

# Irish-Italian Early Exchanges in the Nineteenth Century

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## Abstract:

This article explores Irish perspectives on Italy in the nineteenth century through the writings of James Whiteside, Lady Morgan, and Francis Mahony. Whiteside, in *Italy in the Nineteenth Century*, extols Rome as the “City of the Soul,” reflecting a deep reverence for its historical grandeur and the enduring influence of its past on the present. His Romantic approach portrays Rome as a living embodiment of its ancient glory, bridging the past with contemporary inspiration. In contrast, Lady Morgan’s *Italy* offers a critical view of Italian society, juxtaposing its historical beauty with contemporary political and social challenges. Her travelogue reveals her dissatisfaction with Italian governance and highlights her broader social justice and reform concerns. Mahony’s satirical writings, known for their wit and critical lens, provide another facet of the Irish perspective, adding to the discourse on Italian cultural and political issues. While Whiteside’s work emphasizes a spiritual connection to Rome’s historical legacy, Lady Morgan’s writing critiques the gap between Italy’s past splendour and present realities. Together, these accounts illustrate the diverse Irish responses to Italy, blending admiration with critical analysis and providing insights into nineteenth-century Italy’s cultural and political dynamics.

**Keywords:** Italy, Francis Mahony, James Whiteside, Lady Morgan, Ireland, Victorian, Romanticism

## 1. Introduction: European Revolutionary Movements: Ireland and Italy

In the nineteenth century, they witnessed a surge of nationalist movements across Europe, driven by a collective desire for self-determination, national unity, and independence from foreign rule. Among these movements, the Italian Risorgimento, led by figures such as Giuseppe Garibaldi, and the various nationalist struggles in Ireland stand out as two parallel efforts. Despite their differing contexts, these movements shared similar aspirations and challenges.

The Italian Risorgimento, a complex and multifaceted movement, sought to unify the fragmented Italian states and territories into a single, independent nation. Spearheaded by a strong sense of national identity and the desire to liberate Italian regions from foreign dominance (most notably from the Austrian Empire in northern Italy and the Papal States

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in central Italy), the Risorgimento was as much a cultural revival as it was a political and military struggle. The movement sought to solidify the idea of a unified Italian nation through art, literature, and music.

Garibaldi's visit to Britain in 1864 played a crucial role in strengthening Anglo-Italian relations. He was met with extraordinary enthusiasm and acclaim as a symbol of the shared values of self-determination and national independence, ideas Britain endorsed by supporting Italian unification. During his visit, Garibaldi was celebrated through high-profile events underscoring his widespread popularity. His outings to prominent sites like Woolwich Arsenal, the Crystal Palace, and Eton College drew thousands of Britons, reflecting their admiration for his accomplishments. Diplomatically, Garibaldi dined with members of the British cabinet, signifying formal recognition of his achievements and Britain's support for Italian unification.

Garibaldi's reception, including being granted the freedom of the City of London, was a testament to his revolutionary stature and a reflection of the broader solidarity between Britain and Italy during the Victorian era. This connection resonated with political values in Britain, where Garibaldi was seen as a symbol of democratic ideals and national self-determination. The visit further unified British and Italian aspirations for freedom and national unity.

Marcella Pellegrino Sutcliffe (2014) provides insightful commentary on Garibaldi's 1864 visit to London, emphasizing his efforts to remain neutral and conciliatory amidst England's complex political landscape. Garibaldi aimed to present himself as a "conciliatory liberal hero" (Sutcliffe, 2014: 44), bridging political and social divides in Britain and Italy. He was committed to maintaining his independence and neutrality, reconciling with his former ally, Giuseppe Mazzini, and reconnecting with his radical British supporters, such as George Jacob Holyoake and Joseph Cowen. Garibaldi's diplomatic balancing act reinforced Anglo-Italian ties, solidifying a sense of shared ideals and political vision.

## **2. Cultural Exchange and Irish Victorian Literature**

The cross-cultural interactions of the nineteenth century profoundly influenced Victorian literature, particularly for Irish writers, whose works reflect not only the political and social realities of Ireland but also a broader engagement with European culture. One of the most notable cultural dialogues was with Italy, a country that fascinated many Irish authors due to its rich history, artistic legacy, and contemporary political struggles.

The Italian Risorgimento became a powerful source of inspiration for Irish writers, resonating with their nationalist aspirations. Irish writers used Italian settings, characters, and themes to explore Irish identity and politics. For instance, William Butler Yeats, profoundly influenced by

the Italian Renaissance, drew parallels between Italy's quest for national unity and Ireland's struggles for independence. Italian aesthetic and intellectual movements provided fertile ground for Irish writers to explore themes of national identity, cultural revival, and the role of art in society.

Italy's artistic emphasis on beauty, form, and symbolism also influenced the stylistic choices of Irish writers. Sonnets, classical references, and Italian motifs in poetry and prose enriched Irish literature, adding a cosmopolitan dimension to works rooted in local concerns. These cultural exchanges allowed Irish writers to engage with European intellectual currents while addressing their nation's unique challenges.

