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A look at Maeve Kelly's short story 'Journey Home' from *Orange Horses*

Martin Connolly

In this short study, I will look at one story by the contemporary, but elder, Irish writer Maeve Kelly (b.1930) from her recently re-issued collection, *Orange Horses*. Kelly is not as well-known as she deserves to be, having published the main body of her work at a time in which male chauvinism still had a strangle-hold on critical opinion in Ireland. Pigeon-holed as a feminist writer, her skill as a writer minus-the-qualification has never been adequately addressed or explored.¹⁾ In 2017, a critic described Maeve Kelly as 'quite forgotten until the recent re-printing of her *Orange Horses* by Tramp Press and the publication of *A Last Loving* [poems] by Arlen Press, both in 2016.'²⁾ My own encounter with her work came accidentally as a result of study into a more prominent Irish female writer of the present generation, Claire Keegan (b.1968), and through supervision of a student who was interested in how the situation of modern Irish women has been dealt with in literature.³⁾ Keegan has much to offer on this topic, but Kelly's focus on gynocentric issues is fundamental to what she is as a person, as an historically important activist, and as a writer. Yes, of course, Maeve Kelly could be described as a 'feminist' writer, but to do so tends to imply a limitation of outlook which detracts from the richness of her writing. In the story we will look at here, the reader is afforded a glimpse of her largely

unheralded literary genius.

In ‘Journey Home’, Maura picks up her brother Sean and his wife Josie and their two children from the airport and drives them to her home, a farm in rural Galway. Upon the skeleton of that deceptively unprepossessing storyline is draped a remarkable human mini-drama, and one which involves a wider interrogation of Irish society’s status quo. We soon learn that Maura is locked into a kind of battle for the possession of her home, a farm that, due to the old Irish rule of patrilineal inheritance, is destined to be handed over to her brother Sean. Maura is no shrinking violet, however. Not only is she disgruntled and determined to win, she is also already emotionally battle-hardened by a long-held and free-ranging contempt:

‘Their two children were hideous. As she packed their things into the boot of her car, Maura thought that she loathed her brother and his wife almost more than she loathed their ghastly children, Nigel and June.’

[13]

The story is ostensibly narrated in the third-person, but Maeve Kelly allows Maura to drive the narration with as much abandon as she does her car. Repeatedly, her thoughts are given direct expression, and, as we can see, they are never less than vituperative. Reflecting further on her nephew and niece, and their conspicuously English given-names, Maura is allowed all the space she needs to think out loud:

‘It was incredible that her brother, the grandson of a Fenian, could have christened his children so ineptly. But then when you looked at his wife, nothing was incredible. The children whinged and wrangled all the way from the airport. “Don’t like this car. It’s old and dirty.” Little brats. I’d

love to whack their bottoms with a thorny cudgel. Her vicious desires surprised even herself.' [13-4]

There are a few things we can take away from this passage. Firstly, as confirmed throughout the story, the author, by affording her so much narrative space, seems clearly on Maura's side. This inevitably involves the reader in a sometimes-uncomfortable complicity in Maura's no-holes-barred expressions of contempt, as when directed toward the least culpable characters, the children. The other aspect brought in by Maura's comments on their names concerns the English-Irish issue, a millennium of blood-washed history and the inexorable anglicization of Ireland. Maura sees her brother, who lives and works in what she refers to, anachronistically, as British East Africa, with his English wife and their English-named children, as having assimilated all too readily to British ways. She bristles mightily against the casual anglicization of her own name, from Maura to the dreaded 'Morrie'. Readers not familiar with the various tensions associated with Irish-English relations may gain insight here into the depth of -bad- feeling the subject can give rise to. Maura lashes out, if silently:

'A Sheanin Ui Duibhir [the Gaelic form of her brother's name, Sean O'Dwyer, with a diminutive suffix *-in* thrown in for good measure], how much did you sell it for? / Next thing he'd be calling himself John Dwyer [note: with the Gaelic 'O' prefix excised].' [14]

Here she accuses her brother of 'selling' his Irish identity, in the sense of having betrayed his roots, speculating that he would noticeably anglicize his very name. Her frustration with him is all the more pronounced because of his ancestry, descended from a man who was a member of the nineteenth

century revolutionary organization that still resonates as a movement fiercely allied to the cause of militant Irish republicanism, the Fenians.⁴⁾

