

Charles Lever: An Irish Writer in Italy

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Abstract:

Victorian Irish novelist Charles Lever spent much of his adult life living in Italy and in the partly Italian city of Trieste, serving as British Vice-Consul in La Spezia and later as Consul in Trieste. He used his experience and knowledge of Italy as the source for many articles and as raw material for the Italian sections of his novels. He is one of the most acute observers of Italian life at the time of the unification of Italy but his experience in *il bel paese* also played a key role in forming his views about the Ireland that continued to be the central interest of his fiction.

Keywords: Europe, Exile, Garibaldi, Ireland, Italy

It being now proved, I hope, to my readers' satisfaction,
that the bent of an Irishman is to go abroad.
(Lever 1845 [1843], 177)

In many ways Dubliner Charles Lever was a figure ahead of his time. As an Irish writer abroad, and a British Consul, living in Italy (mostly in Florence, Bagni di Lucca, and La Spezia, where he served as Vice-Consul from 1858), and later in the predominantly Italian-speaking Austro-Hungarian city of Trieste (for the final five years of his life), this ineluctably composite figure spent the greater part of his adult life “dislocated” in Europe, always negotiating between “home” and “away”, between “here” (mostly Dublin) and a sprawling, variegated European “elsewhere”. His middle years, prior to his settling in Italy and his taking up diplomatic positions there, were already spent in regular motion between Dublin and a variety of places on the continent, so much so that it is hard not to see his shadow behind the character of Peter Dalton who, in *The Daltons or Three Roads in Life* (1852) is said to have had “to drag out life in the cheap places of the Continent; and thus, for nigh twenty years, had he wandered about from Dieppe to Ostend, to Bruges, to Dusseldorf, to Coblenz, and so on, among the small Ducal cities ...” (Lever

1872a [1852], 24). In *The Dodd Family Abroad* (1854), Lever would again portray an Irish family seeking to economise by living on the Continent. Lever's own life was not dissimilar prior to his appointment as British Vice-Consul in La Spezia and later as Consul in Trieste, where he took over from Sir Richard Burton as "her majesty's flunkey" – his term – in the Adriatic city. Although he never stopped writing (producing over 30 novels and 5 volumes of essays), the final two decades of his life were spent in an almost perpetual state of disappointment, watching the Ireland he knew as a staunch Unionist slowly ebb away as Home Rule began to loom on the horizon. Similarly disappointing was his vain struggle to regain his earlier literary or popular success from the city that he so despised but which was his final home, Trieste.

As soon as he reached the Adriatic emporium to take up the sinecure secured for him by Lord Derby, he took an instant dislike to it, writing with what was by now characteristic self-pity and melodrama: "As to my new post—*keep the confession purely to yourself*—it is unpleasant, damnable. There is nothing to eat, nothing to drink, nothing to live in, no one to speak to. Liverpool, with Jews and blacklegs for gentlemen—*voilà tout*" (Downey 1906, II, 199). He declared himself "very down in the mouth about my move. I feel as might a vicar leaving a snug parsonage to become bishop in the Cannibal Islands" (*ibidem*).

Disinterested in his role as Consul, suffering from depression, gout, and heart disease, believing that he had been at best hard-done-by as a writer, it was almost as if he felt that he and his hopes had been devoured by the Adriatic city, while in reality he wrote some of his finest works there. He increasingly found his by now enforced exile an oppression and a cruelty as he suggested in an 1868 letter to his friend, John Blackwood:

As the Government are good Christians, and chasten those they love, they have made Hannay a consul! Less vindictive countries give four or five years' hard labour and have an end of it; but there is a rare malice in sending some poor devil of a literary man who loves the Garrick, and lobster salad, and small whist, and small flattery, to eke out existence in a dreary Continental town, without society or sympathy, playing patron all the while and saying, "We are not neglecting our men of letters." I'd rather be a dog and bark at the door of the Wyndham or the Alfred than spend this weariful life of exile I am sentenced to. (*Ibidem*, 224-225)

As he settled into Trieste his view only darkened, and he soon realised that what he called his "leap in the dark" had been a mistake, telling his friend, Burbidge:

Of all the dreary places it has been my fate to sojourn in, this is the very worst. There are not three people to be known; for myself, I do not know one. English are, of course, out of the question. Even as a novelist I could make nothing out of the stoker and engineer class. Then as for all the others, they are the men of oakum, hides,

tallow, and tobacco, who are, so far as I can guess, about on a par with fourth-rate shopkeepers in an English provincial town. The place is duller, the tone lower, the whole social atmosphere crasser and heavier than I could have believed possible in a town where the intelligence to make money exists so palpably. (*Ibidem*, 211-212)

Not surprisingly, Lever would refer only very sparsely to the city in his fiction, peremptorily referring to it in *The Boy of Norcott's* (1869) but preferring to describe the countryside that wound down the Istrian Coast from Trieste to Fiume (where he spent time, during one of his sporadic "changes of air" in order to relieve his depression). Even in this work of fiction, there is a sense of Lever's own alienation from his previous lives in the phrase "how essential it was to leave all my former habits behind me as I entered here" which almost seems to echo Dante's "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here!", the inscription at the entrance to the *Inferno*:

It was late at night when I reached Trieste, and I left it at daybreak. The small steamer in which I had taken my passage followed the coast line, calling at even the most insignificant little towns and villages, and winding its track through that myriad of islands which lie scattered along this strange shore. The quiet, old-world look of these quaint towns, the simple articles they dealt in, the strange dress, and the stranger sounds of the language of these people, all told me into what a new life I had just set foot, and how essential it was to leave all my former habits behind me as I entered here. (Lever 1869, 126)

The vision of Fiume (which, somewhat paradoxically, resembles Trieste quite closely and which was populated by a similarly cosmopolitan mix), lifts the spirits enormously, bringing on thoughts of "Paradise" in a passage which illustrates well Lever's gift for scenic description:

