacle, O'Donnel declares that he has 'seen even women and children pass it, in search of birds' eggs and sea-weeds on the opposite rocks' (1, 226–27). Placing these local representatives of the Irish rural economy within the scene reclaims geography from a staged and theatrical abstraction and locates it within an inhabited reality. O'Donnel himself is able to navigate both the Irish landscape and its culture with ease. As he negotiates the 'majestic swell' of the Irish sea (1, 191), rowing them along the coast to the promontory of Benmore, he provides them with a commentary that traverses discourses of architecture, geography, history, ornithology and folklore. On Mr Dexter's objection to a local fisherman as a "savage-looking fellow" and a "filthy beast" (1, 201), O'Donnel demonstrates his knowledge, not only of the landscape and its features, but of the people that inhabit it, declaring that 'so far are they from exhibiting in either, the ferocity of savage, or the rude and uncivilized life, that they are, perhaps, the most courteous peasantry of modern Europe' in their 'natural tendency to civilization' (1, 203). The travellers, it seems, are unable to view either the Irish landscape or the Irish people with the sensibility that permeates their enlightened discourses of taste. They cannot map or navigate the complex

nature of the Irish landscape, peopled and imbued with rich history. In fact, their assertions that improvement will promote union and sympathy collapse entirely when they are confronted with the Irish landscape.

O'Donnell charts the tension between Irish geography as a resource for improvement and commerce and as a marker of an Irish cultural aesthetic that must be understood and appreciated. While contemporary accounts suggest that the Irish landscape must be cultivated and improved for the benefit of its inhabitants, Owenson contends that the private interest of the Anglo-Irish in their schemes for modernisation undermines the principles of the egalitarian sentimental international community described in Enlightenment accounts of trade and commerce. In doing so, she raises important questions about the relationship between geography, commerce and historical progress. While the literal practice of importation and exportation may bring about economic benefits to the nation, in a cultural sense it is always compromised by the politics of colonial assimilation.

The discourse of benevolent and sentimental improvement articulated by Glentworth and Lady Singleton is ultimately unable to forge any meaningful relationship to place. Glentworth's attempt 'to become better acquainted with my tenants on this [the Irish] side of the water' (I, 3) is ultimately a failure. In the event of his death (having only visited Ireland once) in the second volume of the novel, his initial potential as a source of active benevolence that might bridge the geographical and cultural distance between Britain and Ireland is unfulfilled: his promised return to Ireland comes in the form of a month-old fragment of his obituary column in a newspaper. This fragment replaces Glentworth's commitment to progress with the bleak announcement of his succession by his son, currently residing within the ascendancy enclave of Christ Church College, Oxford (II, 85). Likewise, Lady Singleton's schemes for improvement are fittingly relocated to the individualistic and sentimental realms of the epistolary form. Her schemes not only represent a lack of respect for custom and tradition that fails to understand and sympathise with Irish culture: they also betray her colonial self-interest. Her desire for a canal which links her husband's estate to the commercial centre of Dublin draws attention to the ways in which the sympathetic rhetoric of reform in Ireland often masked the 'powerful interest, and self-interest', as Katie Trumpener puts it, of the ruling classes.⁴² In this way, the Irish landscape becomes colonised and appropriated in a way that subsumes its history and national identity within the imported Enlightenment ideals of civilised commercial modernity. These imported models cannot hasten progress in Ireland; rather, it must derive from a complex process of reconciliation of past and present that can only emerge from within Ireland itself. 

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4. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
5. *An Abridgement of the Speech of Lord Minto, in the House of Peers, April 11, 1799* (Dublin: J. Milliken, 1799), p. 3.
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21. William Playfair, *France as It Is, Not Lady Morgan's France*, 2 vols (London: Chapple, 1819), I, 7.
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