



“Cette contrée méconnue et si souvent outragée” :
*Towards an analysis of the writings of J.-J. Prévost,
a traveller in mid-nineteenth century Ireland*

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Neville Grace, « “Cette contrée méconnue et si souvent outragée” : *Towards an analysis of the writings of J.-J. Prévost, a traveller in mid-nineteenth century Ireland* », *Cycnos*, vol. 15.2 (Irlande - Exils), 1998, mis en ligne en juillet 2008.

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[Cycnos, études anglophones](#)

revue électronique éditée sur *épi-Revel* à Nice

ISSN 1765-3118

ISSN papier 0992-1893

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EPI-REVEL

Revue électronique de l'Université Côte d'Azur

"Cette contrée méconnue et si souvent outragée" :
Towards an analysis of the writings of J.-J. Prévost, a
traveller in mid-nineteenth century Ireland

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le Féminisme, la littérature de l'émigration et les points
d'attache entre l'Irlande et la France.

Cette étude explore les récits de voyage de J.-J. Prévost qui
visita l'Irlande dans les années 1840 à la veille de la Grande
Famine. Il nous laisse des comptes rendus fort détaillés de ses
périple aux quatre coins du pays. Sur l'évocation de l'Irlande
historique et géographique de l'époque, il greffe des portraits
fort vivants des Irlandais eux-mêmes, allant de Daniel O'Connell à
la paysannerie. Ses écrits sont imbus d'une admiration sans bornes
pour l'Irlande et les Irlandais, ainsi que, de façon symétrique,
d'une critique parfois féroce de l'Angleterre, source pour lui des
nombreux maux de l'Irlande. Il conviendrait, sans doute, de situer
ces textes dans le contexte de l'identité de Prévost lui-même :
citoyen français, grand admirateur des idéaux de la Révolution
française et critique acharné de l'Angleterre, ennemie de tous
temps de sa patrie bien-aimée.

From the Middle Ages onwards, Ireland, the Irish and versions of Ireland from the
purportedly factual to the frankly fantastic, have surfaced in French-language texts.¹ This
trickle of writing has swollen into a flood that continues unabated to this very day: from our
own century come works as varied as the luminous colour photographs and accompanying
text left by two French women photographers visiting Galway and the surrounding area in
1913² and the very different famous (infamous?) 1992 *Marie Claire* magazine article
describing modern Irish women as being still stuck in the Middle Ages, and implying that if
only they resembled their French counterparts, they would be happier.

It was arguably in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that travel writing really came into
its own. In his magisterial study, *L'Irlande et le Romantisme*, Patrick Rafroidi provides a
select list of over twenty French writers, from Michelet to Gustave de Beaumont, who turned
their attention to Ireland in the nineteenth century.³ This paper is based on the works of one of
the writers highlighted by Professor Rafroidi, Jean-Joseph Prévost. Prévost was the author of
a number of works on Ireland. A prefatory note in his *Un Tour en Irlande*⁴ refers to the
impending publication ("sous presse") of *Le Comte de Dromore, ou La Terreur Irlandaise*
(described as a "roman historique", 2 vols. in-8). This paper will concentrate on his travel
writings, mainly *Un Tour en Irlande* and, to a lesser extent, *l'Irlande au dix-neuvième siècle*.⁵

¹ See, *inter alia*, *L'Espurgatoire Seint Patriz* ed. and trans. by Yolande de Pontfarcy (Louvain/Paris : Peeters, 1995); *Les Chroniques de Sire Froissart* ed. and trans. by J. Jolliffe (London :Harvill, 1967); Guillebert de Lannoy, *Œuvres de ed. C. Potvin* (Louvain : 1878).

² See *Irlande 1913: clichés en couleur pris pour Monsieur Kahn*, ed. by Jeanne Beausoleil (Paris : 1988). The photographs and accompanying text form part of the *Albert Kahn collection* at the Musée Départemental des Hauts-de-Seine, Boulogne, France.

³ Patrick Rafroidi, *L'Irlande et le Romantisme* (Paris : Éditions Universitaires, 1972).

⁴ J.-J. Prévost, *Un Tour en Irlande* (Paris : Amyot, 1846)

⁵ J.-J. Prévost, *L'Irlande au dix-neuvième siècle* (Paris : Curmer, 1845).

There is constant overlapping between these two works, lengthy passages from one being recycled *verbatim* in the other.