Parallel struggles for independence shaped the political climates in Ireland and Italy during the Victorian era. In Ireland, the Act of Union in 1801 catalysed resistance against British rule, leading to movements led by figures like Daniel O'Connell and Charles Stewart Parnell. Movements such as the Young Irelanders of 1848 and the late nineteenth-century Land War reflected Ireland's persistent efforts to regain autonomy and national identity.

Italy's political climate was dominated by the Risorgimento, culminating in the country's unification in 1871. Figures like Garibaldi, Cavour, and Mazzini played critical roles in organizing revolutionary activities across the Italian states, striving to create a unified nation that could rival the great powers of Europe. Mazzini's vision of a republican Italy, founded on principles of individual freedom, equality, and democracy, inspired Italians and Victorian radicals in Britain, who saw Italy as a symbol of resistance and progress.

Socially, Ireland faced severe challenges during this period, mainly due to the Great Famine (1845–1852), which deepened economic disparities and fuelled a renewed sense of national consciousness. In Italy, the unification process exacerbated tensions between the industrialized north and the agricultural south, leading to persistent unrest and emigration.

Culturally, Ireland's Victorian era was marked by a Gaelic revival to restore the Irish language and traditions suppressed under British rule. This cultural resurgence paralleled Italy's efforts to create a cohesive national identity through the arts. Movements like the Scapigliatura in post-unification Italy, which challenged traditional norms, and the prominence of opera in expressing nationalist aspirations mirrored the artistic Renaissance in both countries.

### **3. Irish and Italian Relations During the Victorian Period**

During the Victorian period, Ireland and Italy shared a rich, though subtle, cultural and intellectual exchange. Both nations struggled for national identity and independence and were united by their parallel

experiences of resistance against dominant powers—Britain for Ireland and foreign-controlled regions for Italy. This shared struggle fostered a dialogue between Irish and Italian intellectuals, artists, and writers.

Irish nationalists looked to the Italian Risorgimento as a model for their struggle. Garibaldi became a revered figure in Ireland, and Italian unification was celebrated as an example of successful nationalist efforts. This admiration extended beyond politics to culture, where both nations embraced reviving their native languages and traditions.

Italy's cultural heritage influenced Irish writers such as William Butler Yeats and George Moore. Their travels to Italy exposed them to Renaissance art, classical antiquities, and Catholicism, all of which shaped their works. Italy inspired Irish writers to navigate their complex relationships with identity, nationalism, and artistic expression.

The literary exchange and cultural interactions between Ireland and Italy during the transformative Victorian era left an indelible mark on the development of Irish literary traditions. Italy, with its profound cultural heritage, provided a deep well of inspiration that significantly shaped the literary landscape in Ireland. This heritage was characterized by a rich tapestry of Renaissance art, classical literature, and Catholic tradition, each of which played a crucial role in influencing Irish writers of the period.

Italy's Renaissance art, renowned for its grandeur and innovation, offered Irish writers a new aesthetic framework to explore and express themes of beauty, morality, and the human condition. The classical literature of ancient Rome and Greece celebrated for its philosophical depth and narrative complexity, provided models for structuring literary works and exploring human themes. Furthermore, Italy's Catholic tradition, deeply embedded in its culture and daily life, resonated with Irish writers, many of whom were themselves devout Catholics.

These cultural interactions were not merely superficial. They facilitated a cross-pollination of ideas that enriched Victorian literature in Ireland. By immersing themselves in Italian art and literature, Irish writers like [James Joyce, W.B. Yeats, and Oscar Wilde] encountered new artistic and thematic possibilities. This exchange led to a creative synthesis, resulting in a distinctive literary output that blended Irish and Italian elements. The fusion of these elements is evident in the thematic exploration of beauty, spirituality, and identity in Irish literature and the adoption of Italian literary forms and styles.

For instance, the grandeur of Italian Renaissance art inspired Irish writers to adopt more elaborate and ornate styles in their work. In contrast, the thematic concerns of Italian literature, such as the exploration of identity and nationalism, were found to echo in Irish literary narratives. Similarly, the influence of Italian Catholicism contributed to the rich spiritual and religious dimensions of Irish

literature, providing a framework for exploring complex themes of faith and redemption.

This cross-cultural fertilization resulted in a literary tradition that was not only enriched by Italian influences but also uniquely Irish in its synthesis of these diverse elements. The impact of Italian culture on Irish literature during the Victorian era thus represents a significant and transformative period, where the blending of two rich literary traditions gave rise to a distinctive and influential body of work enriched by the depth and complexity of Italian influences.

