

‘One morning you would open the paper ... and read, Return of Parnell’: rumours, legends and conspiracy narratives about Charles Stewart Parnell’s staged death*

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ABSTRACT

This article is the first to reconstruct the contemporary legend that Charles Stewart Parnell staged his own death in 1891, pending his messianic return. Although the British press folklorized it as a pre-modern Irish ‘peasant’ delusion, this article demonstrates that the story was one of several pseudocidal narratives about ‘great men’ shaped by the British ‘cult of Napoleon’. The legend did circulate in Ireland, but among city-dwelling Dubliners, not ‘peasants’. This article argues that for some urban Parnellites it functioned as a mode of political resistance; but for most Irish people, doubt and uncertainty, rather than wholehearted belief, characterized its reception.

On the afternoon of Sunday 1 October 1911, almost twenty years to the day since the death of Charles Stewart Parnell, the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens’s bronze statue of ‘the Chief’ (as Parnell was known) stood hidden from view at the top of Dublin’s Sackville Street (now O’Connell Street), waiting to be unveiled. Of ‘heroic size’, Saint-Gaudens’s statue (which had first been exhibited in Dublin three years earlier) was described as ‘recreat[ing] ... Parnell ... as he was’ at his ‘zenith’. Its verisimilitude had struck many of those who saw it at the time: the statue was a ‘vividly, daringly realistic’ representation of him, ‘in a vigorous, erect attitude, the head at the well-known fearless poise, the right hand raised aloft’; it ‘look[ed] and seem[ed] to feel lifelike’.¹ Indeed, as the Dublin *Evening Telegraph* put it at the time, the ‘Parnell of the platform lives again and almost breathes in bronze’.²

John Redmond, one of Parnell’s ‘faithful few’ during the split precipitated by the divorce crisis that threw Irish nationalism into disarray, and, since 1900, leader of the reunited Irish party, unveiled the statue in 1911. In 1907 he too had paid tribute to its realism: ‘It is Parnell to the very life – his

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¹ *Derry Journal*, 22 July 1907; *Evening Telegraph*, 1 Aug. 1907; *Fermanagh Herald*, 10 Aug. 1907; and *Irish Independent*, 2 Oct. 1911.

² *Evening Telegraph*, 1 Aug. 1907.

figure, his appearance, even his very gesture when under the influence of strong feeling or emotion.³ Three years later, amid widespread anticipation that a new home rule bill would shortly be introduced into parliament, Redmond told the assembled crowd that 'the spirit of Parnell watches us', and he continued, 'Let us think of him. What would our feelings be if we had him with us today? What would be his if he could come from his grave and be with us in the hour of triumph?'⁴ Redmond went on to claim that Parnell was, in a sense, by their side: 'If we listen, we can hear his voice. It is speaking to us still. It is speaking to us from that stone.' This was a reference to the famous words of the Chief inscribed on the monument: 'No Man has a right to fix the boundary to the march of a nation. No man has a right to say to his country "Thus far shalt thou go and no further." We have never attempted to fix the ne-plus-ultra to the progress of Ireland's nationhood and we never shall.'⁵

This sense that Parnell had somehow returned was heightened when Redmond's unveiling of the statue reportedly evinced an uncanny feeling among many of the audience when they first saw it: 'As the well-known features of the dead Chief met the gaze of the expectant thousands a sudden hush fell over the great concourse, and then the emotions of the people's hearts burst forth into one mighty shout that must have re-echoed throughout the length and breadth of the city. "Parnell! Parnell!"' 'People were moved to emotion', continued the report, 'which they disdained to conceal, and many a moist eye dwelt lovingly on the lifework and well-remembered figure.'⁶

Although the 'lifelike' nature of the statue produced a feeling in some that Parnell had been resurrected, this sensation was fleeting. By contrast, an alternative return was in contemplation that same evening, in which Redmond's earlier ruminations about 'what ... our feelings [would] be if we had him with us today', took on a very different aspect. After the ceremony was over and the 'more than a quarter of a million people' estimated to have attended had left, Arthur Griffith, who had been present at the 1891 funeral and later founded Sinn Féin, visited the monument at around 10 p.m.⁷ In an article he published about Parnell a week after the ceremony, Griffith briefly mentioned that at the 'base' of the memorial, he had come upon 'a group of men' who 'reiterat[ed] ... their belief that he [Parnell] was not dead and that he would come back again'. This view, added Griffith, was held by 'many in Ireland.'⁸

Griffith's night-time encounter constituted only a brief passage in a longer article, the purpose of which was to indict Parnell's erstwhile friends for having ultimately betrayed him and to condemn his old enemies for now trying to capitalize on his memory. Yet, for all its brevity, his eyewitness account is important; it provides an almost unique insight into currents of thought that we know existed, and modes of exchange that must have occurred, but for which we have little evidence. The existing scholarly literature on the memory and legacy of Parnell is rich and encompasses immediate political reactions to his death, responses to his funeral, the institution of the annual 'Ivy Day' commemoration, the mythologizing of the Chief in subsequent decades, and the fashioning of a usable Parnell in nationalist discourse.⁹ But the rumours that Parnell had staged his own death and that he would return one day have received almost no attention from historians.

Instead, the best evidence we have had until now for the strange stories, theories and conspiracies about Parnell's return is to be found in the work of literary Parnellites, with the subsequent close readings of modern scholars providing useful exegesis. In the Eumaeus episode in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (written between 1914 and 1918 but set in 1904), Leopold Bloom listens to the late-night ramblings of a Dublin cabman:

³ *Evening Herald* (Dublin), 21 Aug. 1907.

⁴ *Cork Examiner*, 2 Nov. 1911.

⁵ *Limerick Leader*, 2 Oct. 1911.

⁶ *Limerick Leader*, 2 Oct. 1911.

⁷ *Nationalist and Leinster Times*, 7 Oct. 1911.

⁸ *Weekly Sinn Féin*, 7 Oct. 1911.

⁹ W. M. Murphy, *The Parnell Myth and Irish Politics, 1891–1956* (New York, 1986); F. Callanan, *The Parnell Split, 1890–91* (Cork, 1992); P. Travers, "Under the great comedian's tomb": the funeral of Charles Stewart Parnell, in *The Ivy Leaf: the Parnells Remembered, Commemorative Essays*, ed. D. McCartney and P. Travers (Dublin, 2006), pp. 85–96; P. Travers, "The Thurible as a weapon of war": Ivy Day at Glasnevin, 1891–1991, in McCartney and Travers, *Ivy Leaf*, pp. 140–58; M. J. Kelly, *The Fenian Ideal and Irish Nationalism, 1882–1916* (Woodbridge, 2006); and M. de Nie, "Our dead chief": the Irish press and the death of Parnell, *New Hibernia Review*, xxxiii (2019), 106–21.

One morning you would open the paper, the cabman affirmed, and read, Return of Parnell. He bet them what they liked. A Dublin fusilier was in that shelter one night and said he saw him in South Africa. Pride it was killed him. He ought to have done away with himself or lain low for a time after Committee Room No. 15 until he was his old self again with no-one to point a finger at him. Then they would all to a man have gone down on their marrowbones to him to come back when he had recovered his senses. Dead he wasn't. Simply absconded somewhere. The coffin they brought over was full of stones. He changed his name to De Wet, the Boer general. He made a mistake to fight the priests. And so forth and so on.¹⁰

Joyce, of course, was fascinated by Parnell.¹¹ Indeed, Joep Leerssen has recently observed that the 'evocations and hauntings of Joyce', as well as the 'post-Parnell poems of Yeats', partly reflect the importance of the theme of resurrection in the literary tradition of the lost leader.¹² He views this in terms of 'the refusal of Parnell to be laid to rest – not so much like a Christ rising from the dead (as devout [Patrick] Pearse would like to see things) but as a Barbarossa, or King Arthur, or Holger Danske, a Once and Future Leader waiting for the moment of his return from the underworld'.¹³

Recent commentary has suggested that Griffith could well have influenced Joyce's writing of *Ulysses*.¹⁴ But internal evidence within the Eumaeus episode suggests that Joyce must have had other sources of information as well. Joyce scholars have observed that the assembled characters who gather in the cabman's shelter subscribe to 'a renovated myth popular in the 1890s that ... Parnell did not die and that he would one day return as Ireland's saviour'.¹⁵ This may account for why it was claimed in 1911 that others in Ireland also believed in the future return of Parnell. Two days after the statue's unveiling (but four days before Griffith's article), the *Huddersfield Daily Examiner* reported that it was, in fact, the recalcitrant 'peasantry' of the west of Ireland, rather than the denizens of Dublin, who would 'not even now believe ... [that Parnell is] dead. Like [King] Arthur, he is to come again, to complete the victory he so nearly won'.¹⁶

