



Samuel Beckett, John Joseph Slattery and Jane Austen's niece

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for Patrick Healy

JUST BEFORE THE END OF SAMUEL BECKETT'S NOVEL *WATT* (1953), THE READER ENCOUNTERS a portrait by 'Art Conn O'Connery' showing a naked Mr Quin playing the piano. In an extraordinarily vivid ekphrasis, this bizarre painting is described with great particularity: 'Beads of sweat ... were plentifully distributed over pectoral, subaxillary and hypogastrical surfaces. The right nipple, from which sprang a long red solitary hair, was in a state of manifest tumescence, a charming touch.'¹ 'Mr Connery's love of significant detail', the increasingly grotesque account continues, was further evinced by the 'treatment of toenails, of remarkable luxuriance and caked with what seemed to be dirt', and this is far from the least decorous detail in the description: 'the bust was bowed over the keyboard and the face, turned slightly towards the spectator, wore expression of man about to be delivered, after many days, of particularly hard stool ... as pretty a synthesis as one could wish of anguish, concentration, strain, transport and self-abandon [sic].'² Although *Watt* was largely written in France during the Second World War, a south Dublin, and sometimes specifically Foxrock, milieu is recognisably evoked; a further portrait, of Mrs Quin, is attributed to the 'Master of the Leopardstown Halflengths [sic]'.³ Mr Quin's portrait merits consideration as a written counterpart to the still little appreciated genre of the nude in Irish art, and in its combination of naked portraiture and scatological context suggests a hitherto unnoticed source for the infamous nude portrait of Taoiseach, Brian Cowen, by Conor Casby, which, in March 2008, was surreptitiously hung in the National Gallery of Ireland.⁴ However, instead of pursuing the thematic or iconological avenues that Beckett's rich imagery invites, this article offers an art historical gloss on the passage; simultaneously, in a conscious paradox, it explores the forgotten career of a painter who was, in part, the inspiration for *Watt*'s fictive artist to make a contribution to the growing iconography of Jane Austen's family in Ireland.⁵

In the addenda to *Watt*, Beckett explicates the artistic lineage of the portrait's pseudonymous creator, noting that he was also known as Black Velvet O'Connery, and that he was a 'product of the great Chinnery-Slattery tradition'.⁶ George Chinnery (1774-1852), who supplies one half of 'Black Velvet's' dual heritage, was an appealing artist,

1 – John Joseph Slattery (fl.1846-58), *PORTRAIT OF NORAH HILL* (1835-1920)
1856, oil on canvas, 53 x 42.5 cm (oval) (private collection)

best known, in an Irish context at least, for notably sympathetic portraits of his wife. However, the freedom of his application of paint differs notably from O’Connery’s *fijn-schilder* technique (‘a finish that would have done credit to [Jan Jansoon de] Heem’ (1650-after 1695)); indeed, one response to Chinnery’s exhibits in an 1801 Dublin show charged him with exactly the opposite quality, or fault, arguing that his work was ‘palpably unfinished’.⁷ If, in addition to this technical divergence from O’Connery’s art, Chinnery’s English birth and distinctly unorthodox career path makes him an unlikely candidate to represent the Irish tradition of face painters, he was at least a well-known quantity and a familiar name. Less obvious is why – indeed, how – Beckett, when he wished to create a composite Irish portrait painter, alighted on the utterly obscure John Joseph Slattery, an artist whose career in Ireland was short, details of whose biography are sparse, and whose work is extremely rare.

In his 1913 *Dictionary of Irish artists*, Walter Strickland admitted that ‘little is known’ of Slattery, and, if anything, in the intervening century he has sunk into yet greater oblivion, being omitted from all modern references works on Irish painting.⁸ Indeed, he seems to be mentioned in scholarly literature today *only* in connection with *Watt*, inviting this corrective in his defence, for despite his total critical neglect and Beckett’s biting parody, surviving works show Slattery to have been a capable practitioner and sympathetic portrait painter. After a successful spell as a student at the Dublin Society Schools, which he entered in 1846 (winning a medal, premium and studentship), by 1852 Slattery was exhibiting at the Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA) from an address at 10 Wicklow Street. Four years later he showed there again, having moved to St Stephen’s Green. Strickland notes that he gained ‘a good practice’ in the years around 1850, and ‘painted several persons of distinction’.⁹ Predominating within his small extant oeuvre are portraits of leading cultural figures of mid-century Ireland, notably of the antiquarian and artist George Petrie (1790-1866) (Royal Irish Academy), the painter Jeremiah Hodges Mulcahy (1804-1889) (Plate 3) and the writer William Carleton (1794-1769) (Plate 2). This last portrait was acclaimed by the sitter’s early biographer as ‘the best and most life-like’ image of the novelist ‘in existence’.¹⁰ However, despite the early success which elicited such praise, Slattery’s documented career in Ireland ended abruptly, and after the 1858 exhibition at the RHA he seems to have vanished. According to Strickland he ‘is said to have gone to America’.¹¹

