

Richard Murphy's *The God Who Eats Corn: A Colonizer's Critique of British Imperialism in Ireland and Africa*

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Abstract

With the passing of Richard Murphy in 2018, Ireland lost its last poet of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. Yet his poetry often displays the poet's sense of unease with his background and features attempts to reconcile Ireland's colonial history with feelings of guilt and self-consciousness as an inheritor to the gains of the British imperialist project. A dedicatory poem to his aging father who had retired to what was then known as Southern Rhodesia (modern-day Zimbabwe), 'The God Who Eats Corn' draws parallels between Irish and African colonial experiences. Yet far from celebrating the 'civilizing' mission of British imperialism, Murphy deftly challenges and questions the legitimacy of his family legacy. I argue that rather than reinforcing the poet's image as representative of the Ascendancy class, 'The God Who Eats Corn' reveals sympathies with the subject peoples of British imperialism and aligns Murphy with a nationalist narrative of history and conception of 'native' identity. For this reason, the poem should be considered a landmark of modern Irish poetics in its articulation of trans-racial anti-colonial solidarity.

Keywords

Irish Nationalism, Postcolonialism, British Imperialism, Rhodesia, Colonizer, Colonial Identity

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Introduction

As a member of the Protestant aristocracy, with deep historical and familial ties to British imperialism, Richard Murphy wrote from a privileged position that distanced him from his majority Catholic, nationalist countrymen of the Irish Republic. Given to such labels as 'the laureate of the Protestant gentry' (Murphy and Kelly 152) and the last Anglo-Irish poet (Crotty 149, Grennan 234) or placed beneath the banner of 'Empire' (Quinn 131), Murphy has long been an outlier in critical discourse on modern Irish poetry. While the hallmarks of his caste (Anglicanism, nobility, Englishness) fly in the face of the popularly received notion of authentic Irish identity (Catholicism, republicanism, Gaelicism), it would be a mistake to too closely associate the stereotypical attitudes of the poet's social background with the poetry itself. Indeed, upon close examination of the poet's work, we witness an at-times transgressive attitude towards the history, role, and legacy of British imperialism, from which his own family's elevated status and bounty is derived. Perhaps nowhere is the ambivalence towards the imperial aspects of his heritage more vividly and innovatively expressed than in his 1963 sequence, 'The God Who Eats Corn'.

Commissioned by the *Sunday Times*, the poem's publication was set to coincide with the dismantling of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (Central African Federation) in December 1963. However, 'The God Who Eats Corn' was trumped by a story about the pope's surprise visit to Jerusalem; it was eventually broadcast by the BBC and published in *The Listener* and *The Reporter* before its inclusion in *The Battle of Aughrim* (1968). It has been one of the most overlooked and misunderstood poems in Murphy's oeuvre. In 1989, the editor at Murphy's publisher Faber and Faber refused to include it in *New Selected Poems*, an omission which kept the book from being a volume of collected works. Patrick Cotter has posited that such lazy misapprehension and misreading of the poem's enduring theme of colonial guilt as unreconstructed

imperialism negatively affected Murphy's reputation (Cotter). Murphy had 'perceived the poem as a portrait of a good man behaving as well as possible in a bad situation not of his making', taking pains to note that while his father, William Lindsay Murphy, had dedicated his life in service to empire, he also 'went against the grain [politically] of a massive majority of white settlers' and had 'won the respect of Africans' (Murphy *Kick* 236-237). The elder Murphy's list of appointments within the empire include the mayor of Colombo in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), governor of the Bahamas, and general-governor of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (now Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Malawi). Upon retirement, William stayed in Southern Rhodesia and established a farm that offered employment, education, and medical services to the local black Africans in an area that had hitherto offered none of the sorts in the modern sense.