This article is the first scholarly attempt to reconstruct the contemporary legend of Parnell's return. It argues that such stories helped to sustain a form of non-canonical Parnellism in *fin de siècle* Ireland. I argue here that for some Parnellites at least, during what the late Frank Callanan termed the 'long split' of 1891 to 1900, stories of the Chief's future restoration were not simply a form of irrational denialism or a symptom of collective trauma, but also, among other things, a form of political resistance.¹⁷

That said, in reconstructing the legend of Parnell, it is also clear that, far from merely reporting on Irish hopes of his future restoration, the British press created its own distinctive version of the legend, not least – as the *Huddersfield Daily Examiner* claimed in 1911 – through its insistence that it was gullible Irish 'peasants' who actively believed in the Parnell myth. Not only did this impute a fixedness when, as I will argue, uncertainty and doubt were more characteristic of Irish reception, but it also presented the episode as somehow uniquely Irish in its backwardness. In fact, as this article explores, Parnell's return needs to be understood as part of a modern phenomenon of pseudocidal legends about 'great men' that was global, and even imperial, in its dimensions. Indeed, the stories considered here about the return of Parnell make sense only in light of this tradition of return narratives, which began with no lesser figure than the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. The Parnell legend therefore provides valuable insights into the role of rumours, conspiracy narratives, and contemporary legends not just in *fin de siècle* Ireland but also in Britain at the close of the long nineteenth century.

¹⁰ J. Joyce, *Ulysses* (Paris, 1922), p. 603.

¹¹ F. Callanan, 'The Parnellism of James Joyce: "Ivy Day in the Committee Room"', *Joyce Studies Annual* (2015), 73–97.

¹² J. Leerssen, 'Introduction: charisma and aftermath', in *Parnell and His Times*, ed. J. Leerssen (Cambridge, 2021), pp. 1–17, at p. 5. For a recent discussion of Yeats's Parnellism, see R. Foster, 'The ghost of Parnell', in *The Oxford Handbook of W.B. Yeats*, ed. L. Arrington and M. Campbell (Oxford, 2023), pp. 134–47.

¹³ Leerssen, 'Introduction', p. 5.

¹⁴ C. Kenny, *The Enigma of Arthur Griffith: 'Father of Us All'* (Newbridge, 2020), pp. 236–43.

¹⁵ *Joyce's Ulysses: Notesheets in the British Museum*, ed. P. F. Herring (Charlottesville, Va., 1972), p. 52.

¹⁶ *Huddersfield Daily Examiner*, 3 Oct. 1911.

¹⁷ Callanan, 'Parnellism of James Joyce', p. 75.

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In October 1941 the placing of an eleven-ton boulder of Wicklow granite on the site of Parnell's grave in Glasnevin Cemetery was the focal point of the fiftieth anniversary commemoration of the Chief's death.¹⁸ Among the programme of events scheduled to mark the anniversary was a lecture delivered by one of the last surviving members of the Parnellite party, Henry Harrison.¹⁹ Writing of this commemoration, the *Irish Independent* observed that there was 'a faint, fragrant nostalgia about the whole thing that is foreign to these days of cold-blooded realism and calculated political passion.'²⁰ Amid this stirring of memories, several observers recalled the events surrounding Parnell's death half a century earlier. Among them, Aodh de Blácam remembered the 'queer legend' that Parnell's body had not, after all, been buried where the granite boulder at Glasnevin now lay, the Chief having 'arranged it that an empty coffin came home to Ireland, while he, in reality, slipped away ... [to s]omeday ... return to our affairs'. De Blácam had been born two months after Parnell died but he related how as 'a young fellow I knew many men who had ... talked with the Chief ... and heard ... that he was not really dead.'²¹ As the *Irish Independent* noted, 'the only man who can prove that the coffin buried in Glasnevin was not a box of stones' was none other than the anniversary's guest of honour, Henry Harrison.²²

In fact, Harrison had already addressed the question in his 1931 book *Parnell Vindicated*, in which, among other things, he had taken issue with many of the 'wild rumours' that had circulated in the immediate aftermath of Parnell's death. These rumours included not merely that Parnell had staged his own death but also that he had died 'by violence, poison, bullet, [and] suicide.'²³ Indeed, as the *Freeman's Journal* had written in 1891, 'The difficulty of obtaining any authorised statement as to the cause of death not unnaturally afforded a basis for speculative rumour and mysterious suggestion that the sensation-mongers grasped ... with ghoulish avidity.'²⁴ The seclusion of his grief-stricken widow, Katherine Parnell, the reluctance of the Chief's doctors to talk to the press without the family's permission, and reports that an autopsy was to be conducted had all fuelled such rumours.²⁵ Comparisons with another high-profile political figure who had recently committed suicide, France's General Boulanger, were also made, with the question allegedly asked by Parnell's mother Delia on hearing the news of his death ('Has he shot himself?') fuelling further speculation.²⁶

That relatively few people reportedly saw Parnell's body after he died (his casket was closed throughout his public funeral) also suggested to some that the Chief might have committed suicide. What may have lain behind this is that the medical cause of Parnell's death ('rheumatic fever with hyporexia'), required that his remains be quickly placed in a lead casket before being put into a wooden outer coffin, as his body temperature at death was so high that 'change[s] had set in' within twenty-four hours.²⁷

The political circumstances surrounding Parnell's death also lent credibility to the rumours that all was not as it seemed. 'Events [had] turned sharply against Parnell', following his naming as a co-respondent in the divorce proceedings brought by Katherine O'Shea's estranged husband the previous year, with the result that during his last eleven months, Parnell was engaged, as Paul Bew has put it, in 'the most bitter struggle of his life' against many of his erstwhile followers. This struggle was 'waged with an obscene verbal cruelty and frequent physical violence on both sides. It was war to the knife, with no holds barred – a mode of conflict which inevitably told more heavily on the weaker party.'²⁸ His most vicious critics had 'hinted broadly that suicide was Parnell's next logical move' and according

¹⁸ *Irish Independent*, 13 Oct. 1941.

¹⁹ *Irish Press*, 1 Oct. 1941; 9 Oct. 1941.

²⁰ *Irish Independent*, 10 Oct. 1941.

²¹ *Irish Press*, 7 Oct. 1941.

²² *Irish Independent*, 10 Oct. 1941.

²³ H. Harrison, *Parnell Vindicated: the Lifting of the Veil* (London, 1931), p. 95.

²⁴ *Freeman's Journal*, 9 Oct. 1891.

²⁵ J. Marlow, *The Uncrowned Queen of Ireland: the Life of Kitty O'Shea* (London, 1975), p. 284; and *Freeman's Journal*, 8 Oct. 1891; 9 Oct. 1891.

²⁶ Marlow, *Uncrowned Queen of Ireland*, p. 284; *Freeman's Journal*, 9 Oct. 1891; and *Henley & South Oxford Standard*, 10 Oct. 1891.

²⁷ *Freeman's Journal*, 9 Oct.; 10 Oct. 1891.