Strickland’s short biography of the artist records a portrait by Slattery of Mrs Somerset Ward (Plate 1). Her own name obscured here by her husband’s, as convention dictated, Mrs Somerset Ward was born Norah Hill (1835-1920). Her father was Lord George Hill (1801-1879), a younger son of Arthur Hill, Marquis of Downshire (1753-1801), of Hillsborough, county Down, and Mary Sandys (1764-1836). In October 1834, Hill, an MP and soldier, married (after several years of parental opposition to the match) Cassandra Jane Knight (1806-1842), the daughter of Jane Austen’s brother Edward Austen Knight (1767-1852), who took her name from the novelist’s beloved sister and confidant.¹² The following year, on 19th December, their first child, Norah Mary Elizabeth (Slattery’s subject here) was born. Lord George and Cassandra settled in Donegal, where Hill was developing his vast estate at Gweedore, but sadly Cassandra died on 14th March 1842, three days after giving birth to Norah’s sibling, another Cassandra (1842-1901). Their



2 – John Joseph Slattery, *PORTRAIT OF WILLIAM CARLETON (1794-1869)*
oil on canvas, 92 x 71 cm (National Gallery of Ireland)



3 – John Joseph Slattery, *PORTRAIT OF JEREMIAH HODGES MULCAHY (1804-89)*
oil on canvas, 114 x 79.5 (University of Limerick)

mother's sister, Louisa Knight (1804-1889), again a niece (and also godchild) of Jane Austen moved to Donegal to help with the young children and on 11th May 1847 married Lord George, her sister's widower, in Denmark as British law forbade their union.¹³ The extraordinary story of the relocation of members of Jane Austen's family from Kent to Donegal has recently been recounted in rich detail by Sophia Hillan, their lives in Ireland echoing 'to an uncanny degree' Austen's novels, although 'some of what befell the Knight sisters was beyond even the realm of their aunt's extensive imagination'.¹⁴

Slattery's portrait of Norah Hill (Plate 1) was painted in Dublin in 1856 when she was twenty-one and shows her with severely tied back hair, blooming complexion and a serious, even intense, demeanour perhaps more in keeping with a Brontë heroine than one of her aunt's, or at least temperamentally more Fanny Price than Elizabeth Bennet. As a girl, Norah's looks and personality had been much admired, just as Jane Austen had praised her mother's.¹⁵ Her cousin, another Louisa, noted in a letter of 1850 of a visit back to the Knights' estate in Kent: 'Uncle George Hill brought Norah over from Ireland to Godmersham ... she is the prettiest as well as the nicest girl of 14 I ever saw.'¹⁶ In addition to Norah's girlish charm and membership of the Downshire family, her kinship with Jane Austen helped her prospects in vice-regal circles with her aunt Louisa noting in the spring of 1856, as Norah sat for her portrait, how Pamela, Lady Campbell, a friend of Lord Carlisle, the new Lord Lieutenant, was 'a most ardent admirer of Aunt Jane's works'.¹⁷ Lady Campbell, herself, wrote to the Viceroy: 'Only fancy the discovery we have made ... Lady George Hill [Louisa] is own niece to Jane Austen the authoress and she can tell us so much about her!' It must be said that Lady Campbell took a now un-



4 – Captain and Mrs Somerset Ward (née Norah Hill), c.1858
(unknown photographer / courtesy Donegal County Archives)

opposite

5 – John Joseph Slattery
PORTRAIT OF MRS WILLIAM
KEOGH (NÉE KATE ROONEY)
AND HER CHILDREN
1858, oil on canvas

fashionably biographical approach to the novels – ‘Was she pretty? Wasn’t she pretty?’¹⁸ Louisa further noted that the Archbishop of Dublin was ‘another of her staunch admirers’.¹⁹ Clearly, if perhaps surprisingly, Janeites permeated the Irish establishment, and another (in this case former) admirer of Miss Austen was the Lord Chief Justice of the Queen’s Bench in Ireland, Limerick lawyer Thomas Lefroy (1776-1869), with whom almost sixty years earlier Austen had, in her own words, danced in the ‘most profligate and shocking’ manner.²⁰ She described Lefroy as ‘my Irish friend’ (he is often thought of as the model for Mr Darcy), and but for the lack of a fortune on either side, Jane might well have found her own path to married life in Ireland long before her nieces, with who knows what consequences for literary history.²¹

