

## The Unappeasable Hunger for Land in John B. Keane's *The Field*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the overriding importance of the land to Irish peasant farmers, as illustrated in John B. Keane's play *The Field* (1965), where the dispute over the ownership of a field between Bull McCabe, the farmer who has the grazing rights, and a stranger who wants to use it for industrial purposes ends with the murder of the latter. While Bull's ethos might appear cruel and unnecessarily violent in mid-twentieth century Ireland, a closer look at his character in the context of the cultural landscape reveals that his unappeasable hunger for land derives not so much from the memory of the past landlord-peasant struggles but from the Irish peasant's ingrained commitment to the land that sustains him and which will prevent his children from the fate of emigration, as well as from his attitude of distrust toward technology.

Together with religion, land has been one of the most potent symbols of unity and conflict in the history of Ireland. As an eminently rural country, the dependence upon the land created among the native Irish a keen sense of place, a spiritual bond with the soil that sustains them, whereas the transference of land ownership, concomitant with centuries of colonial occupation and landlordism, gave rise, from the seventeenth century, to widespread resentment and social division.

Indeed, whereas in 1603, and despite the Tudor confiscations, 90% of Irish land was still in Catholic hands, by 1641 this proportion had been lowered to 59% due to the success of the Ulster Plantations of James I, which forced the native Irish to work as labourers for an alien people or to move to land vastly inferior to their earlier possessions. This figure was further reduced by the Cromwellian Plantation and the defeat of the Stuarts, with the result that, after the implementation of the Treaty of Limerick (1691), only 14% of the land was left in Catholic hands. Moreover, the Penal Laws of the eighteenth century introduced a series of restrictive acts which continued the movement of land ownership. When the relaxation of the Penal Laws began and Catholics were finally allowed to buy, hold or

inherit freehold land and leases on the same terms as Protestants, only 5% of Irish householders owned any land (Edwards 168-187). To this sad tale of secular dispossession were added, in the mid-nineteenth century, the disastrous effects of the famine which, combined with a massive growth in population, made the mere survival of the large rural population almost impossible, especially in the poorest areas of the west.

All these circumstances have brought the land question to the fore of Irish communal experience and have moulded the Irishman's intense relationship with his physical environment, channelling it into two distinctive strands: a) an almost obsessive land-greed, encapsulated in the nineteenth century slogan of the National Land League: "We want the earth and nothing less will do," and b) what Declan Kiberd (1984, 12) has called the myth of "the noble tiller of the soil," that is, the idealisation of the ancient wisdom of the stoical and enduring peasant, uncontaminated by commercialism and embodying the most essential and unchanging element of Irish identity. The latter image, fostered by the writers of the Literary Revival, was also celebrated by artists and politicians in the new Irish Free State which came into being following the Partition Treaty of 1921, an image which Douglas Hyde eloquently described to a Dublin audience in 1926:

Remember that the best of our people were driven by Cromwell to hell or Connacht. Many of our race are living on the seaboard where Cromwell drove them. They are men and women of the toughest fibre. They have been for generations fighting with the sea, fighting with the weather, fighting with the mountains. They are indeed the survival of the fittest. Give them but half a chance and they are the seeds of a great race ... it will save the historical Irish Nation for it will preserve for all time the fountain-source from which future generations can draw for ever. (Brown 93)

Hyde's wishful ambition, to restore a rural, Catholic and Gaelic society was hardly realised in the economically depressed, deeply conservative and backward-looking new state, and the "athletic youths" and "comely maidens" that Eamon de Valera pictured in his St Patrick's Day broadcast of 1943, living in "a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads" and "whose firesides would be the forums for the wisdom of serene old age" (Moynihan 466) were unable to make a living on the land and were forced to emigrate by the thousands. Moreover, the increasing urbanization and consumerism brought about by the economic revival experienced by the Republic since the late sixties, has introduced important changes in the demographic and occupational composition of the country, with the result that the agricultural sector has declined to less than 50% of the population.

However, as Brian Friel argued in an essay on Irish drama published in the *TLS* in 1972, the Irish mind is still eminently peasant: "beneath the patina of Hiltonesque hotels and intercontinental jet airports and mohair suits and private swimming-pools, that is what we still are — a peasant people." Friel then outlines what he sees as the two dominant elements in the peasant mind: "one is a passion for the land; the other a paranoiac individualism. And these two elements have not only been the themes of dozens of Irish plays but have informed in a much wider sense the entire corpus of Irish dramatic work" (305).