Un Tour en Irlande, a work of 444 pages, consists of a series of twenty letters of varying length, the earliest of which is dated 8 September 1843, reputedly sent from Ireland by Prévost to a series of high-status personages in Paris. These include journalists like ‘M. le Directeur de la Revue de Paris’ and ‘M. le Rédacteur du Constitutionnel’ and other eminent public figures like ‘M. d’Hérambault, membre de la Chambre des Députés’, ‘M. F. Halevy, membre de l’Institut’, ‘M. E. Herbet, sous-directeur des Affaires Étrangères, ex-consul de France à Dublin’, ‘M. Gustave de Beaumont, membre de l’Institut et de la Chambre des Députés’ and ‘M. le baron Taylor’. The final letter is to no less a personage than Victor Hugo himself (described grandiloquently as “pair de France, membre de l’Académie Française”, *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 406). These letters recount the author’s extended tour of Ireland (he states his intention of devoting several weeks to the north and west alone, *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 292) which started in Dublin in September 1843. He indicates the precise time of his earlier departure from London: 29 August at 10 h 30 (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 2). He winds his way to Cork, Limerick, the midlands, Belfast, Londonderry (as he calls it), Sligo before abruptly setting down his pen in Galway. *L’Irlande au dix-neuvième siècle* recounts a tour of Ireland that started in Cork and ended also in the West. The conclusion includes a short list of details covering midland and mid-northern counties summarily dismissed as “plusieurs comtés moins intéressants que ceux que nous avons parcourus” (*L’Irlande au dix-neuvième siècle*, p. 125). Included in this second work are sixty-two full-page prints of Irish landscapes attributed to W.H. Bartlett.

The twin hallmarks of Prévost’s descriptions of urban Ireland are detail and variety: from monuments dominating public space like churches, hospitals and educational institutions to private constructions like the mud cabins and peasant graves of the West.

The landscapes he conjures up are those promoted by the Romantic movement sweeping Europe at the time: wild nature, tumultuous cloud formations, cascading streams, lofty cliffs and ruins, ruins and still more ruins (*Un Tour en Irlande*, pp. 292–293 and 371). Places lacking in ruins are disdained:

Quinze milles seulement séparent Antrim de Belfast. Je franchis cette distance en moins de trois heures. Je ne fis aucune rencontre romantique ; je n’aperçus point de vieux châteaux démantelés, d’abbayes ruinées, en un mot aucun de ces poétiques débris dont le sol de l’Irlande est jonché presque en tous les lieux (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 333).

His disappointment is palpable.

Prévost sees his role as that of guide, affording his reader, whom he imagines as a (male) travelling companion, a virtual reality tour of the Ireland of the time:

Si vous n’êtes pas trop fatigué, je vous prierai [...] de vouloir bien faire encore avec moi un court pèlerinage à l’église de Saint-Machan [...]. En sortant de Thomas-street, nous traverserons la Liffey [...] nous prendrons Church-street [...] nous arriverons à Saint-Machan (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 28).

Maintenant, Monsieur, en quittant les Quatre-Cours, veuillez remonter avec moi Ormond-Quay, Bachelor’s Walk [...] afin de visiter Trinity College (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 57).

At a more general level, his stated intention is to introduce Ireland, that badly known (“cette contrée méconnue et si souvent outragée” *L’Irlande au dix-neuvième siècle*, p. 3) country, geographically remote yet full of interest to Parisian audiences.

His work is far more than a mere chronicle of what he saw and did, however. Onto an account of his peregrinations by boat, train and jaunting car, he grafts additional layers. His history of Ireland from earliest times embraces ‘public’ history — the history of kings and queens and, more interestingly perhaps, the history of the dispossessed, their legends and anecdotes along with their readings of the landscape into which they were born. This history is dispensed in

fragmented or even scatter-gun fashion as he strides about the country. Almost every building he sees triggers off a description of it past and present: its history, recent and ancient. Likewise, onto his depictions of scenery he superimposes the local legends associated with it. This deepens the overall effect and lends a two-dimensional quality to his observations. Or, to put it another way, he affords us a synchronic and diachronic reading of the urban and rural landscapes he finds laid out in front of him.

Along with this historical overview of the country, he adds a second layer to his work: that of social observation. At one level, he affords us memorable vignettes of members of Dublin high society on the eve of the Great Famine, desporting themselves in their familiar surroundings like the RDS (*Un Tour en Irlande*, pp. 65–66) and the Phoenix Park (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 71). Clearly Prévost had an ‘entrée’ into all the right places: Gustave de Beaumont (to whom he addressed a letter in his *Tour*) gave him a letter of introduction to Daniel O’Connell (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 9); Lever, whom he met in Dublin (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 45), put him in touch with the Mayor of Limerick (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 362).