The sun had just gone below the sea, as we rounded the great promontory of the north and entered the bay of Fiume. Scarcely had we passed in, than the channel seemed to close behind us, and we were moving along over what looked like a magnificent lake bounded on every side by lofty mountains "for the islands of the bay are so placed that they conceal the openings to the Adriatic. If the base of the great mountains was steeped in a blue, deep and mellow as the sea itself, their summits glowed in the carbuncle tints of the setting sun, and over these again long lines of cloud, golden and azure streaks, marked the sky, almost on fire, as it were, with the last parting salute of the glorious orb that was setting. It was not merely that I had never seen, but I could not have imagined such beauty of landscape, and as we swept quietly along nearer the shore, and I could mark the villas shrouded in the deep woods of chestnut and oak, and saw the olive and the cactus, with the orange and the oleander, bending their leafy branches over the blue water, I thought to myself, would not a life there be nearer Paradise than anything wealth and fortune could buy elsewhere? (*Ibidem*)

Despite himself and his litany of complaints, Lever also sporadically realised that Trieste allowed him peace and space for writing. At one point, after a brief working visit to London he announced that he was looking forward “with pleasure to the unbroken quiet of Trieste, in a different frame to heretofore. Indeed I doubt now (as regards a place to work in) I’d change it” (Stevenson 1939, 286). However, the death of his wife, Kate, in 1870 (his son, Charles had died in 1863 aged just 26) was a final crushing blow and put paid to his ever finding peace on the Adriatic. He did, however, soldier on to complete his final and probably finest novel, *Lord Kilgobbin*. But his preface (dated 20 January 1872) betrays all the unhappiness and sorrow of his final years:

To the memory of one whose companionship made the happiness of a long life, and whose loss has left me helpless, I dedicate this work, written in breaking health and broken spirits. The task, that once was my joy and my pride, I have lived to find associated with my sorrow: it is not, then, without a cause I say, I hope this effort may be my last. (Lever 1872c, n.p.)

Once *Lord Kilgobbin* was written – initially in instalments for *The Cornhill Magazine* – Lever died suddenly in his home at the Villa Gasteiger in Trieste on 1 June 1872. Not for nothing would Joyce tangentially allude to his predecessor’s fate in the city in *Finnegans Wake*, when he wrote, playing on the liver/Lever echo: “And trieste, ah trieste ate I my liver!” (FW, 301, 16).

It might all have been so different. Born into a comfortable middle-class Dublin background (he was the son of an immigrant English father and an Irish mother, Protestant Unionists, both), Lever enjoyed a brilliant start to his literary career following his graduation in medicine from Trinity (he also studied for a time in Göttingen). However, even before graduation he had itchy feet and took a position as a ship’s surgeon on board an emigrant ship bound for Canada where he remained for a period, even spending some time in the North American backwoods. In the years after College, he practised medicine first with the Clare Medical Board where he worked trying to stem a cholera epidemic, and later, in 1832, as a dispensary doctor in Portstewart in County Derry. This was followed by several longish spells in Europe, working as a medic and making his first forays into writing. But by the end of the thirties his writing career really began to take off. His early novels sold brilliantly and his earnings, by the mid 1840s, competed with those of Charles Dickens and exceeded those of all his other contemporaries, including his friend Thackeray. This made him the ideal candidate to take up the editorship of the *Dublin University Magazine* (following James McGlashan) in 1842. He rapidly boosted circulation to 4,000 copies, by toning down the *Magazine*’s Unionist line and by serialising his own novels there before publishing them in book form. He was on a £1,200 annual salary as editor and

this was comfortably topped up by royalties on his many big-selling novels, all of which allowed him to set up a fairly lavish home at Templeogue House, where he famously entertained Thackeray. But Lever had his enemies, many of whom disliked what they considered his stage-Irish writings and the frivolous nature of his novels. Samuel Ferguson was among his chief critics along with William Carleton, who accused him in the pages of the *Nation* of “selling us for pounds, shillings, and pence” (1843, 826). In 1845, Lever, tired of criticism from all sides, brought his editorship at the *Magazine* to an abrupt end. Worse still, he discovered that his Irish publisher, Curry, was on the verge of bankruptcy. With his Irish literary affairs suddenly in a precarious state, he moved back to the Continent setting up home initially in Brussels. But from 1846 on, Lever’s own commercial pull also began to flag. The more sombre and probing novels of the second half of his career evidently frustrated the expectations of his early readers who preferred the rollicking comedy of early works like *Harry Lorrequer* and *Charles O’Malley* (which, ironically, were the ones that ultimately undermined his critical reputation). 1846 was the year he published his eighth novel, *The Knight of Gwynne*, a work which, in John Sutherland’s words, “came to an end amid a general feeling of gloom and mortification” (1976, 164). Once enormously popular, now in the grim mid-century years of the Famine, Lever found himself complaining in a letter to Maria Edgeworth in 1847 “that anything Irish is an ungracious theme to English ears just now” (Downey 1906, I, 256-257), which suggests the extent to which Irish issues in general (however dramatic) and Irish novels in particular struggled in the midst and aftermath of the Famine to find a sympathetic ear in England (or Britain).

His letters in these years are overflowing with concern with Ireland and all things Irish. And Europe offered little at this time by way of solace. The conservative Lever was shocked by the tumultuous events on the Continent at the end of the decade, which he witnessed at first hand, having set up home, mostly in Florence, as Fitzpatrick colourfully describes in his lively but rather problematic and imprecise early biography:

Revolution shook Europe, and a vast change had come over that delicious dreamy Florence which had long made life there a luxury. In February, 1849, Lever describes: “The streets, once thronged with gay groups intent on pleasure, or hastening from gallery to gallery, now filled with beggars, whose demands too plainly evince that the tone of entreaty has given way to open menace. Burglaries and street robberies take place in open day, the utmost penalty of such offences being a few days, sometimes a few hours, imprisonment. Nor is the country better off than the town”. (1879, 270)