In fact, man's attachment to the soil and the related themes of land inheritance, arranged marriages and emigration, which were staple ingredients in the peasant plays that dominated the early years of the Abbey Theatre, still exert — in spite of recent attempts to demythologise them as a “sentimentalisation of backwardness in Ireland, a surrender to what Marx once called ‘the idiocy of rural life’” (Kiberd 13) — a significant attraction for contemporary playwrights and novelists, and for their Irish audiences and readers, because they constitute a basic part of the national being, of the communal memory and world view of the Irish.

As far as contemporary Irish drama is concerned, as D. E. S. Maxwell states in a recent book on the subject: “the lives of middle-class city dwellers and suburbanites have increasingly become a subject” but still most of “the new talents of the 1960s take their subjects from an Ireland still essentially rural and small town. Its frustrations, immobility, hypocrisy — or stability and loyalty to old pieties — are familiar.” (Maxwell 170-71).

One of these playwrights is the North Kerryman John B. Keane, whom another critic identifies as the true spokesman — together with George Fitzmaurice and M.J. Molloy — of the rural West: “The awkward substance of people's lives — not their romantic shadows — are transformed by these playwrights into drama.” (Etherton 2). In fact, as Keane insistently maintained in an interview I held with him on 30 October 1991, he is a countryman and has country values:

I was born in a town but I was reared in the countryside, in a place called the Stacks Mountains. It's a little range of mountains, about thirteen miles from Listowel. When I left here and went to live in the Stacks Mountains, my urban upbringing fused with the traditions and the language of that countryside, and out of it grew a new attitude, a new respect for country people, and a new language that I use . . . I am a countryman, and I can't understand how a man can be happy in the city.

Keane believes that because “they are shy people, who work seven days a week,” the farm people have not “been seen at their best, in their intellectual finery” by city dwellers. Consequently:

When I'd go on television in the old days, I'd always have to go on the defensive, defending myself, because they didn't know how we lived, they knew nothing about our poverty, nor about emigration that was like a haemorrhage in the country. These people just ignored us . . . but we were in essence the native Irish, we did not have the trappings; we had the regality and the gentility, but we didn't have the wealth to back it up. It was not at once visible to the common eye that we had that, that my people had dignity, they had language and they had great humour.

The nightly drama at the pub Keane operates in Listowel gives him a rich insight into the rural Irish experience he then records and dramatises in his plays, whether the tragic consequences of arranged marriages (*Sive* 1959), land grabbing (*Sharon's Grave* 1960), emigration (*Many Young Men of Twenty* 1961), the subservient role of women and the breakdown of families (*Big Maggie* 1969), or disputes over land ownership (*The Field* 1965). Actually, the plot of *The Field*, which revolves around the bidding for title to a

four-acre field between William Dee, an Irish businessman who now lives in England and wants to use it for manufacturing concrete blocks, and Bull McCabe, the peasant farmer who has the grazing rights and wishes to acquire the field to pass it on to his only son Tadhg, is, as Marie Hubert Kealy has pointed out, a true story: “It is based on an unsolved murder which occurred in the Stacks Mountains; it was a case in which a dispute over land precipitated the violence and in which the silence of local residents hid the guilty parties from the authorities.” (291-92).

During the interview cited above, Keane expressed his belief that a play should mirror an incident in life:

The story is the chief thing, the story is paramount. I always believed that if, after seeing a play, if you cannot describe in a sentence what it is about, it's not a play, it's something but it's not a play in the strict sense. A play is something which mirrors an incident in life. If when they ask you “What is it about?” you go on and on and on, it's about nothing. But if you can say in a sentence “it's about a murder,” “it's about a man who kills for land” for instance, “it's about a man who was frustrated in love,” you can build a whole story around this, because these are the great themes, and they are the only things worth writing about. The slenderer the theme, the more you dispose yourself towards character, and that's what comedy is, it's fluffy and light.

Indeed, *The Field* has a strong narrative line which maintains the interest and suspense of the audience. However, to my mind what makes it such a powerful play is Bull's fierce lust for the field, to which he is bound by an obsessive love. It is a feeling which the villagers understand, and even if they do not fully sympathise with the McCabes' rough methods when they beat the stranger and accidentally kill him, they nevertheless protect them with a conspiracy of silence.<sup>1</sup>

At the turn of the century Synge recorded the reasons for such behaviour in *The Aran Islands*:

This impulse to protect the criminal is universal in the west. It seems partly due to the association between justice and the hated English jurisdiction, but more directly to the primitive feeling of these people, who are never criminals yet always capable of crime, that a man will not do wrong unless he is under the influence of a passion which is as irresponsible as a storm of the sea. (64)

However, when Synge drew on a similar conspiracy of silence for the central situation in his *Playboy* (1906), the Dublin critics dismissed it as incredible. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that when Jim Sheridan was working on his 1990 film version of *The Field*, he foresaw that today's urban audiences, and especially the American audience, unfamiliar with the Irish rural soul, would probably fail to accept the villagers' connivance with the murder. Consequently, he introduced certain changes in the film, such as having the murder revealed (“Tadhg told the tinkers' girl and she told her father and he told the priest and the priest told the widow”) and subsequently, making the McCabes purge their crime with their own deaths.<sup>2</sup>

