



Negotiating Cultural Identity and Heritage in John Banville's *Birchwood*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the relationship between heritage and group identity and if there is any comprehensibly enough logic of cultural group identity in connection with heritage sites with particular reference to John Banville's *Birchwood*. I also want to relate the role colonial ruling has played in establishing current patterns of discourse about cultural heritage. John Banville is a representative contemporary novelist of Irish background. *Birchwood*, which is his second novel, is generally accepted as a turning point in Irish Nationalist literary writing history.

Keywords

heritage, Irish Nationalism, the Big House novel

Literary sensibility of John Banville is, in a large extent, shaped by the cultural background of his motherland Ireland. He is often identified as a successor to Marcel Proust and akin to the stylistic tendency of Vladimir Nabokov. But in an interview he himself says, “What is odd is that no one ever seems to notice that the two real influences on my work are Yeats and Henry James.” (Banville, Interview) His deep longing for Irish past and his understanding of Irish nationalist history is indeed Yeatsian in temper. In *Birchwood*, he foregrounds the inherent tensions about our understanding of the composition of boundaries of cultural groups and in a sense about our accepted perception about ‘heritage’. If we accept that at its core, the concept of ‘heritage’ is typically taken to mean the inheritance of something from the past, then, in Irish context what comes corollary to this is an urge for organic unity, regardless of limits and differences of shared cultural memory. We know that in today’s world cultural heritage used to construct the sense of identity of an individual. “This has powerful economic and political consequences of loyalty and rivalry. As a result, governments, institutions, and individuals are strongly motivated to influence your attitudes, values, and behaviour.” (Buckland 2) Between these conflict there stands the Anglo Irish Big Houses, the destiny of which is unresolved still today.

The Big House Novel is a peculiar Irish phenomenon and is based on an Irish reality, namely the ‘Big Houses’ where the landlords, (the Protestant settlers of English origin) settled, encircled by the pitiable Irish peasants. The novels which are written in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries are often portrays the condition of surroundings of those Big Houses. However, the tradition of this kind of writing continues on still today because of the metaphoric presence of these Big Houses in the memory of the Irish populace and as a consequence in the centre of the discourse of the Irish cultural heritage. Within the scope of this paper I will argue how ‘Big Houses’ with their potential disruptive presence in Irish cultural discourse, trigger a simultaneous sense of loss and sustenance, hinting towards a different take about our common perception about cultural heritage.

Because of the above motivation, The Big House Novel is often regarded as a tricky subject in the study of Irish novels. The very name has a straight forward meaning. But its apparent simplicity is blurred in the veil of a peculiar Irish ethos. Critics still today are vigilant in their observations regarding the big house novel. The genre is overwrought with the question of validity. The connection of the Anglo Irish ascendancy with those big houses in Ireland makes it seriously problematic. For a better understanding of the relation between the Anglo Irish ascendancy and general common people of Ireland, we need a quick survey of Irish past history and more importantly its relationship with England. Ireland was undoubtedly one of the oldest colonies of England. Recent historians are shared a common opinion that Ireland was a kingdom.

This regal status, along with the (albeit fitful) existence of a Parliament of undeniable medieval origins consisting of a House of Commons and House of Lords, seemed to mark Ireland off decisively from every colony subsequently acquired by England, for they could only boast of assorted Assemblies, councils and courts. (Bartlett 61)

The operation of England to make Ireland control and exploit in full scale can be seen as divided in to two phases. The first one can be seen as mediaeval phase and the final one as early modern phase. The Mediaeval phase can be dated back to 1171. “When the Earl of Pembroke met Henry II at Newnham in Gloucestershire in 1171, in the words Gerald of Wales he surrendered Dublin (significantly called regni caput), the adjacent cantreds, the maritime towns and castles to the king.” (Lydon 281-294) Moreover since 1541 Ireland enjoyed the constitutional status of a kingdom.