Little surprise, then, that Lever alternated between Florence and the more tranquil Bagni di Lucca, where his daughter, Sydney, his fourth and last child was born and which he liked because “it was picturesque and qui-

et, and not invaded by that miserably minded class of small English, which were the curse of Florence” (*ibidem*, 271). That said, he had little time for the Grand Duke himself, if the opinions proffered in Lever’s early *Nuts and Nutcrackers* can be taken to represent those of Lever himself. “What is a Grand Duke?”, Lever asks and answers: “Picture to yourself a very corpulent, moustached, and befrogged individual, who has a territory about the size of the Phoenix Park, and a city as big and as flourishing as the Blackrock; the expenses of his civil list are defrayed by a chalybeate spring, and the budget of his army by the license of a gambling house” (1845 [1843], 180-181). For all that Bagni di Lucca kept him away from the bustle and heat of Florence yet still at a good vantage point from which to observe the changing Italy. However, much though the events in Italy and in Europe interested him, like Joyce after him, Ireland remained Lever’s principal focus. But again like Joyce he never saw Ireland as a sealed or enclosed island impervious to the events of the outside world. Instead Lever’s Ireland was brought into focus through a European lens which allowed him to see it side by side with other countries, such as Italy, with which it had elements in common. As is clear from what he told Blackwood in 1866, he clearly believed that the distant vantage point brought clarity to his vision of Ireland: “I believe I have lived long enough *in* Ireland to know something of the country, and long enough *out* of it to have shaken off the prejudice and narrowness that attach to men who live at home” (Downey 1906, II, 186). In a preface he wrote specifically for the 1872 edition of *The Martins of Cro’ Martin*, he describes the freedom he felt, decades earlier, in writing about Ireland from Florence:

As this strange drama unfolded itself before me, it had become a passion with me to watch the actors, and speculate on what they might do. For this, Florence offered an admirable stage. It was eminently cosmopolitan; and, in consequence, less under the influence of any distinct code of public opinion than any section of the several nationalities I might have found at home. (Lever 1872b, 1)

Again, like Joyce, in his writing Lever never stumbled into nostalgia in his home thoughts from abroad. He saw nothing tragic about Irish people going to live abroad in exile – although it should be said that he rarely worried too much about the fate of the masses of Irish peasants who sailed more in hope than expectation for Britain or the United States. His Irish diaspora was an unusual one, bound for London or better, if they could afford it, to a European city, sometimes for careers in business or in the military, sometimes as artists. He suggested that “of all people, none are so naturally absentees as the Irish” and, half in jest, whole in earnest, saw this in a positive light:

[...] it would seem that one great feature of our patriotism consists in the desire to display, in other lands, the ardent attachment we bear our own. How can we

tell Frenchmen, Italians, Germans, Russians, Swedes, and Swiss, how devoted we are to the country of our birth, if we do not go abroad to do so? How can we shed tears as exiles, unless we become so? How can we rail about the wrongs of Ireland and English tyranny, if we do not go among people, who, being perfectly ignorant of both, may chance to believe us? (Lever 1845 [1843], 177)

Turning the usual emigrant story inside-out in what is a characteristic and almost Swiftian provocation, Lever claims that it is poverty that keeps the Irish at home; the wealthier they are, the further they will travel with inevitably damage to the home economy. He also notes that the Irish buy homemade products only when “we cannot afford English”:

So it is exactly with absenteeism; it is only poverty that checks it. The man with five pounds in this pocket starts to spend it in England; make it *ten*, and he goes to Paris; *fifteen*, and he’s up the Rhine; *twenty*, and Constantinople is not far enough for him! Whereas, if the sum of his wealth had been a matter of shillings, he’d have been satisfied with a trip to Kingstown, a chop at Jude’s, a place in the pit, and a penny to the repeal fund; all of which would redound to his patriotism, and the prosperity of Ireland. (*Ibidem*, 178)

When writing this, Lever was still living in Dublin and he enjoyed poking fun at other prominent Irish figures abroad who praised Ireland – from a distance – including Thomas Moore. In a review of *The Popular Songs of Ireland* by T. Crofton Croker (“a pleasant bit of a leprechaun”), he writes, in a tone of divilment worthy of Myles na Gopaleen: “One expends every epithet for the language to represent our country as a kind of Elysium upon earth and the other, like our great national poet, pronounces Ireland a beautiful country to live out of” (Lever 1839a, 91). It was an error he would be careful to avoid in the future, trying always to be even-handed in his depictions of the country. Nor was he under any illusions as to the dominant reason that drove most Irish people abroad – economic need. In *The Daltons*, the Dalton family are portrayed as having travelled to Europe simply to try to make their dwindling resources stretch a little longer than they might have done had they stayed at home in Ireland. In portrayals like these, in a very real sense, Lever is the first Irish writer to convey the existence of an Irish diaspora in Europe. Stuck penniless in the Tyrol, Frank Dalton reaches out for help to his uncle, his father’s only brother “GRAF DALTON VON AUERSBERG, Lieut.-General and Feldzeugmeister, K.K.A” (Lever 1872a [1852], 22) not seen for 17 years but still, he hope, sufficiently part of the family to lend a hand and find him a place in the army. This and many other allusions to what the Citizen in *Ulysses* calls “our greater Ireland beyond the sea” (U 12.1364-12.1365) shows Lever’s sensitivity towards the sometimes successful, often vulnerable Irish exiles in Europe. But such concern would

do little for Lever's reputation where it mattered, that is, in Dublin or London. In fact, as Tony Bareham writes: "Lever became more European than his readership could well stomach, and having first reviled him for invoking the stage Irishman they then neglected him for his intelligent internationalism" (1991, 9). There is much truth in Bareham's contention that the "career of Charles Lever suggests very strongly a man striving to be at the centre of things, but constantly being impelled towards the periphery, a position of 'outsiderness'" (96) and he would pay a high price, among critics of his work, for his detachment on the outside (even if his pronounced Unionism also provided a good excuse for his work to be critically ignored or summarily dismissed down to our own times by many Irish critics). Ironically it was the gradual, cautious rethinking of his Unionist beliefs and his slow, mostly grudging acknowledgement of Irish Nationalist aspirations (read against a broad European backdrop of similar movements), coupled with his outsider status and the perspective that it offered him as a novelist of Ireland (and of the "greater Ireland" of the diaspora) that gave Lever's later novels much of their power but which, at the time, deprived him of his public:

[...] the objectivity born of Lever's geographical separation, which enabled him to offer fresh and dynamic views of Irish affairs, may have been responsible in part for an exclusion from the affections of a reading public which preferred to have its prejudices flattered. (Haddelsey 2000, 23)