In truth, the poet inherited a distinguished pedigree from both paternal and maternal lines. It was from a fifteenth-century ancestor on his mother's side from whom the family inherited the 'Big House' in County Mayo in which Richard was born in 1927. The term, 'Big House', has specific connotations:

[...] from the eighteenth century on, it was the center of wealth, power, and influence. These Big Houses were normally inhabited by Ascendancy families, Anglo-Irish in blood and Anglican in faith [...] it is broadly true that they were far removed from their fellow-countrymen in political loyalty, religion, and education. Their way of life and social outlook seemed to belong to another world. (Mortimer 209)

Colloquially called by others and themselves as 'The English in Ireland', one can imagine the state of uncertainty and trepidation as to their place in the country following the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 and the eventual declaration of the Irish Republic in 1948. Independent Ireland was a nationalist, anti-colonial state that operated under a Catholic ethos and harbored many Anglophobic sentiments. As the conditions for Irish identity and belonging were largely set according to the tenets of the then-current cultural nationalism, Murphy, as a Southern Protestant of the 'Big House' tradition, must negotiate, and make legitimate, a place for himself in Ireland under such terms. One of the ways in which he attempts to do so is by bristling against the tradition of British imperialism and its associated violence and hypocrisies.

'The God Who Eats Corn' is novel in its approach by using an African corollary to reflect on the Irish colonial experience. While trying to maintain its tender dedication to the poet's father, the poem, through its use of language, imagery, and allusion, increasingly undermines the legacy and values that the father represents. Where the poem fails in honoring William, it succeeds as a singular example of anti-colonial sentiment from, paradoxically, the point of view of the colonial persona of its author. As the persona seeks to distance itself from the negative trappings of colonial identity, the poem more closely aligns to the two traditions of which it has been historically set against, those of the Irish and African 'native'. This may be considered a breakthrough

as a literary expression of Irish nationalism that crosses the racial divide, no less due to it having been done by an author whose identity has been so closely linked to that of the stereotypical colonizer.

Methodology

Critical discussion is, of course, based on a close reading of the text, and this will be used to highlight instances where language, image, or allusion draw parallels or recalls between the poet's native Ireland and the poem's primary African setting, Southern Rhodesia. The poem itself, the impressions that it gives and the expressions made within it, will be carefully measured against the veracity of the historical record. For this, efforts have been made to draw from reliable voices of Irish and African scholarship in the fields of history and politics. Additionally, links will be made between 'The God Who Eats Corn' and other examples in Murphy's body of work to substantiate certain claims. Where biographical information is pertinent, supporting statements have also been collected from interviews and memoir.

For context, the analysis makes use of both historical studies on the British colonial enterprise in Ireland and Southern Africa and postcolonial interpretations of the concept of 'identity'. While observing how Murphy writes from a particular sense of identity and historical consciousness, we will keep in mind two concepts of identity applicable to the poet: one, offered by Albert Memmi in his seminal work *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1967), of the 'Colonizer', and another, offered by D. George Boyce in his study *Nationalism in Ireland* (1982), of 'Colonial Identity'. These concepts will be defined in the discussion and considered in relation to the anti-imperial, nationalistic sentiments to be found in the poem.

'The God Who Eats Corn' was originally divided into seven parts separated by a typographical symbol. However, the final version of 'The God Who Eats Corn' that appears in *The Pleasure Ground* (2013) was pared down into five numerically labeled sections. The latter version featured drastic revisions that unfortunately altered the poem's force and sentiments (an indication of how problematic the poem had been in Murphy's career). Therefore, the version under analysis will be the original. Rather than moving in sequence from section to section, my exploration centers on the three primary symbolic locales within the poem that initiate a reflection on colonialism and its consequences. By analyzing the unadulterated version using the aforementioned methods we will achieve an accurate explication of the 'The God Who Eats Corn'. This will help us to better recognize the poem's novelty as a rejection of the violent, hypocritical and racist values of the British Empire from arguably the least likely candidate in the modern Irish literary tradition to have done so.

Critical Discussion

By virtue of his background, Murphy is known to have experienced a pronounced

sense of division regarding his identity. This sense was both internally felt, ‘my divided self’ (Murphy *Kick* 220), and externally bestowed, ‘Poet of Two Traditions’ (Harmon), ‘always been an outsider [...] struggling to be accepted into Irish culture’ (Murphy and O’Malley). Yet the aspect of his identity to which the poet himself has most often candidly and consistently referred is the ‘colonial’. For a definition of ‘colonial identity’ in its specifically Irish context, we turn to Boyce who states that ‘Colonial identity [...] is felt by those members of a group whose national identity takes its origins in the mother country, but whose cultural identity has been shaped by their new environment’ (18-19). Under such terms, the ‘national identity’ of Murphy’s Anglo-Irish class, despite a centuries-old presence in Ireland, would still identify the national homeland to be England. This tension between his English and Irish connections manifests itself compellingly in poems set in his native West of Ireland. Yet for a poem largely set in ‘one of Britain’s last great colonial efforts’ (Quinn 113), ‘The God Who Eats Corn’ must grapple not only with the empire’s historical legacy but also its contemporaneous effects.

