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“Making History”:
“The News from Ireland”

BY MARY FITZGERALD-HOYT

THE NEWS FROM IRELAND” (1986), Trevor’s brilliant story of the Potato Famine, reflects the author’s preoccupation with history’s impact on individual lives, a preoccupation earlier manifested in Fools of Fortune and such stories of the Troubles as “Attracta,” “Beyond the Pale,” “The Distant Past,” and “Autumn Sunshine.” But “The News from Ireland” signals a shift in Trevor’s historical stance, for in this story he concerns himself, like playwright Brian Friel, with “making history.” Whereas in much of his earlier fiction, as Christensen and Pihl have noted, “… the lives of his protagonists are determined by what took place in the past” (207), in “The News from Ireland” the protagonists are not universally caught in the grasp of inexorable historical forces beyond their control; rather, their attitudes and choices shape the course of Irish history.

“The News from Ireland” must have been percolating in Trevor’s imagination as he was writing the nonfiction A Writer’s Ireland: Landscape in Literature (1984), an illustrated “writer’s journey, a tour of places which other writers have felt affection for also, or have known excitement or alarm in” (8). Filled with quotations from writers inspired by Irish landscape—too much so, in fact, for Trevor seems tentative, his own reflections often unvoiced—A Writer’s Ireland nevertheless reveals some of Trevor’s sources for what may be his finest piece of fiction.

Echoes of the story’s title appear in a passage quoted from John J. O’Meara’s translation of Giraldus Cambrensis’s twelfth-century Topographia Hibernica (History and Topography of Ireland). Having declared Ireland reptile-free (and he numbers toads, frogs, and scorpions among the reptiles), Giraldus nevertheless notes the appearance of an ominous frog in Waterford and quotes King Duvenadalus of Ossory’s sorrowful reaction: “That reptile brings very bad news to Ireland” (154). In Trevor’s story, the news from Ireland is decidedly bleak: the Potato Famine and the inadequate relief of the suffering wrought by it are but the latest disasters in a country where centuries of invasion and oppression have taken their toll.

Further, in one of the few instances in A Writer’s Ireland where Trevor asserts his own voice, he expresses the historical viewpoint of “The News from Ireland.” Asserting that Ireland had no parallel for the burgeoning of the novel in Victorian England, Trevor comments:
Victorian England was like a great mahogany edifice, enriched with curlicues and secret places, with frills and antimacassars to hide what was best not seen. All the time in the world was at the disposal of the people at the hub of Victoria’s empire, bolstered by as much confidence as the ruling classes could comfortably sustain. It was the perfect hierarchical environment for long afternoons of cricket, for keeping up the eighteenth-century gardens that were decaying in Ireland, for writing and reading the novels that were edifices in themselves. Ireland, compared, lay in fragments, a battleground for seven centuries, a provincial wilderness beyond the pale of Dublin and the life of the big country houses, sick at heart and with half of its population starving. (104)

“The News from Ireland” dissects a sick society in miniature, focusing on one family’s embodiment of Anglo-Irish relations.

In a story that powerfully evokes the Famine’s cataclysm, Trevor keeps the starving Irish offstage and focuses instead on the denizens of a Big House. Using multiple points of view—the Pulvertaft family, their newly arrived English governor, their estate manager, and their butler—Trevor provides a chilling account of how ignorance, bigotry, and inequality generate disaster.

The Pulvertafts, whose name sounds uncomfortably like “pulverize,” are unintentional evildoers. Having inherited a grand estate in Ireland, Mr. Pulvertaft convinces himself that his presence will prove beneficial to the Irish. As his wife tells governess Anna Maria Heddoe, “...had we remained in Ipswich these many acres would have continued to lose heart. There have been Pulvertafts here, you know, since Queen Elizabeth granted them the land” (“News” 884). Unconvinced by this avowal of selflessness, Heddoe shrewdly thinks to herself that “when Mr Pulvertaft first looked upon drawings of the house and gardens his unexpected inheritance must have seemed like a gift from heaven ...” (884).

The Pulvertafts respond to the Famine with a mixture of benevolence, ignorance, and indifference. Believing himself to be acting charitably, Pulvertaft employs the starving to construct a road around the estate. In fact, such “famine roads” were an attempt designed by the British government to enable the hungry to earn sustenance, usually by laboring on public works projects. But as Cormac Ó Gráda has noted, after October 1846 “… landlords were allowed to sponsor works that would improve their properties, provided they accepted responsibility for all the charges incurred” (54). In fact, then, Pulvertaft is incurring considerable expense because he misguidedly believes that the best way to help the hungry is to give them employment—employment that matches severely weakened workers and hard physical labor.