Lever and his contemporaries were, in Chris Morash's words: "too Irish for an English canon but they were too English for an Irish canon, and, as a result, they fell somewhere into the Irish Sea – and that's where they've been floundering around ever since" (Morash quoted in Haddelsey 2000, 25). Perhaps it would be truer to say of Lever that he fell into the English channel – somewhere between the islands of Britain and Ireland and mainland Europe. All of which means that there is definite value in re-examining Lever's ongoing literary entanglement with the continent and looking at his relationship with Ireland through a European perspective. As Haddesley points out: "It was this self-imposed exile and his concomitant role as a Europeanised Irishman which made him almost unique in the nineteenth century" (23-24). More than anything else, in the later work, Lever attempts to break the binary English-Irish opposition by mapping Ireland and Irishness within a European context, reading Ireland through a European lens of connection and influence, and attempting to construct an Irish novel rich with continental connections. As Bareham writes:

Lever's attitude to the problems of Ireland grew steadily more sober and responsible. Unlike some of his immediate contemporaries however, he saw the struggle for Irish independence in a large European context. He was on dining terms with

Garibaldi and followed with close interest the movement for Italian Independence. Later he worked within the Austrian Empire at a time when the signs of disintegration were beginning to show. He was present, for instance, in his consular capacity at the funeral of the unfortunate Maximilian, late Emperor of Mexico. (1991, 9)

He anticipated the funeral to Blackwood, writing: “We are going to have a mournful spectacle here—the funeral reception of the poor Mexican Emperor’s remains. It will be, they say, very solemn and imposing” (Downey 1906, II, 204).

Most of the later works enjoyed scant popular or critical success but they are infinitely more innovative and experimental than the early work by this writer who never stopped attempting to reconfigure his country in fiction and managed to bring it into focus only by understanding it through a distant lens, a parallel vision which saw it through a series of comparisons with other European realities.

The opening story of Lever’s late work *Paul Gosslett’s Confessions* – which he originally published in Anthony Trollope’s *St Pauls Magazine* and then in book form in 1872 – deals with the problematics of writing about Italy as an outsider and, in a sense, casts back into the writer’s early years in the *bel paese*. It plays on stereotypes of Italian brigandry, backwardness, and deceit, but does so in a manner that actually paints the British visitor rather than the supposedly Italian villain in a negative light. The collection itself is an unusual hybrid composed of what can be loosely termed short stories but it also plays with the idea of confession – telling tales, confessing past misdemeanours, allowing the reader into secrets in a series of short narratives held together by the protagonist, Gosslett himself. He is the narrating voice in this volume which blends genres and even uses the diary form. Among other things, it tells tales of Gosslett’s adventures on behalf of the English Foreign Office. In the opening story “My First Mission under F.O.” Gosslett is sent among the brigands in Calabria to pay the ransom for the release of “the son of a wealthy baronet, a Wiltshire M.P., [who] has been captured and carried off by these rascals” (Lever 1868, 2). Gosslett’s contact in the Foreign Office insists that Lord Scatterdale, the Foreign Secretary “will not recognize anything political in these scoundrels” (2), which is, of course, to deny much of the political context of the political upheaval in the Italy of the time and to reduce political protest to mere brigandry (a policy, this, closer mirrored by similar government responses to agitation in Ireland). In the later years of his career, Lever was increasingly disillusioned with British attitudes and with the limits of British political diplomacy in both Italy and Ireland, where he bemoaned a failure to adequately address the worsening political situation. Very often he voices this disillusion with policy in Ireland through both veiled and open comparisons with British readings of Italy.

Gosslett prepares his journey well, telling the reader: “I studied the map of Calabria thoroughly” (Lever 1868, 22), and eventually meets a man whom he thinks is “Stoppa, the brigand, – the cruellest dog in Calabria” (21)

as he is described in the text by “Mr Spoonnington, Attaché, H.M.’s Legation, Naples” (18). He meets him in the brigand-town which could almost be a lawless Irish outpost if it were not for the booty of stolen jewels worn by some of the inhabitants:

Four hours’ walking, occasionally halting for a little rest, brought me to Rocco, a village of about twenty houses, straggling up the side of a vine-clad hill, the crest of which was occupied by a church. The population were all seated at their doors, it being some festa, and were, I am bound to admit, about as ill-favored a set as one would wish to see. In the aspect of the men, and, indeed, still more in that of the women, one could at once recognize the place as a brigand resort. There were, in the midst of all the signs of squalor and poverty, rich scarfs and costly shawls to be seen; while some of the very poorest wore gold chains round their necks, and carried handsomely ornamented pistols and daggers at their waist-belts. I may as well mention here, not to let these worthy people be longer under a severe aspersion than needful, that they were not themselves brigands, but simply the friends and partisans of the gangs, who sold them the different spoils of which they had divested the travelers. (*Ibidem*, 32-33)

The British Foreign Office, from the Foreign Secretary down to the legation in Naples and Gosslett himself, completely misread the Calabrian situation and fully believe that the man demanding the ransom truly is the dangerous “cut-throat”, Stoppa. Later, when he has accomplished his mission and paid the ransom, Gosslet returns to England and sets about explaining Calabria to the English (much in the manner of English travellers to Ireland):

During all this I wrote, I may say, from morning till night. At one time it was my Blue Book; at another I took a spell at stories of robber life. I wrote short poems,—songs of the brigands I called them. In fact, I dished up my highwayman in a score of ways, and found him good in all. The portmanteau which I had brought out full of gold I now carried back more closely packed with MSS. I hurried to England, only stopping once to call at the Legation, and learn that Mr. St. John had returned to his post, and was then hard at work in the Chancellerie. When I arrived in London, my report was ready; but as the ministry had fallen the week before, I was obliged to rewrite it, every word. Lord Muddlemore had succeeded my patron, Lord Scatterdale; and as he was a strong Tory, the brigands must be Bourbons for him; and they were so. I had lived amongst them for months, and had eaten of their raw lamb and drunk of their fiery wine, and pledged toasts to the health of Francesco, and “Morte” to everybody else. What splendid fellows I made them! Every chief was a La Rochejaquelin; and as for the little bit of robbery they did now and then, it was only to pay for masses for their souls when they were shot by the Bersaglieri. My Blue Book was printed, quoted by the “Times,” cited in the House; I was called “the intrepid and intelligent witness” by Disraeli; and I was the rage. Dinners fell in showers over me, and invitations to country-houses came by every post. (*Ibidem*, 43-44)