The central figure of the poem is Murphy’s father, the relationship with whom the poet thusly describes:

The problem with my father was that he was too remote, working in the colonies while I was at boarding school. My father had been a most dutiful and obedient son to his pious Protestant Victorian parents. So he could not understand how I, who had won a Milner Scholarship to the King’s School, could not have been the same. I loved my father but had lost him by growing up with him so far away. In 1963, two years before he died, I tried to retrieve this love in the poem ‘The God Who Eats Corn’. (Murphy and O’Malley)

While Murphy offers a sympathetic portrayal of William, apprehension about the British imperialist tradition witnesses the poem reacting against the most conspicuous feature of his family identity. Though the poem explores a colonial venture in Southern Africa, the feelings expressed within it correlate to the earlier colonization of Ireland. With this in mind, we may recognize Memmi’s definition of the ‘Colonizer’:

It is impossible for him not to be aware of the constant illegitimacy of his status [...] he has succeeded not merely in creating a place for himself but also in taking away that of the inhabitant [...] a privileged being and an illegitimately privileged one; that is, a usurper. (52-53)

It is crucial to our understanding of the poem, and Murphy’s overall career, to realize the extent to which the poet internalizes the Anglo aspect of Anglo-Irish identity in such terms. The son’s self-consciousness about his ‘illegitimately privileged’ colonial identity ends up clashing with a patriarchal embodiment of colonial values, thematically overriding the tribute to the father within the poem.

The Garden

'The God Who Eats Corn' bears the high level of formal maintenance that is a hallmark of Murphy's work, composed entirely of four-lined stanzas with most lines containing five metrical feet, save for the odd inclusion or exclusion of a beat or two in some lines. Visually, this gives the poem a uniform appearance, a sense of aesthetic discipline also being evinced by the lack of enjambment between any of the stanzas. The formal choice is appropriate for the figure that is a 'most dutiful and obedient' servant of the empire, whom we see in the opening poem of the sequence in a garden:

In his loyal garden, like Horace's farm,
He asks his visitor to plant a tree.
The black shadow of the African msasa
Squats among the lawn's colonial company.

The garden is likened to the Roman poet's Sabine farm in the first of several classical allusions regarding his father. William, 'believing that Britain ruled her colonies for the benefit of the natives [...] had expected the British Empire to last longer than the Roman' (Murphy *Kick* 236-238). Yet such a notion is viewed as a fallacy, empire being correctly framed as a construct in which 'natives' are subjugated and marginalized:

In honour among water sprays that spin
Rainbows to keep alive old English roses
Hand-weeded by a docile piccanin
The Queen Mother's cypress nods in a straw hood.

The garden is a symbol of colonial grandeur. The trees planted by its visitors were chosen by distinguished figures of empire, the most prominent representing the eldest member of the royal family. Contrast this tree's position and posture with the low-squatting msasa of the opening stanza, it being 'one of the most common and characteristic woodland or savannah trees of tropical Africa' (Williams 95).

In his father's Southern Rhodesian garden, the empire's colonial social structure is reinforced. English rose beds are maintained by the labor of a young black boy who is described as 'docile', which very much reads like a code-word for 'domesticated'. The trees are labeled by 'great names / Written on tags', names of fellow governors-general and mining magnates. Likewise, in Ireland, the gardens of an Ascendancy estate served as a statement of separation from and superiority over native wildness and disorder. The title of Murphy's last edition of collected poems takes its name from the garden of his family's 'Big House'. Murphy reminisces, 'We loved our Pleasure Ground. A great grey limestone wall wreathed in ivy surrounded it on three sides, enclosing us with midges and horse-flies in a seedy paradise of impoverished Anglo-Irish pride' (Murphy