This was not to be, and instead Austen settled down to work on *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), but, happily following the plotlines of all six of her aunt’s novels, on 28th April 1859, Norah married the dashing soldier Somerset Ward, of Castle Ward, with whom she is pictured in a family photographic album recently acquired by Donegal County Council (Plate 4).²² Theirs was a distinctly companionate union, but also a more pragmatic match than that of her parents, linking as it did the political interests of the Bangor and Downshire families in county Down.

In 1873 Slattery’s painting was lent by the sitter’s father, Lord George Hill, to the *Loan Museum of Art Treasures* in Dublin’s Industrial Exhibition Palace (a rare triumph for Slattery), but subsequently it descended through his brother’s family, now with their own Sandys barony, at Ombersley Court, Worcestershire, until the death of Richard Hill, 7th Baron Sandys (1931-2013).²³ By the time of a 1963 inventory of Ombersley, Norah’s portrait had been relegated to the store rooms, but more recently it was hung with other family portraits on the stairs.²⁴

C ONOR CARVILLE, IN HIS STUDY OF BECKETT AND THE VISUAL ARTS, ARGUES THAT IN the description from *Watt* quoted at the beginning, the author parodies the notion of a ‘tradition’ of Irish portrait painting. Stating that neither Chinnery nor Slattery is ‘particularly distinguished’, he continues that the ‘notion that theirs is a tradition at all, never mind a great one, speaks to Beckett’s sense of the pretensions ... of the so-called Anglo-Irish Ascendancy who sat for them’.²⁵ Suggesting a pun on the artist’s name, Carville argues that ‘both the art and the tradition are a con’.²⁶ While this may or may not illuminate Beckett’s text, it is unsatisfactory art history. Portrait painting in nineteenth-century Ireland deserves a more nuanced approach than Beckett – for all his parodic brilliance – and his exegetes can allow. It seems harsh to characterise as a pretentious ‘con’ so obviously sincere and engaging a portrait as Slattery’s of Norah Hill. Nor, while the sitter, for all her Kentish antecedents, was indubitably a member of the Ascendancy, issues of class and confession, in relation to both Beckett’s O’Connery and his prototype, J.J. Slattery, are more complex. Beckett explains his artist’s high degree of finish not just by reference to the Dutch still-life tradition but also by ‘all the resources of Jesuit tactility’ that O’Connery had lavished on the painting, making him an unlikely house artist to the Protestant Ascendancy.²⁷ Slattery’s oeuvre, as noted above, largely featured middle-class professional artists rather than the landed elite, while seemingly the only one of his nine RHA exhibits that can be identified today is a charming, if slightly naïve conversation piece of Mrs Keogh and her children of 1858 (Plate 5). Kate Keogh was the wife of the (soon-to-be) infamous and very Catholic Judge William Keogh, whose portrait Slattery also painted. Ironically, Keogh’s career had been supported at a key juncture – his elevation to silk – by Jane’s Austen’s one-time Irish dancing partner, the now equally reactionary lawyer, Thomas Lefroy.²⁸ But to take Beckett literally here is perhaps a category



error. He chose Slattery to parody not because of anything intrinsic to his oeuvre, but for the comedic effect of the jingling and grating half-rhyme with Chinnery, the pun on ‘slattern’ (suggestive of Mr Quin’s unprepossessing appearance and issues with bodily hygiene), and also for the distinct Catholic and Gaelic ring to the name.²⁹ To substitute Slattery with a more obviously applicable artist, Stephen Catterson Smith (1806-1872) say, would not have worked nearly as well, even if it made for better art history. Much more so than Slattery, Smith (the ‘leading official portraitist’) did paint the Ascendancy, with his sitters comprising ‘dukes and duchesses, viscounts, bishops, lord mayors, barristers, surgeons, colonels and society ladies’.³⁰

