

A troublesome 'genre'? Histories, definitions and perceptions of paintings of everyday life from early nineteenth-century Ireland

Mary Jane Boland



Figure 1. Joseph Peacock, *The Patron of the Seven Churches, on the Festival of St. Kevin, in the Vale of Glendalough, Co. Wicklow*, 1813. Oil on canvas, 137cm x 86 cm. Belfast: Ulster Museum. Image © Ulster Museum.

In 1813 the Dublin-based artist Joseph Peacock (c.1783 - 1837) exhibited an expansive canvas entitled *The Patron of the Seven Churches, on the Festival of St. Kevin, in the Vale of Glendalough, Co. Wicklow* (fig. 1) at the Society of Artists of the City of Dublin annual exhibition. The painting, which was later exhibited at the Royal Academy in London in 1817 and at the British Institution in 1818, details a wide range of community activities taking place amidst the imposing scenery of the Wicklow Mountains. In the distance a round tower presides over the cluttered scene, its dominance in the landscape exaggerated by the artist for added effect.

Peacock's painting, which is now in the Ulster Museum,¹ depicts a traditional devotional gathering called a 'Pattern Day' that happened at this site on the 3rd of June every year to commemorate the patron-saint of Glendalough, St. Kevin. His canvas is filled with over a hundred figures; some of are singing, dancing

¹ Prov: Lord Deramore, Belvoir Park, Belfast, 1865; Lady Edith Dixon, Belfast, 1964; thence to the Ulster Museum: see Eileen Black, *A catalogue of the permanent collection. 3, Irish oil paintings 1572-c.1830*, Belfast: Ulster Museum, 1991, 55.

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and enjoying the celebrations associated with the day, while others are capitalising on the commercial aspect of the Pattern by trading their wares and produce. Throughout the crowd all walks of Irish life are present, from blind beggars and itinerant musicians to regimental officers and elite spectators on horseback. All of this activity is placed among the ruins of the monastic city founded by St. Kevin in the seventh century. Rolling, threatening clouds provide a backdrop to the glacial valley and cast suitably dramatic lighting effects over the scene.

Much can be learned about the activities of traditional, local Pattern Days from this image. For instance, in 1986 William Crawford used the image as a visual source for the history of this type of festival and the folk-practices associated with it in his descriptive article for *Ulster Folklife*.² Similarly, Mairead Dunlevy used the painting in her investigations into the history of costume and dress in nineteenth-century Ireland.³

Whilst the image has proved very useful to historians of folk-practice or material culture, for the art historian it actually raises more questions than it answers: why was a little-known artist painting such a large scale picture of Irish life at this time? Why did a demand for this type of art exist? And ultimately, what does the painting reveal about practices of spectatorship in early nineteenth-century Ireland?

In spite of the range of questions that the picture raises, it has never been subjected to an intense art historical interrogation.⁴ Indeed, its scholarly treatment to date provides an insight into the historiography of early nineteenth-century painting in Ireland in general. As part of this collection of essays that examine the writing of Irish art history, the aim of this article is to investigate the limitations of this historiography and to offer some suggestions as to how the history of painting in early nineteenth-century Ireland can be re-examined and reassessed. By using the case-study of one artwork (*The Patron of the Seven Churches*) its focus will specifically be on the art of everyday life and the perception of it among art historians, critics and audiences over the past two centuries. A clearer understanding of how the art of daily life was consumed in early nineteenth-century Ireland can be developed by clarifying confused definitions, by moving away from connoisseurial or biographical methodologies and by looking at works of art from the perspective of the audience rather than the artist.

In contrast to the treatment of this type of painting by art historians in Ireland, the everyday as a phenomenon in early nineteenth-century British art has been the subject of intense scrutiny in recent years. Major interventions by scholars such as John Barrell, Christiana Payne and David Solkin have interrogated the

² W. H. Crawford, 'The Patron, or Festival of St. Kevin at the Seven Churches, Glendalough, County Wicklow 1813', *Ulster Folklife*, Vol. 32, 1986, 37-47.

³ Mairead Dunlevy, *Dress in Ireland*, London: Batsford, 1989, 11, 117.

⁴ Only one art-historical article has made reference to this artwork in the past twenty years. See Tom Dunne, 'The dark side of the Irish landscape: Depictions of the rural poor, 1760-1850', in *Whipping the Herring: Survival and celebration in nineteenth-century Irish art*, ed. Peter Murray, Cork: Crawford Art Gallery and Gandon Editions, 2006, 46-61.

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everyday aesthetic in the paintings of George Morland, David Wilkie and Thomas Heaphy.⁵ In his seminal text *The Dark Side of the Landscape: the rural poor in English paintings, 1730-1840* (1980), Barrell assessed paintings of the rural poor by Thomas Gainsborough, Morland and John Constable as pictorial evidence of the hierarchical social system that existed in Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. According to Barrell these painters were 'committed to a continual struggle, at once to reveal more and more of the actuality of the life of the poor, and to find more effective ways of concealing that actuality'.⁶ The notion that the rural poor were both familiar and unfamiliar, known and unknown, or representative of both the safety of an archaic rural past and the danger of an uncertain industrial future, lies at the heart of Barrell's analysis of these works of art.