During my interview with Keane, which was held, quite appropriately, after a busy cattle market day in Listowel, the playwright described thus the material on which he drew for his plays:

It's about the environment of the people who sustain the milch cows that I concern myself. The mistress of the economy of North Kerry, where we are now, is the milch cow. Firstly, because she is a goddess, she is beautiful when she is young, she is matriarchal when she is old. But all lifestyles, all education, all houses, all food depend on the milch cow, whether we like it or not.

This is certainly the case in Carraighthomond, a small village in the south-west of Ireland, where the action of *The Field* takes place. And even Sergeant Leahy, who does not share the peasant ethos, is reluctantly aware of the fact: "There is nothing in your heads [he says to Bull and Tadgh McCabe] but pigs and cows and pitiful patches of land" (29). The sergeant and the priest are outsiders in this rural environment, as Bull reminds them: "When you'll be gone, Father, to be a Canon somewhere, and the sergeant gets a wallet of notes and is going to be a Superintendent, Tadgh's children will be milking cows and keeping donkeys away from our ditches. That's what we have to think about and if there's no grass, that's the end of me and mine" (80). Their uniform and collar, the symbols of authority, set them aside from the rest of the community: "Tadgh, remember this. There's two laws. There's a law for them that's priests and doctors and lawmen. But there's no law for us. The man with the law behind him is the law" (80).

Although in this and other remarks made by Bull ("hangblasted shagger of a stranger" (23), "accursed friggers with nothing in their heads only to own the ground we're walking on. We had their likes long enough, hadn't we?" (18)) we can detect a sense of grievance for past wrongs, anti-clericalism is not general in the play, for both Bull and Tadgh say they "were fond of" an "ould priest" because "he was one of our own" (79). If Father Murphy is not respected, it is because he is, according to Bull "one of the gang ... You have the law well sewn up, all of you . . . all nice and tidy to yourselves" (78-79).

Because of the association between legality and the hated English jurisdiction Synge referred to in the passage quoted above, peasant people mistrust institutionalised authority, and therefore they choose to silence the murder of the Englishman at the hands of the McCabes, despite the Bishop's threat to place the parish under interdict. What is more, they even marginalise those among them who do not conform to the traditional notions of morality and therefore, when young Leamy says the McCabes are bullies and he wants to report the murder to the barracks, his mother does not allow him to do so: "you'll be a freak for ever more, different from the rest of us" (62). But although the community does not accuse the murderers, at the end of the play there is the sense that justice will prevail, and that Bull will be duly punished by his own guilty conscience, which will constantly remind him of the dead man: "The grass won't be green over his grave when he'll be forgot by all . . . forgot by all except me!" (81). Still, he needs the grass of that field to survive and to pass on to his son, and therefore, after paying the last twenty pounds that will ensure his ownership of the field, Bull's last words are a call to his son to resume their daily chores.

In the rural world portrayed in *The Field*, the ties of blood and land have absolute precedence over any other loyalty or moral consideration, as Bull's first words to his son make clear: "Land is all that matters, Tadhg boy, own your own land" (18).<sup>3</sup> Out of the constant and devoted lavishing of care on the land has grown a strong sense of place — "I watched this field for forty years and my father before me watched it for forty more. I know every rib of grass and every thistle and every whitethorn bush that bounds it" (26) — a delicate feeling towards the hard soil which contrasts sharply with the toughness of their life and surroundings. Thus, during the freezing spring night when the McCabes are waiting for the stranger to turn up and beat him, Bull ecstatically exclaims, "'Tis April. Listen and you can hear the first growth of the grass. The first music that was ever heard" (53), after which he confesses to his son that the reason why his wife has refused to speak and to sleep with him for 18 years is that he "walloped her more than [he] meant" when she gave permission to a tinker's widow to let her pony loose in one of their fields at a time when "The land was carryin' fourteen cows an' grass scarce" (55). If women "don't trouble . . . if the hay is scarce and the fields bald" (55), Tadhg fully supports his father's harsh punishment: "You had to do it, Da. Carrying fourteen cows. You had to do it" (55).

In fact, Tadhg is also obsessed with the land,<sup>4</sup> and heeding his father's advice ("Marry no woman if she hasn't land" (26)) he is courting an only daughter with 9 acres of land, though she does not sound very pretty, judging from the comments made by Bull ("a bit red in the legs" (56)) and Bird ("not bad lookin' when you get used to her" (67)).