²⁸ P. Bew, *Charles Stewart Parnell* (Dublin, 1980), pp. 117, 122.

to his wife, albeit writing many years later, he had entertained thoughts not only about taking his own but also her life to escape their critics.²⁹

At the time of his death in 1891, however, Katherine Parnell sought to scotch such rumours; the day after he died, she 'emphatically contradict[ed]' claims that 'her husband [had] made away with himself', while one of Parnell's doctors was prompted to pronounce that 'there is not the least ground for the doubt that has been expressed in some quarters'. The Parnellite member of parliament J. J. O'Kelly told the press that he had personally seen Parnell's body and that 'his look was very peaceful, and he seemed to be sleeping rather than dead ... "Undoubtedly", he added, "the cause of death was natural"'.³⁰

Although the rumour that Parnell had committed suicide had a very short lifespan, it is still noteworthy because several of its narrative components were later repurposed to support the alternative story that Parnell was not, in fact, dead at all, but that he had instead staged his own death and gone into temporary self-imposed exile. In his 1931 defence of Parnell, Harrison had noted of this rumour that it 'cropped up from time to time with a curious persistence'.³¹ In this context, he not only denied that Parnell had committed suicide but also contradicted the claim that the 'mortal decay' of the body had occurred with such 'exceptional rapidity' as to necessitate immediate action, with the result that he also described as 'untrue' the 'tales' that very few people had seen Parnell's body after he died.³²

Whether Harrison also revisited the 'queer legend' in his memorial lecture of 1941 is unknown, but he definitely returned to it a decade later in a radio essay for the B.B.C.'s 'Third Programme', broadcast in April 1951 and later published in the B.B.C.'s *The Listener* magazine as 'Memories of an Irish hero'. Here he declared that 'no man has ever been lied about as Parnell has been lied about. Even his death brought no surcease in the campaign of wanton defamation ... There were too many of the lowest sorts of scribblers in Fleet Street who habitually spiced their random paragraphs and even more ambitious prose with vile falsehoods ... that he was not dead, that he was in hiding'.³³ In fact, although Fleet Street 'scribblers' were undoubtedly important to the propagation and embellishment of one version of the legend, they were not its originators.

The earliest report of the Parnell pseudocide legend emerged within weeks of the Chief's death. In late October 1891 *Irish Society*, the Dublin-based magazine of the Protestant Anglo-Irish social world of the 'Big House' and of Dublin Castle, reported on 'the birth and formation of a [new] myth'; the 'peasantry in lonely districts' were 'comfort[ing] themselves' with the story, it claimed, that 'Parnell is not really dead ... [and that] he will return again some day'.³⁴ No source was offered for this story and no further reference was made to it in the press for another five years. Indeed, it was not until 1896 that none other than Parnell's own mother brought international attention to it.

In 1896 Delia Parnell wrote to the *New York Journal* stating that she was 'firm and unwavering' in her belief that her son had either been assassinated by the British government, or that 'Charles Stewart Parnell did not die at all, and the body of another man was substituted for his coffin, while he himself disappeared'. As she made clear, Delia Parnell favoured the latter theory and added that 'this belief is shared by some of my children and by many of the friends who knew and loved him before his disappearance'. She offered as proof reports that 'no one who knew ... [his] face ... was allowed to see him after he was said to have died', and a report of a family friend who claimed to have seen her son at Glasnevin, 'not long after he was supposed to have been buried'.³⁵ Delia Parnell also pointed to her son's significant financial debts as providing a further motive for why he might have 'resolved to voluntarily disappear, after devising means to make it appear that he had really died'. That said, she also speculated that her son's disappearance might have been involuntary, as she suggested that he could

²⁹ Bew, *Parnell*, pp. 132–3.

³⁰ Marlow, *Uncrowned Queen of Ireland*, pp. 284–5; *Freeman's Journal*, 8 Oct. 1891; 9 Oct. 1891; and R. Kee, *The Laurel and the Ivy: the Story of Charles Stewart Parnell and Irish Nationalism* (London, 1993), p. 4.

³¹ Harrison, *Parnell Vindicated*, p. 95.

³² Harrison, *Parnell Vindicated*, p. 95.

³³ H. Harrison, 'Memories of an Irish hero', *Listener*, 22 March 1951, pp. 455–8, at p. 455.

³⁴ 'Court and society', *Irish Society*, cxcix (Oct. 1891), 1017.

³⁵ 'Court and society'.

have been 'seized and spirited away by religious enthusiasts', as a consequence of 'an intrigue of the Vatican.'³⁶

Although widely reported across the English-speaking world, the sensational nature of Delia Parnell's claims prompted various commentators to observe that she did not 'enjoy perfect mental health' (though Harrison later insisted that she was merely 'eccentric').³⁷ Despite such doubts, several newspapers at the time returned to the 'puzzling fact' that 'the man or woman who saw Chas. Stewart Parnell dead on his bed, or in his coffin, is far to see and hard to find.'³⁸ Moreover, as Delia Parnell had intimated, her doubts were shared by others; as the *Dublin Journal* noted, her claims were, in fact, 'the repetition of an uncanny rumour that has long been current in some circles.'³⁹

Within a few months of Delia Parnell's letter, speculation about the fate of her son 'received a curious fillip.'⁴⁰ According to the *Leeds Mercury* of October 1896, 'There is still a belief in Ireland that Parnell is not dead but gone on a journey ... to reappear when the other Irish leaders have demonstrated their power in dividing the party.'⁴¹ The *Sunday Times* reported that a London publishing firm had recently been in touch with Alfred Haddon, professor of zoology in the Royal College of Science, Dublin, with the purpose of commissioning him to write a biography of Parnell; Haddon responded to the invitation by stating that 'there is a general belief that the late leader is not dead but is living on a ranch in an obscure Western [American] State'. Haddon added that an earlier attempt by another writer to produce an authorized biography of Parnell had been frustrated by his family, 'for the reason ... that Mr Parnell was not dead'. Haddon's respectability and – again – the 'curious ... facts attending the announcement of the death and proceedings connected with it', lent, the *Sunday Times* claimed, 'some colour to its possibility'.⁴²

Although the *Sunday Times* asserted that the story had received 'widespread belief in America', the paper insisted that the 'rumour has not gained any ground in this country', because 'we in England [have] ... a high belief in the honour and integrity of our medical men.'⁴³ Other British newspapers, by contrast, gently mocked reports that Parnell was still alive. The *Daily Chronicle* published a satirical poem at the time titled 'Parnell is still alive', which included the lines 'There's a story gaining currency that Parnell is alive! / So the Dillons and the Healys can with decency withdraw / For 'tis very hard to find a card to beat the knave or five / If this trump of all the "pack" should in Ohio still survive! And – we met the man, who saw the man that saw!'⁴⁴

Whereas some observers considered the report of the *Sunday Times* to be 'ridiculous' and 'preposterous', the Parnellite newspaper the *Irish Daily Independent* took a more sombre line, lamenting that 'it is only too true that the body of the late Irish Leader sleeps in Glasnevin Cemetery.'⁴⁵ Nonetheless, reports continued to appear suggesting that Parnell's mother remained convinced that her son was not dead and that she planned to search for him in Ireland.⁴⁶ In fact, it was only after Delia Parnell's death in 1898 that the narration of the legend of Parnell's return gained real momentum in the British press. In 1898 one British newspaper reported that in life Parnell had 'engaged the services of a "double" who bore a striking resemblance to himself, and that many believe that it was the "double" who died at Brighton'. The same newspaper reported that a 'well-known English Home Ruler' had seen 'Parnell leaving England two months after his supposed death' and that a former Nationalist M.P. had told an English reporter that 'I have left politics pending Parnell's return.'⁴⁷

However, from the late 1890s onwards, one particular feature of the legend became especially prominent in British reportage. In 1899 the London-based *Golden Penny* magazine, 'An Illustrated Home Weekly of stories, adventures, yarns, humour and inventions', reported on the rumour of

³⁶ *Drogheda Independent*, 16 Aug. 1896.

³⁷ *Drogheda Independent*, 16 Aug. 1896; and Harrison, *Parnell Vindicated*, p. 427.

³⁸ *South Wales Daily News*, 9 Nov. 1896.

³⁹ *Dublin Journal*, quoted in *Carlow Nationalist*, 22 Aug. 1896.

⁴⁰ *Sunday Times*, quoted in *Cardiff Times*, 14 Nov. 1896.

⁴¹ *Leeds Mercury*, 17 Oct. 1896.

⁴² *Sunday Times*, quoted in *Cardiff Times*, 14 Nov. 1896.

⁴³ *Sunday Times*, quoted in *Coolgardie Miner*, 19 Dec. 1896.

⁴⁴ *Daily Chronicle*, 6 Dec. 1896.

⁴⁵ *Berrows Worcester Journal*, 14 Nov. 1896; and *Irish Daily Independent*, 9 Nov. 1896.

⁴⁶ *Atchison Daily Globe* (Kansas), 27 Nov. 1896.

⁴⁷ *Irish News*, 24 Dec. 1898.