More interesting and valuable, however, one might argue, are the glimpses he affords us of ‘le petit peuple’, the ‘marginiaux’, those countless hosts largely written out of history until recently, perhaps until the advent of the *École des Annales* and la *Nouvelle Histoire* in France. He contrasts what he sees as the homogeneity of the upper classes throughout Europe with what to him were the fascinating particularisms of the lower classes: a somewhat surprising stance for the son of the French Revolution that he professes to be. An early critic of ‘la mondialisation’, he laments: “ce n’est pas seulement en ce pays que la civilisation passe son niveau uniforme” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 141). The myriad welcome differences existing within the ranks of the lower classes can be perceived, according to Prévost, only by close observation, “en s’asseyant à la table de l’artisan” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 187) — and this he does with relish. He assiduously cultivates informants such as coach drivers, a turf cutter (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 143), fishermen (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 357), “le colporteur à qui j’achète un journal, le garçon d’hôtel qui me sert, le cocher qui me conduit, le mendiant à qui je fais l’aumône” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 9) and an old woman described as a ‘sorcière’ whom he paid for information on an intriguing-looking abandoned house (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 25). Elsewhere, he takes advantage of a situation in which two peasant women “grillaient d’envie de faire la conversation avec un étranger, un Français” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 149). A quarter of an hour later, “nous étions tous trois les meilleurs amis du monde” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 149). He plies them with tobacco in order to keep them talking. One imagines him striding across the landscape in search of yet another interesting ruin, not hesitating to climb onto a woman’s shoulders in order to squeeze into some cave (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 178) or haranguing some unsuspecting native on the affair in hand: “je l’ai questionné avec une averse curiosité sur les affaires d’Irlande” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 46).

Thanks to this boundless curiosity, he is able to recreate the atmosphere at the time: he listens to the word on the street, people’s worries and conversations, their preoccupation with O’Connell and Home Rule (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 9) that extended, to his amazement, even to sermons in peasant churches (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 304), Father Matthew’s success in turning the Irish away from alcohol (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 111), promising developments like national schools (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 62), more ominous news like the early failure of the potato crop:

Il est une époque terrible en Irlande, et qui revient chaque année, c’est celle où les pommes de terre deviennent mauvaises et finissent même par manquer tout à fait. Alors le paysan est obligé ou de mourir de faim ou de se procurer comme il peut de quoi manger en attendant la prochaine récolte (*Un Tour en Irlande*, pp. 306–307),

the sense that the situation had been improving but that now, because of political agitation, this may be jeopardised (*Un Tour en Irlande*, pp. 52–53).

First-hand observations flow on the rituals of the Irish peasantry surrounding:

- birth (intimate details recounted by a midwife, *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 149),
- marriage (wedding parties, *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 89),
- death (funerals, *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 189),
- work practices (fishing in the Claddagh),
- physical appearances (he was clearly wowed by the peasant girls of Connemara),
- peasant clothes (formal as at weddings, and informal, *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 142),
- languages (*Un Tour en Irlande*, pp. 192, 273, 375, and 422),
- pastimes (Irishwomen's love of smoking pipes and cigars, *Un Tour en Irlande*, pp. 7, 149, and 348),
- religious beliefs (superstitions, holy places e.g. holy wells, *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 86).

In these areas, his writings constitute a goldmine for ethnographers and social historians alike. Far from being “impartial et désintéressé” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 48) as he professes, he represents Ireland as an unfortunate country where ‘histoire’ rhymes with ‘malheurs’ (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 60–61): “tout le peuple irlandais souffre et meurt de faim” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 37). His condemnation of the atrocious living conditions he witnessed is unambiguous. Beggars crowd his urban and rural landscapes: “cortège[s] de mendiants déguenillés et de pauvres enfants presque nus” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 352). Dublin alone boasts of “cent mille mendiants affamés” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 83). Limerick is scourged by rapacious money-lenders (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 290). He hints at TB in Wicklow (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 183). Casting aside nostalgia and ‘noble savages’, he recounts the seamier side of what he encountered. Just six pages into his *Tour en Irlande*, we encounter prostitutes, even child prostitutes in Dublin:

Il faut du courage pour s'avancer seul et à pied dans ce sombre dédale, dans cet abîme de misère et de corruption. Le soir, de malheureuses femmes en haillons, quelquefois de toutes jeunes filles, des enfants âgées de douze ans à peine, accostent l'étranger, et lui offrent leur corps à vil prix ; s'il refuse, alors elles tâchent de l'apitoyer, et lui demandent simplement l'aumône. (p. 6, see also pp. 32–33)