In any case, the Ascendancy at this juncture was subject to fissure and riven with not infrequent ambiguity; Norah’s father Lord George Hill, a highly controversial landlord during the Famine, was an Irish language speaker, while Lady Campbell, friend of the Lord Lieutenant and admirer of Jane Austen, was the daughter of the revolutionary Lord Edward FitzGerald. It is noticeable here that Norah, with her distinct ‘Irish colleen’ colouring, wears proto-Celtic Revival costume in the emblematic colours of the tricolour of the Young Ireland rebellion of eight years earlier; she appears almost as a personification of Hibernia.³¹ Given the heightened awareness of colour symbolism in mid-nineteenth-century Ireland, this is unlikely to be accidental, but quite how it should be interpreted is unclear. Portraiture is a complex art that does more than flatter the ‘pretensions’ of its sitters; it can reveal much and intuit more. It may not be a coincidence, for example, that Norah’s sister Cassandra would become close to Charlotte (1845-1909), daughter of the Young Ireland leader William Smith O’Brien (1803-1864), and die in the house Charlotte built, ‘Fáilte’ in Foxrock, in August 1901, just round the corner from ‘Cooldrinagh’ where Samuel Beckett would be born five years later – ‘birth astride a grave’.³²

Samuel Beckett and Jane Austen are not obvious literary bedfellows. However, while they did not necessarily share the same existential worldview, their laconic sense of irony invites comparison. A kinship was acknowledged by Beckett himself. In a 1935 letter to Thomas MacGreevy, he noted that he was reading ‘the divine Jane’: ‘I think she has much to teach me’.³³ If the propensity for mischievous speech play, which defines Beckett’s verbal humour, answers the question ‘why Slattery?’, the question of how the author had even heard of the obscure portraitist is surely answerable through his frequent visits to the National Gallery of Ireland, which had owned Slattery’s portrait of William Carleton since 1884, and, more specifically, by his close friendship with MacGreevy, its director, who frequently acted as Beckett’s informal artistic adviser.³⁴ This hauntingly soulful portrait suggests that it is ill-advised and slightly misses the joke to take his wicked parody for art historical analysis; Beckett himself described *Watt* as ‘only a game’.³⁵ At the same time, Slattery’s painting shows him to have been a noticeably more engaging portraitist than Beckett’s caricature of O’Connery would suggest. Finally, and pleasingly, the migrations of Jane Austen’s family to-and-fro across the Irish Sea continue with the recent return of Slattery’s portrait of her niece from Ombersley to Ireland.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Samuel Beckett (ed. C.J. Ackerley), *Watt* (London, 2009; first published Paris, 1953) 219.
- ² *ibid.*, 220, 219.
- ³ *ibid.*, 215.
- ⁴ David Sharrock, 'Biffo on the bog, Conor Casby hands more work to the police', *The Times*, 27th March 2009. For the nude in Irish art, a thriving genre whose very existence has often been denied, see William Laffan, 'Beyond the puritan nude' in *Royal Hibernian Academy, one hundred and eighty-eighth exhibition* (Dublin 2018) 48-55, and the exhibition at the Crawford Art Gallery, Cork, *Naked truth: the nude in Irish art* (13th July – 28th Oct 2018).
- ⁵ Sophia Hillan, *May, Lou & Cass, Jane Austen's nieces in Ireland* (Belfast, 2011); Sophia Hillan, 'Daughter of the house: Cassandra Hill, Jane Austen's Irish great-niece', *Irish Times*, 18th Dec 2018 and Sophia Hillan, 'Jane Austen's family in Ireland: how they shaped politics and society in the north', *Irish Times*, 20th Sept 2019.
- ⁶ Beckett, *Watt*, 215.
- ⁷ *ibid.*, 219. The manuscript makes it clear that the younger de Heem, not his better-known father, Jan Davidsz de Heem (1606-84), is referenced here. Conor Carville, *Samuel Beckett and the visual arts* (Cambridge, 2018) 174. Royal Irish Academy, MS 24K14, anonymous diarist, cited in Walter Strickland, *A dictionary of Irish artists*, 2 vols (Dublin and London, 1913) I, 171.
- ⁸ Strickland, *Dictionary of Irish artists*, II, 358. Slattery is included in neither Anne Crookshank and Desmond FitzGerald, Knight of Glin, *Ireland's painters, 1600-1940* (New Haven and London, 2002) nor Nicola Figgis (ed.), *Art and architecture of Ireland, vol. 2: painting 1600-1900* (Dublin, New Haven and London, 2014).
- ⁹ Strickland, *Dictionary of Irish artists*, II, 358.
- ¹⁰ William Carleton, *The life of William Carleton: being his autobiography and letters and an account of his life and writings, from the point at which the autobiography breaks off by David J. O'Donoghue*, 2 vols (London, 1896) II, 349.
- ¹¹ Strickland, *Dictionary of Irish artists*, II, 359.
- ¹² Edward had changed his name from Austen to Knight when he became heir to Thomas and Catherine Knight of Godmersham Park in Kent. Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen, a life* (London, 1997) 37; Hillan, *May, Lou & Cass*, 74-79, 95-96.
- ¹³ Hillan, *May, Lou & Cass*, 132-34.
- ¹⁴ *ibid.*, 5.
- ¹⁵ Jane wrote of the young Cassandra, Norah's mother, in 1808, 'She has charming eyes and a nice open countenance, and seems likely to be very loveable. Her size is magnificent.' Cited in Hillan, *May, Lou & Cass*, 6. A miniature portrait of Cassandra Knight (Hill) by Hugh Ross (1800-1873), reproduced in Hillan, 'Jane Austen's family in Ireland', invites comparison between the features of mother and daughter.
- ¹⁶ *ibid.*, 147.
- ¹⁷ *ibid.*, 160.
- ¹⁸ *ibid.*, 161, 160.
- ¹⁹ *ibid.*, 160.
- ²⁰ Tomalin, *Jane Austen*, 113-19.
- ²¹ Linda Robinson Walker, 'Jane Austen and Tom Lefroy: Stories', *Persuasions On-line, Jane Austen Society of North America*, 27, no. 1, Winter 2006, retrieved 4th Feb 2024; J.A.P. Lefroy, "'Jane Austen's Irish friend" Rt. Hon. Thomas Langlois Lefroy, 1776-1869', *Proceedings of the Huguenot Society of London*, 23, May 1979, 148-65.
- ²² Donegal County Archives, IRE/DCC/PH/13, photograph album relating to Lord George Hill, Cassandra and Louisa Knight Hill and their families.
- ²³ Strickland, *Dictionary of Irish artists*, II, 359. The picture bears a label for the exhibition on its reverse. Christie's, 'Ombersley Court. The collection of Lord and Lady Sandys', 29th Nov 2023, lot 209. The Sandys title was created (for the third time) for Norah's grandmother, Mary Sandys (1764-1836), created Baroness Sandys in her own right (just after Lord George Hill's birth), with remainder to her younger son, Lord Arthur Moyses William Hill (1792-1860).
- ²⁴ Ombersley Court manuscript inventory, June 1963.