Parnell's staged death. Picking up on a key part of the story as it had first been reported by *Irish Society* in 1891, the magazine claimed that it was 'the unlettered and superstitious peasantry' who truly 'believe[d] that Parnell will someday, when he has atoned for his worldly sin, come back and lead a United Ireland'.⁴⁸ Indeed, in the years that followed, it became routine for British and American press reports about Parnell's suspicious death to claim that 'among the peasantry and poorer classes in various parts of Ireland', belief in the legend was widespread.⁴⁹

This narrative development in the Parnell myth was also a prominent feature of its final iteration during the second Anglo-South African War (1899–1902). In August 1900 the London *Daily Mail* reported that it was now 'actually believed in many parts of Ireland' that the bearded Boer general, Christiaan de Wet, was none other than Charles Stewart Parnell. This 'absurd' and 'preposterous' suggestion was the pretext for the press to again make fun of the gullibility of 'certain romantically inclined ... imaginative Celt[s]' and 'simple Irish folk'.⁵⁰ Other newspapers likewise reported that 'in the more isolated districts of Ireland there are thousands of peasants who believe that Mr Parnell is not dead'.⁵¹

The coverage of the Parnell rumour by Fleet Street 'scribblers' was indicative of 'elite discourse[s]' about popular attitudes.⁵² Indeed, the gullibility of the Irish 'peasantry' had been a constant in the coverage of Ireland more generally in much of the British press during the preceding century.⁵³ However, there are good grounds for believing that the claims of the British press that credulous Irish 'peasants' really did expect Parnell to return may originally have been at least partly inspired by events far beyond Ireland's shores and that occurred long before 1891.

During the 1890s and in subsequent decades, the supposed belief of Irish 'peasants' in the legend of Parnell's return was often folklorized by commentators in terms of the 'king in the mountain' trope (that is, a hero of a past golden age – often located in the early medieval period – who is said to be asleep in a hollow mountain or cave awaiting the summons to come to the defence of the kingdom). As early as 1891 *Irish Society* compared Parnell's return to the 'old Danish legend of Holger Danske, and Saxon myths about King Arthur'.⁵⁴ Five years later, a Dublin newspaper described the Parnell story as 'strangely suggestive of the ... old Irish Gaelic legends'; Finn McCool is an Irish example of the 'sleeping king' trope, though, in an early modern context, it can also be seen in the tales of the exiled Hugh O'Neill and the various Stuart pretenders.⁵⁵ The British press likewise compared the Parnell legend to the stories of other so-called 'sleeping heroes' like Charlemagne, Frederick Barbarossa and Sebastian I of Brazil.⁵⁶ Later press reports also tended to folklorize the legend in the same way, describing the Parnell narrative in Arthurian terms, with the Chief now sleeping with the 'wee folk' under 'the hollow hills of Wicklow; whence he would return in the hour of peril'.⁵⁷

In so doing, these commentators positioned themselves in modern, rationalist terms and viewed the Parnell conspiracy, by contrast, through what has been termed the 'pathologising paradigm': 'as something opposed to the rational project of modernity'.⁵⁸ From this perspective, the persistence of such archaic interpretations was understood in terms of Irish 'folk metaphysics' (that is, 'folkloric assumptions about how the supernatural engages the material world').⁵⁹ British newspapers were then highlighting what they regarded as the anachronistic persistence in Ireland of pre-modern Weberian types of enchantment.

⁴⁸ P. H. MacEneaney, 'Views and interviews', *Golden Penny*, viii (28 Jan. 1899), quoted in *Kerry Weekly Reporter*, 4 Feb. 1899.

⁴⁹ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 21 Oct. 1900. Also see *Washington Post*, 22 June 1902.

⁵⁰ *Daily Mail*, 30 Aug. 1900.

⁵¹ *Western Mail*, 29 Dec. 1900.

⁵² R. Chandavarkar, 'Plague panic and epidemic politics in India, 1896–1914', in *Epidemics and Ideas: Essays on the Historical Perception of Pestilence*, ed. T. Ranger and P. Slack (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 203–40, at p. 223; and D. Coast and J. Fox, 'Rumour and politics', *History Compass*, xiii (2015), 222–34, at p. 223.

⁵³ M. de Nie, *The Eternal Paddy: Irish Identity and the British Press, 1798–1882* (Madison, Wis., 2004), p. 123.

⁵⁴ 'Court and society'.

⁵⁵ *Dublin Journal*, quoted in *Carlow Nationalist*, 22 Aug. 1896; and 'Sleeping heroes', *Genealogical Magazine*, viii (1904), 125–7, at p. 125.

⁵⁶ *Globe*, 21 March 1904. Also see *Westminster Gazette*, 23 Feb. 1903.

⁵⁷ D. Marshall, 'Parnell after fifty years', *The Commonweal*, xxxv (24 Oct. 1941), 6–9, at p. 9.

⁵⁸ R. Chlup, 'Conspiracy narratives as a type of social myth', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, xxxvii (2023), 219–41, at p. 2.

⁵⁹ J. M. Harris, *Folklore and the Fantastic in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Aldershot, 2008), p. 8.

Parnell was certainly called the 'uncrowned king' of Ireland; yet, as William Michael Murphy's analysis of the historical figures that the Chief was actually compared to in Ireland suggests, Julius Caesar and Napoleon Bonaparte were much more frequent comparators than slumbering kings beneath ancient burial mounds.⁶⁰ Moreover, although comparisons to Napoleon in particular were occasionally made before 1890, it was only during the split that Parnell's Irish supporters and opponents framed his leadership in Napoleonic terms, to signify either his greatness as a leader or the autocratic nature of his personal dictatorship. In Britain meanwhile, erstwhile critics of nationalism now discovered new, hitherto unfathomed 'Napoleonic qualities' in the Chief, with the so-called 'Paper-Unionists' praising the embattled leader as a means of attacking Gladstone.⁶¹ British newspapers compared Parnell to Napoleon in terms of his 'marvelous quickness of vision and action' but also his 'moral obtuseness'.⁶² Anti-Parnellites noted that the Tory press portrayed 'him as ... [a] solitary man wrapping his cloak around him[self] like Napoleon at St Helena'.⁶³ At Parnell's death, further comparisons to Napoleon were made by British commentators. As Matthew Arnold noted of Parnell, 'He thought, like Napoleon, he could break through the iron laws which govern the lives of men and states'.⁶⁴ In the decades that followed his death, Parnell came to be styled in Britain as the 'Napoleon of Irish politics' and was ascribed 'Napoleonic' attributes, such as unscrupulousness, 'extraordinary mental vigour', an 'electric' or 'magnetic' personality, and the power to compel his followers to 'servile submission'.⁶⁵

British comparisons of Parnell to Napoleon reflected the long-standing fascination of Britons more generally with the emperor. Not only did he fascinate leading Romantic and Victorian authors (such as Byron, Scott, Hazlitt, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Bronte, Thackeray and Hardy), but as the 'most commonly produced pottery portrait figure of the Victorian era', Bonaparte's image also adorned middle-class mantelpieces throughout the long nineteenth century.⁶⁶ Much of this interest was undoubtedly ambivalent. Thomas Carlyle may have regarded Napoleon as a 'great man', but he was in no doubt that the emperor was also a 'deeply flawed hero'.⁶⁷ As Sir John Seeley noted in 1869, Napoleon was a 'fit object of hero-worship, if not always approval'.⁶⁸ Just as in other parts of the English-speaking world, part of the fascination of Britons with Napoleon may have been that he offered ways into thinking about some of the 'problematic dimensions' of key ideas, 'like freedom, meritocracy, and market capitalism'.⁶⁹

Given the British cult of Napoleon, and the comparisons made to Parnell, it is striking that there existed a legend that Bonaparte himself had not died in 1821 but had instead gone into exile, pending some future return.⁷⁰ This story was certainly familiar to at least some among the British press in the first half of the nineteenth century.⁷¹ It almost certainly had its origins in Napoleon's actual escape from exile and return to France in 1815. As Sudhir Hazareesingh has noted, in the years after Napoleon's defeat and re-imprisonment, rumours that he had escaped again and planned to return to France appeared regularly. These stories varied; in some he was to come back accompanied by an American army and in others by large numbers of Spanish Catholic priests.⁷²

⁶⁰ Murphy, *Parnell Myth*, p. 52.

⁶¹ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 25 June 1887; *The Times*, 11 Dec. 1890; and *Pall Mall Gazette*, *The Elector's Picture Book* (London, 1892), p. 38.

⁶² *Glasgow Herald*, 12 Dec. 1890; *Weekly Dispatch*, 14 Dec. 1890; and *Standard*, 19 Jan. 1901.

⁶³ *Manchester Evening News*, 8 Dec. 1890.