“Even such terms as civilization and imperialism and other associated phases like Anglicization and colonization, defy easy categorization in the context of early modern Ireland. (Ohlmeyer 26)

England had employed military political and in a greater way religious and economic forces to optimize its imperial control over Ireland. “Empire was always a language of power.” (Armitage 29) These military, political, administrative, legal, religious and cultural strategies were employed by England to make Ireland submissive. Together, “these strategies, though often couched in rhetoric of civility effectively amounted to a form of imperialism that sought to exploit Ireland for England’s political and economic advantage and to Anglicize the native population.” (Armitage 28) As a part of this imperial strategy England had employed a large number of settlers to achieve this goal to grip Ireland firmly. As a result:

Between 1649 and 1651 the parliament dispatched 55000 men to serve in Ireland and at the Battle of the Boyne (1690) King William of Orange commanded a force numbering 36000. Each English victory, especially in 1603, 1653, and 1691, brought with it a fresh wave of expropriation and colonial activity as the metro pole exercised its military and political dominance. (Wheeler 177)

Thus, in this systematic way the greater number of common general mass of Catholic Irish people is controlled by a lesser number of Protestant English settlers in Ireland. These settlers are generally known as Anglo Irish class. Naturally these settlers are well backed by English laws and military power. Their pomp and might is being reflected in the term “Big House” to the peasant society of the Irish general mass. These houses formed the symbolic focal point or a kind of metaphor of the Anglo Irish political dominance in the early modern period. The hostility between the inhabitants of those big houses with the common Irish people makes this as a subject for the historians and the literary artists also. Big Houses is often standing as a point of impact to these completely different two sets of people surprisingly living within Ireland. Thus, in latter period when struggle of Irish independence become stronger this houses were often looted and vandalized. The impact is so deep that even in twentieth century a number of Irish critics are in absolute opposition to treat the Big House novels as a separate field of study in Irish national literary tradition. That is why still today, the Big House, is hugely controversial area under discussion, when we consider the relation between group identity and heritage in Irish context.

Vera Kreilkamp’s *The Anglo- Irish Novel and the Big House* (1998) is one of the earliest book to assert that Big House novels, “represents a major traditions in Irish fiction.” (Kreilkamp, pp 13) Subsequently in *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel* (2006) she also contributed a chapter entitled “The Novel of the Big House”. There she has provided a list of the Big House novels, which starts from Maria Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent* (1800). Likewise, some contemporary study suggests that there is an obvious shift in attitude, which is visible clearly, regarding the Big House novels as a main stream Irish novel.

John Banville is a representative modern Irish novelist and *Birchwood* is one of his early novels. A peculiar blend of straightforwardness of expression and a tremendous amount of thematic complexity is juxtaposed in this novel. A close analysis of *Birchwood* will clearly make us understand how the Big House discourse entangles the protagonist of the novel Gabriel Godkin and tears him within. The novel begins with:

I AM, therefore I think. That seems inescapable. In this lawless house I spend the nights poring over my memories, fingering them, like an impotent casanova his old love letters, sniffing the dusty scent of violets. Some of these memories are in a language

which I do not understand, the ones that could be headed, *the beginning of the old life*. They tell the story which I intend to copy here, all of it, if not its meaning, the story of the fall and rise of Birchwood, and of the part Sabatier and I played in the last battle. (Banville, 11)

Protagonist hero of the novel Gabriel Godkin goes on saying:

I have begun to work on the house. Not that it is in need of repair, no. I swept away the broken glass, dead flowers, the other unnameable things. You would think I expect guests, which is a laugh. I fail to discern a defensible reason for my labours, but there must be one, I suppose, buried somewhere. It gives me something to do in these long dog days. At night I write, when Sirius rises in icy silence. The past is poised around me. I imagine an arrow whistling through the darkness. (Banville, 12)

His desperate attempt to free himself off from the legacy of the Birchwood Big House is clearly evident from these lines:

We imagine that we remember things as they were, while in fact all we carry into the future are fragments which reconstruct a wholly illusory past. That first death we witness will always be a murmur of voices down a corridor and a clock falling silent in the darkened room, the end of love is forever two spent cigarettes in a saucer and a white door closing. I had dreamed of the house so often on my travels that now it refused to be real, even while I stood among its ruins. It was not Birchwood of which I had dreamed, but a dream of Birchwood, woven out of bits and scraps (Banville, 14)

This longing almost reaches in its climax when Gabriel Godkin expresses, “I wept for what was there and yet not there. For Birchwood.” (Banville 11)

Not only the central protagonist has to bear with the legacy which Birchwood indelibly imposes on them but other characters also have to suffer the same fate.

