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book review of

*Aloysius O'Kelly: Art, Nation, Empire* by Niamh O'Sullivan

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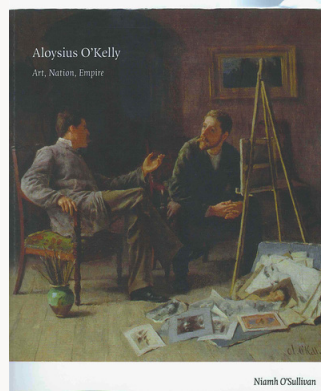
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Niamh O'Sullivan,  
*Aloysius O'Kelly: Art, Nation, Empire*.  
Dublin: Field Day Publications, University of Notre Dame, 2010.  
358 pp.; 122 color and 64 b&w illus.; catalog, notes, index.  
\$45.00  
ISBN: 978-0-946755-42-4

Niamh O'Sullivan's book forms part of a sustained development in scholarship on the history of art in Ireland. This expansion continues apace: the department of art history at University College Dublin was fifty years old in 2016, and the year before saw the publication of the five-volume *Art and Architecture of Ireland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), showcasing the research of a multitude of specialists, O'Sullivan included. Modern Irish culture has been defined by its literary contributions: everyone knows Irish poets and writers, but relatively few are acquainted with Irish painters, sculptors, architects, or draftsmen. The forms of Irish visual art that are widely known are generally perceived to convey Celtic roots: the *Book of Kells* (ca. 800 C. E.), for instance, and other illuminated manuscripts, along with examples of ninth-century enamel work, such as the Ardagh Chalice. A bias against more recent art crept in: as in any colonial situation, art tends to be associated with works commissioned by the ruling class, leading to irresolvable questions of what counts as authentically Irish. The Sam Maguire Cup, commissioned five years after the establishment of the Irish Free State and awarded every year to the winners of the All-Ireland Final in Gaelic football, is a copy of the Ardagh Chalice. Patronage, and the entire market system, had to be seen through a different lens, and much interpretation needed to be done on work by artists from neglected centuries. Scholars across Ireland took up the challenge—the last several years in particular, have been rich in published evidence of what is now a newly substantial tradition of research.

Niamh O'Sullivan (pronounced "Neeve") has become one of the most influential voices in this renaissance. An inspirational force for the study of art history and visual culture during her teaching career at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin, O'Sullivan has now brought her considerable energies to a curatorial role in Ireland's Great Hunger Museum at Quinnipiac University. Since the museum's founding its publications have included essays from the leading voices in Irish Studies, including Luke Gibbons, Christine Kinealy, and Angela Bourke. Aloysius O'Kelly was an ideal choice for O'Sullivan, because his variegated career requires interpretation not only in terms of art history (much of this book is

composed of groundbreaking primary research and interpretation), but also cultural studies in general (because it is necessary to understand his curious career choices in terms of Empire versus nation, center versus periphery, and kingdom vis-à-vis colony). A study of O’Kelly is also timely given last year’s many events in Ireland commemorating the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising.<sup>[1]</sup>

O’Kelly is one of the most important painters to emerge from nineteenth-century Ireland; he was also among the most elusive and certainly the most radically politicized. As a teenager, he added an “O” to the family name to make the common-or-garden variety “Kelly” that bit more Irish. His four equally scrappy siblings did the same. It was one of the few obviously politicized gestures they could make, given that the oath-bound society of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (also known as the Fenians), founded in 1858, had already claimed them as enthusiastic members.