Maura's own adoption of Irish republicanism seems to derive from her simple awareness of history and of exploitative human systems like capitalism, as when, on the drive she notes the 'ancient Irish castle now in the hands of an ancient Irish-American hotelier'. Her politics seem natural and part of a wider awareness of the struggles of humans everywhere. While Maura, obliged -by her gender- to take care of their parents on the farm, has missed out on formal education, Sean -because of his gender- was given the best opportunities. And yet, she is by far the more enlightened. Describing Sean's African life, she recalls his casual racism:

'Every two years, during the past eight, Sean came home from British East Africa. Only now it wasn't B.E. Africa. There were new states, new names, new people. Not long down from the trees, Sean once said, emanating his aura of civilised behaviour. Maura's fury groped for words in defence of the dignity of man but her educational lack left her inarticulate and twice as angry.' [18]

This 'educational lack' and inarticulacy helps to further fuel Maura's internal monologue and unspoken expressions of rage. At one point, as though glad for the eloquence it provides, she even draws on fiery republican rhetoric to give extra voice to the long-held bitterness inside her:

'Oh Lord above send down a dove, with wings as sharp as razors, to cut the throats of those English dogs, who shot our brave Sinn Feiners.'

[15]

While Maura does seem to hold all things English in contempt, one suspects her anger has its source in bitter awareness of the unfairness of her situation, as a woman discriminated against by a patriarchal society -indeed, she's likely more upset with Ireland than England. Nevertheless, Maura is Irish, and she exploits her identity to the full. Taking a leaf out of Hamlet's playbook, she adopts a conspicuously Celtic antic behaviour, one designed to terrorize her charges:

‘She took fierce delight in the screech of brakes as she two-wheeled around the sharpest bends. She blew on the horn ferociously - clear the way everyone - Morrie the great is coming, watch out accursed world, the killer is on the rampage. She sang loudly and happily -

Is iomaí slí sin do bhíos ag daoine

Ag cruinniú pinghinne is ag déanamh stóir

The rowdy drinking song added to the terror of the drive.’ [22]⁵⁾

Whether or not the other occupants of the car could catch the intricacies of the Gaelic, Maura's singing of this ditty amplifies the effect of her dangerous driving, leading Sean, with his face contorted, and the car finally at rest, to gasp: ‘You're mad’ ‘I always knew you were crazy.’ Maura, however, is more interested in his wife Josie's reaction. Through her final actions, and the strategic singing of the Gaelic drinking song, Maura has played up the old English stereotype of the wild Irish, the image set in stone by nineteenth century magazines like *Punch*.⁶⁾ It is an ingenious re-employment, or re-weaponizing, of that derogatory legacy of colonial consciousness, by Maura, and of course by the author of the story. Yet, this is just the beginning of Maura's efforts to make them retreat from their plan to take up residence and proprietorship. She knows it will take time and cunning, but she has plenty

of both. She had tried to scare them with the idea that she would soon enter a convent, thereby obliging them to take care of the ailing mother, but Sean had an answer to that up his sleeve. The story ends with Maura thinking of her next plan, to focus exclusively on Sean's wife Josie. Maura has started the ball well and truly rolling, and she knows that Josie's social reserve is only skin deep:

‘Scratch the veneer ever so slightly and underneath is the same old feline ready to claw to survive. How would she survive on Lough an Eala? She smiled, picturing the crumbling of that polished façade. Sean’s banana skin wouldn’t stand up to much either. She had them.’
[21]

‘Journey Home’ finishes with a lot yet for Maura to do, but that is the beauty of the short story form and a testament to Maeve Kelly’s use of that form to engender so much interest in the person at the centre of the story and the background which gives rise to the drama. Critic Marie Kane’s comments are apt here, as she reveals her insight into Maeve Kelly’s careful and mature approach:

‘All of Maeve Kelly’s heroines have this resilience, this determination to fight to the end. They reflect a gradual change in the position of women in Irish society – a slow change. After all, she is truthful in that she does not show the victory won but the start of the serious struggle.’⁷⁾

That ‘change in the position of women’ brings us back to the activism of Maeve Kelly. It is the 1970s when Maeve Kelly began writing and, also, when she began her activism for the rights of women. Most of the stories

from *Orange Horses* were written in the 1970s as she was getting to grips with the problems faced by women in a country which had not developed beyond the statutes of 1937, as a recent critic, Ángela Rivera Izquierdo, summarizes conveniently in her recent article about Maeve Kelly:

‘The Church’s glorification of women’s domesticity permeated the legislation of the Irish Free State. The State intruded into private family life with the banning of divorce and artificial birth control, and consolidated the public image of Irish femininity as wife and mother in De Valera’s 1937 Constitution. Article 41.2.1 stated that “the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved”. Furthermore, the terms “wife” and “mother” were used interchangeably in Article 41.2.2, thus explicitly linking women to the domestic.’⁸⁾

Maeve Kelly, having abandoned nursing in England, due to illness, returned to her home country and slowly but surely came to discover the problems facing women on a daily basis, a process which led her to join the Irish Women’s movement. She co-founded the Limerick Federation of Women’s Organizations in 1974 and the Limerick Refuge for Battered Wives in 1978, known now as Adapt House. This decade was a true period of awakening for all people, men and women, in regard to women’s issues, but it was generally women who led the battle. Maeve Kelly is an integral part of that next stage in history, often called the ‘Second-wave’ of feminism, the first referring to early 20th century suffrage movements.⁹⁾ What is remarkable also is that the literature which she produced at that same time was not merely an unostentatious vehicle designed to act as a direct, untrammelled feminist battle cry, but rather a sophisticated response to a very complex problem.

‘Journey Home’ is part of that response. It is a story which could be enjoyed by anyone living anywhere because it puts the dramatic focus on elements which are universal: sibling rivalry, inter-family tensions, grand frustration with life and economic inequality, and humour, if of a wicked variety. Yet, for those who wish to look a little further, the story also says a great deal about the state of Ireland, and, in particular, addresses the more-wicked-than-the-humour issue of patrilineal inheritance in Ireland. The idea that the male heir of any given family is entitled to ownership of any given property in Ireland is not, or certainly was not, at the time when Maeve Kelly wrote ‘Journey Home’, queried by society. It is, or was, and likely continues to be, one of those unquestioned customs that are a part of any patriarchal system. This is the reason why Maura’s anger, bordering on venom, is ultimately acceptable, because she is actually giving vent to what should be, in a democratic society which favours equality, an abomination. As a recent writer on women and farming has stated:

‘There is nothing inevitable about the patrilineal line of inheritance, and indeed Arensberg and Kimball (1940) note that the system adopted in Ireland is only one of many systems that could have been adopted. Nor are systems of land transfer cast in stone... / ...Even in Ireland, the patrilineal system is relatively recent. Prior to the Great Hunger, land was subdivided between children, and impartible inheritance, or the passing on of the farm intact to one heir, was only instituted in the post-famine era (Connell, 1950; Kennedy, 1973).’¹⁰

Ironically, in the story, it is a woman, Sean and Maura’s mother, who proclaims that the farm should go to her son and not her daughter:

‘ “When I’m gone” – Mother had meant dead, of course – “the farm must go to Sean. It’s really his place, you know, dear. When he was only a little fellow before your father died, his grandfather put his hand on his head – he had lovely hair too, a mass of black curls, and he said, ‘This place is to be for this boy.’ I always respect the wishes of the dead.” ’ [17]

What this twist tells us, and what Maeve Kelly tells us, is that the discrimination against women in patriarchal Ireland is so ingrained that even the women are complicit with its workings. This aspect, perhaps more than any other, is what elevates Maeve Kelly’s writing from social complaint to literature of depth and worth: throughout her stories, she reveals that male chauvinism and patriarchy are not simply about violent men battering defenceless women, but about society’s attachment to the unquestioned values of an inequitable system, an attachment which can be traced to the behaviour and thinking of both men and women.¹¹⁾

In Ireland, the idea of dispossession usually refers to what resulted from English occupation and the plantations. It is an integral part of Irish consciousness and of Irish literature, but on the dispossession suffered by women due to customs like the one highlighted in ‘Journey Home’ there is much less written. Maeve Kelly’s ‘Journey Home’ is therefore a precious expression of outrage on a buried topic. Kelly returns to the issue later in the collection, in ‘The False God’, an exquisitely crafted piece which tells of the return of the male heir from residence in America and his re-acquaintance with his four remaining sisters. These sisters do not behave like Maura -they are friendly and accommodating. In fact, they are simply keeping their anger in check, anger at having been obliged to give up their aspirations in favour of their brother. They have no intention of letting him now take control of

the farm. The story ends with a revelation of the various horrors visited upon the family by the indirect actions of the brother. It is compelling, and also compelling testament to Maeve Kelly's literary breadth. Kelly is able to tell a story of great social import without it ever becoming a piece of simple didacticism -her stories contain enough universal elements to be of interest to any reader.