The broader historical context of Irish-Italian relations during the Victorian era shaped this literary exchange. Ireland's deep Catholic roots aligned with Italy's position as the heart of the Catholic Church, fostering a shared cultural and intellectual connection. Irish expatriates in Italy, such as those residing in Rome, Florence, and Milan, created networks that furthered this exchange, enriching Irish and Italian literary traditions. Both countries' political and social circumstances facilitated a natural affinity, further deepening the cultural interactions.

In *The Romantic National Tale and the Question of Ireland* (2002), Ina Ferris reframes the notion of the "incomplete Union" between Ireland and Britain by emphasizing the dynamic role of language and public discourse. She suggests that to understand this incomplete Union, one must recognize "a sense of language and public discourse as a mobile scene of agitation and agency" rather than a static system or mere containment. Ferris argues that language and discourse are not impersonal tools but active participants in the cultural friction and resistance that characterize Irish-British relations. This "cultural friction" refers to the clash of cultural values and the resulting tension, which is a crucial aspect of the ongoing, contested space that Ferris frames the Union. This narrative is continually unfolding, where language and discourse continually reflect and shape the tensions and struggles inherent in the Irish experience. This ongoing nature of the Union keeps us engaged and interested in its evolution.

According to Alessandro Vescovi, Villa Louisa, and Paul Vita in *The Victorians and Italy: Literature, Travel, Politics, and Art* (2009, p. 16), Italy's allure for Victorian writers was not merely a political fascination. The struggles of Italians for freedom and national unity did resonate with Victorian audiences, sparking sympathetic identification and political debate. However, the authors argue that Italy's cultural legacy – its history, art, and literature – played a more profound, more pervasive role in shaping these writers' thematic and stylistic choices. This observation underscores the dual attraction of Italy during the Victorian period: it was a site of political turmoil that mirrored the Victorians' concerns with freedom and governance, but it was also a

reservoir of artistic and cultural inspiration that had shaped Western civilization for centuries.

The authors stress that the direct experience of traveling to Italy often catalysed the creative process of British writers. Their profound interest in and inspiration drawn from Italy's rich cultural heritage deepened their understanding of Italian art and history and gave them a fresh perspective often reflected in their literary works. This suggests that the physical act of being in Italy – walking through its historic cities, encountering its art firsthand, and absorbing its landscapes – was crucial in fostering the creative engagement that so many Victorian writers had with Italy.

In the context of Irish Victorian writers, Italy's cultural and historical legacy can be seen as part of a broader European engagement. Italy represented an aesthetic ideal and a space for contemplating broader themes of identity, nationalism, and artistic expression. The excerpt supports the idea that Italian culture was not just a backdrop but a central influence that shaped these writers' thematic and stylistic choices. For Irish writers, who were themselves navigating questions of national identity and cultural revival under British rule, the Italian experience provided a rich source of inspiration and a space for intellectual stimulation. Therefore, this excerpt serves as a valid entry point into exploring how travel and cultural immersion in Italy significantly impacted British and Irish Victorian literary production.

Italian culture, particularly its Renaissance heritage, played a pivotal role in shaping the aesthetic sensibilities of Irish writers. The grandeur of Italian art and architecture, the revival of classical themes, and the humanistic philosophy of the Renaissance provided a rich framework for Irish writers to explore themes of beauty, morality, and the human condition. This influence is palpable in the works of writers like Oscar Wilde and W.B. Yeats, who seamlessly integrated elements of Italian art and thought into their literary creations. For instance, Wilde's fascination with aestheticism was deeply influenced by his exposure to Italian art, which celebrated beauty and the pursuit of pleasure as central to the human experience. Similarly, Yeats's exploration of symbolism and mysticism can be traced back to his engagement with Italian Renaissance ideals, emphasizing art's spiritual and transcendent aspects.

The influence of Italian culture on Irish literature during the nineteenth century was not a superficial admiration for Italy's art, architecture, and landscapes. Instead, the unique aspects of Italian culture, particularly its political and cultural struggle during the Risorgimento, became a powerful thematic resource for Irish writers. Italy's long and tumultuous journey towards unification, its desire to consolidate its fragmented states into a single nation under one government, resonated deeply with Irish writers who were also grappling

with the question of national self-determination in the context of British colonial rule.

The Italian quest for unification during the Risorgimento offered a compelling model for Irish writers seeking parallels to Ireland's struggle against British dominance. The Risorgimento, the nineteenth-century movement for Italian political unification, was a potent symbol for Irish nationalists. Figures like Giuseppe Garibaldi, Giuseppe Mazzini, and Count Cavour emerged as heroes, representing resistance to foreign rule and the desire to reclaim cultural and political sovereignty. For Irish writers, these figures were not just revolutionary. However, they embodied the ideals of liberty, national unity, and the rejection of oppressive foreign powers, inspiring them in their struggle for independence.