Chapter 1 gives a complete picture of O’Kelly’s upbringing in a highly politicized, Republican family, first in Dublin (he was born in 1853), and then in London. We are introduced to the Dublin life that O’Kelly forged for himself, and to the exploits of his brother James, whose life reads “like a *Boy’s Own* adventure story,” including trips to the Sudan, Cuba, Mexico, and the United States, all under police surveillance (9). Chapter 2, “The Making of an Artist,” presents O’Kelly studying in Paris, a city O’Sullivan describes as “a satellite city of radical Irish nationalism” (16). O’Sullivan presents one of the most vivid accounts I have read of the draconian disciplines at Jean-Léon Gérôme’s studio, with its six-day weeks and early morning risings, and she provides a detailed picture of the centrality of his studio for international artists. Chapter 3 plunges us into the Land Wars in Ireland (1879–1882), characterized by rent strikes, organized resistance to evictions, and what became known as boycotting (a term coined in County Mayo in the year the Land Wars began). O’Kelly drew many scenes during these tumultuous years, which were engraved and printed in the *Illustrated London News*. The chapter ends with an account of Vincent van Gogh’s admiration for what he called O’Kelly’s “fifty sheets about Ireland” (74). Chapter 4, “The Connemara Crucible,” centers on what is arguably the most important Irish painting of the entire nineteenth century, O’Kelly’s *Mass in a Connemara Cabin* (1884, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin), which was shown in the 1884 Paris Salon. It depicts a sacrament being celebrated not in a church, but in a domestic dwelling, a change of location originally necessitated by the Church’s institutional suppression in Ireland but which popular tradition then enveloped. O’Kelly’s large canvas (4 1/2 by 6 feet) was the only history painting shown at the Salon in the nineteenth century with an Irish subject, but one not taken from history or mythology—O’Kelly chose a scene from contemporary Irish rural experience. Chapter 5 transports us to an entirely different context: O’Kelly’s work in the Sudan as Special Correspondent for the illustrated newspaper *The Pictorial World*. O’Kelly and his brother saw the resistance to British rule as a global problem, extending beyond their previous experience in Ireland. Chapter 6, “Irish Orientalism,” argues that O’Kelly’s scenes of marketplaces and mosque interiors, mainly in Cairo, differ from other examples of such motifs by other Orientalists. O’Sullivan points out how O’Kelly was able to project his resistance to colonial authority by his carefully observed scenes of café culture, which avoid the predictable scenes of harems and stereotypical indolence. Chapter 7 returns us to France, where we follow O’Kelly’s visits to small Breton towns and ports in the 1870s and learn how the region retained its allure for O’Kelly into later decades. Chapter 8, “The Art of Concealment,” is about a painter named Arthur Oakley; O’Sullivan argues that he may be O’Kelly, working across locations and under one of several

pseudonyms. After ceaselessly moving around Europe and Africa starting in the late 1870s, O’Kelly emigrated to the United States in 1895, where he died in 1936. The last chapter covers a collection of episodes of the last decade of O’Kelly’s life, including the story of how Samuel Clemens may have selected O’Kelly as the illustrator of *Huckleberry Finn*. The book ends with O’Kelly’s first complete catalogue raisonné.

This is a remarkable and complex book about an unusually challenging career. I would like to take the remainder of this review to bring out some of the arguments that are of interest to the larger context of a nineteenth-century art history, where Paris might remain the capital, but in ever more variegated form. I concentrate on the role a number of O’Kelly’s works (1881 to 1884) played in giving visual form to an emerging sense of Irish national identity. After all, O’Kelly earned his laurels at the *Illustrated London News*—where he was “Special Artist”; a coveted designation within Victorian journalism’s highly competitive world, which helped inaugurate international reportage in terms of both word and image—by his charting of the Land Wars. Nowhere were these conflicts more deeply etched than on Ireland’s western seaboard. Well into the twentieth century however, nineteenth-century specificities—the extent of continuing impoverishment in subsistence communities, especially those in Connemara with their particularly humble versions of the iconic vernacular dwelling, the thatched cottage—would melt into a “a ubiquitous picturesque view of indigenous Ireland,” as Yvonne Scott has put it.<sup>[2]</sup> In the small scale, sky-dominated landscapes of Paul Henry, much disseminated after 1925 (in that year Henry’s paintings started to appear on posters for British railway companies) the iconic, fine art version of this view became fixed as—crucially—depopulated. At the same time, awareness of the contribution made by an overseas training to depictions of the Irish landscape was eroded. For example, the Impressionist use of a white ground was learned by Henry at the Académie Julian and decisive for his trademark high cloud banks set over pastel-hued, matte-painted lakes and mountains with occasional cottages in the middle ground as slices of ocher with white. Meanwhile, the unedifying consequences of a myopic focus on an “indigenous Ireland” had its most famous twentieth-century airing in the character of the Citizen from the Cyclops episode of *Ulysses* (1922).