- ²⁵ Carville, *Samuel Beckett and the visual arts*, 174.
- ²⁶ *ibid.* Elsewhere in the book, Art and Con are 37-year-old identical twins measuring 3'4" in height who are frequently mistaken for one another. Beckett, *Watt*, 85.
- ²⁷ *ibid.*, 219.
- ²⁸ *Dictionary of Irish biography*, <https://www.dib.ie> (acc. 12th Nov 2023).
- ²⁹ This point is reinforced by the very plausible suggestion that O'Connery's name, in addition to combining Chinnery and Slattery, is more specifically derived from James Arthur O'Connor (1792-1841). O'Connor was almost exclusively a landscape painter, and so his inclusion in Black Velvet's artistic make-up could be explained only by the opportunity if offered for word play. See Eoin O'Brien, *The Beckett country: Samuel Beckett's Ireland* (Dublin, 1986) 148-50; C.J. Ackerley, *Obscure locks, simple keys: the annotated Watt* (Edinburgh, 2005, 2010) 206.
- ³⁰ Julian Campbell in Figgis, *Art and architecture of Ireland*, 455.
- ³¹ In general, see Alex Ward, 'Dress and national identity: women's clothing and the Celtic Revival', *Costume*, 48, no. 2, June 2014, 193-212.
- ³² Hillan, *May, Lou & Cass*, 227. Following a more conventional path, Norah's daughter, also Norah, would marry the staunchly Unionist politician Henry Lyle Mulholland (1854-1931), Baron Dunleath of Ballywalter, county Down. Pozzo in Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (*En attendant Godot*, 1952).
- ³³ Cited in Mark Byron, 'English literature' in Anthony Uhlmann (ed.), *Samuel Beckett in context* (Cambridge, 2013) 224.
- ³⁴ Carville, *Samuel Beckett and the visual arts*, 178.
- ³⁵ Cited in Ackerley, *Obscure locks*, 12.
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