If conventional history airbrushes certain social groups out of existence, one might argue that children tend to be more invisible than most. Prévost, however, draws them out of the shadows as he points to some of their dwelling places such as workhouses (*Un Tour en Irlande*, pp. 34–35) and prisons (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 217). His sketches of the Dublin slums are worthy of the work O'Casey started writing half a century later (*Un Tour en Irlande*, pp. 6–8). His depictions of mud cabins recall Montesquieu. Whatever about conventional histories and descriptions of Trinity College, this other type of material is very rare and all the more vivid, perhaps, since it comes from the pen of a clearly shocked and sympathetic outsider.

What these people need is work and bread, he urges (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 52). He explains why they have neither: the source of their problems, as he sees it, absentee landlords, are castigated as the main ‘fléau’ (*L'Irlande au dix-neuvième siècle*, p. 126). Far from being a detached observer, he engages with the social problems he encounters and looks for solutions at every opportunity: the relationship between landlords and tenants must be improved urgently, he stresses (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 407). When he sees something that works, he holds it up as a model, a source of hope. Thus, the neatness and general prosperity of County Armagh are attributable, at least in part, he says, to good i.e. non-absentee landlords (*Un Tour en Irlande*, pp. 315 and 327). Government interventions at a more political level are called for (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 37) and he suggests what the government should do (*Un Tour en Irlande*, pp. 50–51). And since Ireland and England are ‘accouplées’ for better or for worse, best to establish structures (such as integrated schooling) that would enable the two races to get along:

Puisque l'Irlande, à raison de sa position géographique, est comme accouplée à l'Angleterre, puisqu'il est prouvé qu'elle est obligée de demeurer anglaise, tout effort qui tend à faire vivre en bonne harmonie les deux peuples doit être approuvé hautement par tous les hommes généreux et éclairés, par tous ceux qui désirent sincèrement le bien de l'humanité (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 64).

In the absence of radical overhaul, however, even mild, interim measures might help: the Irish should grow useful crops like tobacco since they are a nation of such inveterate smokers (*Un Tour en Irlande*, pp. 37–38).

Along with Ireland urban and rural, social and political, one of the stars of his work are the Irish themselves, especially the ordinary people for whom he had literally so much time. Like many nineteenth-century commentators, he believes in 'national character', in the existence of a 'typical' Irishman (whom he calls 'Paddy'): Paddy is eloquent (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 132), indeed loquacious, honest (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 103), lively ("vivacité de ce peuple", *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 113) though poor (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 36), aggressive ("le belliqueux Paddy", *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 199), intelligent (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 105), unpunctual (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 388), physically demonstrative (he hurls his hat in air when happy and cries when moved by a sermon on O'Connell, *Un Tour en Irlande*, pp. 294 and 304) innately courteous ("une courtoisie tout irlandaise", *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 143), staunchly Catholic ("le pays le plus catholique au monde", *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 38), marries young (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 90) and has large families. Ruled by their hearts rather than by their heads, the Irish are "incapables de supporter tout frein, toute règle, et accusés généralement, non sans quelque raison, de n'obéir qu'à leurs passions" (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 177) and profligate though careful to set aside their funeral money (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 189). Every true Irishman is "doué [...] d'un esprit fin, subtil, et d'une humeur galante" (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 399). They hate the English as much as he does though for different reasons and from a different vantage point.

They are not merely anti-English however: in his eyes, the Irish have the good sense to be passionately pro-French. Their francophilia is everywhere highlighted and celebrated. When Dublin high society promenades in the Phoenix Park, "les dames portent avec beaucoup de grâce nos modes parisiennes" (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 71). Even in that Protestant seminary, as he calls Trinity College (*Un Tour en Irlande*, pp. 61–62), the library is "riche en livres de littérature française" (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 60). At the level of entertainment, "les pièces françaises défrayent maintenant la scène irlandaise, de même qu'elles font vivre, depuis plus d'un quart de siècle, la plupart des théâtres de l'Angleterre et des autres pays de l'Europe" (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 75). Indeed, in the early Abbey Theatre, as he himself witnessed, "l'on joue [...] surtout des parades militaires à grand spectacle, dont Napoléon est ordinairement le principal héros" (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 73).