Irish writers drew on these Italian experiences to articulate their own aspirations for independence. Thomas Davis, a key figure in the Young Ireland movement, championed a vision of Irish nationalism that mirrored Italian resistance models. However, Lady Morgan's travelogue *Italy* (1821) truly intertwined the Irish and Italian struggles for national sovereignty. Her work sought to rally support for the Italian cause, reflecting how deeply the two movements had intertwined. Morgan's admiration for the Italian fight for independence was infused with an implicit call for Irish nationalists to draw inspiration from Italy's revolutionary zeal.

By aligning the Irish cause with Italy's, Irish writers could frame Ireland's political struggle as part of a broader European movement for self-determination. The Italian case demonstrated to Irish nationalists that national identity could be a tool of resistance and political empowerment. Italian writers like Manzoni, who used literature to champion national unity, showed Irish writers how literature could serve as a form of cultural expression and a political tool for awakening national consciousness and inspired them to follow suit.

In addition to its political resonance, Italy's cultural revival during the Risorgimento also deeply inspired Irish writers. The Italian movement was about political unification and reviving a sense of national pride by reconnecting with Italy's ancient past and rich cultural heritage. This emphasis on cultural revival and the celebration of national history resonated with Irish intellectuals who, during the same period, were beginning to rediscover and reclaim Ireland's own past, mainly through the Celtic Revival. The shared emphasis on cultural revival and the celebration of national history created a deep bond between Italian and Irish writers, inspiring them to delve deeper into their cultural roots.

In Italy, the renewed interest in the Roman Empire, the Renaissance, and Italy's historic role as a cultural and intellectual hub



provided the Italians with a deep sense of national pride and unity. Irish writers saw the parallels in their own history, where Ireland's Celtic past and its folklore tradition and mythology were ripe for rediscovery. The Italian model encouraged Irish writers to explore their roots, drawing on ancient myths, legends, and historical figures to forge a sense of Irishness distinct from British influence. This alignment with Italy's cultural revival contributed to a burgeoning sense of Irish identity, ultimately leading to the Irish Literary Revival.

Writers like W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and John Millington Synge turned to Ireland's pre-colonial past, much like their Italian counterparts had turned to the Renaissance. They sought to reclaim a uniquely Irish cultural heritage independent of British rule, drawing heavily on folklore, mythology, and the Irish language to revive a sense of national identity. The parallels with Italy were clear – both nations were in the process of cultural rebirth, seeking to reconnect with their ancient pasts to assert modern political independence.

The Italian influence on Irish literature was crucial in shaping the Irish Literary Renaissance of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This movement, which sought to revive Irish culture, language, and literature, was directly inspired by Italy's cultural revival during the Risorgimento. Just as Italy had used its literary tradition to articulate and promote national unity, Irish writers sought to do the same.

The celebration of Ireland's mythological and historical past, a hallmark of the Irish Literary Revival, owed much to the Italian model. Italian writers had demonstrated how literature could serve as a medium for cultural and political revival, inspiring Irish writers to use their work as a platform for nationalist expression. By emphasizing Ireland's distinct cultural identity, they could promote the idea of an independent Ireland that was culturally and politically separate from Britain. The commitment of Irish writers to their cause was evident in their use of literature to promote the idea of an independent Ireland.

The Italian influence went far beyond superficial aesthetic appreciation. Italy's political and cultural struggle during the Risorgimento gave Irish writers a powerful model for exploring their national identity and political aspirations. The Italian emphasis on cultural revival and the celebration of national heritage inspired Irish writers to delve deeper into their cultural roots, leading to a literary renaissance in Ireland that mirrored the Italian experience. This connection between Italian and Irish nationalism shaped the thematic exploration of Irish literature and contributed to the broader European movement for national self-determination. Through their engagement with Italian culture, Irish writers found new ways to articulate their national identity and promote their political cause.



Cultural hybridization, stylistic innovations, and navigating complex cultural landscapes were crucial in developing Irish Victorian literature. For Victorian Irish writers, cultural hybridization incorporated diverse cultural elements into new, mixed forms that transcended singular national identities. This involved the rich traditions of Irish folklore and mythology, the dominant British literary models, and Continental Europe's artistic and intellectual currents. The synthesis of these elements resulted in a body of literature that was not purely Irish, British, or European but a distinctive amalgam of all three, reflecting the time's complex historical and cultural conditions.

#### **4. Marguerite Blessington: The Salonnière Acknowledging Italian Culture**

Journalist and novelist Marguerite Gardiner, Countess of Blessington (1789–1849), a contributor to Charles Dickens's *Daily News*, was well known for her close relationship with Lord Byron. She authored *Conversations of Lord Byron with the Countess of Blessington* (1834) and published *The Idler in Italy* in 1839.