⁶⁴ *Middlesex County Times*, 8 Oct. 1891.

⁶⁵ *Carmarthen Weekly Reporter*, 29 May 1896; *Leicester Daily Post*, 10 Nov. 1898; *Echo* (London), 20 July 1899; *District*, 9 Sept. 1899; *Bournemouth Daily Echo*, 5 Feb. 1902; and *Hampstead News*, 24 Oct. 1907.

⁶⁶ S. Bainbridge, 'Battling Bonaparte after Waterloo: re-enactment, representation and "The Napoleon Bust Business"', in *Tracing War in British Enlightenment and Romantic Culture*, ed. N. Ramsey and G. Russell (Basingstoke, 2016), pp. 132–50, at p. 141.

⁶⁷ D. R. Sorensen, "'Je suis la révolution Française': Carlyle, Napoleon, and the Napoleonic mythus', *Carlyle Studies Annual*, xxii (2006), 283–302, at p. 283.

⁶⁸ *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 17 Nov. 1869, cited in L. Daly-Groves, 'The Napoleonic legend in nineteenth century Britain: a comparative analysis' (unpublished University of Leeds M.A. thesis, 2016), p. 30.

⁶⁹ E. Duquette, 'Introduction: seeing tyranny' (abstract), in *American Tyrannies in the Long Age of Napoleon* (Oxford, 2023) <<https://academic.oup.com/book/47088/chapter/415898491>> [accessed 29 July 2024].

⁷⁰ P. Dwyer, *Napoleon: Passion, Death, and Resurrection, 1815–1840* (London, 2018), pp. 78, 135, 147, 148.

⁷¹ *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 1 Oct. 1904.

⁷² S. Hazareesingh, *The Legend of Napoleon* (London, 2005), p. 46.

These rumours declined in frequency but did not disappear after Napoleon's death in 1821. One such rumour had it that the fictitious 'General Malmort', who was believed to be in command of the French forces that intervened in 1823 to restore the Bourbon monarchy in Spain, was none other than Napoleon.⁷³ Although these rumours were reported in the British press from an early stage, those from the mid century are particularly relevant when considering the later Parnell legend.⁷⁴ During the 1848 French election (by which time Napoleon, had he still been alive, would have been in his late seventies), and the years that immediately followed it, British commentators noted the supposed belief of 'many' so-called 'peasants' in 'the remote provinces' of France that 'the great Napoleon is still alive'. In some versions, he was secretly imprisoned by the British and in others, he was 'still alive in America, planning a return to France.'⁷⁵ How far these narratives reflected currents in French rural opinion, as opposed to Parisian fears about the extent to which Napoleon's nephew Louis-Napoleon (later Emperor Napoleon III) was exploiting the 'magical allure of the Bonaparte name for the rural hordes', is open to question.⁷⁶ As Laura O'Brien notes, some hostile commentators certainly believed that the 'Bonapartist campaign deliberately exploited popular Napoleonism', not least by encouraging the belief in 1848 that rural electors were 'voting for the great Bonaparte, instead of Prince Louis-Napoleon.'⁷⁷ Nor was this the end of the Napoleonic tradition of pseudocide: in 1873, following Napoleon III's death, there were rumours that this too had been staged, and that he 'will be heard of some fine morning at Strasbourg or Boulogne-sur-mer.'⁷⁸

British reporting of the post-1891 stories of Parnell's return in terms of the Chief's self-imposed exile in America, his adoption of a new military identity, and that such 'superstition[s]' were 'cherished in many a mud-hut' in the countryside, strikingly echo how the mid century press had described the rumours of Bonaparte's return.⁷⁹ Indeed, some Edwardian British commentators invoked the Napoleon legend when writing about Parnell's alleged pseudocide.⁸⁰ This suggests that the more recent cult of Napoleon had a greater bearing than the folklore of Charlemagne *et al.* on the *fin de siècle* legend of Parnell's return, especially in the way that the British press attributed belief in it to 'fanciful ... peasant[s]'.⁸¹

Although Napoleon was in all likelihood the original source for much of the Parnell legend, a constellation of late Victorian and Edwardian pseudocide stories were also, arguably, important to its shape and trajectory. In this context, if the Parnell narrative was neither entirely unique nor the first of its kind to emerge during the late nineteenth century, it was surely the most influential overall. Indeed, although the Napoleon legend exercised a formative influence on how stories about the Chief were narrated, the Parnell myth, in turn, seems to have made its own impression on the constellation of survival narratives that appeared between 1885 and 1916.

Arguably the first of these modern stories concerned Major General Charles 'Chinese' Gordon. In the years immediately before Parnell's death the British press reported on speculation that Gordon might have survived the fall of Khartoum to the forces of the Mahdi in 1885. Initially, these reports focused on whether he might have been taken prisoner, though the official narrative about his heroic final moments quickly predominated (in which he was depicted as having first donned his ceremonial uniform before confronting the approaching enemy, armed only with a rattan cane).⁸² However, without a body, some family members and friends reportedly still desired proof that he was really dead.⁸³ Then, in the late 1880s, the press suggested that he might have survived and escaped to southern Sudan or even reinvented himself as the mysterious 'White Pasha'.⁸⁴

⁷³ Dwyer, *Napoleon*, p. 148.

⁷⁴ *London Packet*, 8 Aug. 1821; *Globe*, 21 Jan. 1830; and *Morning Post*, 12 Aug. 1843.

⁷⁵ 'A campaign in Algiers', *Fraser's Magazine*, xxxvii (May 1848), 525–39, at p. 534; *Preston Chronicle*, 16 Dec. 1848; *Express* (London), 26 Nov. 1849; *North Devon Journal*, 22 Aug. 1850; *Edinburgh Evening Courant*, 22 Jan. 1852; and *Scotsman*, 20 Nov. 1860.

⁷⁶ L. O'Brien, *The Republican Line: Caricature and French Republican Identity, 1830–52* (Manchester, 2015), p. 216.

⁷⁷ *Preston Chronicle*, 16 Dec. 1848; and O'Brien, *Republican Line*, p. 219.

⁷⁸ *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 26 April 1873; and *Woodford Times*, 27 Sept. 1873.

⁷⁹ 'Sleeping heroes', p. 125.

⁸⁰ *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 1 Oct. 1904.

⁸¹ *Globe*, 21 March 1904.

⁸² *Evening News* (Edinburgh), 5 Feb. 1885.

⁸³ *Bridlington Free Press*, 30 Oct. 1886; and *Dundee Advertiser*, 31 March 1887.

⁸⁴ *Liverpool Daily Post*, 2 May 1887; and *Buchan Observer and East Aberdeenshire Advertiser*, 3 July 1888.

Although Gordon's adoption of a false identity and his projected return anticipated the Parnell legend in certain respects, there seems to have been no notion before 1891 that his survival was the result of a deliberate plan. In fact, it was only in the early twentieth century (and so after the emergence of the Parnell legend) that Gordon's survival was narrated in pseudocidal terms. The British press now claimed that there were 'millions of people' in the Sudan who believed that Gordon was still alive, and that he was 'biding his own good time to reappear and rule over them once more'. On the other hand, there were some in England who reportedly believed that Gordon had been so 'disgusted' by his treatment at the hands of the Gladstone government that he had 'escaped the massacre and retired into the untrodden wilds of ... Kordofan, never to return'.⁸⁵

Notwithstanding certain clear similarities, the evidence suggests that the Parnell legend – as narrated by the British press during the 1890s at least – was far from a simple transposition of the Gordon story. Instead, another narrative may have interposed and cross-pollinated with it – that of General Mikhail Skobelev, nicknamed the 'White General'. Skobelev had made his reputation as a charismatic and dynamic commander during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–8, before dying 'suddenly', and some thought mysteriously, at the age of thirty-eight in 1882.⁸⁶ At the time, some Russian soldiers apparently refused to believe Skobelev was really dead.⁸⁷ Then, in 1897, the British press reported the story that many Russian 'peasants' apparently believed that it had been a 'soldier resembling' the bearded Skobelev who had actually been buried on his estate outside Moscow in 1882. Meanwhile, the general had been living incognito in France (disguises having been something he had used in real life).⁸⁸ Indeed, he had reportedly commanded a Japanese regiment 'under a false name' during the recent Chino-Japanese War of 1894–5. Otherwise, he remained 'ready to re-appear when his country shall need his sword'.⁸⁹