Such an inherent conflict also informs Solkin's study of Wilkie and his contemporaries in *Painting out of the ordinary: modernity and the art of everyday life in early nineteenth-century Britain* (2008). Solkin argues that a fundamental dialectic lies behind how early nineteenth-century artists and audiences used everyday imagery. For instance, the dominant upper and middle classes could assert their authority over the lower orders by commissioning artworks that depicted characters and their expressions in a pejorative, regularised way, while at the same time emblems of social advancement (like the newspapers seen in Wilkie's *Village Politicians* of 1806) indicate that this hegemonic power also felt threatened and fearful of a world that was becoming less familiar thanks to the rapid dawn of modernity. Solkin's Foucaultian argument that an elite audience used paintings of everyday life as a means to survey the poor can be extremely persuasive. However, these methods have yet to be thoroughly considered by arts historians looking at this type of artistic production in Ireland.

Central to recent discussions on the art of daily life in Britain has been the need to define key terminology. Particularly, art historians have grappled with the term 'genre' and its widespread (mis)use in Western art history as a means to describe scenes of everyday life. The term is particularly enigmatic in an Irish context. While there is a wealth of material relating to late nineteenth and twentieth-century artists of Irish everyday life, particularly Jack Yeats and the so-called 'Irish Impressionists', little has been written about their late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century predecessors like Peacock, or others such as Nathaniel Grogan, John George Mulvany and George Grattan.

'Genre' derives from the French word for 'kind' or 'type' and up until the late eighteenth century it referred to all minor categories of painting such as

⁵ See Christiana Payne, *Toil and plenty: images of the agricultural landscape in England, 1780-1890*, London: Yale, 1993; Christiana Payne, ed., *Rustic simplicity: scenes of cottage life in nineteenth-century British art*, Nottingham: 1998, Nottingham: Lund Humphries Publishers, 1998; John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: the rural poor in English paintings, 1730-1840*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980; David Solkin, *Painting out of the ordinary: modernity and the art of everyday life in early nineteenth-century Britain*, New Haven, Conn. ; London : Yale University Press, 2008.

⁶ Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, 22.

landscape, still life and animal painting.⁷ In other words it described all subjects that were considered beneath the preserve of history painting. Following the admission of J.P. Greuze to the French Academy as a 'peintre de genre' in 1769, it was frequently used to describe paintings of ordinary life and was widely adopted by French art theorists, such as Denis Diderot and Quatremère de Quincy, when discussing domestic scenes.⁸

The situation was slightly different in Britain where the term 'genre' was not used until the mid-nineteenth century.⁹ Instead, scenes of daily life were usually described as the art of 'common' or 'familiar' life. Similarly in Ireland, scenes of everyday life were titled 'pictures from familiar life' or 'subject pictures' in the early-mid nineteenth century.¹⁰ The earliest known reference to the term 'genre' in Irish art discourse appears in *The Irish Monthly* in 1879 where, in an article about Netherlandish 'genre' painting, there is a lengthy description of Jan Van Eyck's altarpiece *The Adoration of the Lamb*.¹¹ Although the contributor is aware of the term 'genre' there is an unawareness of its misuse.

Today the term is widely used in surveys of nineteenth-century art despite the fact that it rarely appeared in contemporary English language discussion on the subject. As a result, it may be judged as a retrospective classification – something that serves a useful purpose in current art history but doesn't actually mean anything from a contextual standpoint. Perhaps this is why historians of nineteenth-century European art are increasingly turning away from the practice of compartmentalising works of art; for instance, would *The Patron of the Seven Churches* be termed a 'genre' painting or a 'landscape' painting? The indeterminacy and confusion associated with such processes of categorisation can be alleviated by simply describing what a painting portrays rather than placing it within a hierarchy of art historical terminology; so, in the case of *The Patron of the Seven Churches*, it seems sensible to simply refer to it as 'a painting of Irish life' or 'a painting of everyday life'.

While the lack of a distinct rhetoric may be partly to blame for the dearth of scholarship in this area, it is more likely that art historians have been discouraged by the lack of primary evidence relating to paintings by Peacock, Mulvany and others. Certainly in the case of Peacock, very little evidence survives to bring to

⁷ Wolfgang Stechow and Christopher Comer, 'The History of the Term Genre', *Bulletin of Allen Memorial Art Museum*, Vol. xxiii, no. 2, 1975-76, 89.

⁸ Stechow and Comer, 'The History of the Term Genre', 90.

⁹ Solkin, *Painting out of the ordinary*, 2.

¹⁰ For instance, the term 'familiar life' appears several times in a pamphlet by an anonymous author titled *Appeal of the Directors of the Royal Irish Institution, for promoting the fine arts in Ireland. Addressed to the nobility, gentry and opulent classes of the United Kingdom, on behalf of the national object for which it was founded*, Dublin: Benham and Hardy, 1828, 18. As well as this Peacock referred to himself as 'a painter of familiar life'; see Walter Strickland, *A Dictionary of Irish Artists: Volume 2*, Dublin: Maunsel and Company, 1913, 223. Strickland was still using the term 'subject paintings' to describe artists of everyday life such as Nathaniel Grogan, J.G. Mulvany and Peacock in his *Dictionary of Irish Artists* first published in 1913.