Pleasure 13-14). Just as there are notes of irony in the poet's recollection, the garden in 'The God Who Eats Corn' has elements of subversion. Murphy's persona chooses a local plant, an act of defiance to his imperial heritage, 'As a son I choose the native candelabra'. His father's plane tree, a non-native species, 'brought as a seed from Cos [...] Wilts in the voodoo climate'. Gum trees imported by white 'trekkers' are said to have 'sapped the earth'. The foreign species correspond to invasive colonizers, unsuited for the environment and exploitative of the land. Elaine Windrich points out how the arrival of Europeans 'caused most of the soil erosion and soil exhaustion' on lands that would later be assigned to black Africans as 'Native Reserves' (132). The corollary to Ireland, where confiscation and dispossession took place in all but the least arable pockets and barren far reaches of the country, is glaringly apparent.

Murphy is wary of the foreboding consequences stemming from white colonization in Africa. In the section's closing stanza, the poet observes his father, 'Under these trees, he wishes that indaba / Might avoid a blood feud'. The son is less hopeful, 'Tolerant water / Eases roots, but cannot cool the racist fever'. 'Indaba' is Zulu for a council or conference of headmen and chiefs. A tree that had historically been used as a site for 'indaba' stands in the garden of the Government House in Bulawayo; it was the place where the local Ndebele surrendered to the British in 1893, resulting in the loss of their king, land, minerals, cattle, and civil liberties (Chanaiwa 191). Murphy is right in predicting that there will be no cooling-off 'racist fever'. Rhodesia was, after all, conceived and developed as a 'White Man's Country', employing social and political policies based on white supremacy and black segregation (Kay 95-96). Paul Moorcraft and Peter McLaughlin summate the years just before the poem's composition:

Legislation like the Law and Order Maintenance Act (1960), which gave the government sweeping powers for the control of political opposition and laid down draconian penalties for politically motivated crimes, and the election of the Rhodesian Front – which was committed to white supremacy – in Southern Rhodesia in December 1962, symbolized white determination to resist African political aspirations. (Moorcraft and McLaughlin 27)

Only a year after the poem's completion, Rhodesia's black African nationalist party split into two factions along tribal lines and sparked an insurgency against the white government, with all sides fighting one another. Murphy presciently forecasts near the end of the sequence the unnerving fate of the white settlers, 'Dust-storms gather to hide their traces / Under boulders balanced in a smoldering sky'.

The Schoolhouse

Murphy was particularly proud of his family's altruism in building a schoolhouse for the local children, especially as it contrasts to the prevailing attitudes of white Rhodesia. He notes, 'There were no schools in the area, and the policy of white settlers

was to keep Africans ignorant to ensure a supply of cheap, submissive manual laborers' (Murphy *Collected* 233). He expounds:

[William Murphy] was brought up with the fear of hunger going back to his father's upbringing in a village schoolhouse in Carlow, and his grandfather Christopher Mulvany's memories of the great famine. That was why he and my mother and my brother Edward, their farm manager, built a school on the farm to accommodate 250 African children from their own and neighboring farms, who otherwise would have had no education.

(Murphy
*Kick*23)

Murphy would later write a poem titled 'Carlow Village Schoolhouse' emphasizing the structure as a site of deracination, 'He needed my firm, grave / Façade, to be freed from bog-dens and sod-huts... Twenty poor scholars, / Birched if they uttered Irish words, he taught / To speak like you'. As Justin Quinn observes, the poet is mindful of 'the conversion of the Murphy family from Roman Catholicism to Protestantism, from imperial victim to imperial agent [...] The imperial colonized echoes two generations behind the imperial colonizer' (114). Murphy is cognizant of the fact that his family's presence in Africa is an extension of 'the colonist's "civilizing" imperative' (Crotty 149). Parts of the poem document his father's efforts to cultivate, house, employ and educate: 'they build wicker-and-mud rondavels to sleep in. / Tractors invaded the elephant road/ A bore-hole was sunk... He fed corn to his gang and cured fever... Kept people stooped on his kopje alive. / Each year he felled more trees to plant a crop'. These moments speak to a humanitarian motivation behind the farm's establishment, the sense of responsibility to develop, to shelter, to tend, to feed. Yet the farm's principal function is never far from mind:

Daily at dawn, they clang the plough-disc gong
That winds a chain of men through vleis and veld.
No boss boy drives them with a sjambok's thong.
At dusk they come to class-rooms to be schooled.