In reality, the roadbuilding scheme was ill-conceived, for the workers’ wages did not allow them “to command subsistence at prevailing prices” (Ó Gráda 54). James Donnelly agrees that “… too many earned too little to enable them to ward off starvation and disease” (302). As Eavan Boland has written so movingly in “That the Science of Cartography Is Limited,” the enterprise was profoundly tragic: starving workers died building unfinished roads; the people vanished from history; the roads were never mapped:
Trevor makes it clear that Pulvertaft’s attempted benevolence is both shortsighted and ineffectual. The futility of the road is symbolically reflected in its circularity. Commenting that when the road is completed it will enhance the aesthetic value of the estate, Pulvertaft complacently observes:

“Now, what could be nicer ... than a picnic of lunch by the lake, then a drive through the silver birches, another pause by the abbey, continuing by the river for a mile, and home by Bright Purple Hill? This road, Miss Heddoe, has become my pride.” (884)

Congratulating himself on his charity and believing that later generations will remember him for the road—a belief laden with irony, for the road will eventually be overgrown and the roadbuilding project bitterly resented for in effect denying charity to the suffering—he fails to see, as even his hardbitten estate manager does, that the workers are too physically debilitated to lift heavy boulders or, as his butler, Fogarty, observes to Miss Heddoe, that this road “‘that leads nowhere...only insults the pride of the men who built it ... ’” (903). Having been assured by the Distress Board that he has relieved the suffering, he sees no irony in his placid observation, in noting how many of the surviving Irish are emigrating to America, that “‘At least...there is somewhere for them to go’” (901).

Mrs. Pulvertaft’s conscience is less untroubled, though her anxiety manifests itself primarily in dreams. Her contribution to the relief effort is her distribution of soup to the hungry, and she accepts the word of male authority—her husband, her minister, and the British government—that nothing more can be done.

It is nobody’s fault, Mrs Pulvertaft reflects, that for the second season the potatoes have rotted in the ground. No one can be blamed. It is a horror that so many bloated, poisoned bodies are piled into the shared graves. But what more can be done than is already being done? Soup is given away in the yard of the gate-lodge; the estate road gives work; the Distress Board is greatly pleased. Just and sensible laws prevent the wholesale distribution of corn, for to flood the country with corn would have consequences as disastrous as the hunger itself; that has been explained to her. (594)

In her waking life Mrs. Pulvertaft accepts Reverend Poole’s belief that the Famine is a sign of God’s wrath, her husband’s self-congratulatory conviction that the road is beneficial, her government’s assurance that famine relief is adequate and that to do more would destroy the English economy. But Mrs.
Pulvertaft’s dreams belie her waking life. She dreams of running naked on the seashore freed from the constraints of Victorian social convention. In another telling dream Reverend Poole exhorts the congregation to wash the feet of Jesus, and, believing that Jesus is one of the Irish road workers, Mrs. Pulvertaft approaches the work crew, only to be rejected.

The Pulvertaft children, whose futures are the abiding concern of Mrs. Pulvertaft’s life, remain largely untouched by the Famine. Charlotte, pretty and superficial, resigns herself to marrying an Anglo-Irish soldier, naively reflecting that “it probably will be nice, knowing devotion like this for ever” (899). Adelaide, whose plainness deems her unmarriageable in the eyes of her family, remains oblivious to the Famine, consumed as she is with unrequited love for her sister’s fiance. Emily, whose restlessness to travel seems in part rooted in her reluctance to assume her expected social role as a husband’s wife or a brother’s dependent, does in fact love Ireland, albeit a romanticized image of the country. Enamored of the monastic ruins on the Pulvertaft estate, Emily idealizes Ireland’s past and ignores its terrible present. Fogarty asserts to Miss Heddoe that Emily has become indifferent:

‘Emily would linger down by the old abbey, knowing that the men who lie dead there have never been dispossessed by all the visitors and the strangers there have been since. But now the old abbey is a lady’s folly, a pretty ruin that pleases and amuses.’ (904)

However, Trevor provides no evidence that Emily has in fact undergone any such transformation.

Among the siblings, only George Arthur, the youngest and as only son the heir to the estate, thinks about the Famine. George Arthur’s name is historically suggestive: as Kristin Morrison has noted, he

... is christened for the two chief heroes of England, both powerful in battle (Saint George, dragon slayer, declared Protector of the Kingdom of England by Pope Benedict XIV in the Middle Ages, and King Arthur, whose court provided the legendary material of the founding of Britain). (115)

Yet the names may also be weighted with colonial connotations, as Arthur was a hero of Celtic legend later refashioned to suit English national myth; George I a German whose foreignness rendered his accession to the English throne a source of resentment; George III the bête noire of the American colonists.