Critic Geoffrey Hicks (2022) highlights the substantial British presence in Rome at the start of the nineteenth century, noting a diverse mix of visitors, from “young men on grand tours” to “middle-class families, aristocrats escaping the English weather,” and those in “permanent exile”. By the early 1830s, an estimated 5,000 English tourists were in Rome alone during Christmas. Many documented their experiences, offering unique insights into their time there. Marguerite, Lady Blessington, wife of the Irish Earl of Blessington, vividly described the surprising ubiquity of the English community in Rome. She noted that “Rome is filled with English” and remarked on the frequent sight of “carriages, liveries, and faces of my compatriots” on every street, making her feel as though she were “at home” despite being far from England. The presence of English shops, including a confectioner, in a country renowned for its sweets particularly amused her: “Hear it, ye gods of ancient Rome! An English confectioner in Italy, which surpasses the rest of the world in its sucrerie. The Romans laugh and shrug their shoulders at our national tastes, and well they may” (*Blessington*, 1839, Vol. II: 321–322).

Beyond her observations of the English community, Lady Blessington also offered detailed descriptions of the people she encountered, portraying them with an almost artistic sensitivity. For instance, she described La Contesse Guiccioli as having a “decidedly handsome” face with “regular and well-proportioned” features, a “delicately fair” complexion, and hair of “that rich golden tint” reminiscent of the women depicted in Titian and Giorgione's paintings. Her overall appearance, with her “exquisitely beautiful” bust and arms,

brought to mind the best portraits from the Venetian school (*Ibidem*, 1839: 357).

Lady Blessington's travelogue expresses her deep admiration for Italy's rich history and culture, offering an intriguing comparison between Dante and Shakespeare, the towering figures of Italian and English literature. She observed, "Dante is as enthusiastically talked of, and more universally read, in his own country, than Shakespeare is with us" (*Ibidem*, 1839: 24). This stark contrast in the public's engagement with Dante and Shakespeare invites the reader to delve deeper into the cultural nuances. It highlights the pervasive presence of Dante's works in Italy, where his *Divine Comedy* is central to the literary canon. In contrast, while Shakespeare is celebrated in England, his works are often studied as part of a broader English literature curriculum rather than being as deeply ingrained in the national consciousness as Dante's are in Italy.

Blessington critiques the English relationship with Shakespeare, noting that while many praise him, this admiration often comes from those who do not truly understand or appreciate his works. She points out that in England, Shakespeare's works are frequently reduced to mere cultural symbols, with his quotes used out of context, and his plays valued more for their iconic status than their literary depth. According to Blessington, this superficial engagement contrasts sharply with the Italian public's more authentic and heartfelt connection to Dante, challenging the reader to reevaluate their understanding of Shakespeare. The phrase "read Dante con amore" underscores Italians' deep and personal engagement with his works, suggesting that they approach Dante with genuine love and passion, rather than out of obligation or national pride.

Conversely, she suggests that in England, the reverence for Shakespeare sometimes lacks depth, with praise driven by societal expectations rather than a proper understanding of his works. This observation subtly critiques how literary giants are revered more out of habit than genuine engagement, underscoring the societal pressure that often dictates public perceptions of Shakespeare.

Blessington's reflections highlight differences in how Dante and Shakespeare are revered in their respective countries, emphasizing the authenticity and depth of the Italian public's love for Dante. She praises the Italian approach as a model for more sincere and passionate literary engagement that transcends national pride and fosters a deeper connection with the works themselves.

## **5. Francis Mahony's Italy: The Democratic Heart of Art Appreciation**

Reverend Francis Mahony (1804–1866) began his literary career in 1834, contributing to *Fraser's Magazine* for three years. He also wrote

for *Bentley's Magazine*, edited by Charles Dickens, who later sent him to Rome in 1846 as a correspondent for *The Daily News*. Mahony held this post for twelve years before moving to Paris in 1858, where he continued as a correspondent for *The Globe*, remaining there for the rest of his life.

Writing under the pseudonym Father Prout, Mahony offered profound insights into the Italian people's deep connection to art in his *Songs of Italy*. He famously described Italy as the "climate of art," capturing the pervasive artistic atmosphere throughout the country. Mahony noted that even the peasantry, who regularly gained access to public art collections due to the "wise munificence of the reigning princes," displayed "an instinctive admiration of the capi d'opera of the most celebrated masters" (Mahony, 1881: 222). He was particularly struck by this "innate perception", which he regarded as the "birthright of every son of Italy" (*Ibidem*), suggesting that the ability to appreciate art was deeply embedded in Italian identity. This celebration of Italy's cultural wealth should instil in readers a sense of pride and appreciation for the country's rich artistic heritage.

Mahony's reflection challenges the stereotype that cultural refinement and artistic taste are exclusive to the upper classes or those with formal education. He was often "surprised" by the insightful comments of Roman artisans and the inhabitants of the surrounding hills as they wandered through the Vatican gallery, demonstrating that even those without formal training could discern and appreciate the quality and significance of great works of art.