Although reports of the Skobelev legend postdated the earliest stories of the Chief's pseudocide, the Russian story may have influenced subsequent claims that Parnell assumed a military alias during the Anglo-Boer War. This aspect of the Parnell legend, in turn, subsequently became a trope in later pseudocide myths reported by the British press. It almost certainly, for example, influenced the stories concerning Major General Sir Hector 'Fighting Mac' MacDonald. MacDonald's distinguished military career had been brought to a sudden end by his suicide in 1903, following accusations that he had sexually abused British and Sinhalese boys while serving in Sri Lanka, with the result that he was facing a court martial at the time of his death. Although MacDonald died in Paris and was buried in Edinburgh, reports appeared in the British press within two years suggesting that 'every native in our Eastern Empire', many members of the 'rank and file' of the British Army, and some Scottish highlanders believed that 'a bogus suicide had been specially arranged' for him. Later, according to reports, he had assumed the identity of the Japanese General Kuroki Tamemoto, who distinguished himself in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5.⁹⁰ It was afterwards also claimed that MacDonald had disguised himself as an officer in the Chinese Army, as the Russo-Bulgarian General Radko Dimitriyev (who was reportedly 'leading the soldiers of the Czar to Berlin' in 1914), and finally a German general during the same conflict.⁹¹ As with Parnell, commentators claimed that the circumstances surrounding MacDonald's death in 1903 had been 'suspicious': there had been no inquest, he had been very quickly buried, and that it had been 'openly remarked' at the time of his death that 'nobody outside three or four relations ... ever saw the body'.⁹²

Finally, and perhaps most famously, there was the Kitchener myth: the wartime and interwar British legend that Field Marshal Lord Kitchener, secretary of state for war, had not died on 5 June 1916 on board H.M.S. *Hampshire*, dressed in his uniform, calmly talking to his staff officers as the ship went down, after it apparently struck a German mine, west of Orkney, en route to Russia. Instead, alongside the claims that Kitchener had been assassinated by German spies, Irish republicans or even agents of

⁸⁵ 'Dead men who are living', *Pearson's Weekly*, dclvii (Feb. 1903), 582.

⁸⁶ *Globe*, 7 July 1882; and *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 7 Feb. 1889.

⁸⁷ O. K., *Skobelev and the Slavonic Cause* (London, 1883), p. 132.

⁸⁸ *St James's Gazette*, 18 Feb. 1882.

⁸⁹ *Eastern Daily Press*, 22 Oct. 1897.

⁹⁰ *North Star and Farmer's Chronicle*, 30 March 1905; *Lincolnshire Echo*, 13 Apr. 1906; *Nuneaton Observer*, 10 Aug. 1906; and *Shoreditch Observer*, 27 Apr. 1907.

⁹¹ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 2 Apr. 1907; *Sunday Post*, 1 Nov. 1914; *Bradford Daily Telegraph*, 21 Sept. 1915; and *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 11 Jan. 1917.

⁹² *Peebles News*, 6 Apr. 1907.

his own government, the 'preposterous story' that he had survived the North Sea emerged soon after his death. In one version, he was now a German prisoner, in another, he was said to have escaped in a 'small boat', before reaching 'some remote part of the world ... [where he] is living in anonymous retirement'.⁹³ In some of these stories, his survival was fortuitous, but in others (such as those where he had gone on to become a senior imperial Russian commander or, alternatively, Alexander Kerensky), there was a clearer sense of pseudocide.⁹⁴ As in previous pseudocide narratives, stories that portrayed Kitchener assuming different identities may have been informed by earlier accounts of his having used disguises in real life.⁹⁵ Some stories suggested that Kitchener was 'awaiting the day when he can once more come to his country's assistance'.⁹⁶ Again, like Parnell, members of Kitchener's family insisted that he was still alive and sought, via a medium, to prove this by showing that he was not yet in the afterlife.⁹⁷ And although there were no gullible English 'peasants' to attribute belief to in Kitchener's case, other 'simple-minded' folk were drafted in by the press to take this role: Indian soldiers and English women.⁹⁸

Of course, Parnell was not a military hero of the British (or, indeed, Russian) Empire; and yet, the legend of his staged death bears striking similarities to the stories that were told about MacDonald and Kitchener, to a lesser extent of Gordon, and certainly also those concerning Skobelev in these years. These myths included claims that the deaths of these hirsute men had been staged, that these men had subsequently assumed military aliases in far-off conflicts, that some people expected these men to return one day, and that those who believed in these myths often hailed from lower-status groups (that is, peasants, rural dwellers, women, etc.) or colonial subject peoples. Understanding the wider phenomenon of these intersecting narratives lies beyond the scope of the current article (though it poses interesting questions – not least about how far pseudocidal stories were a function of public disappointment in the failure and/or sexual transgressions of bewhiskered high-profile men). What can be said here, is that these stories all arguably reflected the contribution that the British press made over a thirty-year period, not just to their narration but also to their entanglement, conflation, and, ultimately, co-creation. More particularly, while the Gordon myth was the first such example, the press's rendering of the Parnell legend seems to have been central to the co-narration of these different stories in the years between c.1900 and 1920. After all, Parnell's pseudocide was frequently invoked in newspaper articles about these other stories: it served as a key comparator in accounts of the Gordon legend after 1900, functioned as the main point of reference in reports about MacDonald's afterlife in the years 1905–15, and performed an important corroborative function (albeit a subordinate one to the more recent MacDonald story) in the case of the Kitchener myth after 1916.⁹⁹ What is also noticeable is that the same newspapers did not tend to invoke Gordon, or later MacDonald and Kitchener, when reporting specifically about the Parnell legend after c.1900.¹⁰⁰ Instead, Parnell's pseudocide was still to be understood as the product of the peculiarly Irish 'peasant' mindset.

If the Irish peasantry emerged from these narratives as somehow particularly superstitious, the Arthurian-esque expectations attributed to them as to what the return of Parnell would mean were also different to those assigned to the equivalent groups who performed similar functions in the legends of Gordon *et al.* Gordon's return would reportedly involve merely the retaking of Khartoum or recovery of Sudan, whereas restoration seems never to have been a feature of the MacDonald pseudocide narrative. As for Kitchener, his future reappearance was framed merely in terms of providing 'assistance' in some future crisis. By contrast, British newspapers reported Irish expectations of the Chief's return in terms of resurrection, with the risen Parnell then leading the nation onto the achievement of a 'United Ireland'.

⁹³ D. Laws, *Who Killed Kitchener? The Life and Death of Britain's Most Famous War Minister* (London, 2019), pp. 44–55; *Northampton Chronicle and Echo*, 21 Apr. 1917; and *Cambridge Daily News*, 7 Sept. 1917.

⁹⁴ *Civil & Military Gazette* (Lahore), 25 Jan. 1917; *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 27 July 1917; and *Thomson's Weekly News*, 15 Sept. 1917.

⁹⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 Dec. 1917.

⁹⁶ *Orkney Herald*, 17 June 1925.

⁹⁷ *Stonehaven Journal*, 2 Aug. 1917; and *Financial Times*, 7 Nov. 2014.

⁹⁸ *Midlothian Advertiser*, 7 July 1916; and *Sketch*, 6 Dec. 1916.

⁹⁹ For direct comparisons of the Parnell and Gordon legends, see 'Dead men who are living'. For Parnell and MacDonald, see *Nuneaton Observer*, 10 Aug. 1906; *Manchester Courier*, 15 Sept. 1908; and *Sunday Post*, 1 Nov. 1914. For Parnell and Kitchener, see *Midlothian Advertiser*, 7 July 1916; *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 27 July 1917; and *Western Mail*, 18 Oct. 1918.

¹⁰⁰ See, e.g., *Huddersfield Daily Examiner*, 3 Oct. 1911; *Northern Weekly Gazette*, 25 Aug. 1906; and *Streatham News*, 6 Sept. 1913.

This distinctive feature is particularly noteworthy because it intersected with the Parnell legend as it seems to have circulated in Ireland. That this comparison is possible, reflects the fact that Ireland was not remote Africa, Asia or Russia, and so the recovery of the Irish version of the myth can be attempted. The fact that the emphasis in Ireland seems to have been on Parnell's return from an earthly exile, rather than on a paranormal resurrection event, points towards important divergences. Understanding, as far as it can be reconstructed, the form the legend took in Ireland, as distinct from how it was narrated in Britain, underscores how much more terrestrial and secular it actually seems to have been on the other side of the Irish Sea.

