

Clare Wallace PhD
SUPERVISOR'S REPORT:
re **"THE IRISH PEASANT NOVELS OF EMILY LAWLESS. *HURRISH: A STUDY & GRANIA: THE STORY OF AN ISLAND*"** by **Kateřina Bonnerová**
(MA dissertation, 2006)

As is noted in the introductory chapter of the thesis, the work of Anglo-Irish writer Emily Lawless is neither widely known, nor has it attracted a great deal of scholarship. As such Kateřina Bonnerová's chosen topic is a challenging one, but also one that potentially offers scope for a highly original piece of research. Lawless' work provides a dramatic example of Protestant colonial values with regard to the Irish and might be seen on a continuum with the much more accomplished work of a writer like Maria Edgeworth. It is perhaps not all that surprising that the two selected novels *Hurrish: A Study* and *Grania: The Story of an Island* have not won a place in the Irish canon due to their obvious artistic limitations, nevertheless they are of interest in terms of narrative stylistics and the values encoded therein. Ms Bonnerová's aims are wide ranging including a general introduction to the biography of Emily Lawless, the political and cultural context of the time, the discourse of Celticism, the national revival and finally Lawless' representations of the Irish in the above mentioned novels. As a result, though admittedly there is a latent argument to be found in most of the chapters, the overall structure of the work is rather disjointed and fails to cohere as a systematic or developed thesis.

Although the opening chapter is clear in the expression of general aims and objectives, as well as mentioning the limited materials available on Lawless and her work, it would have been advisable to incorporate some of the extensive contextualising material at this stage rather than as separate chapters later. This is most evident in chapter two which is basically a long summary of a single source: William Linn's dissertation on Lawless from 1971 (it is not clear whether this is an MA or PhD dissertation). While Linn's work is a mine of sometimes very bizarre detail (some of which seems highly difficult to corroborate), the relevance of Lawless' interest in moth collecting as a child (p.2), her supposed nervous disorders and heroin (?) addiction (p.5), or the alleged quality of grazing in the Burren (p.24) to Ms Bonnerová's overall project seems tenuous to say the least. The concluding quotation of Lawless' obituary via Linn that she was "perhaps, the most distinguished literary woman of her time" (p. 7) deserves some sort of critical comment, rather than merely being taken at face value.

Chapter three is more successful in presenting material relevant to the contextualisation of Lawless' work. Ms Bonnerová's sources here are more varied and scholarly, and she demonstrates a familiarity with some of the most important aspects of the historical context. The sections on the Protestant Ascendancy and the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century are competently assembled; the significance of organisations such as the Land League, the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Gaelic League is well communicated. Perhaps less logical is the arrangement of the other sections of the chapter; it might have been more appropriate to deal with the development of Celticism *before* turning to revivalist appropriations of dimensions of Celticism. Also, it would have been useful to explore how the essentialist notion of the Celt and Arnold's Celt in need of Saxon rule transmutes into an essentialist notion of the peasant as the basis of the prevalent strain of Irish

nationalism. The sections on the literary and aesthetic context and the Revivalist perspective on the peasant are less satisfactory. Lawless was writing at a time of extraordinary cultural activity, not merely in Ireland – Ms Bonnerová gives little sense of this. The assertion made by Betty Webb Brewer that Lawless’ reputation suffered due to “the general decline in the novel as genre” (p.17) is repeated without critical reflection and seems to run directly counter to obvious literary history i.e. modernism. Attention to what *kind* of novel Lawless wrote would have helped Ms Bonnerová to advance a more tenable argument here. Further obvious inaccuracies, such as the suggestion that WB Yeats or JM Synge attempted to mitigate their “Englishness” by “trying to identify the real Irishness in the Irish peasantry and its past” (p.18) suggest a weak understanding of Anglo-Irish identity (which certainly had little to do with Englishness in this sense at the end of the nineteenth century) and, much more seriously, a potential misunderstanding of the aesthetic projects of two of Ireland’s best known writers. This is compounded by the claim that Lawless’ “accounts of the peasant life are much more realistic than those of Yeats and his revivalist companions” (p.19). Certainly the novels in question seem to have little truck with realism, while one might ask which “accounts of peasant life” has in mind here as counterweights to Lawless.

In the fourth chapter Ms Bonnerová moves to analysis of the texts themselves. The chapter opens with two dramatically opposing reviews of *Hurrish* which are cited at length. Ms Bonnerová misses a prime opportunity to critically engage with these reviews and what they indicate about the cultural politics of the day. A similar pattern is repeated when she turns to *Grania*. This chapter ought to be the core of the thesis yet close critical analysis of the two novels is replaced by a rather descriptive approach. Although Ms Bonnerová asserts that Lawless must be “perfectly acquainted” with discourse of Celticism, she never really engages with the ways in which Lawless’ fiction perpetuates the stereotypes established by that discourse. It is not entirely clear how Lawless’ comments on the Irish can be “eloquently patronising” (p.29), yet at the same time realistic and balanced in their perspectives on peasants and landlords (cf. p. 18). Lengthy sections of the novels are quoted which repeatedly feature didactic narratorial interventions and generalisations about the Irish and the Celts (cf p. 35ff), yet no analysis is made of this aspect of the texts. Similarly, Lawless’ stunning summing up of Irish history as a “pandemonium of carnage which year after year, and century after century, had made the rest of the island [beyond the Burren] a fit habitation only for some blood-besmeared rabble of hell” (p.30) is blandly seen as suggesting “a certain air of condescension (sic) on Lawless’ part” (p.30) – it is hardly unexpected that the reviewer for *The Nation* was less than impressed with the novel. Finally, the rather frequent lapses in proof-reading in this chapter contrast sharply with earlier sections of work.

To conclude, Ms Bonnerová the project sets herself is ambitious in its scope. Had she submitted earlier drafts of the work and allowed time for revision undoubtedly some of the questions and criticisms above would now be unnecessary. She certainly collates material on the historical context of Ascendancy and the rise of nationalism well and accounts to some extent for the discourse of Celticism. She seems aware of the broad scheme of attitudes concerning the idealised stereotype of the Celt and the nationalist romanticisation of the peasant and the Western seaboard regions. What the thesis fails to do is to critically reflect upon what Lawless’ novels tell us about colonial politics of representation. The generalisations about the objectives of the

revival movement (of which WB Yeats seems to be the prime and often only, representative) are at times inaccurate, while ultimately the claims made for Lawless' work vis-à-vis the revival seem contradictory.

For these reasons I would recommend the grade of 3 (pass) for this diploma work.



Clare Wallace PhD
Supervisor
4.19.2006