My father is grinning in his grave at the notion of his paltry son fiddling with this, with his, baroque madhouse. Mama in her plot is probably weeping. Birchwood for her was a kind of desert, bleak, magnificent, alien. She would have gladly seen the place collapse some suitably wet Sunday. (Banville, 15)

But what is more important is the difference in which separate generations face the Birchwood legacy. Gabriel, in the beginning of the novel, though somewhat vaguely, has trying to understand what imposition does Birchwood asserts in his life. But in subsequent stages of the novel we find him utterly hopeless and tremendously puzzled with Birchwood legacy. It looms over his head as a dark shadow. A bleak future is seen obvious and only remain in the life of Gabriel. Though he had faint or no connection with the political or religious situation which construct the Birchwood legacy yet as an inhabitant of the house he needs to suffer. But what is interesting here is that amidst of this seriously troublesome situation he is never completely ready to left the fight to hold his Big House owner identity. His apparent calmness about Birchwood happenings can be seen as an aloofness of a modern hero.

This inverted Cartesian dictum, the first line of Banville’s first major novel Birchwood, is an apt illustration of what is perhaps the single most striking feature of Banville’s writing: the quintessential modern voice. It is the voice of modern man who is thrown into the world (I am) and tries to make sense of it (I think). (D’hoker 19)

In contrast both Gabriel’s father as well as mother presents a kind of active participation in the day to day events of Birchwood. They desperately try to live within the compass which Birchwood

provides them. Each of their experience is coloured only in a way which Birchwood allows them to enter. So it can be said that they are absorbed completely by the big house legacy.

In the course of the story, we come to know that there was a legal battle regarding the Birchwood estate between the Lawless family and Godkins. Gabriel provides us beautifully, the first person narration of the outcome of the event.

The Lawlesses, Joseph's brothers, fought for Birchwood, and what with the legal tangles, and the peculiarities of the will, not to mention the unshakeable faith in perfidy which there was on both sides, the fight was long and dirty in the extreme. Gabriel won, and his fortunes flourished. Demoralised by defeat, the Lawlesses languished. From landed stock to small-town merchants was a short step down. However, there is always justice, of a kind, and while the Lawlesses grew solid and sane the Godkins were stalked by an insatiable and glittering madness born, I suspect, of the need to hate something worthy of their hatred, a part the Lawlesses could no longer play. I am thinking of Simon Godkin furiously dying with his teeth sunk in birch bark, of my mother screaming in the attic. I am thinking of all the waste sad deaths. This violence will be visited on me, in the fullness of time. (Banville 16)

The cultural impact of the Big House legacy is so heavy that regarding grandmother Godkin, Gabriel remarks, "I had, I know not how, gained her—gained her regard, I wanted to say love, but the Godkins loved only those they could fight, and as yet I was too young for that." His gaining maturity about his cultural background becomes evident with this lines, "Forgetting all I know, I try to describe these things, and only then do I realise, yet again, that the past is incommunicable. (Banville 29)

The story adrift from 'summer' to 'wet days' and Gabriel become aware that, but the twist in the tale comes with the introduction of Aunt Martha and her son Michael.