At a personal level, Prévost recalls how a crowd at a political rally burst into spontaneous applause on learning that he was French. It was at the political level, however, that Franco-Irish solidarity was most in evidence for him. The French Revolution "excita beaucoup d'enthousiasme en Irlande" (*Un Tour en Irlande*, pp. 25–26). Indeed, Prévost avails of every occasion to stress the shared — indeed, criss-crossed — history of the Irish and French: the French invading Ireland West (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 368), South and North (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 343), the Irish fighting for France (*Un Tour en Irlande*, pp. 124–125). Without the French Protestants who fled to Ireland after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes (*Un Tour en Irlande*, pp. 23 and 217), would Belfast be the industrious and wealthy city it clearly is (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 335)? Without "le grand exemple de la révolution française [qui] avait électrisé toutes les têtes" (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 154), would the 1798 Rising ever have happened? Without French example, where would the United Irishmen be: "la plupart avaient été élevés en France, parlaient notre langue, étaient imbus de nos idées et de nos mœurs" (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 320)?

Socially and geographically outside “le beau monde dublinois”, even in faraway Achill Island, Prévost is questioned about France (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 397). Irish peasants are better versed in French history even than the French themselves: a turf-cutter consoles Prévost that Napoleon is not dead, merely waiting for the right moment to reemerge (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 126). Indeed, one of Prévost’s guides is “un admirateur passionné de Napoléon” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 341). Did not another Irishman save Napoléon from drowning (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 341)? Hardly surprising, therefore, that in Ireland even children would recognise Napoleon (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 340). Prévost’s French identity earns him a ‘traitement de faveur’ even from an old woman cave-dweller: “voulez-vous voir ma chambre à coucher?”, she urges, inviting him into her cave. “Je ne ferais pas cette proposition à des Anglais, mais à vous, gentleman, français, c’est tout différent” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 348). Despite his criticism of the English view of Ireland and the Irish as hopelessly biased and negative, Prévost himself also stereotypes the Irish, albeit in a positive sense as outlined earlier. Closer to nature than the sophisticated Parisian audience he addresses and to which he himself belongs, they are the Other: uncomplicated and childlike (“les paysans irlandais sont impressionnables et mobiles autant que les enfants” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 296). As if children are in any way simple... but that might best be the subject of another paper! There are strong hints here of the ‘topos’ of the Irish as ‘noble savages’, an association that goes back at least to medieval times and recalls ‘noble savages’ from Montaigne to Rousseau and beyond.⁶

Out of the mass of Irish people high and low, North and South, evoked by Prévost, the star is undoubtedly Daniel O’Connell. Indeed, Prévost’s works constitute, inter alia, a hymn of praise to the Kerryman whom he dubs ‘le Libérateur’ and occasionally ‘l’Agitateur’. O’Connell’s name resounds everywhere from peasant sermons to Orange meetings (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 316). His image emblazons a shop sign in Ballina (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 386) and is mocked in caricatures which Prévost buys in Armagh (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 318). O’Connell is physically everywhere: only on Achill Island does he find people who have never heard of O’Connell: proof positive, for him, that the islanders are “bien plus arriérés que les habitants d’Irlande” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 394). For Prévost, O’Connell is “l’avocat le plus rusé des trois royaumes” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 50). His powers of oratory are extraordinary, as Prévost witnessed personally in Dublin when O’Connell spoke, uninterrupted, for five hours (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 14). It goes without saying that O’Connell’s French is good (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 11). His influence in changing what Prévost, as a typical nineteenth-century commentator, regards as national character, predetermined by nature as something unruly and passionate, into something more realistic and responsible, is nothing short of breathtaking (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 117). Interestingly, Prévost shows O’Connell being lionised less by the middle class than by the working class (*Un Tour en Irlande*, pp. 12–13), indeed “escorté par des milliers de gardes du corps déguenillés, mais fidèles, dévoués et soumis” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 56–57). In addition to the usual scenes of O’Connell leading a cast of thousands, Prévost affords us memorable and rare glimpses of O’Connell in private, in his study, surrounded by his books, papers strewn all over the floor (*Un Tour en Irlande*, pp. 9–10).

Another individual star of Prévost’s travel writings is Prévost himself. Unlike his contemporary Gustave Flaubert, he clearly did not believe in the invisible writer who, in the great novelist’s memorable phrase, should be “présent partout et visible nulle part”. Prévost fleetingly alludes to his own age (mid-twenties? *Un Tour en Irlande*, pp. 410–411), marital status (unmarried, *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 377) and physical appearance. As for his clothes, “je portais un habit noir, des bottes et un chapeau” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 303); “chaudemment

⁶ Peter Rickard, *Britain in Medieval French Literature: 1100-1500* (Cambridge : Cambridge University press, 1956), p. 69.

enveloppé dans un manteau de bure indigène, je défiai la bise de septembre, la fraîcheur de la rosée, et je me lançais dans la campagne” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 110).