But in 1879, the year the Land League was founded to counter “vicious landlordism” across Ireland, such coarsening lay in the future (94). Until the arrival, via O’Kelly and others, of what O’Sullivan calls a new “ethnographic realism,” the repertoire (“the round tower, the wolf hound and the harp”) tapped by artists provided nothing of the western seaboard’s affective depth, its potential to offer “spiritual, cultural and social values [to] the nation” (3, 86). To be sure, cosmopolitan elites across late nineteenth-century Europe flocked to rural fringes. As O’Sullivan emphasizes however, to stress parallels is to underestimate the stricken state of the west of Ireland in that period. The playwright J. M. Synge toured Connemara in 1905 in the company of the painter Jack B. Yeats (brother of the poet) but it was not a creative endeavor. Synge was filing reports on the Congested Districts (named as such in 1891 when a Board was set up to alleviate suffering in the west). This bears out O’Sullivan’s observations that “attempts to represent the desolation of the west of Ireland on canvas” were “notably few” given that “the grim social realities” and “manifold miseries” called for “denunciation rather than representation” (94). Trips to Brittany then—made by O’Kelly and later by Synge—cannot be considered Celtic preludes to Connemara. Unlike “notionally quaint Breton

villages,” to quote O’Sullivan, those in the west of Ireland were still “on the verge of famine” due to landlordism (94).

Amid desolate poverty though, the “abundance and fluency of the foreign tongue,” to quote Synge in 1907, struck the ethnographic realists.<sup>[3]</sup> A new enthusiasm for the Irish language was key to new “spiritual, cultural and social values” for the nation. In 1903, a few years after his language classes on the Aran Islands overlapped with those of Synge, Patrick Pearse, who read out the Proclamation of the Republic on Easter Monday 1916, set his links to Connemara in stone by building a cottage on the side of a mountain lake. O’Kelly was a pioneer of such immersion. (Memories of honing his language skills—adding to a repertoire that included French and Arabic—may have inspired the London-born artist to tell census takers in 1920 that Irish was his “mother tongue” [229].) More importantly though, O’Kelly had made his own lakeside Connemara cottage into a studio where he painted *Mass in a Connemara Cabin*.

The *Mass* remains “the only painting of an Irish subject ever seen” in the Paris Salon. As O’Sullivan argues, it is O’Kelly’s chef d’oeuvre. Critics in turn-of-the-century New York might later claim him as one, but O’Kelly, as O’Sullivan emphasizes, was “no pastoralist” (93). By setting a painted scene in Connemara (the *Mass* was one of several), O’Kelly took on a challenge, avoided by many, of depicting a “lived reality” so awful that it “almost defied the limits of artistic representation” (94). Twelve years after his arrival in Hibernophile Paris, O’Kelly used the unparalleled resources his training had given him to make the west’s inhabitants, not its scenery, the focus. Imposing in scale, multifigural and, as befitting a student of Gérôme, impeccably researched in all details, the *Mass* announces a belief that history painting was still viable if it was studiously updated. With Daniel O’Connell’s signature achievement of Catholic Emancipation still relatively recent (1829), celebrating the sacraments in domestic settings (“the Stations”) lingered on; by the late nineteenth century, they were settled in place on the rural calendar. Ernest Renan archly noted how their remunerative potential made them a clergy favorite (88). In setting a religious compass toward the provincial, Gustave Courbet’s *Burial at Ornans* (1848–49, Musée d’Orsay, Paris) was O’Kelly’s precedent: O’Sullivan identifies, for example, the *Burial*’s “radical use of white” in “an inverted triangle” which structures the *Mass*, “from the priest, to the young woman, to the girl, to the white cloth hanging on the far side of the dresser” (90). O’Sullivan argues that the *Mass* also “stands almost in a sequential relation to van Gogh’s *Potato Eaters* (1885, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam), the interior of the cabins being virtually interchangeable” (75).