Not long after his return, Gosslett comes to realise that he has been utterly deceived. He is invited by Mr. St. John to visit him and, to his horror, finds that his host had pretended to be Stoppa. In other words Gosslett and the entire foreign legation had been set up and conned, not by an Italian but by a member of their very own delegation in Naples. As was often the case, Lever's fiction flirts with fact. The choice of the name "Stoppa" for the brigand cut-throat recalls Enrico Stoppa (1834-1863) who was known as "Lo Sparviere della Maremma". He was infamous for kidnappings, extortions, and murders (*ibidem*, 10) around the area of Orbetello between 1853 and 1863 and escaped conviction for a long time because locals were always too terrified to testify against him. Lever takes his name and the dark shadow of his reputation and relocates them in Calabria, another hotspot for brigandage and one where the kidnapping of Englishmen was common in the 1850s and 60s. In doing so, Lever was participating in what Niall Whelehan describes as the "proliferation of pejorative images of the *mezzogiorno*" which intensified following the creation of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861 and the spread of brigandage. This was a decisive period in the shaping of relations within Italy, the "first massive encounter between north and south", and one where stereotypes about the *mezzogiorno* distorted the views of political and military officials (2015, 7).

But he was also drawing attention to what did actually happen to a number – officially 14 – of English travellers in Southern Italy. Most prominently, William John Charles Möens recalled his ordeal in his bestselling memoir *English Travellers and Italian Brigands. A Narrative of Capture and Captivity* (1866). This told the true story of two English travellers – Möens himself and the Rev. John Cruger Murray Aynsley – who were captured and held for ransom in Campagna in 1866; Aynsley was released to procure the ransom while Möens had to wait several months in captivity until the sum was paid. "News of their kidnap spread like wildfire and became the main topic of conversation for all foreigners in Italy" (Weindling, Colloms 2012, n.p.). But perhaps of more relevance to Lever was the story of the Marquis de Leuville. In June 1865, two letters were printed in the *Times*; the first was by de Leuville's father-in-law John Sedgwick which announced "Young Artist taken by Brigands" (referring to de Leuville) and cautioned travellers against visiting Italy. It cited de Leuville's own letter to Sedgwick asking him to send money to have him released. Sedgwick duly sent money but gradually it transpired that De Leuville had invented the whole story in order to get himself out of financial difficulty: "English artists from Rome laughed merrily over the tale, and made no secret of there being 'a wholly different version of the affair'" (*ibidem*). Thus, not for the first time, Lever plucked a story out of contemporary news but used it to comment on perceptions of Italy in England and to turn a stereotype about violent Italian brigands on its head by instead exposing the dishonesty of a young Englishman and the gullibility of the English Foreign Office.

All of this reveals the shakiness of even the great British Foreign Office in reading situations around the world with Italy and Ireland almost appearing in parallel. The Irish elements in the *Confessions* of the English Gosslett, who, like Lever, is a man always struggling for money and for a position, are seen in chapter two entitled “Confession the Second. As to Love”. Here he is sent to Donegal to relatives on his mother’s side. Like many a real and fictional English traveller to Ireland, Gosslett confesses “I was not, I shame to own, much better up in the geography of Ireland than in that of Central Africa, and had but a very vague idea whither I was going” (Lever 1868, 68).

Throughout this story Lever plays with the English manner of viewing the Irish in stereotypical terms when describing an encounter with an Irishman (almost in a rewrite of much of his own earlier material):

I passed a restless, feverish night, canvassing with myself whether I would not turn back and leave forever a country whose first aspect was so forbidding and unpromising. What stories had I not heard of Irish courtesy to strangers,—Irish wit and Irish pleasantry! Was this, then, a specimen of that captivating manner which makes these people the French of Great Britain? Why, this fellow was an unmitigated savage! (*Ibidem*, 73)

The final story tells of Gosslett in Germany where he has somehow been hired to run “an hydropathic establishment on a small river, a tributary of the Rhine,—the Lahn”. He is pleased to find out that

[...] my duties were to be pretty much what I pleased to make them. My small smattering of two or three languages—exalted by my uncle into the reputation of a polyglot—had recommended me to the “Direction;” and as my chief function was to entertain a certain number of people twice or thrice a week at dinner, and suggest amusements to fill up their time, it was believed that my faculties were up to the level of such small requirements. (*Ibidem*, 111)

The entire collection plays with the question of double identities and shams, thus mirroring in a sense Lever’s own, by now inevitable, doubleness, his being caught between Europe or better Italy and Ireland and his own sense that the one would also function in his writings as a mirror-image, however distorted, of the other.

Lever’s 1865 novel, *Tony Butler* is, in many ways, another exemplary text for any understanding of the Irish-European or, perhaps better, the Irish-Italian tandem adopted by Lever. At the centre of the book is Butler himself, a young Northern Irish man, whose father served with distinction in the British military. He and his mother survive on the late father’s modest pension before Butler sets off to make his fortune in London, managing to get work in the British Foreign office as a “messenger” sent with important post to

the legation in Naples, a city which is under revolt at the time. While the plot is typically long, a little torturous and contrived, and as such very much in keeping with its genre, the treatment of the events in Italy – around the time of Garibaldi's successful attempts to overthrow the Kingdom of Naples in 1860 – is uniquely broad and pertinent. Lever had been in a perfect position to observe almost two decades of constant flux in Italy and to filter elements of the changing historical picture into his fiction, in particular into *Tony Butler*. As Downey wrote:

During the first fourteen or fifteen years of Lever's residence in Florence, Italy had been in the melting-pot. The Tuscan Revolution of 1848, the defeat of the Sardinians, and the abdication of Carlo Alberto in the following year, the earlier struggle of Garibaldi, the long series of troubles with Austria (ending in the defeat of the Austrians), feuds with the Papal States, insurrections in Sicily, the overthrow of the Pope's government, the Neapolitan war, and, to crown all, triumphant brigandage, had made things lively for dwellers in Italy. The recognition by the Powers of Victor Emanuel as king of United Italy promised, early in 1862, a period of rest; but the expectations of peace-lovers were shattered, for the moment, by Garibaldi's threatened march upon Rome. His defeat, his imprisonment in the fortress of Varignano, and his release, inspired hopes, well-founded, of the conclusion of the struggles (largely internecine) which had convulsed New Italy. (1906, II, 28)

This overthrow of Naples was one of Garibaldi's greatest victories and it was the crucial event that transformed Italian unification from dream to reality. In May of 1860, Garibaldi landed in Sicily with a volunteer force of just over 1000 soldiers (the famous "mille") and took the city of Palermo in just two weeks, overcoming an opposing army of more than 20,000 regulars. In August of the same year Garibaldi crossed to the Italian mainland, and rapidly defeated the Neapolitan army before taking Naples itself within the month. Garibaldi's successful campaign rapidly became the stuff of legend and defined a period of the nineteenth century because of his undoubted military genius and the manner in which he represented and gave substance to the rising call of nationalist aspiration in a Europe that was witnessing the hurried decline of the old dynasties and power systems. That the conservative Anglo-Irish Lever, traditionally seen as an enemy of nationalism – at least of Irish nationalism – would choose to make the Garibaldi narrative so dominant in the novel might seem extraordinary and it is difficult to read the sections about Garibaldi without also keeping in mind a possible Irish parallel: Butler enlists and fights for Garibaldi's cause along with his friend, Rory Quinn, who had originally gone to Italy as part of the Irish brigade fighting on the other side for the Papal States. But we should be careful. As the undisputed leader behind the movement to unite Italy in the nineteenth century, it would be easy to imagine that Garibaldi was a universally liked

figure. Far from it in Ireland at least. To put things very simply, Irish Protestants tended to support Garibaldi while Catholics condemned him because of his anti-clericalism and because they were loudly encouraged to do so by Church leaders marshalled by Cardinal Cullen of Dublin, who, answering Pius the ninth's call for help, went so far as to organize the formation of a battalion to fight in the defence of the Papal States in 1860. What began as a Catholic movement was soon hijacked by Irish nationalism. As Anne O'Connor has written, "denigration of Garibaldi became a badge of Irish nationalism" (2010, 401). Irish public opinion was deeply surprised by English support for Garibaldi and for Italian Unification in general, particularly in the light of its denial of similar Irish demands.

The formation of the Irish brigade in 1860 was greeted with annoyance among Italians. Clearly in these years, Irish and Italian nationalisms did not speak a common language. Mazzini was deeply ambivalent towards Ireland and believed the country needed better rule, not Home Rule. There was a similar lack of sympathy from Gioberti and Cavour who saw Ireland as a problematic "region" of Britain rather than a potential nation. Presumably, Lever, in his diplomatic role contributed to the formation of such opinions among Italian leaders. But he also attempted to influence British opinion with regard to Garibaldi and, following his release from Varignano in 1862 (after Aspromonte):

Lever naturally sought out his distinguished Spezzian neighbour, and one morning he had the pleasure of entertaining him at breakfast. It was said that the British Minister at Florence was eager that the Italian patriot should be disabused of the favourable impressions he was supposed to entertain of the Irish revolutionary movement. The Vice-Consul at Spezzia [*sic*] found it necessary to explain to his guest that any overt expressions or acts of sympathy with Fenianism would be certain to alienate English sympathies. Garibaldi seemed to be somewhat surprised at this. He looked on England as a nation eager to applaud any patriotic or revolutionary movement. Lever is said—the authority is Major Dwyer—to have been unable to comprehend how a man so ignorant and childish as Garibaldi could have attained such vast influence over a people, and could have won such general renown. (Downey 1906, II, 28)

This, in all likelihood, is not an altogether reliable account of Lever's opinion of Garibaldi. A fuller account is to be found in Lever's *Cornelius O'Dowd* volume of essays (all of which had earlier appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine*). O'Dowd can be safely said to represent Lever's own ideas in this somewhat rambling book which is a cross between the short story and the essay, between fiction and fact. Rather like Lever himself, O'Dowd is insecure about his identity defining himself as "a bashful Irishman" before referring just lines later to "we English" (Lever 1864, 8). Not that this holds him back from expressing forthright views. The first essay on Garibaldi in

the collection is actually an amusing take on his followers or as he prefers, his “worshippers”. It begins with another beautiful evocation of Italian landscape, something of a constant in Lever’s writings:

The road from Genoa to Spezia is one of the most beautiful in Europe. As the Apennines descend to the sea they form innumerable little bays and creeks, alongside of which the road winds—now coasting the very shore, now soaring aloft on high-perched cliffs, and looking down into deep dells, or to the waving tops of tall pine-trees. Seaward, it is a succession of yellow-stranded bays, land-locked and narrow; and on the land side are innumerable valleys, some waving with horse-chestnut and olive, and others stern and rock-bound, but varying in colour from the bluish-grey of marble to every shade of porphyry.

For several miles after we left Genoa, the road presented a succession of handsome villas, which, neglected and uncared for, and in most part untenanted, were yet so characteristically Italian in all their vastness—their massive style and spacious plan—as to be great ornaments of the scenery. Their gardens, too—such glorious wildernesses of rich profusion—where the fig and the oleander, the vine and the orange, tangle and intertwine—and cactuses, that would form the wonder of our conservatories, are trained into hedgerows to protect cabbages. (*Ibidem*, 43-44)

O’Dowd goes on to describe how his companion points out local landmarks connected with Garibaldi including the Villa Spinola from which he set sail on his expedition to Marsala: “Wandering on in his talk from the campaign of Sicily and Calabria, my companion spoke of the last wild freak of Garibaldi and the day of Aspromonte, and finally of the hero’s imprisonment at Varignano, in the Gulf of Spezia” (*Ibidem*, 44) Lever is amused at the “shoals” of followers that come to pay homage to Garibaldi: “Steamboats and diligences were crammed with them, and the boatmen of Spezia plied as thriving a trade that summer as though Garibaldi were a saint, at whose shrine the devout of all Europe came to worship” (45). None would be turned away, despite the General’s poor health. Lever’s principal story is about “a party of English ladies” or better “a deputation!” that had come from “the Associated Brothers and Sisters of Freedom—from the Branch Committee of the Ear of Crying Nationalities—” (47) and who insist on seeing the great man, refusing to take no for an answer with the result that Garibaldi’s minders decide to use a substitute, Ripari, one of his medics, who will receive them in his place:

Ripari, one of the most faithful and attached of all his followers, and who bore that amount of resemblance to Garibaldi which could be imparted by hair, moustache, and beard of the same yellowish-red colour, and eyes somewhat closely set. To put the doctor in bed, and make him personate the General, was the plan [...] To the half-darkened room, therefore, where Ripari lay dressed in his habitual red shirt, propped up by pillows, the deputation was introduced. (*Ibidem*, 49)

The plan works to perfection as the “sight of the hero” is too much for one of them:

One dropped, Madonna-wise, with hands clasped across her bosom, at the foot of his bed; another fainted as she passed the threshold; a third gained the bedside to grasp his hand, and sank down in an ecstasy of devotion to water it with her tears; while the strong-minded woman of the party took out her scissors and cut four several locks off that dear and noble head. They sobbed over him—they blubbered over him—they compared him with his photograph, and declared he was libelled—they showered cards over him to get his autograph; and when, at length, by persuasion, not unassisted by mild violence, they were induced to withdraw, they declared that, for those few moments of ecstasy, they’d have willingly made a pilgrimage to Mecca. (*Ibidem*, 49-50)

Knowing Lever, there was likely to have been a modicum of truth behind this story. Its strength, however, lies not in its authenticity but in his deft, humorous touch, which effortlessly makes fun of the English ladies and quietly undermines their devotion to Garibaldi. Lever’s own opinion was balanced and realistic as might be expected from a diplomat. In his essay entitled “Garibaldi”, O’Dowd confesses that had it not been for Carlyle “I might have been a bit of a hero-worshipper myself”. He continues, once more concentrating on Garibaldi’s followers:

The grand frescoes in caricature of the popular historian have, however, given me a hearty and wholesome disgust to the whole thing; not to say that, however enthusiastic a man may feel about his idol, he must be sorely ashamed of his fellow-worshippers. “Lie down with dogs, and you’ll get up with fleas,” says an old Irish adage; but what, in the name of all entomology, is a man to get up with who lies down with these votaries of Garibaldi? So fine a fellow, and so mangy a following, it would be hard to find. (*Ibidem*, 123-124)

O’Dowd’s task, having underlined “the stupid incongruity between Garibaldi and his worshippers” is to hone in on the Garibaldi’s physical and psychological qualities, which he does without inhibition:

It is not easy to conceive anything finer, simpler, more thoroughly unaffected, or more truly dignified, than the man himself. His noble head; his clear, honest, brown eye; his finely-traced mouth, beautiful as a woman’s, and only strung up to sternness when anything ignoble or mean had outraged him; and, last of all, his voice contains a fascination perfectly irresistible, allied, as you knew and felt these graces were, with a thoroughly pure, untarnished nature. The true measure of the man lies in the fact that, though his life has been a series of the boldest and most daring achievements, his courage is about the very last quality uppermost in your mind when you meet him. It is of the winning softness of his look and manner, his kind thoughtfulness for others, his sincere pity for all suffering, his gentleness, his

modesty, his manly sense of brotherhood with the very humblest of the men who have loved him, that you think: these are the traits that throw all his heroism into shadow; and all the glory of the conqueror pales before the simple virtues of the man. (*Ibidem*, 124-125)

Lever's portrait is unusually straightforward and its purpose, first and foremost, is to explain the qualities that brought Italians to follow him with such ardent affection. It is not so much a picture of a great military leader but of Garibaldi as a "thoughtful, silent, reflective man" and as a man of his word "who could so magnetise his fellow-men as to associate them at once with his nobility of soul, and elevate them to a standard little short of his own" (*Ibidem*, 133). He describes the simple dinner he attended at Caprera. He was impressed by the humble hospitality and by the absence of political talk from the table. O'Dowd discounts "the conversations reported of him by writers" (129) and lauds instead his capacity to listen: "He rarely spoke himself, but was a good listener – not merely hearing with attention, but showing, by an occasional suggestion or a hint, how his mind speculated on the subject before him" (126). O'Dowd's analysis is that Garibaldi's simplicity is what made him so powerful, and he says that "greater intellectual ability" would have rather "detracted from" his "power as a popular leader":

I myself feel assured that the simplicity, the trustfulness, the implicit reliance on the goodness of a cause as a reason for its success, are qualities which no mere mental superiority could replace in popular estimation. It is actually Love that is the sentiment the Italians have for him; and I have seen them, hard-featured, ay, and hard-natured men, moved to tears as the litter on which Garibaldi lay wounded was carried down to the place of embarkation. (*Ibidem*, 129)

Ultimately, in O'Dowd's estimation, the "bold buccaneer" Garibaldi succeeded because, as Cavour immediately spotted, he was the one who could "move the national heart" and who, at the same time would not "dissever the cause of liberty from the cause of monarchy" (*Ibidem*, 130). In the end, Lever's judgment as voiced through his mouthpiece is acutely political and nuanced and shows a blend of the diplomat's shrewd eye for the political and the fiction writer's sharp pen:

It might be possible to overrate the services Garibaldi has rendered to Italy – it would be totally impossible to exaggerate those he has rendered the Monarchy; and out of Garibaldi's devotion to Victor Emmanuel has sprung that hearty, honest, manly appreciation of the King which the Italians unquestionably display. A merely political head of the State, though he were gifted with the highest order of capacity, would have disappeared altogether from view in the sun-splendour of Garibaldi's exploits; not so the King Victor Emmanuel, who only shone the brighter in the reflected blaze of the hero who was so proud to serve him. (*Ibidem*, 131)