More than his physical appearance, however, Prévost’s personality and philosophy infuse every page. His sense of humour rarely fails him and he appreciates wit wherever he finds it: an Irish writer’s comments on the mystery of the origins of round towers clearly amuses him: “avec toutes les rames de papier qui ont été couvertes d’encre à ce sujet, on pourrait bâtir une tour aussi élevée que la plus haute d’entre elles” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 98). His humour is occasionally self-deprecating: he lets us know that his beard makes Dubliners laugh (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 12). He is clearly well-educated: his writings are larded with references to ancient Greek mythology (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 355) and literature (*Un Tour en Irlande*, pp. 197–198), English literature from Spenser (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 270) to Scott (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 357) and Sterne (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 167), and Irish writers like Thomas Moore (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 301). His linguistic prowess is beyond question: witness his obvious pleasure in Irish bulls (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 113) as well as his ability to oil his peasant informants’ tongues. He is a lover of detail which he rarely gets wrong (except e.g. “l’Irlandais et le Gaélique n’étant que deux dialectes d’une même langue”, *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 192). He conscientiously documents his sources (“la tradition rapporte que...”, *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 22, see also p. 416). Apart from his first-hand experiences, he cites an impressive array of books, guides ancient and modern (especially that of Mr and Mrs Hall, *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 291), statistical surveys (*Un Tour en Irlande*, pp. 265–266) and other writers like Sterne, Maria Edgeworth (her *Essay on Irish Bulls* *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 113), Crofton Croker (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 378) and Bunting (his *melodies*, *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 310). He researches his topics with care: “j’avais étudié d’avance la topographie du Wicklow” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 109), “je me suis fait traduire un caoine” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 192). He is resolute and even prepared to bend the truth in search of a good story: in order to persuade the monks in Clondalkin to talk to him, “je me fis un peu plus fervent catholique que je ne le suis réellement: aussi furent-ils enchantés” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 102). Mission accomplished; they invite him to dinner:

j’avoue à ma honte que l’odeur de graisse qui m’avait saisi à la gorge en descendant dans la cuisine me laissait pressentir que je ferais probablement pénitence, je déclinai l’invitation avec politesse et en témoignant de mes regrets. Je les quittai, en leur promettant d’assister un dimanche à leur messe, et il me faut encore confesser que je manquai à cet engagement (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 103).

His nineteenth-century belief in and love of scientific progress are everywhere visible: witness his empathy with the peasants who went all the way to Dublin just to see the gaslight and the railways (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 141) and his admiration of a recently constructed bridge in Waterford (“l’œuvre d’un ingénieur américain”, *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 217). Opiniated, he disagrees with luminaries past and present, from Swift (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 23) to Lever (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 47) and even the great O’Connell: despite his professed admiration for ‘le grand Agitateur’ (“ce grand homme, qui a délivré son pays de l’esclavage politique, et sur la tête duquel semblent reposer toutes les espérances du peuple”, *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 9), Prévost seems somewhat taken aback by his “opinions très étranges et inconciliables, selon moi, avec sa conduite politique”, especially regarding the French monarchy and “la légitimité de notre révolution de juillet” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 11). Elsewhere, while acknowledging O’Connell’s undoubted familiarity with the Irish political scene, Prévost cannot help expressing his own belief that the ‘Libérateur’ is frankly misguided in his ‘politique actuelle’ (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 53). As for the sights of Ireland, Dublin Castle is ‘triste’ and ‘monotone’ (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 19), the Four Courts are pompous, ridiculous and best avoided (*Un Tour en Irlande*, pp. 56–57), Wellington’s Monument in the Phoenix Park is “du plus mauvais goût” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 69), Wicklow town is boring (“je dédaignai d’[y] entrer”, *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 209), Waterford

is disappointing (“le comté de Waterford offre peu de ruines remarquables”, *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 218) and in Youghal he finds “une église protestante d’un goût médiocre” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 268).