Though still a child, George Arthur slowly acknowledges that his dream of a military career must be sacrificed to his dual role as heir to the estate and protector of any unmarried sisters. George Arthur asks his governess whether the Irish “‘eat their babies, like in the South Seas,’” unconsciously invoking Swift’s “A Modest Proposal”—a connection that is surely deliberate, as Swift is mentioned several times within the story as having been a former visitor to the estate. The Anglo-Irish Dean seems to have been likewise a despoiling visitor, for family lore has it that he ordered the felling of elm trees to improve the view of the estate (895).
In *A Writer’s Ireland*, Trevor notes Swift’s passion for gardening, a passion that sometimes entailed a ruthless attitude toward nature, which Swift himself acknowledged in self-satirizing verse. Though Trevor admires the Dean’s mocking self-awareness, he also sees a colonial dimension to the felling of a thorn tree at Market Hill, Sir Arthur and Lady Acheson’s estate in County Armagh:

The felling of the thorn tree displays Swift’s purposeful, no-nonsense Protestantism in full confidence. Even though the spirit of Oisin had been effectively banished centuries ago, the old pagan superstitions which imbued natural phenomena still lingered. There would have been muttering indeed at Market Hill when the impatient Dean tidied away this magic growth, for the thorn, above all trees, belonged to the otherworld. (62-63)

Trevor emphasizes that the Pulvertafts, eight-year denizens of Ireland, “make allowances for the natives, they come to terms, they learn to live with things” (881). Seduced by a rich inheritance, lulled into complacency by their comfortable lives, the Pulvertafts have allowed their moral sensibilities to become blunted. Not inherently evil—as Fogarty puts it, “‘The wickedness here is not intentional!’” (904)—the Pulvertafts suffer from the serious sin of accidia. As postcolonial critics such as Ashis Nandy and Albert Memmi have commented, colonization is mutually destructive to both colonizer and colonized: “Colonization distorts relationships, destroys or petrifies institutions, and corrupts men, both colonizers and colonized” (Memmi 151).

Protestant and poor, Fogarty belongs neither to the privileged lives of the Anglo-Irish nor to the miserable existence of the impoverished Catholics. His role as outsider aligns him with Trevor himself, who has observed in his memoirs:

I was fortunate that my accident of birth actually placed me on the edge of things. I was born into a minority that all my life has seemed in danger of withering away. This was smalltime Protestant stock, far removed from the well-to-do Ascendancy of the recent past but without much of a place in de Valera’s new Catholic Ireland. (*Excursions in the Real World* xiii)

Fogarty could in fact be Trevor’s imaginary ancestor, for as he describes himself and his sister: “Poor Irish Protestants as they were, he and his sister belonged neither outside the estate gates with the people who had starved nor with a family as renowned as the Pulvertafts” (905).

Fogarty assumes the futile task of attempting to stop history. Observing the inequities between the Pulvertafts’s comfortable lives and the sufferings of their tenants, Fogarty clings to the ultimately disappointed hope that Miss Heddoe, troubled as she is by the horrors of the Famine, will speak up to their employers in a way that he cannot. Fogarty, who evinces an acute understanding of Irish history, wishes to halt the cycle of invasion and oppression, and believes that the newly arrived Heddoe will not succumb to their employers’ complacency.

Eccentric and, as Robert Rhodes has observed, “more than a little sinister, moving always in secrecy and penetrating the secrets of others while husbanding his own” (40), Fogarty becomes obsessed with Heddoe, secretly reading
her diary and letters, unrealistically placing upon her the burden of enlightening the Pulvertafts and in effect changing the course of Irish history.

In Anna Maria Heddoe, Trevor provides a sensitive portrait of that most distressful of Victorian women, the governess. Lonely, bewildered by her employers’ limited sympathy for the suffering Irish, Heddoe pours into her diary her private incomprehension and anxiety. Fogarty rightly assumes that she is still capable of being shocked by injustice, exercised by suffering, as her employers are no longer capable of being. When Fogarty relates that a poor family’s child has been marked with stigmata, the governess is shocked at the Pulvertafts’s assumption that the wounds have been inflicted by the parents, and confides to her diary, “I wept before I went to bed. I wept again when I lay there, hating more than ever the place I am in, where people are driven back to savagery” (897).