Schooling is offered after a workday that lasts from dawn to dusk. Though the natives are not whipped by an overseer (third line of the above stanza) as they labor, they participate in the mutilation of their landscape ('vleis and veld'). Black Africans did not tend to respond to white settler calls for paid employment as laborers since such a practice was out of their cultural norm (Vambe 100), but given few other options, we find them hard at work on the Murphy property, bestowed an education after a long day at the plough. Perhaps foremost among the lessons learned is the famed 'Protestant work ethic'.

In 'The Battle of Aughrim', which features in the same volume as 'The God Who

Eats Corn', Murphy adapted a Protestant eyewitness account into verse that verbalized 'what the English conquerors thought about the native Irish: that it would do us (Murphys etc.) good to be subjugated' (Murphy *Pleasure* 257); 'it was always the genius of this people / To rebel, and their vice was laziness... They are a naturally lazy crew... Lacking plain honesty... Not one in twenty works... the people now must learn to be industrious' ('The Reverend George Story Concludes *An Impartial History of the Wars in Ireland*'). Like the Irish, the Africans now 'must learn to be industrious', thus maintaining an imperialist prerogative that holds that so-called civilized societies have a right and responsibility to requisition lands and enlighten its peoples. However well-intentioned, his father perpetuates a colonial enterprise manned by 'cheap, submissive manual laborers. One must remember, the government policy of farmland distribution in Southern Rhodesia gave rise to a racial division of resources which placed a lion's share of the natural assets in European hands (Kay 95-96). It was this system that allowed the Murphy family to own and operate such a large plantation with so many black workers under their employ. Elsewhere in the poem, we see 'boys sharpening pangas [knives] at the wood-pile' and 'trailers... filling barns from the field / With limp tobacco' under the auspices of 'A Union Jack... on the school flag-pole', a reminder that the education received on the farm is contingent on the labor exerted on it. As Lawrence Vambe notes, the white settlers 'required plenty of labor, and the cheaper it was, the better for their profit', going on to ask ironically, 'What was more natural and logical than for the Europeans to look to the victims of their spoilation to provide the muscles for their enterprises?' (100-101).

Such images in the poem register Murphy's dissonance with the contradictory aspects of his family's Rhodesian farm, the simultaneous nature of civilizing and subjugating, of educating and exploiting. The consciousness of his colonial identity and how it renders him alien from the natives is made more explicit in the poem's description of local women, 'Hunkered on dust in kaffir quarters / With rickety babies', they squat and 'gossip of clothes and clinics'. There is a certain exoticism in Murphy's description, 'Such tinkle of bangles, such ivory teeth / Clacking'. His choice of words in calling their homes 'kaffir quarters' is indicative of racial and class divides and harks back to the 'servants' quarters' of the East Wing of his family's 'Big House' (Murphy *Pleasure* 12-13). This type of characterization is not uncommon in Murphy's poems set in the West of Ireland where local fishermen 'know the sea intimately' ('Sailing to an Island'), 'teenage girls from a tribe of tinkers' have 'iodine odour' and 'sea-breath' ('Morning Call') and an illiterate Traveller is a 'wild duck' you can 'never tame' ('The Reading Lesson'). In both Irish and African contexts, exoticism tokens a level of 'native' authenticity foreign and inaccessible to the poet, exacerbating a 'Colonizer's' sense of alienation and illegitimacy. If 'authenticity and claims to authenticity underlie the conceptual and cultural denial of dominance' (Graham 8), the instances of recoil in the poetry from the historically dominant British tradition may be said to be reflective of a desire to be rid of the poet's self-conscious sense of 'colonial identity'.

The Pulpit

Some of the most powerful indictments of imperialism appear in moments throughout the sequence where a disdainful connection is made between the contradictory values of Christian faith and British commerce. Shades of past Protestant efforts to exploit and acculturate Ireland's Catholic peasantry are echoed in the poem's African setting. The Plantations of Ireland, the seventeenth-century migration scheme to settle Protestant colonists from Britain on confiscated Irish lands, find their successor in 'the young plantation of his old age' in Southern Rhodesia:

To each black, his ten acres for millet;
To each white, his three thousand of grass.
The gospel of peace preached from the pulpit;
From the hungry fields the gospel of force.

