Only Connect: Violet Martin and Edith Somerville

With his invocation of Gibbon in *The Kellys and the O’Kellys* Trollope linked the decline and fall of the country house order in Ireland to a greater historical theme. In 1848 it was only a visionary prolepsis. ‘Imperialism’ was still far from its apogee (indeed it still awaited Disraeli). The emergence of the Land League was unpredictable, let alone the distant absurdities of 1914, the Easter Rising of 1916 and the stockmarket crash of 1929. A retrospective imposition of historical teleology is always false to the necessary myopia of historical agents. Nonetheless it is easy (but facile) to find parallels to Trollope’s decline and fall motif. William Allingham’s country house verse novel, *Laurence Bloomfield in Ireland* (1864), raises the imperial issue, which also informs the early political prose of Aubrey de Vere. Perhaps most remarkable is the proleptic vision by that vigorous historian of the imposition of ‘civilisation’ upon ‘savagery’ and ‘anarchy’, J. A. Froude, who nonetheless claimed in 1882 to have been aware from the beginning of the degeneration of the post-Union Irish ruling classes. He wrote: ‘All things have their appointed end, and English dominion over Ireland must come to an end also….We can govern India: we cannot govern Ireland. Be it so. Then let Ireland be free.’ In the Biblical resonances of ‘all things have their appointed end’ Froude invokes a divine teleology that takes him back beyond Gibbon to St Augustine as a historian of decline and fall.1

These are numinous, transhistorical resonances back to the roots of European culture. Yet in Trollope the visionary suggestion is counterbalanced by the mundane depiction of the *vis inertiae*, and the very Latinity of Trollope’s phrase insists on the continuing presence of the old order, for even the middle-class reader is expected to understand that much Latin. *The Kellys and the O’Kellys* terminates, conventionally, in propertied marriage and the return to an original estate that mirrors

M. Kelsall, *Literary Representations of the Irish Country House*  
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(albeit ironically) the ‘Paradise Hall’ motif of the Ur country house fiction of Fielding’s *Tom Jones*. If Trollope’s landlords are reduced, in comparison with squire Allworthy in *Tom Jones*, to being those who are merely *fruges consumere nati*, his view of country house culture is as old as that of Horace, satirist but celebrant of the Augustan *imperium*.²

There is, therefore, an ironic eddying about a cultural crux in the invocation of Gibbon, rather than an (accidental) visionary forecast of things to come. Gibbon functions in Trollope rather as Homer functioned in the culture of the previous century. He is a revered canonical classic (now in the vernacular rather than the decent obscurity of a learned language) whose placing within culture determines the mind-set of that culture. For the adherents of ‘ancient’ civilisation (to employ the old, neoclassical vocabulary) Gibbon is a palladium of value; but for the ‘moderns’ he is unreadable (and for Lord Cashel himself, ancient books and their authors are merely the furniture of wealth). Accordingly, Gibbon is himself part of the *vis inertiae*, an empowered cultural tradition that is ‘there’ but going nowhere, and ‘there’, the locus, is the library of a great country house. This text and that place are inextricably related; the library carries the text, and the text transmits the constituents of the idea of civilisation that created the library in the first place.

In relation to our own theme, the (inter)relationship of civilisation and savagery, Gibbon is an exemplary text. His subject is the eruption of barbarianism into the *imperium* of the Graeco-Roman world; but it is also the inner failure of civilisation itself, physically weakened by internecine war, intellectually corrupted by the primitive recidivism of sectarian superstition. To tie that subject merely to the local history of landlordism in mid-Victorian Ireland would be to fail to see the wood for the trees. It is European culture that is at issue in the invocation of Gibbon. The paradox of Gibbon’s text is that it preserves the idea of Graeco-Roman civilisation as a textuality and a metaphysic embodied in an ideal form (the rise of the republic) that was prior to Gibbon’s chosen period and now entirely vanished. Yet modern European civilisation exists as the reinterpretation and reincorporation of that textuality and metaphysic, indeed it can only exist because the original is not there.

It would be an easy progression from here to the ‘culture wars’ of Victorian Britain (or even our own age), but our concern is only with the country house as textualised icon. It is a reasonable reading of Trollope (and of Lever) to claim that in the Irish novels the inherited culture the house incorporates ‘hits the buffers’, as it were. It is tempting to relate that interpretation to Trollope’s (and Lever’s) ‘bourgeois’ window on the world. If writers constitute their own ideal readers, it might be