The stigmatized child, of whom Kristín Morrison has asserted, “... the child is clearly an emblem of the peasantry itself, crucified by the ascendancy, the poor crucified by the rich” (12), in fact illustrates the gulf between Heddoe and her employers. When Fogarty first informs the governess of the child’s existence, she is willing to accept a miraculous explanation and cannot understand why the Pulvertafts have made no mention of the event. Unintentionally ironic, she wonders why such an astounding occurrence does not find its way into the family conversation:

It seemed so strange and so remarkable, an occurrence of such import and magnitude, that I would hardly have believed it possible that any conversation could have taken place in the house without some astonished reference to it. (885)

When Fogarty later assures her that he and the Pulvertafts have concluded that the wounds were inflicted by the parents, Heddoe is horrified. Fogarty’s own anti-Catholic bias leads him to assert that the child’s wounds were a hoax fostered by a drunken priest—“‘They’re as wily as cockroaches, these old priests ... ’” (896). Heddoe for her part wants to believe in a miraculous explanation: “‘Surely it could have been real, truly there, as stigmata have occurred in the past?’” (897). But Fogarty’s response silences and shocks her: the family in question had already suffered the deaths of seven children and four grandparents; only the parents and the baby remain alive. Fogarty shares with Heddoe his sister’s conviction that the wounds were inflicted in a desperate attempt to halt annihilation:

‘Didn’t they see an R I P all ready for them, and wouldn’t they be a holy family with the baby the way they’d made it, and wouldn’t they be sure of preservation because of it?’ (897)

After the baby dies, Heddoe is tormented by her imaginings of the family’s suffering as well as the Pulvertafts’s reticence about the event.

Yet sensitive and sympathetic as she is, Anna Maria Heddoe cannot realize Fogarty’s hopes that the cycle of invasion and usurpation can be broken in Ireland. She depends upon the Pulvertafts for her livelihood and has already compromised herself. When the family pretends that plain daughter Adelaide can compensate for her lack of beauty with her musical accomplishment,
Heddoe dishonestly praises the young woman’s clumsy piano playing. Further, she is inevitably conditioned by her English upbringing. She assumes that the Famine is a manifestation of God’s displeasure, and her God apparently views the English as His chosen people:

... I wonder—for I cannot help it—what in His name these people have done to displease God so? It is true they have not been an easy people to govern; they have not abided by the laws which the rest of us must observe; their superstitious worship is a sin. But God is a forgiving God. I pray to understand His will. (900)

Heddoe also unwittingly perpetuates injustice, for responsible as she is for the education of George Arthur, the son and heir, she unquestioningly teaches him from a history text that rationalizes an earlier act of English aggression, the dissolution of the monasteries during the reign of Henry VIII.

Miss Heddoe’s complicity in the historical process is sealed when she decides to marry Erskine, the Pulvertafts’s callous estate manager, whose “temper is short, his disposition unsentimental, his soldier’s manner abrupt; nor is there, beneath that vigorous exterior, a gentler core” (891). He believes the Famine is “ill fortune,” just as his loss of an arm is the ill fortune that ended his military career. Distrustful of the Irish, contemptuous of his employer, who in his eyes is a “painless inheritor” who “takes too easily for granted the good fortune that came his way” (891), Erskine spares pity neither for himself nor for the roadworkers he supervises. By marrying him, Heddoe aligns herself with the Pulvertafts and other invaders.

Fogarty, using a painful Irish euphemism, notes that “Stranger and visitor, she has learnt to live with things” (906): as the estate manager’s wife, she will indeed become one of the “strangers” with a stake in maintaining the status quo. She, like the Pulvertafts, has been seduced by comfort. Though she does not love Erskine, marrying him will elevate her social status. She will be mistress of her own house, not a lonely governess. And considering her continuing economic dependence on the Pulvertafts—for, after all, they employ Erskine—it is unlikely that the sentiments of dismay and incomprehension that fill her diary will ever find their way to the family’s ears.

In “The News from Ireland,” those who suffer the ravages of hunger and disease are kept at a distance. Though we hear the rumors of the stigmatized child and are made privy to Mrs. Pulvertaft’s dreams and Miss Heddoe’s diary entries, both haunted by the faces of the starving women who come to the estate seeking food, to a large extent we are as insulated as the Pulvertafts from the physical horrors of the Famine. Instead, Trevor uses hunger as a metaphor to depict the disastrous Potato Famine not as a “tragic ecological accident” (Ó Gráda 76), not as an English act of genocide, but rather as a profound failure of the human community.

Just as physical starvation plagues the Irish poor, emotional hunger gnaws beneath the placid surface of the Pulvertaft household. Notably absent from the genteel conversation of the drawing room is any mention of Adelaide’s unhappiness, Emily’s frustration at women’s limited opportunities, Charlotte’s resignation to marriage, George Arthur’s disappointed hopes. Mrs. Pulvertaft keeps
her unhappy dreams to herself; Erskine conceals his wounded pride beneath a gruff exterior; Miss Heddoe confides her heartache only to her diary.