¹¹ Nathaniel Colgan, 'Netherland genre pictures', *The Irish Monthly*, Vol. VII, December 1879, 628-634

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light his artistic practice or contemporary reaction to it. In fact, to date only one contemporary newspaper article on the painting has been found.¹² This article, which comes in the form of an anonymous letter to the editor of the Dublin-based *The Patriot* newspaper, offers an in depth description of the painting's various attributes:

This picture... is the production of Mr. Peacock, a most ingenious Artist, who last year produced a picture on a similar subject, to which this might be properly termed a comparison. Though far superior both in composition and execution. Those who are fond of drawing comparison, said my friend, have styled him the Irish Teniers, and even his enemies admit that with a regular course of education, he would make a first rate Artist—... in my opinion, an Artist of his powers has no need to draw upon Teniers, to eke out his reputation: His style seems to me to be his own, and with his fertility of invention, and the superior ability he manifests in handling his pencil, certainly promises great things, if suitably recognised... The enchanting scenery of this picturesque spot exceeds every idea of it my imagination had formed... to the fine effect, which on whole, the picture derives from the grandeur of the landscape... it unites all the minutiae of individual character... Its general colouring is rich, warm; the touch is spirited, and the local contrast, in the various groups, and the figures of which they are composed, have a striking effect.¹³

Despite this commentator's enthusiasm for the potential promise of Peacock's career, by 1821 the artist himself seems to have grown disillusioned and frustrated with his chosen profession; 'why is it that we persist in following a profession which tho' universally admired is so little understood – and which in nine cases out of ten the professor is disesteemed, neglected and insulted?'.¹⁴

It is likely that Peacock's frustration is related to his decision to work mainly as a painter of 'familiar life', which conjured up negative connotations among Academicians and art critics due to deep-rooted hierarchical discriminations that favoured history painting above all else. It was widely acknowledged that an artist should strive to challenge the viewer's intellect rather than to please the eye. The greatest proponent of this idea in English artistic discourse was Sir Joshua Reynolds

¹² Using the National Library of Ireland's extensive collection of contemporary newspapers, the author has checked the following newspapers published in 1813 for any reference to the exhibition of Peacock's painting: *The Dublin Weekly Messenger*, *The Evening Herald*, *The Correspondent*, *The Patriot*, *Dublin Evening Express*, *Hunter's Dublin Chronicle*, *Hibernian Journal*, *Dublin Morning Post*, *The Freeman's Journal*.

¹³ Anon., 'The Exhibitions: to the Editor of the Patriot', *The Patriot*, 6 June 1813. It is likely that the other work by Peacock referred to here is *Palmerstown Fair*.

¹⁴ A reproduction of a fragment of a letter from Peacock to J. Rock Esq. dated 29 April 1821 can be found in the Crookshank Glin Collection, which is in the Trinity Irish Art Research Centre in Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland. Accessed by the author 11/01/2012.

who argued that 'it is not the eye, it is the mind, which the painter of genius desires to address'.¹⁵ Unsurprisingly, Academic judgments of what constituted admirable artistic practice (and spectatorship) in England resonated in the Irish art world. Particularly, the teachings set out by Reynolds in his *Discourses* were strongly observed and revered among commentators on the arts in Ireland. One anonymous contributor to *Walker's Hibernian Magazine* in 1790 proclaimed that 'Sir Joshua Reynolds's very ingenious Discourses and Notes are well known' throughout the country and offer readers a 'striking instance' of first-rate writing on art.¹⁶ Indeed, Reynolds' status as an artist (and an intellectual) worthy of the utmost admiration persisted long after his death in 1792. In an essay on painting published in Dublin in 1825 Hugh Frazer described him as 'one of the brightest luminaries of modern art' and 'among the great fathers of painting', and went on to praise 'the imaginings of [his] poetic mind'.¹⁷ It is unsurprising then that early nineteenth-century discourse on the arts in Ireland tended to focus on works by European Old Masters rather than on emerging Irish painters. Scenes from daily life appear to have been completely disregarded and little contemporary commentary or theoretical engagement with this type of art survives, making it a particularly challenging research area for twentieth and twenty first-century scholarship.

This may explain why art historical approaches towards the painting of daily life in the early nineteenth century have been largely connoisseurial in nature to date. The most influential study of painters working in Ireland during this period is the canonical *The Painters of Ireland* published by Anne Crookshank and the Knight of Glin in 1978 (and revised as *Ireland's Painters* in 2002).¹⁸ It provides an encyclopaedic survey of biographical details, exhibition histories and technical analyses and is an extremely useful foundation on which to build further research. While other historians of Irish art like Cyril Barrett attempted to make discussions on nineteenth-century Irish art more analytical in the 1970s,¹⁹ an artist-based approach remained the most dominant practice in writing about early nineteenth-century Irish art during the 1980s. Throughout the 1990s many art historians moved away from these biographical methods and instead paintings from the early nineteenth century were successfully used to illustrate broader contexts of national identity and material culture.²⁰ In the past decade discussions on methods of

¹⁵ Joshua Reynolds, 'Discourse III', in *Sir Joshua Reynolds. Discourses on Art*, ed. R.R. Wark, London: Yale University Press, 1997, 50.

¹⁶ Anon., *Walker's Hibernian Magazine or Compendium of Entertaining Knowledge*, MDCCXC Part II, October 1790, 329.

¹⁷ Hugh Frazer, *Essay on Painting*, Dublin: James Burnside Capel Street, 1825, 19.

¹⁸ Anne Crookshank and The Knight of Glin, *The Painters of Ireland, c. 1600 -1920*, London : Barrie and Jenkins, 1978.

¹⁹ For instance see Cyril Barrett, 'Irish Nationalism and Art 1800-1921', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 64, No. 256, 1975, 393-409.