Identifying himself as part of “l’Europe libérale” (*L’Irlande au dix-neuvième siècle*, p. 1), he is respectful of other systems of belief although he clearly does not share them (“je devins sérieux comme mes deux interlocuteurs, par égard pour leurs croyances”, *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 328), noting with sensitivity and evident sympathy, in a passage on fairy belief among the Irish peasantry:

aucune action, aucun détail de la vie n’est indifférent ; il y a une manière de faire le ménage, de préparer les repas, de blanchir le linge, de cueillir les fruits, qui est particulièrement agréable aux fées (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 140).

Such respect can coexist with other feelings such as impatience with these same superstitious peasants: lost at night in thick fog, Prévost’s terrified coach-driver, in desperation, resorts to prayer: “[je l’ai] engagé à ne plus nous rompre la tête avec ses litanies” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 350).

There are flashes of prescience in his writings. Writing about the potato crop (“la seule nourriture de la plupart des paysans irlandais”, *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 104) on the eve of the Great Famine, he warns:

il ne faut pas qu’un temps plus rigoureux qu’à l’ordinaire vienne retarder l’époque de la récolte, car alors, si les provisions sont épuisées, le peuple est réduit à mourir de faim (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 105).

His powers of prediction occasionally desert him, however: for him, the Orange Order is in decline (*L’Irlande au dix-neuvième siècle*, p. 116) as is sectarianism. On national schools (which were multidenominational at first), he predicts, again erroneously:

il est impossible que les enfants de toutes les sectes élevés ainsi en commun, ne perdent pas cet esprit de discorde qui a divisé en tout temps la population. Ce système d’éducation nationale, on peut l’espérer, est donc destiné à extirper les préjugés invétérés qu’entretiennent les uns contre les autres les protestants et les catholiques, et il contribuera ainsi de la manière la plus efficace à la fusion de deux races ennemies depuis sept siècles (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 64).

Over and above all these traits, however, his love of France and all things French shines through. France is, quite simply, the centre of the world: France (or more specifically Paris) is the touchstone of all that is good, fair and even beautiful. The Phoenix Park is “le bois de Boulogne de Dublin — c’est mieux encore, au dire des habitants, c’est à la fois un Longchamp perpétuel, un jardin des Tuileries, et un Chantilly ou un Champ de Mars” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 70, see also p. 4). Dublin Castle recalls ‘notre Val-de-Grâce’ (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 19); Dublin hospitals look like those in Paris (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 33); in Kilmainham Hospital, “la cour rappelle celle de l’hôtel des Invalides [...] les cuisines de Kilmainham sont aussi célèbres à Dublin que celles des Invalides à Paris” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 80); the early Abbey theatre is a “petite contrefaçon du cirque de notre boulevard du Temple” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 73); Finglas village is like “les bourgades poétiques et délabrées de la Bretagne” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 86); Newry is “le Montpellier de l’Irlande” (*L’Irlande au dix-neuvième siècle*, p. 116); the “mont-de-piété” in Limerick is “fondé en 1837 sur le plan de celui de Paris” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 289); the conservatory in the Belfast Botanical Gardens is “aussi élégant que les serres de notre Jardin des Plantes” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 339). Indeed, Prévost’s habitual method of praise is to say that the object of his admiration comes up to French standards: Thomas Moore is “le Béranger irlandais” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 301); the boat that carried him across the Irish Sea resembled “une petite-maîtresse parisienne” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 2). In their eloquence, Irish peasants are like “nos Gascons” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 117). Conversely, in order to damn someone, suffice to suggest that this unfortunate does not come up to French standards: thus, Charles 11 is a ‘pâle reflet de Louis XIV’ (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 79). Hence, in Prévost’s eyes, Ireland is

admirable and interesting because his francophilia is shared by everyone there, high and low, from O'Connell to the peasantry (*Un Tour en Irlande*, pp. 124–125). In his avowed egalitarianism, Prévost is, above all, a true and faithful son of the French Revolution. France, he assures us, is a place where

le fils du duc et pair est assis sur les mêmes bancs que le fils du marchand et de l'artisan, où dans les classes les professeurs ne reconnaissent d'autre supériorité que celle du travail et du mérite personnel, de même qu'aux heures de la récréation, dans les cours, où tous les élèves se mêlent et jouent ensemble, le plus fort, le plus agile ou le plus espiègle, qu'il soit noble ou roturier, est le roi de toute la bande joyeuse (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 59).

His praise for the Irish national school system as an egalitarian machine anticipates later pronouncements by his compatriot, Jules Ferry, in the French context (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 62).