Ironically, these emotionally hungry characters lack nothing in the way of physical nourishment. As Robert Rhodes has noted, “Trevor ironically limns starvation without by repletion within ...” (40). Fogarty dutifully passes chops and gravy at dinner; Mr. Pulveraft happily describes how the famine road will provide a scenic route for a picnic outing; champagne is served at Charlotte’s wedding; food is sufficiently plentiful that scraps are thrown to birds hungered by wintry weather.

In the midst of this plenty, however, linger signs that the well-nourished are ill at ease with their good fortune. While families starve on the estate, stout Mrs. Pulveraft suffers from daily bouts of indigestion. Though her overindulgence is a disturbing reminder of how removed the Anglo-Irish are from the grim realities of the Famine, the indigestion, which causes her to lie down for naps filled with unsettling dreams, is indicative of her uneasy conscience.

Similarly, Miss Heddoe does not fully enjoy the plentiful food reserved for the Pulveraft household. Her delicate stomach cannot tolerate the food prepared by Fogarty’s sister. What does not occur to her is the terrible waste she causes when Fogarty removes her uneaten food by disposing of it in the water closet.

Ultimately the starved bodies of the Irish and the hungry hearts of the Big House remain unassuaged. Decimated families, loveless marriages, disappointed hopes: these are the legacy of the Famine, and by the end of the story there are ominous hints of its consequences. Fogarty dreams of a future in which the Pulveraft dominion crumbles. Implying that “the descendants of the people who were hungry” will exact retribution, Fogarty foretells to Miss Heddoe the murder of George Arthur’s son and the family’s subsequent abandonment of the house, the overgrowing of the famine road. He also describes an arson fire at the estate manager’s house and the consequent deaths of the unspecified inhabitants. Surely this last has personal meaning for Heddoe: does Fogarty foretell her own death, the deaths of her husband and children? But Miss Heddoe, frightened and repelled by Fogarty’s disturbing confidences, rejects him.

Gregory Schirmer has argued that the “governing moral force” in Trevor’s fiction is “the tension between Forster’s ‘Only Connect’ and Eliot’s ‘I can connect/nothing with nothing’” (1): that is, “the complex vision of contemporary life generated by both an advocacy of Forster’s principle of compassion and connection and a counterpointing, realistic assessment of contemporary society as alienated and disconnected” (2). “The News from Ireland” shares Trevor’s earlier preoccupation with the failure of human relationships, the unassuaged yearning for companionship, as is evident in the lonely souls that inhabit the Pulveraft estate. Yet “The News from Ireland” also evinces the increasing separateness of Trevor’s Irish works from his fiction with English or other European settings, a growing preoccupation with Ireland’s colonial legacy. In Fogarty, the perceptive yet ultimately impotent butler, Trevor focuses his own complex vision of Ireland.
Unlike his employers, Fogarty is acutely aware of history and cognizant of the Famine will have profound and far-reaching consequences. Classifying the Pulvertafts with other past “visitors,” Fogarty wishes to stem the tide of invasion:

Fogarty is an educated man, and thinks of other visitors there have been: the Celts, whose ramshackle gypsy empire expired in this same landscape, St Patrick with his holy shamrock, the outrageous Vikings preceding the wily Normans, the adventurers of the Virgin Queen. His present employers arrived here also, eight years ago, in 1839… He does not dislike the Pulvertafts of Ipswich, he has nothing against them beyond the fact that they did not stay where they were. (881)

The passage is fraught with irony, as the “educated” Fogarty well knows, for the aforementioned “visitors” stayed, had a profound, often violent impact on Irish history, a fact that the ironic euphemisms “outrageous,” “wily,” and “adventurers” do not quite conceal. One cannot help but wonder how the Pulvertafts of Ipswich, who not only “did not stay where they were” but also became entrenched in Ireland, will be remembered in future generations.

Fogarty’s dearest wish is to see Ireland in the literal sense decolonized: he dreams of the estate’s decay “back into the clay it came from,” all signs of foreign occupation erased. Obsessed though he is with Miss Heddoe, he hopes she will leave Ireland, that her “sharp fresh eye,” having “needled out” the “wickedness” of dispossession, will compel her to refuse to “learn to live with things,” to refuse to become complicit in Ireland’s occupation and exploitation. For though his own eye is no longer “fresh,” it has “needled out” the Pulvertafts’ private thoughts, and having unscrupulously read Miss Heddoe’s letters and diary, he knows her most intimate thoughts as well. Asserting that he is “no humanitarian,” Fogarty calmly asserts that the place is full of “wickedness,” that the estate should have been left to decline, its fruit trees and game become the sustenance of the hungry: “The past would have withered away, miss. Instead of which it is the future that’s withering now” (904).