²⁰ For example see Fintan Cullen, *Visual Politics: The Representation of Ireland 1750-1930*, Cork: Cork University Press, 1997. The expansion of canons and diversification of scholarly practice at this time relates to the practice of 'new art history' that was prevalent in western art historical scholarship

writing Irish art history have intensified even further. In an essay on the historiography of nineteenth-century Irish art published in 2005, Fintan Cullen called for 'increased dialogue between university-based scholars from art history with colleagues from such disciplines as literature, history, and critical theory'.²¹ Indeed, a departure from connoisseurial methodologies and an engagement in the dialogues suggested by Cullen (among others)²² has been a welcome development in writings on nineteenth-century Irish art history in the past number of years. Particularly, an increased engagement with interdisciplinary methodologies has resulted in the expansion of traditional canons and the diversification of scholarly practice.²³ In 2006 Claudia Kinmonth published a study of household furnishings and domestic practices in nineteenth-century Ireland that effectively used scenes of everyday life as source material.²⁴ Similarly, in 2010 Ciara Breathnach and Catherine Lawless edited a collection of essays that blended diverse histories of nineteenth-century visual, material and print culture.²⁵

Also in 2006 two of Ireland's major museums dedicated large-scale exhibitions to nineteenth and twentieth-century scenes of everyday life.²⁶ More recently in 2012, the McMullen Museum of Art at Boston College held an exhibition of artworks and artefacts related to Irish domestic life from the same period.²⁷ A prominent focus of these exhibitions, and their accompanying catalogues, was the role of the painted image as a document of social history. Consequently, critical

during the 1980s and 1990s. For more on 'new art history' see Eric Fernie, ed., *Art History and its Methods: A critical anthology*, London: Phaidon, 1995, 18-21.

²¹Fintan Cullen, 'Art History: Using the visual' in *Nineteenth-Century Ireland: A Guide to Recent Research*, eds. L. Geary and M. Kelleher, Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2005, 153-164.

²² For more discussion on approaches to the writing of Irish art see Lucy Cotter (ed.), *Third Text*, special edition on Ireland, vol. 19, no. 5, 2005; James Elkins, 'The state of Irish art history', *Circa*, No. 106, Winter 2003, 56-59; Joan Fowler, Lucy Cotter, Maeve Connolly, Mia Lerm Hayes, Róisín Kennedy, Rosemarie Mulcahy, Sheila Dickinson, Siún Hanrahan, James Elkins, 'The state of art history in Ireland: replies and response', *Circa*, No. 118, Winter 2006, 36-47.

²³ The term 'interdisciplinary', and the practice of 'interdisciplinarity', is understood in this article in accordance with the definition set out by JulieThompson Klein in 'A taxonomy of interdisciplinarity' in *The Oxford handbook of interdisciplinarity*, eds., Robert Frodeman, Julie Thompson Klein, Carl Mitcham, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 15-26. In Klein's opinion interdisciplinarity is characterised by the interaction, integration, linking and blending of different fields of knowledge across disciplines to give a holistic understanding of an area of research. More specifically, when the practice of interdisciplinarity is referred to in this article it relates to 'integrated interdisciplinarity' which uses the concepts and insights of one discipline to contribute to the problems and theories of another.

²⁴ Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art*, London: Yale University Press, 2006.

²⁵ Ciara Breathnach and Catherine Lawless, eds., *Visual, Material and Print Culture in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010.

²⁶ The exhibitions in question are *Whipping the Herring: Survival and celebration in nineteenth-century Irish art* at the Crawford Art Gallery, Cork, 4 May - 26 August 2006, *A Time and A Place: Two centuries of Irish social life* at the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, 18 October 2006 - 28 January 2007.

²⁷ *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story* at the McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, Boston, 11 February - 3 June 2012.

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reaction tended to cite the works on display as excellent illustrations of Irish history but ultimately judged them to be second-rate art.²⁸ Rather than placing value judgements on these works of art, there is a need to question what they reveal about the history of artistic practice and viewership in Ireland in the nineteenth century. Of course, the lack of primary material relating to paintings like Peacock's *The Patron of the Seven Churches* has made this a rather difficult task. How can one analyse the contribution scenes of everyday life have made to the evolution of Irish art when such little information about artist intent, patronage or artistic practice survives?



Figure 2. Joseph Peacock, *Man playing fiddle to group of people*, c. 1811. Pencil drawing on paper in an Album of Marine, Landscape and Figurative Sketches. Dublin: National Library of Ireland, PD 3166 TX. Image © National Library of Ireland.

²⁸Aidan Dunne, 'Playing the role of documentary', *The Irish Times*, 13 December 2006. In his review of *A Time and a Place*, Dunne argues that 'the limitations of Victorian genre painting come as no surprise, and there is a great deal, or what feels like a great deal, of such painting included. Caricaturish exaggeration, heavy-handed narrative, over-worked messages of elaborately descriptive painting all add up to richly informative documents but second rate art'. This attitude is mirrored in other reviews, for instance Bruce Arnold suggests the exhibition is worth visiting if one has an 'enthusiasm for social history' in his review 'Taking an airbrush to Ireland's past times', *The Irish Independent*, 21 October 2006. This opinion is also shared by art critics writing for *The Irish Examiner* and *The Dubliner Magazine*.