Interestingly -or is it 'inevitably'?- it is to another female, not male, writer that we must go for literary exposure of female dispossession in Ireland, Eavan Boland. Her poem 'Inheritance' encapsulates the essence of Maeve Kelly's story, and communicates the melancholy that underlines the outdated practice. I here paste in just the opening of the poem, which may act as an echo of Maeve Kelly's story, and as a fitting conclusion to this study.

I have been wondering
what I have to leave behind, to give my daughters.

No good offering the view
between here and Three Rock Mountain,
the blueness in the hours before rain, the long haze afterwards.
The ground I stood on was never really mine. It might not ever
be theirs.

Notes

- 1) See my latest study 'Reflections on Maeve Kelly, neglected Irish writer, and the reception of her work -in particular *Orange Horses*', in *The Bulletin of Tsurumi University, Studies in Foreign Languages and Literature*, No.56 (2019).
- 2) See 'A "New Irish Woman" Emerges: Subverting Femininity in Maeve Kelly's "A

Life of her Own" ', Ángela Rivera Izquierdo, *Estudios Irlandeses*, Number 12, 2017, pp.104–114, quote from p.106.

- 3) I am indebted to Toshio Ikegami, who introduced this old Joycean to contemporary Irish female writers, in particular Claire Keegan and Maeve Kelly.
- 4) See *The Encyclopedia of Ireland*, ed. Brian Lalor, Gill & Macmillan (2003), pp.382–383 for a brief summary of Fenian history.
- 5) Below see the opening verse of the song, entitled 'Preab San Ól', followed by English translation. It was famously sung by The Dubliners, and appears on their eponymously named album:

Is iomaí slí sin do bhíos ag daoine
Ag cruinniú píosaí is ag déanamh stóir
'S a laghad a smaoiníos ar ghiorra a' tsaoil seo
Go mbeidh siad sínte faoi leac go fóill
Más tiarna tíre, diúc no rí thú
Ní cuirfear pingin leat 's tú 'dul faoin bhfód
Mar sin is dá bhrí sin, níl beart níos críonna
Ná bheith go síoraí ag cur preab san ól

Why spend your leisure bereft of pleasure?
Amassing treasure, why scrape and save?
Why look so canny at every penny?
You'll take no money within the grave.
Landlords and gentry with all their plently
Must still go empty where e'er they're bound.
So, to my thinking we'd best be drinking,
Our glasses clinking and round and round.

- 6) For a useful book on the topic, see *The Eternal Paddy: Irish Identity and the British Press, 1798–1882*, Michael de Nie, University of Wisconsin Press (2004).
- 7) 'Maeve Kelly and new Irish women writing', Marie Kane, *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 5, Issue 5, 1982, pp.393–400, quote from p.399.

- 8) Izquierdo (2017), p.105.
- 9) See *Encyclopedia of Ireland* (2003), entry on the Women's Movement, pp.1150–1151.
- 10) *Women and Farming: Property and Power*, Sally Shortall, Palgrave Macmillan, (1999), quote from p.30.
- 11) Kelly envisions in her various fictions a people enslaved to unquestioned principles: her critique is never simply a revelation of male violence in the domestic sphere but an exposure of a society-wide mind-set which engenders such behaviour. In her 1985 novel *Necessary Treasons*, (I used the 1991 Blackstaff Press edition) the female doctor Eleanor reflects on her daily clinics in which she treats mostly women, women who suffer from domestic abuse:

‘Her surgery seemed to have more than its usual quota of women complaining of depression. Stories of despair, frustration, lack of love abounded. Her patients lived with people who did not love them and who would not be loved. Ungrateful children, selfish husbands had ruined and laid waste their lives. They were trapped in an endless round of drudgery.’ p.120

This could be a portrait of many of the women who people the narratives of Joyce's *Dubliners*. It certainly recalls the Joycean notion of ‘paralysis’ and ‘hemiplegia’, as applied to the people in his stories.

Primary texts

- ‘Inheritance’ can be found in Eavan Boland's *Domestic Violence*, 2007, Carcanet Press.
- ‘Journey Home’ is the second story in Maeve Kelly's *Orange Horses*, Tramp Press, 2016, pp.13–23.