I had expected, perhaps even hoped, that their arrival would immediately transform life at Birchwood. Nothing is so simple. Things changed, certainly, but slowly, and in subtle ways. The morning rituals, the fights, the elaborate, barely edible evening dinners, they remained unaltered, but the patterns woven by these set-dances of life shifted gradually, until the whole mesh of emphasis and echo between the inhabitants of the house was warped. (Banville 45)

The irony of the situation is that though the inhabitants of the Big House estates presently share neither the glory nor the pomp of their ancestors yet they bear the same amount of hatred from the common Irish folk. The situation is more aggravated when, though in a certain way, they have been received cordially by the outside world, yet they are always in search of an imaginary conspiracy. The atmosphere of faithlessness is what they acquired as their cultural inheritance. Gabriel is almost a detached observer of these incidents.

The Godkins of the Birchwood are in a serious financial position as time moves on. Gabriel realizes:

The main reason I was not sent away to a proper school was that we could not afford it. The finances of Birchwood were dwindling at the same rate as the decline of Papa's interest in the farm, which had never been great anyway. I can still see him, with ink-stained fingers and collar agape, his gold tooth glittering, crouched at his desk in the library in a pool of lamplight, scrabbling desperately among a litter of bills, and, a little later, standing in the shadows, where glass clinked furtively on glass, running his

fingers through his hair, soothing himself. Of course our genteel slide toward penury was never mentioned, not in my presence, but the silent evidence of it was everywhere around me, in the cracked paint and the missing tiles, the dry rot that ate its way unchecked across the floors and up the stairs, in the games of musical chairs which Mama played, switching them from the front rooms to the back in a circle of increasing degeneracy until the day when, groaning and creaking, they regained their original places and the wheel ceased to turn. He also realizes “It appears that if we follow the dictates of the nature god has given us, our reward will be to fry eternally in a lovingly prepared oven, whereas if we persist in denying the undeniable truth about ourselves we will be allowed to float for all time through an empty blue immensity, the adoration of the lord our only task. (Banville 49)

The first part of the book, which is named as “The Book of the Dead”, comes to an end with as many as three unnatural deaths; deaths of Gabriel’s grandfather, grandmother and Aunt Martha. Gabriel has compelled to leave Birchwood by his father, in order to go to town. He still cherishes to find his missing twin sister. This seems to be an obsession for him.

Book Two namely “Air and Angels” begins with Gabriel’s entrance into Prospero’s Magic Circus in the town. There also he has to face the comments over his ancestry. Circus manager Silas asks him:

“Tell me, boy, what is your name?”

‘Gabriel, sir.’

‘Gabriel Sir?’

‘No sir, Godkin. Gabriel Godkin.’

He raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips.

‘Godkin, eh? Well now, that’s a fine name to have, a fine old name.’ (Banville, 116)

In “Prospero’s Magic Circus”, for the first time in his life, his ancestral identity gradually becomes secondary. The day to day activity, the shows, the travel from one town to another, becomes a kind of routine for Gabriel. The busy schedule of a circus life, along with the hard living life style of a circus life, allows him with a little leisure to cherish his long preserve dream namely to find his missing twin sister. Day by day, “The exotic, once experienced, becomes commonplace that is a great drawback of this world. One touches the gold and it turns to dross. It was not so with Prospero’s band. I travelled with them for a year.” ((Banville, 125)

But this situation also changes within a short span of time. Ireland becomes disquiet as socio economic condition is rapidly disintegrating. Many revolutionary groups spearhead the attack on landed elites. This unrest also affects Prospero’s band. While travelling his final journey Gabriel considers seriously about his:

...past and future. It was the present I should have thought about, but the present is unthinkable. It did colour my thoughts, however, with of all things a certain insouciance. The imminence of disaster brings not piety and a concern for last things, it brings frivolity and laughter. I think that we shall all be drunk and gay, dancing a jig in the nude, when the apocalypse arrives to annihilate us at last. Famine hung above us like black smoke, and under that black cloud I wondered, with incredible levity, if it might not be better for me to cast aside the notion of a quest.” (Banville, 138)

Meanwhile their circus tents are looted and ablaze as plunderers attack their caravans. To save their life they retreat and as a consequence lose all sorts of communication with each other. At the end of book two, amidst of murder and destruction accidentally, Gabriel reaches in Birchwood estate.