By the mid-twentieth, century half of the land of the Rhodesian colony had been allocated to whites who comprised only about one-eighth of the total population, and this contained nearly all the fertile soil (Brown 128). This is not a far remove from the situation in the Irish colony where by 1776 Catholic landownership was reduced to five percent (Simms 12). Murphy's planter ancestors acquired an estate of 70,000 acres whilst neighboring Catholics lived on five or only two-and-a-half acre rented holdings (Murphy *Pleasure* 14). Just as Plantations and Penal Laws were meant to secure English Protestant colonial dominance, British imperialism in Africa meant to ensure 'The white man rides: the black man is his horse... Soothing the master, scrubbing his bath, / Folding his towels timidly with smiles... wincing at his wrath'. David Lloyd comments:

Against this other, the ambivalent smile – of servility transforming constantly to contempt – is the repeated reserve of the colonized subject even as it becomes the locus of stereotype. The project of nationalism, conversely, is to break down this reserve [...] recompose those remains of national selfhood made derelict by the colonizer. (54)

Murphy is conscious of the ambivalence of an African's 'smile'; its submissiveness is always undergirded by fear and resentment. Interestingly, when recalling a conversation with his father about the de-colonization taking place throughout Africa in the 1960s, he makes sure to note the presence of a 'barefoot black butler in a white uniform [...] timidly filling our glasses with South African wine' (Murphy *Pleasure* 237). It becomes ever more apparent that the poet's sympathies lie with nationalist aspirations for liberation from the duplicitous 'gospel of peace' preached by the defenders of his family's traditional values.

The missionary's gospel conceals the commercial interests underlying the

colonizer's mission, 'the gospel of force' and the violence he is willing to use to carry it out. The poem's historical awareness is illustrative in details specific to British imperialism in Southern Africa:

'To do some good for this poor Africa'
Was Livingstone's prayer, but not the Founder's dream.
Towards gold and diamonds, the Pioneer Column
Trekking at the bidding of a childless millionaire.

David Livingstone's Christian mission is secondary to the profit-driven enterprises of the 'Founder' and namesake of Rhodesia, Cecil Rhodes. The section of the sequence in which the above stanza appears focuses on the broader history of white encroachment, amassing a substantial list of injustices against the native blacks along the way. The Pioneer Column of Rhodes' British South Africa Company coerced concessions from local tribesmen, 'claiming a treaty, to Lobengula's kraal... With charming letters from Queen Victoria: / There the chameleon swallowed the black fly'. Moorcraft and McLaughlin provide some insight into Rhodes' swindle of the area of modern-day Zimbabwe:

Cecil Rhodes' invasion of the lands north of the Limpopo [...] was the gamble of a megalomaniac with the wealth to indulge his fantasies. Rhodes secured by deceit a mining concession from Lobengula, the Ndebele king who claimed dominion over most of the territory between the Limpopo and Zambezi rivers. He used it as a legal basis to secure a Royal Charter from the British Crown, which empowered him to establish a settler state in Mashonaland ruled by Rhodes' British South Africa Company (19)

From such pretenses, the white settlers may then make use of their illegitimately acquired spoils:

In dusty dorps they slept with slave-girls,
On farms they divided the royal herd.
In stifling mine shafts the disarmed warriors
Were flogged to work, their grazing grounds wired.

Here we see the deftness of Murphy's writing as poet-historian. He has been said to have an air of 'impersonal authority' (McDonald 95) which often gives his poems a cool narrative distance from the subjects that they consider. Yet the injustices of the colonizers are magnified by the plainness of language and blunt observation. In this way, hypocrisies are more self-evident. For example, connections for the reader more obviously manifest between the Rhodes' 'pioneers' who in the past 'slept with slave-girls' with the modern-day, where 'Racial partners / Do not mix in wedlock sons and

daughters', the brutality of such a directive being reinforced by images of 'The black man hanged for a white woman's "rape", / For loving a Negro, the fair girl hanged.'

However benevolent or well-intentioned, Murphy's father can be said to embody the ideals of both Livingstone and Rhodes, problematizing the poem's intention to honor him. In a section depicting William swimming in his patio pool, the Atlantic waters of his boyhood and the light 'Splashed on to hymn-books in a pitch-pine hall / Where his father preached' are recollected. William continues to preach but to a different audience:

At a carol service in the grading shed
He reads the lesson, joining trade with truth.
My knees remember his coconut mats,
The mesh of our duty to improve the earth.