Now, while this greed for land seems to carry us back to the feuding land hunger of the 19th century and therefore sounds inconsistent with the outside world of modern commodities — bathrooms, television sets, cinema and jets "with the high boomin' sound" (55) — which is beginning to impinge on this close rural community, and while Bull McCabe's world view and behaviour might appear cruel and unnecessarily violent, a closer look at his character in the context of the cultural landscape reveals that his unappeasable hunger for land derives not so much from the memory of the past landlord-peasant struggles but from the Irish peasant's ingrained commitment to the land that sustains him and which will prevent his children from the fate of emigration<sup>5</sup>.

The Bishop understands the peasants' ethos, and while entreating the villagers to break their silence, he describes their plight:

This is a parish in which you understand hunger. But there are many hungers. There is hunger for food — a natural hunger. There is the hunger of the flesh — a natural understandable hunger. There is a hunger for home, for love, for children. These things are good — they are good because they are necessary. But there is also the hunger for land. And in this parish, you, and your fathers before you knew what it was to starve because you did not own your own land — and that has increased; this unappeasable hunger for land. (63)

Bull McCabe considers the decision to sell the field to the best bidder a betrayal of his rights, for he holds the primitive concept that use gives him a prior claim on the land: "By all rights 'tis our property an' we're not men to be cheated out of our property" (19). However, it is not only the prospect of losing his grazing that angers him, but the thought

that the new owner would use the field in order to manufacture concrete blocks: “God Almighty! ’Tis a sin to cover grass and clover with concrete” (44). As Kealy points out, “Keane directs us to appreciate the love for land that recoils at the inroads of technology. No one in a North Kerry dairy-farming community would understand an individual using land for any reason other than grazing” (Kealy 290).

Indeed, compared to the beauty of a well kept field, technology seems abhorrent to the rural soul, an idea that Bull tries to impress on his son when, in the film version of the play, he says that apart from being more profitable the field “is cheaper than linoleum because it doesn’t wear out.” On the other hand, in Keane’s short story “The Fort Field” the best compliment an old man receives on his favourite field, “the kind of field the man above makes especially to compensate for all the other squelchy, boggy acres” (60) is that “’tis a land worth fighting for,” a phrase that transforms the old man’s face with “a smile of supreme contentment” (65) every time he repeats it. However, this is not just a witty phrase but a reflection of the extent to which the Irish peasant farmer is prepared to go in order to fight for his right to the land.

In *The Field*, when the Bishop asks the villagers: “how far are you prepared to go to satisfy this hunger [for land]. Are you prepared to go to the point of robbery? Are you prepared to go to the point of murder? Are you prepared to kill for land?” (63), he only gets silence for an answer, but they all know that in order to appease his hunger for land, Bull has not only sacrificed his married life (“I seen lonesome nights, Taghd, lonesome nights” 55) but has subscribed to the Machiavellian dictum that the end justifies the means.

## **Afterword**

“I will give up my life before I give up that land,” announced Kathleen Nolan on September 7, 1992, as she and her husband were sent to Mountjoy jail. The imprisonment, which left their five children at home alone in the townland of Dirrha, county Kerry, followed a dispute over Turbury rights — access to turf on someone else’s land — which Mrs Nolan is alleged to have infringed by planting her five-acre bogland with spruce and birch, an enterprise she undertook as an investment for the future care of one of her daughters, who is a spina bifida sufferer.

The case is still pending, but it confirms that right at the end of the twentieth century the land row in rural Ireland can still be as bitter as in the bygone days of peasant unrest. It also goes to show that fact often reaches out beyond the realm of fiction.

## Notes

1. The silence of the villagers is also due to fear of Bull who warns them: "keep your trap shut . . . There's men around here would think nothing of puttin' a bomb up ag'in' a public door. 'Twas done before, the time of the land division" (51). Moreover they are also afraid of the possibility the McCabe clan might boycott anyone who challenges Bull.

2. The film has a spectacular and cathartic last scene by the sea, reminiscent of Cuchulain's unpremeditated killing of his son Conlán, "then [Cuchulain] strove with the waves seven days and nights till he fell from hunger and weakness, and the waves went over him" (Curtin 229).

3. In the film, this overriding importance of the land is very effectively expressed in visual terms, by having Bull blow a dandelion and then comment to his son: "This is what we would be without the land, boy."

4. In the film, though, Tadgh runs away with a tinker girl and says to his father: "I never cared about the land, I'm going to marry her . . . I don't want the field; she doesn't want the field, you're the only one who wants it," to which Bull answers: "I wanted it for you . . . I cursed myself, I cursed my mother to hell to get the field."

5. During the period 1951-1961 in which the action of the play takes place, the Republic lost 408,766 people, i.e. 14% of the population.

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