By highlighting the art appreciation skills of the Italian peasantry and artisans, Mahony underscores a more democratic and widespread distribution of cultural wealth in Italy. He attributes this widespread artistic instinct to the accessibility of art collections and the enlightened policies of Italian rulers. These policies, which included the establishment of public art collections and the promotion of art education, played a significant role in democratizing art appreciation. Their contributions to the country's cultural wealth, Mahony suggests, should be recognized and appreciated by all citizens, regardless of social standing, fostering a sense of respect for Italian rulers' roles in shaping the country's cultural landscape.

Mahony presents Italy as a country where art is integral to everyday life. He celebrates the idea that genuine appreciation of art does not require wealth or formal education but can be an innate gift nurtured by exposure and a deep cultural connection to artistic masterpieces. His reflections offer a compelling commentary on the universal and democratic nature of art appreciation in Italy, suggesting it as a model for integrating art into national identity and everyday life.

In his article "From Cork [...] to St. Peter's Cupola': The Idea of Italy in the Writings of Francis Sylvester Mahony" (2016), Fergus Dunne

emphasizes that Francis Mahony, in his Italian series, celebrated Italy's rich literary culture while steering clear of typical Romantic notions of British superiority. Dunne notes that Mahony's narrative is "notable in its refusal to impose an improving metanarrative on contemporary Italian squalor and deprivation" (Dunne, 2016: 179). Instead, unlike his British counterparts, who often found themselves "stranded" among an "ignorant, restive peasantry," Mahony used the idea of Italy to fulfill a "positive, multi-purpose role" (*Ibidem*) in his scholarly writings.

Mahony viewed Italian culture as an enduring model of "intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic perfection" (*Ibidem*), drawn from ancient Rome, Christianity, Petrarchan ideals, and the Renaissance. This ideal provided solace amid the social unrest and political upheavals of post-Emancipation Ireland. However, when commissioned in late 1845 by Charles Dickens to write Italian letters for *The Daily News*, Mahony was forced to "revisit the guiding ideal of Italy enshrined in his Prout writings" (*Ibidem*), adjusting his views to reflect developments in pre-revolutionary Rome.

Despite his enthusiasm for Italian culture, Mahony's relationship with Charles Dickens was not without tension. When Mahony invited Dickens to edit and introduce a collected volume of his Roman journalism, Dickens responded with a "perfunctory, single-sentence statement," merely acknowledging their formal literary relationship. In return, Mahony criticized Dickens's travelogue, *Pictures from Italy* (1846), for its "largely apolitical, impressionistic" approach, accusing Dickens of having "simply daguerreotyped the glorious landscape, the towered cities, and the motley groups". Mahony offered only "faint praise" for what he called a "pleasant" work, using his critique to align Dickens with the Romantic travelers he had previously castigated in the "Prout Papers" (*Ibidem*).

## 6. Rome, The City of the Soul

Irish lawyer and politician James Whiteside (1804–1876), author of *Italy in the Nineteenth Century* (1848) and translator of Luigi Canina's *Indicazione Topografica Di Roma Antica* (published in English as *Vicissitudes of the Eternal City* in 1849), is recognized for his praise of Leopold II's administrative reforms in Tuscany and his critical stance on Austrian and papal rule. His portrayal of Italian revolutionaries as potential Anglicans and English-style radicals elicited criticism from the ultra-Tory *Quarterly Review*. However, his controversial comparison of Italian disaster relief efforts with the inadequate response to the Irish famine, attributing Ireland's failures to religious and political divisions, sparked heated debates.

In his travel account *Italy in the Nineteenth Century, Contrasted with Its Past Condition* (1848), Whiteside expresses a profound

reverence for Rome, calling it “the City of the Soul”. He reflects on how its “venerable walls” evoke “burning thoughts” even in the “coldest heart” and how they animate the “famous men of the mighty republic”, including Coriolanus, Scipio, and Caesar. Whiteside’s depiction of Rome is imbued with personal exultation as he imagines the spirits of these historical figures still haunting the streets, providing him with a direct connection to the past. He views Rome not merely as a city of ruins but as a place where its historical grandeur continues to inspire and influence the present, embodying a spiritual communion with the ideals of a bygone era (Whiteside, 1848, vol. II: 37).

Whiteside’s writing vividly captures the awe and admiration that Rome evokes, especially for those deeply invested in its historical legacy. He portrays Rome as a place where time stands still, allowing visitors to connect profoundly with the past. His imagination brings the ancient city to life, populated with “famous men of the mighty republic” such as Coriolanus, Scipio, Brutus, and Caesar as if their spirits still wander the streets. This depiction not only suggests that Rome’s history is not just remembered but remains actively alive but also captivates the reader, transporting them to “the theatre of their illustrious actions” (*Ibidem*).

This passage exemplifies Whiteside’s Romantic approach to history, where the past is not merely studied but imaginatively relived. He emphasizes his profound emotional and intellectual engagement with Rome’s history, portraying it as a place where the grandeur of the past continues to inspire the present. Whiteside’s reflections go beyond admiring Rome’s physical remnants; they convey a deep spiritual connection to the ideals and achievements of a bygone era, showcasing the enduring power of Rome’s legacy.