We have seen how the poet is conscious of the way Christian missions facilitated the expansion of the British Empire; by 'joining trade with truth' in his sermon, his father embodies how 'commercial' and 'spiritual' values were woven into the fabric of the British imperial tradition (Carey 1). One must not forget how missionaries 'provided 'a moral justification' for later policies of segregation, exploitation, and racism in the African colonies, especially in 'white-settler-dominated societies like Southern Africa' (Etherington and Maxwell 198). Furthermore, as David Chanaiwa points out:

The missionary [...] anointed the European as the superior custodian of values, morals and ethics and as the sole measure of culture, civilization, and history. Consequently, imperialism and colonialism were made to look like humanitarian responsibilities. They were no longer simply the means for capitalistic exploitation of African resources and African labor, but noble and moral duties to the rest of humanity. (2)

Murphy's play on words about the coconut mats being the 'mesh of our duty to improve the earth' mock such moral and humanitarian pretensions. A power dynamic is ironically undermined in the submissive posture of kneeling. The end of the sequence dramatically foreshadows the eventual upheaval of the racial power structure of Rhodesian society, predicting 'rain falls... sweeping off crops... dust heaps... brown rivers bleed, / Cattle die of rinderpest, dogs with rabies / Bite their masters, the half-free slave are freed... showers of assegais [javelins]'. William Murphy's reaction to the foreboding sense of conflict: 'He's bored'. With 'His Governor's helmet stored in a teak chest', Murphy's father is a figure who 'upholds the manners of a lost empire', and in both the former Irish and current Rhodesian colonial possessions, the poem insists that 'Time has confused dead honour with dead guilt'.

Conclusion

In writing 'The God Who Eats Corn', Murphy had failed to please his father, who reproached him for not upholding the imperial values which the family had for generations proudly represented (Murphy *Kick* 237-247). As the central figure, it may not be surprising that Murphy's father had a better grasp of the poem's nuances than the critical readers who for decades mistook the formal manner, tonal authority, and subject matter of the sequence as a reconstitution of imperialistic chauvinism. The truth is that 'The God Who Eats Corn' is one of the most important and emblematic compositions of Murphy's career. Its subversive paralleling of the colonial experiences of Ireland and Southern Africa under British rule confirms the poet as 'a renegade' from his 'family of Protestant imperialists' (220). Murphy's historical consciousness translates here to a form of moral conscientiousness which ought to be properly recognized and applauded. By repudiating the violence and hypocrisy inherent to the Anglo aspect of his identity, he makes a statement of solidarity with the 'native' identities of Ireland and Africa, innovatively aligning them.

The courage of transcending this racial divide in the Irish context of both poetry and nationalism is commendable. 'The God Who Eats Corn' is one of the earliest, if not the first, instances of a major Irish poet not just depicting but sympathizing with the black African subjects of British imperialism. Since the Second Boer War (1899-1902) when 'pro-Boer fever' swept up Irish nationalists, 'the plight of the black population was not an issue' (McCracken 26-27). After having achieved independence, nationalist Ireland's utmost concern was consolidating the Southern state, and its main sympathies with an oppressed people lay with Catholics stuck in the Protestant-dominated Unionist Northern Ireland which had been partitioned from the rest of the island. For the first time in Irish poetry, Murphy shines extendedly a light on black colonial experiences with his skillful use of image, language, and historicity, thus making the poem a landmark achievement.

We must note that while most of those of Murphy's aristocratic Protestant caste either turned insular or emigrated in the wake of Irish independence, the poet stayed and attempted to come to terms with the most agonizing aspects of his identity and heritage. Though it is easy for some to demean or dismiss Murphy's place in the history of Irish poetry by virtue of his 'Colonial Identity' and 'Colonizer' background, astute readers of the poet's work will appreciate his honest expressions of resistance to, and rejection of, the most objectionable aspects of those troublesome elements. In 'The God Who Eats Corn', Murphy confronts the violence and hypocrisy of British imperialism and holds it to account, and as a poet who was a beneficiary of that imperial tradition, the credit owed to him in this regard should be better accounted for in Irish literary studies.

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