Despite Fogarty’s eccentricity and the reductiveness of his solution for Ireland’s ills, it is clear that Trevor invests him with a certain moral authority in the story. He is one of the “truth-tellers” (Gitzen), characters who frequently appear in Trevor’s fiction, and who bring to light uncomfortable truths, for which acts of honesty they are usually ignored or ostracized. Symbolically appropriate is Fogarty’s daily duty of lighting the household lamps, for he wishes to illuminate for his employers the injustice in which they are complicit. It is hard to accept Gregory Schirmer’s dismissal of Fogarty as “fanatical,” a “figure of alienation and disconnection” (146) who cannot accept the Pulvertafts, “no matter what their motives and what they do to try to relieve the suffering of their starving tenants” simply “because they are not Irish” (146).

But as with Trevor’s previous tellers of truth, Fogarty’s message is rejected, for when he confides in Miss Heddoe she accuses him of drunkenness and threatens to complain to Pulvertaft, despite the fact that the butler has voiced her own secret sentiments of shock and outrage at the treatment of the Irish. His earlier wish that Miss Heddoe would herself become a truth-teller is quashed and, realizing his inability to sway her, Fogarty resigns himself to silence. His prophetic dreams of dissolution and disaster as being the legacy of
the Pulvertafts—and by association Miss Heddoe and Erskine—are received about as kindly as prophecies usually are.

But Trevor gives truth and its telling a number of complicated spins in this story. The word “truth” appears frequently, and frequently couched in qualifying language. When Erskine asserts to Pulvertaft that the Irish workers “‘bite the hand that feeds them…. They’re reared on it’” (892), we are told that “‘It is the truth as he recognizes it’” (892). Fogarty’s perception that the Pulvertafts’s “fresh, decent blood is the blood of the invader though they are not themselves invaders, that they perpetrate theft without being thieves” (881) is “the truth as it appears to him” (890). When he later shocks the governess by asserting that the parents inflicted the stigmata on the child, he notes that “‘My sister and I only decided that that was the truth of it’” (896) when the Catholic Church, an institution that excites the Fogartys’s deep-seated prejudices, becomes interested in the phenomenon.

Ironically, Miss Heddoe, who by the end of the story has compromised her convictions and refused to tell her version of the truth, writes in one of her earliest diary entries that when Mrs. Pulvertaft expressed the desire that her family and the governess become better acquainted, “I felt, to tell the truth, that I knew the Pulvertafts fairly well already” (884). Significantly, when Fogarty thinks of his cherished fantasy that Miss Heddoe will alert the Pulvertafts to their errors, the word “truth” is free from qualifying adjectives: “She will stand in the drawing-room or the hall, smacking out the truth at them, putting in a nutshell all that must be said” (887).

More insistently ironic are the circumstances surrounding Miss Heddoe’s telling Fogarty the Legend of the True Cross. She is reminded of the story by Fogarty’s description of the stigmatized child, and the Protestant governness, unlike Fogarty and his sister, is willing to believe that miraculous events can happen, that they are not merely the spawn of superstitious Catholic imaginations. When Fogarty relates the story, astonishing the Catholic maids and offending his sister, the mention of “truth” and “true” is frequent—and slippery. Cready, a Catholic servant, cries out, “‘Is it true, Mr Fogarty?’” (890), and she is told “‘It’s a legend…. It illustrates the truth. It does not tell it, Miss Fogarty and myself would say. Your own religion might take it differently’” (890). He implies that Miss Heddoe sees nothing amiss in the story because she has been in Ireland only a short time, whereas “old Hugh Pulvertaft,” the present family’s predecessor, would find such a story objectionable (presumably because it smacks of Catholic superstition) and that “the present Pulvertafts have been long enough away from England to consider it unsuitable also. He’d guess they have anyway; he’d consider that true” (890). He later replies to his sister’s disapproval of his telling the story, “‘To tell the truth, you could have knocked me down when she told me in the nursery’” (890).

In a household where “true” and “truth” are so frequently used, painful truths are, ironically, avoided, explained away, or ignored. As Kristin
Morrison states flatly, “The story is in fact full of lies...” (12). Pulvertaft’s assertion that plain daughter Adelaide is an accomplished musician is a falsehood in which Miss Heddoe is complicit; Pulvertaft convinces himself that he is not a usurper of Irish land but rather a benevolent caretaker; Mrs. Pulvertaft persuades herself that the inadequate relief effort is justifiable; Emily rationalizes an expensive European tour that is in fact an avoidance of the constrained life of a Victorian woman. The most disturbing evasion of truth is practiced by Miss Heddoe herself, who finally barters her shocked sympathy for the Irish for the dubious prospect of marriage to Erskine. Even when the estate manager first shows interest in her, Heddoe compromises her beliefs: in reply to his inquiry about how she likes living with the Pulvertafts, Heddoe smiles and nods, “... for to have said that I did not care for this place would have seemed ill-mannered and offensive. Mr Erskine, after all, is part of it” (901). Miss Heddoe wishes to be courteous, but her behavior may also be influenced by her dawning awareness that it will not do to offend a prospective husband. Yet Trevor’s deliberately ambiguous reference to Erskine’s being “part of it” underlines the depth of Heddoe’s moral compromise, for though Erskine as estate manager is indeed “part of” the Pulvertaft estate, in his anti-Irish bigotry and callous attitude toward the starving workers he supervises he is “part of” the evil that besets Ireland; in marrying him, Miss Heddoe will become “part of it” as well.