Whiteside’s translation of Luigi Canina’s *Indicazione Topografica Di Roma Antica* was published in English as *The Vicissitudes of the Eternal City or Ancient Rome*, with notes classical and historical in 1849. It thoroughly explores Ancient Rome, providing an in-depth account of its rise and fall and the intricate tapestry of its cultural and political evolution. The author meticulously examines various facets of Roman life, including art, architecture, religion, and social structure, offering a rich and nuanced perspective on the empire’s grandeur and complexities. By drawing parallels to modern societies, the book also highlights the enduring relevance of Ancient Roman history.

The text is rich in classical and historical annotations that enrich the narrative with additional context and insight into Roman history’s key events and influential figures. These notes illuminate the intricate connections between historical developments and their broader cultural implications, enhancing the reader’s understanding of Ancient Rome’s enduring impact, leaving them enlightened and inspired. It is an

invaluable resource for anyone fascinated by the history of Ancient Rome and its lasting legacy. This scarce antiquarian book is a facsimile reprint of the original edition and may include some imperfections, such as library markings and annotations. Despite these minor flaws, the book remains a significant cultural artifact.

The Preface of *The Vicissitudes* outlines the book's aims and unique enhancements, serving as a "suitable companion" to the volumes titled *Italy in the Nineteenth Century* and a practical "hand-book for travelers" (Whiteside, 1849: vi-vii). This volume expands on Canina's work, which focuses solely on the public buildings of Rome. Whiteside introduces a new chapter on the "street architecture of Ancient Rome" and the "domestic comforts" of its citizens, providing a more comprehensive view of Rome's evolution. The book also details the "restoration works" carried out during the French administration of Rome and meticulously corrects errors in Canina's classical references, often misprinted or mistaken in the original Italian text.

In the "Introductory Observations", the translator highlights Cavaliere Canina's significant advantages due to "modern discoveries," the "labours of the French", and the "researches of Niebuhr and Bunsen" (Idem, 1849: 2). These scholars' contributions have significantly enriched our understanding of Rome's history and architecture. He underlines that his entire career has been dedicated to antiquarian studies, earning him a well-deserved and widespread reputation. The honorific title he holds reflects his distinguished expertise in archaeology.

## **7. The Ungentle Traveller: Lady Morgan and the Italy of the Risorgimento**

Writing about Julia Kavanagh's 1858 two-volume travelogue *Summer and a Winter in the Two Sicilies*, Anne O'Connor comments on the strikingly "strong female presence in Irish travel writing on Italy in the nineteenth century", mentioning such names as Lady Morgan, Catherine Wilmot, Lady Blessington, Anna Jameson, and Julia Kavanagh. She notes that for a traveler like Lady Morgan, "travel writing was a genre that allowed her to write extensively on politics and society, a realm which might otherwise have been considered out of bounds for a female writer" (O'Connor, 2017: 15-16). According to the Irish researcher, "From the 1820s, women pushed the boundaries of what was possible in travel writing on Europe, and the Irishwoman Lady Morgan was to the fore in redefining the genre for women" (*Ibidem*: 17).

Not surprisingly, in her *Memoirs* (1820), Lady Morgan confesses her relief after returning safely from "such a long journey as we have made throughout Italy, not to have met with an accident, and in a country too, part of which is infested with bandits; but the fatigue was killing,



accommodation wretched, and expense tremendous” (Morgan, 1820, p. 139; qtd in O’Connor, p. 2).

Lady Morgan (née Sydney Owenson, 1776-1859) was one of the early voices of the Irish literary revival, contributing significantly to the formation of Irish national identity in the 19th century. Her novels, most notably *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), played a crucial role in shaping the discourse on Irish culture and politics. Lady Morgan’s works often depicted Ireland in a sympathetic light, challenging the prevailing English narratives that portrayed the Irish as uncivilized and barbaric. Bridget Matthews-Kane notes the dual identities that Lady Spencer grappled with throughout her life. By the time Sydney Owenson published *The Wild Irish Girl*, Lady Spencer had already lived a life that “straddled the major divisions of her colonial society”. She navigated between Irish and English, Gaelic and Anglo-Irish, Catholic and Protestant, rural and urban, upper class, middle class, and peasant. Even after 1806, her life continued to reflect this ambiguous status. Despite being proud of her social standing, she “stubbornly clung to her ‘humble’ Irish identity” (Matthews-Kane, 2003: 9). This resilience in the face of societal expectations is genuinely inspiring.