Although original exhibition catalogues still exist from the year Peacock exhibited his painting, these also tend to raise more questions than they answer. When the picture was shown at the Society of Artists in 1813, it was part of only 6% of the exhibition dedicated to scenes from daily life. In comparison landscape painting accounted for nearly 50% of the works on show.²⁹ Given the contemporary critical reception of the art of everyday life, one is inclined to question why Peacock chose to paint this picture at all, especially considering its scale (86 cm x 137cm) and the variety of details and figures included. Considerable time was invested in the preparation of the work, as is indicated by Peacock's observations of the pattern-day crowds in a sketchbook from 1812 (fig. 2).³⁰ A point of further curiosity is that Peacock was not working under the instructions of any patron – the painting was on sale in 1813 and it would be at least five years before it found a buyer.³¹ So, why did Peacock take such a risk in painting a large-scale work he was not guaranteed to sell?

One cannot turn solely to primary evidence to answer this question: there are no surviving artist letters or journals to provide the key to Peacock's choice of subject matter. Of course, some indication of the picture's attraction to audiences can be found in the article from *The Patriot*. Particularly, it should be acknowledged that Peacock's likeness to the seventeenth-century Flemish artist David Teniers the Younger played some part in his critical acclaim at this time.³² However, further answers may be found by adopting an interdisciplinary methodology and moving away from the connoisseurial or artist-based approach that has informed histories of early nineteenth-century art in Ireland to date. Indeed, by integrating research from other fields of knowledge and by considering the cultural conditions in which *The Patron of the Seven Churches* was created, a clearer idea of the stimulus behind the work begins to emerge.

For instance, recent analyses of cultural practice at this time indicate that Irish audiences were not just interested in viewing the 'high art' that was exhibited annually by elitist societies. In 1801 an anonymous diarist enthused about a new

²⁹Data taken by the author from *Catalogue of Exhibitors at the Society of Artists of the City of Dublin, Fourth Exhibition*, Dublin: Hawkins Street, 1813. Catalogue is now located in the Barber Fine Art Library, Barber Institute of Fine Art, Birmingham.

³⁰ Many sketches of Glendalough and the pattern-day crowd exist in an Album of Marine, Landscape and Figurative Sketches by Joseph Peacock at the National Library of Ireland, Dublin, PD 3166 TX

³¹ The painting is listed for sale in the 1813 exhibition catalogue. As subsequent discussion will show, in an article from 1828 the painting is listed as part of the collection of Lord Deramore in Belvoir Park; see 'Fine Arts', *Belfast News Letter*, 9 December 1828.

³² David Teniers the Younger became hugely popular with collectors and connoisseurs in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century Britain so it is likely that Peacock was keen to capitalize on this trend. For more on this see: Harry Mount, *The reception of Dutch genre painting in England, 1695-1829*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1991, 5.

cultural phenomenon that was engaging 'the attention of everyone' in Dublin.³³ The event in question was the display of Robert Ker Porter's panorama *The Battle of Seringapatam* in Parliament House on College Green, which dramatically depicted the British army's capture of Mysore over 2,550 square feet of canvas and was a popular sensation amongst audiences during its exhibition in Cork, Dublin and Belfast from 1801 to 1802.³⁴ Histories of the panorama tell us that the monumental size of these works invited audiences to actively participate in the events unfolding on the canvas.³⁵ An all-encompassing view removed the limitations of a one central focal point: instead the eye of the viewer was also drawn to the outer and peripheral corners of the picture plane.

Although there is no evidence to suggest that the young Peacock joined the enthusiastic crowds at Parliament House in 1801,³⁶ it is still worth considering the possible influence panorama had on his decision to paint the pattern day on such a large scale and to include so many details. Displays of panorama paintings became increasingly popular and increasingly elaborate as the nineteenth century wore on.³⁷ As an active participant in Dublin's exhibition culture, Peacock was presumably aware of these changes in practices of spectatorship and may have planned his depiction of Glendalough accordingly. Rather than centring his work on one focal incident and character responses to it, the painting (like a panorama) is composed of various groupings of animated figures, each of whom provide separate narratives for the audience to engage with from one end of the canvas to the other. In the left foreground groups of figures are visible in an entertainment tent dancing and engaging in the general revelry associated with festivals like this. Slightly behind them a group of well-dressed women are being helped down from a carriage by a soldier in brightly coloured regimental uniform. Another group on horseback crowd around a ballad singer and fiddle player, others interested in the more commercial aspect of the pattern inspect the various stalls selling hats, toys, cakes and hardware. In the distance people can be seen hurriedly crossing the stream, perhaps trying to escape the violent crowd that are engaged in a large brawl under the shadow of the looming round tower. The inclusion of over one hundred figures in the foreground must have drawn attention to Peacock's technical abilities; audiences could delight in scrutinizing the microscopic detail and feel a sense of awe at the spectacular landscape which provides a backdrop for the painting.

³³ Anonymous Diarist, *Journal kept by a young man, name and profession not given, in Dublin from Feb. 1801 to May, 1803, giving an account of social life in Dublin and comments on current affairs*, Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, Mss. 24. K. 14.

³⁴ Fintan Cullen, *Ireland on show: Art, union and nationhood*, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2012, 62

³⁵ For more on this see Stephan Oettermann (translated by Deborah Lucas Schneider), *The panorama: history of a mass medium*, London: MIT Press, 1997.

³⁶ Incidentally Peacock's only lived five minutes away on Great Strand St.

³⁷ Niamh O'Sullivan has shown that panoramas often upstaged exhibitions of 'high art' in her analysis of audience reception to the display of Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa* in Dublin in 182: Niamh O'Sullivan, 'Troubled waters: high art and popular culture, Dublin, 1821' in *Visual, Material and Print Culture in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, Breathnach and Lawless, eds., 30 -47.