His style is lively if occasionally overblown: Dublin is like Venice (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 4), Limerick is like Paris, Cork harbour recalls the Bosphorus (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 219), the Cross of Cong would not have put Benvenuto Cellini to shame (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 68). Modern readers may not always appreciate his penchant for stylised comparisons: the islands in the lakes of Killarney are “semés avec symétrie sur la surface des eaux comme des bouquets brodés sur une robe de gaze” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 285), the red of the Autumn leaves there recalls the red waistcoats of the hunters (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 286). Indeed, his love of detail occasionally can leave the reader drowning in cascades of details on topics such as round towers and Trinity College (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 57), rather like the apocryphal schoolboy who complained about a library book that had taught him more about snakes than he had ever wanted to know!

Some observations have not yet lost their validity even in late-twentieth century Ireland: the unpredictable weather (*Un Tour en Irlande*, pp. 95, 162, and 417), certain priorities (or lack thereof): poor time-keeping (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 388), admiration of the latest technology (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 141), insouciance regarding environmental protection (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 428) and mass tourism (which, even in the mid-nineteenth century, was already ruining picturesque areas like the Dargle valley, according to Prévost (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 117)).

Some questions remain: were Hugo and the other names cited really the recipients of his letters or is the epistolary structure of the *Tour* some kind of fiction? Prévost refers to “le touriste à qui ces lettres tomberaient entre les mains” (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 56): how might this proto-tourist have procured these letters? Were some of them really published in the publications to whose editors they were addressed? This begs other questions: whence Prévost's passion for Ireland (which fleeting references suggest that he visited on more than one occasion: see *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 3) and where, if anywhere, are his papers?⁷ Clearly, a trawl through archives in Paris beckons.

Questions can sometimes turn to doubt. What is “la part de vérité” in all this? Much of the material served up by Prévost is predictable, stereotyped and widely rehearsed elsewhere, lending a cut-and-paste air to the whole exercise: the south (which includes Donegal, *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 364) is feckless if engaging, the north is well-kept (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 315) and industrious (Belfast is “une grande ville tout entière consacrée au travail”, *Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 337) if offputting. How convenient that his path should cross O'Connell's so often and so unexpectedly even in remote corners of the country (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 293). How amazing that he can recall in detail the private conversations of emigrants leaving Cork. On the other hand, some of the small details he includes were hardly borrowed from books: whatever about Cork harbour looking like the Bosphorus, Prévost's remark that the citizens of

⁷ Je voudrais remercier Monsieur Pierre Joannon, Consul d'Irlande à Antibes, de m'avoir fait savoir que J.-J. Prévost fut un éditeur de la *Revue Britannique*.

Cork keep insisting that Cork is a city and not a town rings true (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 222)! A trawl through passenger lists might reveal much.

In many ways, of course, whatever the truth about Prévost's visits to Ireland, one might argue that this question is irrelevant: that what these writings are really about is less Ireland and the Irish than that eternal triangle, that perennial 'ménage à trois' formed by Ireland, England and France or, more specifically, age-old Franco-British hostilities. If, as the adage suggests, my enemies' enemies are my friends, Ireland emerges as a useful pretext for England-bashing on Prévost's part. In other words, the composition of these letters could be seen as a displacement activity in which Prévost uses Ireland in order to castigate 'perfidious Albion'. Thus, Ireland is conveniently transformed into a bottomless reservoir of examples of 'orgueil britannique' (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 308) and other reputed failings. Through Irish informants and even Irish buildings, Prévost ventriloquises his passionate dislike of England: from the old woman who invites him into her cave-bedroom, stressing that she would never dream of offering such hospitality to an Englishman, to Trinity College Dublin, a prime example of the class distinction rampant in England but unknown, Prévost insists, in egalitarian France, Trinity College where "le jeune nobleman ne fréquente pas les étudiants des castes inférieures" (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 60). Ferocious competition between France and Britain in the area of colonial expansion marked the entire period during which Prévost was writing. This spirit of competitiveness pervades Prévost's travel writings: even remote, unknown Ireland outshines Britain every time: "Londres n'a rien à comparer à la Banque d'Irlande" (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 18), he proclaims in one of his typical grandiloquent flourishes. Even the destitute Irish surpass their English counterparts: they remain cheerful while their equally impoverished Saxon counterparts are 'mornes' (*Un Tour en Irlande*, p. 36). Indeed, where would England be at all were it not for the Irish, he muses: in England, are not all the foremost singers, actors and playwrights Irish?

In conclusion, in their evident curiosity and commitment, passion and power, Prévost's multi-faceted, multi-layered travel narratives constitute a legitimate if neglected part of age-old Franco-Irish relations that continue to prosper and deepen to this very day.