In *The Wild Irish Girl*, she used the romantic genre to explore themes of national identity, cultural pride, and the political issues facing Ireland under British rule. Sydney Owenson’s portrayal of Irish characters, particularly Glorvina, the “wild Irish girl”, highlighted the Irish people’s nobility, intelligence, and cultural richness. Through her romanticized yet politically charged narratives, the author sought to counteract the negative stereotypes of the Irish that were prevalent in English literature of the time. Her work was not only famous in Ireland but also in England, where it helped to shift perceptions of Irish culture. J. C. Beckett comments that *The Wild Irish Girl* “became immensely popular with an English public that was even more ignorant of the realities of Irish rural life than the author herself”, and the Irish novel “hitherto unheard of, became a recognized genre” (Beckett, 1981: 105). Ina Ferris thinks that “*The Wild Irish Girl* not only offers a history of Ireland countering the official London-based narrative, but it also sets up an elaborate subtext of footnotes in which a personal, authorial voice criticizes, revises, comments, and otherwise engages a plethora of texts on Ireland written from different points of view (and sometimes in different languages)” (Ferris, 1996: 291).

In *Reading the Irish Woman: Studies in Cultural Encounter and Exchange, 1714–1960*, Gerardine Meaney, Mary O’Dowd, and Bernadette Whelan trace the evolution of Sydney Owenson’s ideas. Her goal in *The Wild Irish Girl* was “to delineate the character of woman in the perfection of its natural state”. This idea is further developed in her final book, *Woman and Her Master*, where she explores the complexities of female identity and



autonomy. This evolution reflects Lady Morgan's deepening engagement with issues of gender and power, both in Ireland and across Europe.

In *The Wild Irish Girl* and other works, Lady Morgan critiques the traditional portrayal of Irish women as passive and submissive, instead presenting them as strong, independent figures capable of significant influence. Her depiction of women in Irish society challenges stereotypes and highlights the potential for female agency and empowerment. By situating Irish women as central to her narratives, Lady Morgan not only redefines the representation of women in Irish literature but also contributes to broader discussions on gender roles and social expectations. She creates a counter-narrative that asserts the significance of Irish women in shaping national and cultural identity.

Lady Morgan's travel writing, published as *Italy* (1821), offers a distinct perspective on Italian society and history. Her observations reflect a complex interplay of admiration and critique. Although she acknowledges the beauty and historical significance of Italy, she is often critical of its political and social conditions. This ambivalence highlights her broader concerns about governance and social justice, resonating with her nationalist and reformist views.

Lady Morgan's descriptions of Italian cities are marked by a critical eye, reflecting her dissatisfaction with the political and social realities of the time. Her observations on Rome, for instance, underscore the contrast between the city's grandeur and its contemporary condition. She is acutely aware of the discrepancies between the historical splendour of Italy and the more disheartening aspects of its present state. Her travelogue is infused with a sense of disappointment and frustration, particularly with the state of Italian governance and society. This critical perspective is consistent with her broader political views, which often challenged established systems and advocated for reform.

In *Italy*, Lady Morgan contrasts the beauty and historical significance of Italian cities with their contemporary political and social challenges. Her travel writing is marked by a critical tone, reflecting her disappointment with the state of Italian governance and society. This ambivalence underscores her broader concerns about social justice and reform, resonating with her nationalist and reformist views.

## Conclusions

The literary exchange and cultural interactions between Ireland and Italy during the Victorian era impacted Irish literary traditions. The influence of Italian culture, from Renaissance art to Catholic spirituality, provided Irish writers with new thematic and stylistic tools that enriched their work and contributed to developing a distinctive Irish literary voice. This cross-cultural exchange not only deepened the artistic and intellectual life of Irish writers but also helped to position Irish literature

within the broader context of European literary movements, where it continues to be celebrated for its unique blend of influences.

The Irish Revival, a pivotal movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, marked a renaissance of Irish culture, language, and national identity. While its roots were deeply embedded in rediscovering Ireland's Gaelic traditions and heritage, the movement did not develop in isolation. Among the various cultural and nationalist inspirations that shaped the Irish Revival, Italy's rich historical, artistic, and political legacy played a significant role. The Italian Renaissance, the Risorgimento, and Italy's Catholic tradition provided both a model and a source of inspiration for Irish intellectuals, artists, and nationalists as they sought to revive and assert their national identity.

One of the most profound influences on the Irish Revival was the Italian Renaissance, a period of immense cultural and intellectual growth in Italy that saw the revival of classical art, literature, and humanism. The leaders of the Irish Revival, such as W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, were deeply inspired by the Renaissance's emphasis on rediscovering and celebrating a nation's cultural roots. They saw the Renaissance as a powerful example of how a nation could rejuvenate itself by returning to its historical and cultural origins.

This translated into a renewed focus on Ireland's Gaelic language, folklore, and mythology. Just as the Italian Renaissance sought to revive the classical past of ancient Rome and Greece, the Irish Revival aimed to resurrect the stories, traditions, and language of Ireland's ancient Celtic past. This cultural reawakening was not just about looking back; it was about using the past to create a vibrant national identity that could unite the Irish people and distinguish them from their British colonizers.

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