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Certainly Peacock must have been attracted to the majesty of Glendalough's dramatic scenery when choosing this subject. As a site of immense beauty, Glendalough had been appealing to artists since the mid-eighteenth century and it remained a common subject for painters throughout the nineteenth century.³⁸ Peacock's work is different to other versions though - rather than being about the landscape, the focus of this picture is on the people. Histories of Irish literature can help inform as to why this is the case. The early years of the nineteenth century have been described as the 'classic age' of traveller's accounts of Ireland by historians of popular literature.³⁹ These travel journals often included lengthy descriptive passages on the architecture at Glendalough and on the festival (or pattern) that took place there every June. Peacock's painting provides an illustrative dimension to the observations of folk practices that filled the pages of travelogues. A typical example of this can be found in *Researches in the South of Ireland* by Thomas Crofton Croker, who wrote about a pattern day he had visited in Gougane Barra, Co. Cork in 1813:

After a walk of about seven Irish miles .. we gained the brow of a mountain and beheld the lake .. one spot on its shore, swarming with people, appeared from our elevated situation, to be a dark mass surrounded by moving specks, which continuously merged into it .. we turned towards the banks of the lake, where whiskey, porter, bread and salmon were sold in booths or tents resembling a gipsy encampment, and formed by, means of poles or branches meeting at angles .. the tents are generally so crowded that the dancers have scarcely room for their performance: for twenty or thirty men and women are often huddled together in each, and the circulation of porter and whiskey amongst the various groups is soon evident in its effects⁴⁰

By reading this elaborate description, Croker's readers could feel as if they too had witnessed the ritualistic customs of a pattern day. In a similar way Peacock's panoptic view would have satisfied audience curiosity about rural Irish folk culture with its abundant details and lively depictions of the festival day crowds. Traditional beliefs, customs and recreations of the peasant classes became the subject of increased scholarly interest at this time. Devotional rituals, such as those associated with the celebration of a patron saint, attracted particular attention due to

³⁸ For instance, Peacock's contemporary, George Petrie, exhibited *The Seven Churches, Glendalough, Co. Wicklow* at the Society of Artists of Ireland in 1809. See Stewart, ed., *Irish Art Loan Exhibitions 1765-1927*, 585.

³⁹ C. J. Woods, *Travellers' accounts as historical source material for Irish historians*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009, 14.

⁴⁰ Thomas Crofton Croker, *Researches in the South of Ireland: Illustrative of the scenery, architectural remains, and the manners and superstitions of the peasantry, with an appendix containing a private narrative of the rebellion of 1798*, London: Murray, 1824, 280.

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their relationship with sites of historical importance, most notably round towers and holy wells.⁴¹

An examination of the history of antiquarians in nineteenth-century Ireland explains more about the appeal of these sites to curious urban audiences. Throughout the nineteenth century the origin of round towers was the subject of great fascination and contemporary antiquarian debate.⁴² In 1813, when Peacock exhibited his painting in Dublin, the popular belief was that round towers were used as places of fire-worship by pagan Phoenicians. It was not until 1845 that Peacock's contemporary George Petrie (who was an antiquarian and an artist)



Figure 3. George Petrie, *The Last Circuit of Pilgrims at Clonmacnoise, County Offaly*, c.1828. Graphite and watercolour on paper, 67.2 x 98 cm. Dublin: National Gallery of Ireland. Image © National Gallery of Ireland.

conclusively established their Christian origins.⁴³ Perhaps this is why Petrie's painting of the round tower at Clonmacnoise from 1838 (fig. 3) mainly concentrates on the religious associations of these medieval structures. For Petrie, these uniquely Irish round towers were links to a monastic golden age and the pilgrims that visited

⁴¹ Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, 'The Pattern' in *Irish Popular Culture, 1650-1850*, eds., James Donnelly Jr. and Kerby A. Miller, Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998, 201-222.

⁴² Ó Giolláin, 'The Pattern', 201-222.

⁴³ For more on this see Brian Lalor, *The Irish round tower: origins and architecture explored*, Cork: Collins Press, 1999.

them on annual feast days were the living ancestors of this Gaelic past.⁴⁴ This rather sentimental interpretation of the Irish peasantry is mirrored in earlier depictions of the pattern at Glendalough, most notably in the work of Maria Spilsbury-Taylor (fig. 4).⁴⁵

Although mostly based in London, Maria Spilsbury-Taylor spent several years in Ireland from 1813 at the invitation of the Tighe family in Rosanna, Co. Wicklow.⁴⁶ Unsurprisingly, she and Peacock have been subject to comparative studies in the past; as Spilsbury Taylor exhibited her *Pattern at Glendalough* only



Figure 4. Maria Spilsbury Taylor, *The Pattern at Glendalough*, c. 1816. Oil on canvas, 102 cm x 124cm.
Dublin: National Folklore Collection. Photo © National Folklore Collection

three years after Peacock's in 1816 it has been judged by Tom Dunne as a 'corrective' response to Peacock's more carnivalesque version.⁴⁷ In the later painting by Spilsbury-Taylor, the revelry of the dancers in Peacock's tent has been replaced by a

⁴⁴ Tom Dunne, 'Towards a National Art: George Petrie's two versions of *The Last Circuit of Pilgrims of Clonmacnoise*' in *A Shared Legacy: Essays on Irish and Scottish Art and Visual Culture*, eds., Fintan Cullen and John Morrison, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005, 79-96.