The *Mass* sought singularity as an arresting *tableau*—storied Salon criteria was met by subject matter drawn from a completely new social source. O’Kelly’s constant crossing between worlds of exhibition venue and press is among the topics treated in the tour de force that is O’Sullivan’s chapter three. Time spent in front of an easel could give way at will to stints on location, and the years just prior to the exhibition of the *Mass* were those in which “O’Kelly’s output was at its height” (76). As a “Special Artist,” O’Kelly “stamped his stock of subversive images on the pages” of the *Illustrated London News*, “that powerful organ of empire” (2). A discussion that ranges from William Ivins to Roland Barthes leaves us in no doubt as to O’Kelly’s fluidity. In an *ILN* page, *The State of Ireland: Arrested under the Coercion Act: A Sketch at Roscommon Railway Station* (December 3, 1881) O’Sullivan parses the artist as invested participant, adroit on-the-spot reporter and peerless contributor to pictorial journalism’s

new, veritably communal, and highly specialized process of box-wood engraving. The context of demotic immersion occasions van Gogh’s second appearance in O’Sullivan’s book. The *Potato Eaters* and the *Mass* belong in a sequence, she argues: both depict a frozen moment updated from Jacques-Louis David. The neoclassical frieze receives a horizontal rescaling and re-adjusted massing in vernacular scenography. O’Sullivan avoids source hunting and influence speculation. Between 1882 and 1883 was the most likely period in which van Gogh was musing over his “fifty sheets about Ireland,” using them to fuel the “serial approach” he used for the *Potato Eaters*’ preparatory work (74). What attracted van Gogh to O’Kelly’s pictorial journalism was collectivity: he “was struck” by O’Kelly’s command of “serial publication” (75). These “fifty sheets” are crowd scenes. They’re not simply impassioned (although O’Kelly portrayed violent assaults); they also depict the orderly and somber (the fields of an incarcerated Land Leaguer tilled by fellow tenants; a prison spell for Charles Stewart Parnell and entourage). Rarely is there a heroic focus. O’Kelly responded to what O’Sullivan calls “the unities of a mobilized group of people, engaged in escalating collective action” (41). These unities made Irish nationalism in the 1880s a movement no longer local in effect. O’Kelly’s resistance to hierarchy—also inscribed in the *Mass*—was in accord with Anna Parnell’s resolve not to elevate “particular individuals” in her account of the Land League (43). In *Tale of a Great Sham*, Parnell’s sister announced that “it does not matter what particular individual” carried out “any particular actions” except in so far as he or she “represent[ed] a number of persons” (43).

I have highlighted just a few points in a landmark publication. O’Kelly is not an easy subject for an art historian: he was unusually international, unusually politically engaged, and a master of compartmentalization. At the same time that he was gauging the drying times of glazes—for details like the “tattered and torn” chromolithograph of the Sacred Heart found at the center of the upper-third portion of the *Mass*—he was in the thick of a “stuttering and shrieking” (John Ruskin’s description, quoted by O’Sullivan) world of mass journalism then being fashioned by new forms of reproductive printmaking, chromolithography included (90, 67). But O’Sullivan excels at pacing a complicated story—her account of the indefatigable O’Kelly installing himself at the heart of the Sudanese insurrection kept me rapt—and her subject’s incorrigible duplicity never fails to amuse her. At 67, the artist couldn’t help but continue to palm off authority figures with inaccurate information—in this case the United States Census. All par for the course in a life strewn with aliases, “secret addresses, disappearances, invisible ink, false passports,” and “destroyed letters” (9).

*Aloysius O’Kelly: Art, Nation, Empire* is a remarkable, beautifully written book that deserves the widest possible readership among specialists in nineteenth-century European and American painting.

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## Notes

[1] Details on Ireland's Decade of Centenaries from 2011 onwards (the Census of Ireland was conducted in 1912, in the following year, the Dublin Lock-Out took place; Ireland's contribution to the Great War began to be marked in 2014, and so on) can be found on, for example, <http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie>, accessed October 27, 2016.

[2] Yvonne Scott, "Assessment," in Rachael Ziady DeLue and James Elkins, eds., *Landscape Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 254.

[3] J. M. Synge, *The Aran Islands* (Dublin: Maunsell, 1907), 2.