Perceiving painful truths and telling them are usually mutually exclusive in this story. Fogarty and Heddoe, the two most perceptive characters, are, respectively, silenced and silent, their private news from Ireland buried. Robert Rhodes wonders, “... why would Fogarty the butler in ‘News’ not tell all that he might and why does Anna Maria Heddoe abort the search for the truth?” (49); yet considering the characters’ circumstances, is their silence so surprising? Fogarty and Heddoe are servants whose livelihood depends on the goodwill of the Pulvertafts. As a governess, Heddoe occupies a place socially superior to Fogarty, but she is still essentially powerless. Were she to “smack out” her private beliefs about the Pulvertafts’ moral lapses in the face of the Famine, she would just as surely be dismissed as would Fogarty for similar behavior. Ultimately Heddoe’s choice of learning “to live with things” necessitates that she “abort her search for the truth”: though marriage to Erskine will elevate her socially, Heddoe is still confined by her status as a Victorian woman. Distancing herself from the suffering Irish may be an act of psychological survival; further, it is likely that her future husband, a forceful, narrow-minded man who dislikes the Irish, “intends to permit” as little “nonsense” from a woman as he would from the roadworkers he distrusts. One can hardly imagine that Erskine would encourage Heddoe’s sympathy for the Irish.

With Heddoe’s defection, Fogarty is left alone with his conviction that “There is wickedness here ...” (903), and his assertion is difficult to refute. Beneath the genteel benevolence of the Pulvertaft estate lie starvation, dishonesty, usurpation of land and power, exploitation of the powerless, and a host of
other evils. In his religious bigotry and invasion of the governess’s privacy, Fogarty is indeed a flawed prophet, but he is a shrewd seer of the news from Ireland—past, present, and future—nonetheless.

Indeed, Fogarty’s character marks a turning point in Trevor’s Irish fiction, an increasing concern with Ireland’s colonial legacy. Though in his earlier works dealing with Irish political violence and colonial oppression Trevor clearly connects injustice and violence and emphasizes both violence’s contagion and its futility, in “The News from Ireland” he plumbs Ireland’s past more deeply, couching individual lives in the more far-reaching realm of historical allegory.

The story’s title is itself indicative of Trevor’s scope: he will undertake to convey the news from Ireland, not simply the news from a lonely governess or a brooding butler or a well-meaning but ignorant Anglo-Irish family. Unlike many contemporary writers, Trevor frequently employs omniscient narrative, a particularly effective strategy here, for not only does it reveal to us the complex, alienated lives of the characters, it highlights the profundity of Ireland’s plight by exposing the timidity, ineffectuality, ignorance, and even bigotry of those possessing some power to render the news less dire.

The indeterminate setting of the story also encourages a symbolic reading. Trevor, who in other works reveals a delight in Irish placenames and their meanings recalling the dinnsheanchas tradition in early Irish literature and shared by such contemporary writers as Seamus Heaney and Brian Friel, is markedly silent about the Pulvertaft estate’s locale. In fact, the only mention of a specific geographical location is that Charlotte’s fiance, Captain Coleborne, is from a family “established for generations in Meath” (893). Similarly, the Pulvertaft estate, unlike other Big Houses in life and literature, including Trevor’s own works, has no name.

This deliberate ambiguity would seem to suggest that the story’s news is indeed from Ireland, not from a single estate or a single Anglo-Irish family. Even the color scheme of the Pulvertafts’ drawing room—white, green, and apricot—prefigures the tricolor Irish flag and the politically fragmented island it represents.

Furthermore, Trevor’s frequent references to history urge us to place the story in a larger context. Fogarty, who shares his author’s interest in history, connects the Pulvertafts to the earlier invaders of Ireland—Celts, Normans, Vikings, et al., concluding that “He does not dislike the Pulvertafts of Ipswich, he has nothing against them beyond the fact that they did not stay where they were” (881). He does not wish to see history repeat itself, no matter how well-meaning the invaders.