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That the story of Parnell's return was not simply the invention of the British press is suggested by various contemporary reports in Ireland and elsewhere. At least one foreign newspaper reported on Irish expectations of Parnell's return, though, significantly, it eschewed the trope of credulous 'peasants'. *Le Temps* reported instead that 'many people in Ireland believe[d]' that Parnell had staged his own death and that he was 'wait[ing] until a more favourable time ... for putting his cherished plans into execution'.¹⁰¹ The same was true of those Irish nationalist commentators who publicly noted the 'fantastic myth' that Parnell had reinvented himself as De Wet. The Dublin *Evening Herald* described them not as rustics but as 'romantic pro-Boer[s]' overcome by the fact that the 'guerrilla warrior' bore a 'certain resemblance to the "lost leader" in his full beard days'.¹⁰² Likewise, Michael Davitt, in his book *The Boer Fight for Freedom* (1902), observed of 'De Wet's Irish admirers' who believed in the 'legend' that the Boer general was really Parnell, that they were 'very romantic souls'.¹⁰³ And when Arthur Griffith claimed in 1911 that 'many in Ireland' still believed that Parnell would return, he too avoided characterizing these people as gullible countryfolk.

In fact, there is very little evidence that the legend of Parnell's return was ever popular in rural Ireland. Indeed, one nationalist newspaper observed of such rumours in 1898 that they were 'excellently illustrative of the facility with which the British public can be gulled about anything Irish'.¹⁰⁴ Although Dublin's National Folklore Commission, for example, holds songs and lamentations in English and Irish mourning Parnell's death, no reference has been found (among its English language material at least) to the story of Parnell's pseudocide. The only contemporary example of such rural folk belief in situ is an article by the Anglo-Irish dramatist and folklorist Lady Augusta Gregory, published in 1901, that features her alleged encounter with an old man in the west of Ireland who insists that Parnell is not dead and a policeman who observes that 'there are many [who] say that'.¹⁰⁵

In some ways, this absence is a little surprising. After all, in life, some of Parnell's supporters do seem to have imbued him with quasi-supernatural qualities. As Joseph Valente has noted, the 'phantasmatic trait[s]' of Parnell's public persona were important to the 'multiple and mass political investment' of his supporters and opponents during his lifetime.¹⁰⁶ Likewise, Roy Foster and Alvin Jackson have described his reputation in life as 'quasi-magical'.¹⁰⁷ His 'unearthly' eyes and 'indescribably magnetic glance' were noted by contemporaries, as was the 'hypnotic quality' of his personality.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, the 'hypnotic influence which Parnell could exercise over people' was a trope of both friendly and hostile commentary during his lifetime, with this 'power' being described variously as 'strange', 'dark', and 'mysterious and sinister'.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰¹ *Le Temps*, quoted in *San Francisco Call*, 21 Oct. 1900.

¹⁰² *Evening Herald*, 27 May 1920.

¹⁰³ M. Davitt, *The Boer Fight for Freedom* (London, 1902), p. 165.

¹⁰⁴ *Irish News*, 24 Dec. 1898.

¹⁰⁵ A. Gregory, 'On the edge of the world', *The Speaker*, 17 Aug. 1901, pp. 547–8, at p. 548.

¹⁰⁶ J. Valente, *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880–1922* (Chicago, 2010), p. 30.

¹⁰⁷ R. Foster and A. Jackson, 'Men for all seasons? Carson, Parnell, and the limits of heroism in modern Ireland', *European History Quarterly*, xxxix (2009), 414–38, at p. 417.

¹⁰⁸ W. O'Brien, *The Parnell of Real Life* (London, 1926), p. 125; D. D. Sheehan, *Ireland Since Parnell* (London, 1921), p. 15; Murphy, *Parnell Myth*, p. 23; J. Abels, *The Parnell Tragedy* (London, 1966), p. 63; and *Pall Mall Gazette*, 8 Oct. 1891.

¹⁰⁹ T. P. O'Connor, *Charles Stewart Parnell: a Memory* (London, 1891), p. 72; *Gloucester Citizen*, 7 Dec. 1885; *Dublin Daily Express*, 15 Dec. 1885; *Warwick and Warwickshire Advertiser*, 13 Feb. 1886; *Birmingham Mail*, 8 Oct. 1891; *East Anglian Times*, 9 Oct. 1891; and *Leeds Times*, 17 Oct. 1891.

Nor, according to James Loughlin, was this merely hyperbole. What he terms as the 'poorer, superstitious [Irish] peasantry ... invested Parnell with quite awesome abilities', as evidenced by the way that the mighty storm that followed his arrest in October 1881 had been interpreted by his 'peasant followers ... as the elements protesting against his arrest'. Such supernatural associations were also apparent in the small, talismanic objects that 'hero-worshipping peasants' slipped into the Chief's pockets.¹¹⁰ Parnell, as Foster has pointed out, did not discourage the 'strange, almost supernatural' aura that was projected onto him by his followers.¹¹¹

Notwithstanding such apparent 'peasant' projections, the available evidence suggests that the legend, in fact, appealed to a more diverse range of constituencies. In her statements to the press in 1896 Delia Parnell had asserted that she was not alone among her family in believing that her son was still alive; corroborating evidence exists to bear this claim out. One London magazine reported that among his immediate family, Parnell's brother John and all his sisters save one remained 'unconvinced that "Charlie" was the occupant of the Brighton coffin'.¹¹² The Parnellite journalist R. Barry O'Brien's interviewed Parnell's sister Anna in this period, during which she asked him, 'Do you really believe he is dead?'; before volunteering, 'I don't'.¹¹³ Parnell's other sister, Emily, later attributed the origins of the Parnell legend to the fact that 'no one was allowed to see him after his death', with the result that 'rumours began to get about more openly that Charles had been seen, by this person and that, in one place and another. The people got the idea that their hero was not dead at all, and that it [had been] ... only a mock funeral'. Unlike her mother and sister, Emily – writing in 1905 – did not express an opinion about these stories, though she noted similarities to those about the 'first Napoleon and other leaders in many lands'.¹¹⁴

Beyond the immediate family, questions of precisely what Parnell's 'faithful few' believed about the Chief's whereabouts also received some attention. In 1899 the *Golden Penny* magazine named several of Parnell's lieutenants on a list of 'followers who believe Parnell is dead'.¹¹⁵ Even among this group, however, the legend may have exercised some influence; one French newspaper reported an unnamed Parnellite M.P. lamenting that 'it is our duty to keep silent when we find that the Irish people are so strongly convinced of his immortality'.¹¹⁶ In addition, the wife of one of Parnell's parliamentary supporters, Pierce O'Mahoney, was described as 'one of those who believe that Parnell is not dead'.¹¹⁷

There is also some evidence that other politicians, beyond the Parnellite faithful, had cause to doubt whether Parnell had really died in 1891. Only two years after the Chief's death, in September 1894, one of his most senior political lieutenants until the split, John Dillon, M.P., recorded in his diary that he had recognized the intonation, clothing, gait, beard and, finally, face of Parnell at, of all places, a performance of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* in Munich.¹¹⁸ However, as Dillon considered what to do next, the figure 'disappeared', and he was unable to find him again. Dillon confided in his diary the same evening that the encounter had been so 'sudden' that he had been thrown off 'balance'.¹¹⁹

Over half a century later Shane Leslie gave an account of Dillon's meeting with 'the identical figure of Parnell', based on a first-hand report he had received from Dillon himself. Leslie was a devotee of ghostly tales; he accordingly presented the episode as a spectral encounter, indicative of the fact that for 'most of the older Nationalists' who had abandoned the Chief during the split, Parnell's 'betrayed memory rankled at the back of their souls'.¹²⁰ But although Leslie understood the encounter in terms

¹¹⁰ J. Loughlin, *The British Monarchy and Ireland: 1800 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 229; and K. O'Shea, *Charles Stewart Parnell: His Love Story and Political Life* (2 vols., London, 1914), i. 186.

¹¹¹ R. Foster, *Paddy and Mr Punch: Connections in Irish History and English History* (London, 1993), p. 47.

¹¹² *Golden Penny*, quoted in *Kerry Weekly Reporter*, 4 Feb. 1899 (my emphasis).

¹¹³ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 9 Aug. 1896.