Final Book, 'Mercury' opens with hiding Gabriel sees a fierce battle in Birchwood adjacent forest. He does not understand clearly why the battle is taking place. But at the end he realizes that,

Michael, of course, wanted to be squire, to ride on a black horse around his land and hunt the foxes and thrash the peasants. He wanted all that I had, and hated me for having it and despising it. I think he would have killed me, willingly, it would have been so easy, but something held him back, that same something which stayed the knife in my own hand when we faced each other in the murderous dark of the summerhouse, and so, instead of fratricide, he played with Martha her sly game, and between them they sent me off in search of a sister. But by then all that was Birchwood had collapsed, the Lawlesses were taking over, and Michael too had to fly. Wherever I went he was ahead of me, dogging the steps I had not taken yet. He found the circus, and joined the Molly Maguires, brought them to fight the Lawlesses, and the circus to fight the Mollies. All that blood!

That slaughter! And for what? For the same reason that Papa released his father into the birch wood to die, that Granny Godkin tormented poor mad Beatrice, that Beatrice made Martha believe that Michael was in the burning shed, the same reason that brought about all their absurd tragedies, the reason which does not have a name. So here then is an ending, of a kind, to my story. It may not have been like that, any of it. I invent, necessarily. (Banville, 173)

Ultimately Gabriel rejects the proposal of Silas to go with him and join Prospero's band and he prefers living in Birchwood.

But this is not where Banville wants to reach. He wants to give a message deeper, more penetrating, and more pervasive through his main protagonist Gabriel.

The weather held for weeks, limpid and bright, wind all day, sun and rain and a luminous lilac glow above the trees, then the evenings, night and stars. At first the silence troubled me, until I realised that it was not really silence. A band of old women came one day and took away the bodies of the dead men down in the field. I watched from my window, fascinated. I wanted to go and help them, to say, Look, I am not my father, I am something different but they would have run away from me, horrified. The poppies languished. I worked on the house, cleared out the attic, boarded up the windows smashed during the siege, tended the flowerbeds, I do not know why. The summer house was invaded by pigeons, starlings, a hive of bees. I let them stay there. They were alive, and I had enough of death. Perhaps I shall leave here. Where would I go? Is that why they all fought so hard for Birchwood, because there was nowhere else for them to be? Outside is destruction and decay. I do not speak the language of this wild country. I shall stay here, alone, and live a life different from any the house has ever known. (Banville, pp174)

The novel comes to an end with almost in a prophetic note from Banville through Gabriel,

Spring has come again, St Brigid's day, right on time. The harmony of the seasons mocks me. I spend hours watching the sky, the lake, the enormous sea. This world. I feel that if I could understand it I might then begin to understand the creatures who

inhabit it. But I do not understand it. I find the world always odd, but odder still, I suppose, is the fact that I find it so, for what are the eternal verities by which I measure these temporal aberrations? Intimations abound, but they are felt only, and words fail to transfix them. Anyway, some secrets are not to be disclosed under pain of who knows what retribution, and whereof I cannot speak, thereof I must be silent.” (Banville, pp175)

Through this discussion what I want to prove is that the novel *Birchwood*, interrogates the very influence of the Big House from a point of view of an insider. Banville allows his protagonist Gabriel to negotiate with the inherent contradiction of his past. Gabriel completes his journey of life seeking answer to an age old puzzle about the relation of group identity and heritage in Irish context. The novel also arise the debate about Anglo Irish ascendancy’s legitimacy to contribute in any discourse regarding Irish nationalism and more precisely in Irish literary tradition. Thus, *Birchwood* offers us a larger frame to look at Ireland’s complex past history as well as many layered social, cultural, economic and religious construction. The heritage sight of the novel serves as a metaphor for a complex and problematic set of ruler – ruled relation between England and Ireland and in the centre of novel stands the negotiation of group identity and cultural heritage.

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