And yet, behind all Garibaldi's success, Lever sees the manoeuvring hand of the wily Cavour. It was he who, "behind the scenes, pulled all the wires; and these heroes - heroes they were too- were but his puppets" (*Ibidem*). Until Cavour died in 1861, that is. The article finishes with warm praise for Garibaldi the man if not for his politics:

All honour, therefore, to the man—not whose example only, but whose very contact suggests high intent and noble action. All honour to him who brings to a great cause, not alone the dazzling splendour of heroism, but the more enduring brightness of a pure and unsullied integrity! Such a man may be misled; he can never be corrupted. (*Ibidem*, 133)

In his letters, Lever expressed his opinion that if Italian Unification had to happen should have happened in the early 1860s and commented: "How miserably the Italians lost their opportunity not backing up Garibaldi and making Rome their own at once" (Downey 1906, II, 207). There is a sense of *realpolitik* in this. Lever learned through observation in Italy that sometimes political action and change can take on a dynamic that can be perhaps resented and resisted but which ultimately cannot be stopped. Back in 1847 in his strange and dark book *Horace Templeton*, he had seen the unification of Italy as impossible (in a description which still speaks today to the fact that Italy continues to be less than the sum of its distinct parts:

When thinking of Italian liberty, or Unity, for that is the phrase in vogue, I am often reminded of the Irish priest who was supposed by his parishioners to possess an unlimited sway over the seasons, and who, when hard-pushed to exercise it, at last declared his readiness to procure any kind of weather that three farmers would agree upon, well knowing, the while, how diversity of interest must for ever prevent a common demand. This is precisely the case. An Italian kingdom to comprise the whole Peninsula would be impossible. The Lombards have no interests in common with the Neapolitans. Venice is less the sister than the rival of Genoa. How would the haughty Milanese, rich in every thing that constitutes wealth, surrender their station to the men of the South, whom they despise and look down upon? None would consent to become Provincial; and even the smallest states would stand up for the prerogative of separate identity. (Lever 1894, 391)

Twenty years later, Lever would see that Italian Unity had indeed been realised and this would be a lesson the relevance of which for Ireland he would gradually come to work out in his final novels. Writing about his final novel, *Lord Kilgobbin*, Richard Haslam claims that the many references "to political events in Greece, Crete, Turkey, Italy and Austria, all of which echo and comment upon Irish upheavals, suggests that in this, his final novel, Lever had begun to place Ireland in a broader European context, one which reflected the dismantling of ancient landowning traditions and the emergence of a new and

ambitious class eager to gather up and redistribute the fragments” (Haslam 1991, 78). This process of placing Ireland in a European context was a longer one which began in earlier works with his admonishments of Irish landlords for not facing up to their duties. What finally happens in *Lord Kilgobbin* is that he finally steps beyond bemoaning the failures of the Ascendancy and starts allowing himself to consider the situation from the other side. In *Cornelius O’Dowd*, speaking of the “Turin Chamber” and its failure to be effective in the country he lamented that “the Italians are far more eager to learn what is said in the French Parliament than in their own” (Lever 1864, 23) before comparing this situation with an Irish equivalent: “I remember an old waiter at the Hibernian Hotel in Dublin, who got a prize in the lottery and retired into private life, but who never could hear a bell ring without crying out, ‘Coming, sir.’ The Italians remind me greatly of him: they have had such a terrible time of flunkeyism, that they start at every summons, no matter what hand be on the bell-rope” (*ibidem*). But what Lever lived to see was that the Italians did form their unified State, did come into their own and if they could overcome “flunkeyism” perhaps the Irish could too. Thus if a whole series of Dukedoms and minor Kingdoms could come tumbling down in quick succession then what had been for most of his life the mere hypothesis of the end of the Anglo-Irish world could now too be contemplated and his deeply engrained, conservative perspective on Ireland reversed. No longer was only an end in sight but he also perhaps began to intuit the beginning of a new world – as imagined by the Fenians – that he could finally allow himself to contemplate if not endorse.

The case of Italy played a central role in Lever’s facing up to the writing on the wall at home. Lever’s capacity to see the value and integrity in Garibaldi, a man whose politics he did not endorse, would inform his own later fiction in which he would not shy away from seeking to understand a Fenian leader, whose politics he deplored, but whose integrity he undoubtedly came to value. Thus, in *Lord Kilgobbin*, he can have Nina Kostalergi fall for Daniel Donogan, revolutionary head of the Fenians and be genuinely touched and impressed by the integrity and constancy of his nationalist beliefs.

It was Italy, therefore, that brought about the belated change in Lever, writer and diplomat, and led him to finally examine scenarios for Ireland that he had hitherto refused to countenance. It was almost as in *Lord Kilgobbin*, the work he described as “essentially Irish” (Downey 1906, II, 218) and his last “chance of finishing creditably” (254), that Lever finally answered for himself the question he had Meg Dodds (presumably Mrs O’Dowd as she is elsewhere referred to in the text) put to O’Dowd some years earlier in *Cornelius O’Dowd*:

“What for no?” as Meg Dodds says; but I can’t help thinking there are no people in Europe so much alike as the Italians and the Irish; and I ask myself, How is it that every one is so sanguine about the one, and so hopeless about the other? Why

do we hear of the capacity and the intelligence of the former, and only of the latter what pertains to their ignorance and their sloth? Oh! unjust generation of men! Have not my poor countrymen all the qualities you extol in these same Peninsulars, plus a few others not to be disparaged? (Lever 1864, 58)

One of the last things that Lever wrote was a new preface to *The Martins of Cro' Martin* and, having commented on the sufferings endured during the Famine, he concludes with an augury that he knew well he would not live to see but which suggests that he had despaired of "English governance of Ireland". As he asked his friend Blackwood in 1866: "When will you Saxons learn how to govern Ireland?" (Downey 1906, II, 158) intuited change for the country on a par with the big changes he had witnessed throughout a lifetime in Italy: "If a nation is to be judged by her bearing under calamity, Ireland—and she has had some experiences — comes well through the ordeal. That we may yet see how she will sustain her part in happier circumstances is my hope and my prayer, and that the time be not too far" (Lever 1872b, 4). That new Ireland would not be his nor would it have been a time or a place he would have felt at home in but from his vantage point at the other side of Europe on the Adriatic seaboard he saw it coming.

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