⁴⁵ Maria Spilsbury Taylor painted three versions of *Pattern at Glendalough*: one version is in the collection of the National Gallery of Ireland, one is in a private collection and one is in The National Collection of Folklore, University College, Dublin, which is the version discussed and illustrated here. Spilsbury Taylor exhibited one of these three paintings at the Hibernian Society of Artists, Dublin in 1814: see Stewart, ed., *Irish Art Loan Exhibitions 1765-1927*, 698.

⁴⁶ Anne Crookshank and the Knight of Glin, *Ireland's Painters 1600-1940*, London: Yale University Press, 2002, 190-191.

⁴⁷ Dunne, 'The dark side of the Irish landscape', 55.

more sober, sombre crowd who gossip quietly in the right foreground. Above them a crucifix reminds the viewer that this is an occasion to celebrate the local patron saint - by contrast, overt religious symbols are markedly omitted from Peacock's interpretation.

In 2010 Charlotte Yeldham published an interdisciplinary study of Spilsbury-Taylor's life which used religious histories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to re-examine the artist's work in the context of the 'feverish evangelical activity' that gathered momentum in Ireland during the early years of the union with Britain.⁴⁸ Yeldham provides an insight into the integral role played by the Spilsbury-Taylor and her husband in the 'moral reformation' of the Catholic poor in Ireland through the establishment of Sunday schools and formation of bible societies.⁴⁹ Consequently, her reading of Spilsbury-Taylor is much informed by these contexts; in her discussion of *The Pattern at Glendalough* she likens the heightened round tower to the tower of Babel 'whose top may reach unto the heaven' and the lack of greenery in the landscape to the 'parched land' of the barren desert described in Isaiah and Doddridge.⁵⁰ Although Yeldham acknowledges that religion has been somewhat marginalised in the painting she focuses on the presence of the crucifix and argues that its position in the shadows 'suggests that true faith is in eclipse; that it appears to be sprouting leaves implies the artist's view that true religion is nonetheless growing, in response no doubt to evangelical effort.'⁵¹

This interdisciplinary approach convincingly persuades the reader that Spilsbury-Taylor's view of Glendalough has an underlying proselytising motive that would have satisfied an elite ascendancy audience. The relaxed atmosphere and the civilised nature of the activities taking place have an air of georgic tranquillity; although the people we see are poor they are content with their situation in life. On the other hand, Peacock's ballad singers, jig-dancers, and faction fighters present a rather different picture of the peasantry. Why has Peacock chosen to depict the people in his painting in such a different manner?

Some explanations can be found by listening to historians of popular culture and performance during the early nineteenth century. Peacock has chosen to include a violent brawl in the distance of the crowded scene. Fights like the one we see here were known as faction fights and usually involved a battle between two warring families.⁵² Contemporary accounts of fairs, patterns and other festivals indicate that faction fights were a stark reality at events like this; rather than acting as a deterrent to visitors were often considered part of the attraction. In a recent article, the drama historian Mark Phelan has reassessed how the role of faction

⁴⁸ Charlotte Yeldham, *Maria Spilsbury Taylor (1776-1820): Artist and Evangelical*, Farnham: Ashgate 2010, 124.

⁴⁹ Yeldham, *Maria Spilsbury Taylor*, 124.

⁵⁰ Yeldham, *Maria Spilsbury Taylor*, 154.

⁵¹ Yeldham, *Maria Spilsbury Taylor*, 155.

⁵² Patrick D. O'Donnell, *The Irish faction fighters of the nineteenth century*, Dublin: Anvil Books, 1975

fighters should be perceived in nineteenth-century social life.⁵³ His analysis indicates that intense preparation, elaborate choreography, chants, 'war-songs' and ritualized gestures meant that these stage-managed encounters were actually highly performative and were not simply the shillelagh-wielding matches of popular perception. As well as this, according to Phelan 'faction fighting played a critical role in the construction and performance of masculinity in that they also became crucial rites of passage for young men to display their prowess, to prove their honour, and to protect their family and locality's reputation'.⁵⁴ Phelan's reassessment of the faction fight as a form of recreation indicates that it may be time to revise accepted readings of the violent mob in Peacock's painting.

For instance, Dunne has discussed the stereotypical depiction of the Irish peasant as feckless, drunken and violent in relation to *The Patron of the Seven Churches*.⁵⁵ In his view the distant faction fight helps to contribute to what English audiences would have believed to be a typical Irish scene with romantic scenery, ruins of a glorious past and 'wild' people. This image of the Irish as a primitive and superstitious race became more widespread in visual, literary and dramatic representations of Ireland as the nineteenth century wore on.⁵⁶ Did Peacock contribute to the construction of this national stereotype? Were later nineteenth-century stereotypical visualisations of everyday life in Ireland actually building on a negative comment that had been established in earlier paintings by artists like Peacock?

The research findings of other disciplines discussed throughout this article provide a case to argue against this point. Phelan has reassessed the negative connotations of faction fights and has highlighted their relevance to histories of performative practice and identity in Ireland. Similarly, histories of devotional practice indicate that there was widespread discontent at the decline of traditional religious festivals from 1800 onwards due to the condemnation of their excessive and immoral nature by the Catholic Church.⁵⁷ As a result, when Peacock painted this picture in 1813 it is likely that he didn't view these warring factions with the same adversity as later generations. In addition to this, the faction fight in Peacock's

⁵³ Phelan, Mark, 'The Advent of Modern Irish Drama and the Abjection of Peasant Popular Culture: Folklore, Fairs and Faction Fighting', *Kritika Kultura, Special Edition on Radical Theatre and Ireland*, No. 15, 2010.