Miss Heddoe observes that “... families and events are often seen historically in Ireland—more so, for some reason, than in England” (884). Surely this is as devastating a bit of irony as Mrs. Pulvertaft’s rueful reflection that she cannot comprehend Emily’s desire to visit France, Austria, and Italy, those “dangerous places where war is waged when offence is taken. Only England is not like that: dear, safe, uncomplicated England” (893). Miss
Heddoe fails to see, as Fogarty does, the continuum of Irish history and England’s far from benevolent role in it; the butler implies that the Irish cannot ignore history because they are constantly being reminded of how it repeats itself. It does not occur to the xenophobic Mrs. Pulvertaft, as it does to Fogarty, that “offence is taken” in Ireland as well, offense that carries its own resultant violence, and that her family bears part of the responsibility.

In “The News from Ireland,” Trevor evinces his growing concern with, to borrow John Wilson Foster’s term, “colonial consequences.” Pulvertaft, an inherently kindly man, allows himself to be seduced by his inheritance of an Irish estate, burying the issue of ownership and usurpation beneath a “white man’s burden” attitude toward the Irish. If one can insulate oneself from the horrors of the Famine—and Rhodes has noted how Trevor’s use of walls, shutters, and other devices symbolizes the family’s detachment from the suffering without (“Secrets” 39)—life on the Pulvertaft estate can be quite pleasant, with plentiful food, scenic rides, an elegant household. Plied with such temptations, it is perhaps not surprising that the Pulvertafts, like so many other colonials, let “surprise and dismay fade from their faces” (880); “They make allowances for the natives, they come to terms, they learn to live with things” (880).

Bewildered, frightened, and appalled as she initially is by her news from Ireland, Miss Heddoe also allows herself to be seduced: Erskine can offer her the companionship and financial security lacking in her life as a governess. She, too, as Fogarty observes, “has learnt to live with things”—one of the most tragic statements that Trevor has ever written. When she takes her place in Erskine’s house, its garden “reclaimed ... as the estate was reclaimed” (901), she will unintentionally conspire on a smaller scale in the Pulvertafts’s dispossession of the Irish.

Neither Miss Heddoe nor the Pulvertafts will fulfill Fogarty’s dearest wish by returning to England, nor does it seem that the coming generation will alter the course of Ireland’s history. Even as George Arthur, the Pulvertaft heir, is troubled by the question of whether or not the starving Irish eat their babies, as a child he already betrays the arrogance of the privileged: even as he questions Miss Heddoe about cannibalism, he imitates his father’s behavior by blocking the hearth with his body, thus appropriating the fire’s warmth for himself and selfishly leaving Miss Heddoe to suffer the cold: already the master/servant roles have become entrenched in the boy’s behavior.

George Arthur’s dreams of a military career, thwarted by his duties as heir to the estate, reveal how even a child has internalized British colonial attitudes. He longs to go to India as a British soldier, a dream frequently assailed by his sister Emily’s assertions that India is a place of disease-bearing flies, polluted water, and uncomfortable barracks—besides, she reminds him, he has his responsibilities as heir. It is clear that neither one of them has ever been encouraged to question why the British army is in India at all, and the Indian people do not figure in the conversation: like the Irish, they have become tangential in their own country. Ultimately Trevor neither demonizes the
Pulvertafts nor suggests that they can single-handedly alter the course of Irish history. Yet by keeping the story’s locale indeterminate and by investing the prophetic Fogarty with his author’s own acute awareness of history and its consequences, Trevor renders in “The News from Ireland” an acute appraisal of the effects of England’s presence in Ireland: the colonials are not inherently evil but corrupted by power and susceptible to greed. Both the Pulvertafts and Anna Maria Heddoe become desensitized to the suffering around them because its horrors are almost as unbearable as acknowledging the ugly truth that they are complicit in them.

Since the 1970s, when escalating violence in Northern Ireland compelled Trevor to write about the Troubles, both past and present, the effect of history upon individual lives has been the author’s frequent preoccupation. But whereas in earlier fiction history seemed both inevitable and inexorable, doomed to repeat itself, in “The News from Ireland” Trevor catches history on the cusp, reveals it in the making. The choices that Miss Heddoe and the Pulvertafts make, however tragic, are not inevitable, and though the story’s ending is grim, “The News from Ireland” signals a new direction in Trevor’s depiction of Irish history. In The Silence in the Garden, the 1988 novel that is in effect a sequel to “The News from Ireland,” characters again make history-changing choices, again with tragic results. But in “Against the Odds,” from Trevor’s most recent collection, The Hill Bachelors, Trevor makes it clear that tragedy is not inevitable, that people can learn to trust, can choose peace.

Works Cited