⁵⁴ Phelan, 'The Advent of Modern Irish Drama and the Abjection of Peasant Popular Culture: Folklore, Fairs and Faction Fighting', 169.

⁵⁵ Dunne, 'The dark side of the Irish landscape', 55.

⁵⁶ For a broader discussion on representations of Ireland during the later part of the nineteenth century see Síghe Bhreathnach-Lynch, 'Framing the Irish: Victorian paintings of the Irish peasant', in *Ireland's art, Ireland's history: representing Ireland, 1845 to present*, Síghe Bhreathnach-Lynch, Omaha, NE: Creighton University Press, 2007, 55; Fintan Cullen, 'The peasant, genre painting and national character', in *Visual Politics: The Representation of Ireland 1750-1930*, Fintan Cullen, Cork: Cork University Press, 1997, 116-159.

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Malcolm, 'Popular recreation in nineteenth-century Ireland' in *Irish Culture and Nationalism, 1750-1950*, eds. Oliver McDonagh, W. F. Mandle and Pauric Travers, London: Macmillan Press, 1983, 40-55.

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painting is by no means the focal point of the picture; it has been consigned to the distance and is somewhat obscured by the shadows of the round tower and surrounding mountains. Instead, greater attention has been paid to the commercial aspects of the day, such as the groups selling hard wares and hats, and to the diversity of the visiting crowd in the foreground. Peacock may have composed the picture in this way in order to emphasise that the faction fight was a disappearing tradition and, like the round tower it is placed under, the remnant of an archaic past. By placing members from all spectrums of society in the crowd and by focusing on consumerism Peacock's picture presents a more positive outlook on Irish rural life than has previously been suggested – this is a place where commerce can progress and community spirit can flourish.

Histories of class have shown that education, communication and industrialization contributed to a social change that witnessed the emergence of a strong and lively middle-class in Dublin and particularly in the regional centres of Belfast, Cork and Limerick from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards.⁵⁸ Recent research indicates that this emerging class were interested in decorating their well-furnished homes with works of art.⁵⁹ Perhaps when the painting went on sale in Dublin in 1813 Peacock had these urban professionals in mind as potential buyers for his panoramic picture. In any case, *The Patron of the Seven Churches* was not as successful as Peacock might have hoped; it failed to sell and was later re-exhibited in London at the RA in 1817 and at the British Institution in 1818.⁶⁰ Eventually by 1828 the work was in the possession of the Bateson family of Belvoir Park which is situated in the Lagan valley just outside Belfast.⁶¹ Robert Bateson was a banker, a landlord and a politician who had a particular interest in agricultural improvement and sat on a number of committees that contributed to the improvement of life in Belfast.⁶² He was also an avid art collector: records exist of a collection that included works by (and after) J.P. Rubens, Angelica Kaufmann and Caravaggio.⁶³ With such an extravagant collection of European Masters, why was he interested in a picture of 'familiar' life by a relatively unknown Irish artist?

⁵⁸ For more on the history of the middle class in Ireland see Fintan Lane, ed., *Politics, Society and the Middle Class in Modern Ireland*, Basingstoke: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2010; Maureen Wall, 'Catholic Ireland in the Eighteenth Century', in *Collected Essays of Maureen Wall*, ed. Gerard O'Brien, Dublin: Geography Publication, 1989; Kevin Whelan, 'An Underground Gentry? Catholic Middlemen in Eighteenth-Century Ireland', *Eighteenth Century Ireland*, No. 10, 1995: 7-68; Jacqueline Hill, 'Irish Identities before and after the Act of Union', *Radharc*, Vol. 2, November 2001: 51-73.

⁵⁹ Unpublished research undertaken by the author indicates that wealthy urban patrons of the arts decorated their homes with art collections that included paintings by European and Irish artists. For instance, proprietors of paintings by Peacock in Dublin included John Crosbie Graves, the Chief Police Magistrate and the novelist and historian William Hamilton Maxwell: <http://piprod.getty.edu/starweb/pi/servlet.starweb> (accessed 20 May 2011).

⁶⁰ Graves, *Royal Academy of Arts*, 86-87; Graves, *The British Institution*, 420.

⁶¹ Eileen Black, *Art in Belfast 1760-1888 : art lovers or Philistines?*, Dublin : Irish Academic Press, 2006, 36-37.

⁶² Ben Simon, ed., *A Treasured Landscape: the heritage of Belvoir Park*, Belfast : Forest of Belfast, 2005.

⁶³ Anon., 'Fine Arts', *Belfast News Letter*, 9 December 1828.

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It could be suggested that Bateson wanted to commemorate links with the mysterious pagan past, or maybe he was attracted to the ruined monastic city and scenery at Glendalough, or could relate to the illustrations of folk culture that the picture displays. Ultimately, there are no definitive answers to this question. However, the aim of this article has been to emphasize the contribution that an interdisciplinary approach can make to scholarship in this area. While it is clear that the historiography of this period remains limited, recent interest in this type of painting from disciplines outside the realm of art history, and attention from major art institutions, means the field is now open to diversify the conversation among scholars of early nineteenth-century Ireland. By sharing in the knowledge of other disciplines, questions about audience demand and artistic practice no longer remain completely unanswered. Instead, a more holistic understanding of the place of an everyday aesthetic in the history of art in nineteenth-century Ireland can be developed.

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