¹¹⁴ E. M. Dickinson, *A Patriot's Mistake: Being Personal Recollections of the Parnell Family* (Dublin, 1905), pp. 187, 197.

¹¹⁵ *Golden Penny*, quoted in *Kerry Weekly Reporter*, 4 Feb. 1899 (my emphasis).

¹¹⁶ *Le Temps*, quoted in *San Francisco Call*, 21 Oct. 1900.

¹¹⁷ *Golden Penny*, quoted in *Kerry Weekly Reporter*, 4 Feb. 1899.

¹¹⁸ John Dillon, diary, 27 Sept. 1894, Trinity College Dublin Archive, John Dillon Papers, MS. 6572.

¹¹⁹ Dillon, diary, 27 Sept. 1894.

¹²⁰ S. Leslie, *The Film of Memory* (London, 1938), p. 396. Although not the focus here, spectrality was another important way that contemporaries understood, experienced and discussed Parnell's death and return after 1891. Indeed, pseudocidal discourses intersected with and were influenced by spectral narratives about the Chief. Many of those caught up in public speculation about Parnell's staged death (e.g., his family and parliamentary colleagues) were also implicated in a more covert culture of Parnellite supernaturalism. In addition, the 'shade' of Parnell was a figure employed by literary Parnellites, humourists and cartoonists.

of 'Parnell's tremendous personal identity ... so impress[ing] ... itself on his followers that under certain emotions the memory produced hallucinations', others have suggested that the episode may have simply been a case of mistaken identity, given the resemblance between the Chief and his two surviving brothers.¹²¹ It is possible, however, that Dillon, who Leslie noted was 'a most practical and level-headed Parliamentarian', might have considered the strange meeting in terms of the stories already circulating about Parnell's pseudocide. After all, Dillon did not himself record his 1894 experience as a spectral one. Moreover, his encounter was apparently not unique, given that 'another Irish member of parliament had a similar experience in Australia' in these years.¹²²

Beyond these cases involving specific, mostly family or elite actors, the evidence otherwise suggests that the story of Parnell's return was very much an urban myth, rather than a 'peasant' fantasy. Griffith's chance encounter with the legend in 1911 and Bloom's in the cabman's shelter both point in this direction. Likewise, Sean O'Casey's recollections of growing up in working-class Dublin included the memory that 'the [De Wet] story went everywhere' in Ireland's capital.¹²³ This would also be consistent with the support that the Parnellite minority received from large Irish towns and cities during the 1890s.¹²⁴ Indeed, there is evidence that the story circulated beyond Dublin, to other Irish urban areas; the writer St. John Ervine recalled many years later that he had been told 'in his boyhood ... in Belfast, that General De Wet was really Parnell.'¹²⁵

In this context, it is important to note that such instances of transmission do not necessarily signify belief in the legend. Far from people wholeheartedly accepting such stories (as British journalists often insinuated), their popularity was probably fuelled much more by doubt: an inherently fragile, 'unstable and self-contradicting' category of knowledge.¹²⁶ William G. Pooley has recently described doubt as 'perhaps truth'. 'Doubts', he continues, 'are contagious and emotional. They can be denied or defended by the same individuals in different contexts.'¹²⁷ Rather than a coherent set of beliefs, for many of the Irish people who encountered stories of Parnell's future return, their engagement probably rested on a 'tissue' of such doubts.¹²⁸

Likewise, for at least some of those sharing and hearing these stories, elements of them (disguises, bearded doppelgangers, etc.) may have seemed funny and even farcical, suggesting that pleasure and laughter could also have been among the motivations for transmitting them. That said, humour is a form of social communication, and so, in the case of stories about Parnell's return, transmission could also have reflected a desire to defuse felt tensions between expectations and actual events. As Elisabeth Cheauré and Regine Nohejl have observed, 'The general constituent of humorous situations seems to be the need for some kind of "recognition" of the "strange" ... in such a way as to take away ... [this] horror and strangeness.'¹²⁹ Humorous rumours can also operate as 'strategies of resistance' among the powerless.¹³⁰

If many of those sharing these stories regarded them in all likelihood as curious, thought-provoking and even funny, without necessarily believing absolutely in their veracity, some people – especially in Dublin – do seem to have been more emotionally invested in them.¹³¹ According to one, much

¹²¹ Leslie, *Film of Memory*, p. 372; and G. Martin, 'Charles Stewart Parnell: economics and politics of a building trade entrepreneur', *Gedmartin.net* <<http://www.gedmartin.net/martinalia-mainmenu-3/263-charles-stewart-parnell-economics-and-politics-of-a-building-trade-entrepreneur>> [accessed 26 July 2024].

¹²² Leslie, *Film of Memory*, p. 372.

¹²³ S. O'Casey, *Mirror in My House: The Autobiographies of Sean O'Casey* (2 vols., New York, 1956), i. 306.

¹²⁴ M. Kelly, "'Parnell's old brigade": the Redmondite-Fenian nexus in the 1890s', *Irish Historical Studies*, xxxiii (2002), 209–32, at p. 210.

¹²⁵ St. J. Ervine, *Parnell* (London, 1925), p. 313.

¹²⁶ W. G. Pooley, 'Doubt and the dislocation of magic: France, 1790–1940', *Past & Present*, cclxii (2023), 133–67, at p. 134.

¹²⁷ Pooley, 'Doubt', pp. 134, 135.

¹²⁸ Pooley, 'Doubt', p. 135.

¹²⁹ E. Cheauré and R. Nohejl, 'Introduction', in *Humour and Laughter in History: Transcultural Perspectives*, ed. E. Cheauré and R. Nohejl (Bielefeld, 2014), pp. 7–14, at p. 7.

¹³⁰ B. B. Tshuma, L. A. Tshuma and N. Ndlovu, 'Humour, politics, and Mnangagwe's presidency: an analysis of readers' comments in online news websites', in *The Politics of Laughter in the Social Media Age: Perspectives From the Global South*, ed. S. Mpofu (Cham, 2021), pp. 93–111, at p. 96.

¹³¹ D. A. Locher, *Collective Behaviour* (Upper Saddle River, N.J., 2002), p. 159.

later Irish account, so powerful was the belief among some Victorian and Edwardian Dubliners that Parnell would return that 'each day the watchers by the pier scanned the passengers that swung down the gangplank in the hopes of seeing once more the tall form of the forsaken leader'.¹³² This cycle of expectation and disappointment bears some resemblance to the Parnellite subculture described in *Ulysses*. In the Hades episode Bloom and others visit Parnell's grave after attending another funeral:

The mourners moved away slowly, without aim, by devious paths, staying awhile to read a name on a tomb.

– Let us go round by the chief's grave, Hynes said. We have time.

– Let us, Mr Power said.

They turned to the right, following their slow thoughts. With awe Mr Power's blank voice spoke:

– Some say he is not in that grave at all. That the coffin was filled with stones. That one day he will come again.

Hynes shook his head.

– Parnell will never come again, he said. He's there, all that was mortal of him. Peace to his ashes.¹³³

Here, there is also a clear sense of how the legend may have, in part, been a product of the individual or collective trauma experienced as a result of Parnell's fall and the political instability that followed.¹³⁴ Indeed, Joyce's famous Christmas dinner scene in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and his short story 'Ivy Day in the Committee Room' reveal 'the domestic trauma that pervades Ireland ... long after Parnell's death'.¹³⁵ As Lindsay Porter has noted of rumours more generally, they 'flourish in times of anxiety; they thrive on ambiguity and uncertainty, filling the void left by lack of information. They are an articulation of anxiety, of threat or of hope'.¹³⁶

Porter also notes that rumours are not necessarily just an irrational response to uncertainty; they can also 'provide satisfaction; they explain the inexplicable ... meet an emotional need' or, indeed, 'provide answers that are more palatable than reality' (what Tamotsu Shibutani described as the capacity of rumour to produce 'a satisfactory interpretation of ... event[s]').¹³⁷ At times of 'extraordinary upheaval, accurate facts are not sufficient to explain the course of events; further explanations are needed to make sense of the inexplicable'.¹³⁸

The remarkable circumstances surrounding Parnell's death seem to have been just such a case of an exceptional situation creating a need – at least among some – for extraordinary explanations. The Parnellite activist Katherine Tynan later recalled her feelings when she first heard about the Chief's death:

The air was full of the horrible sounds. We would *not* believe it. It was a device of the enemy, a wicked, horrible lie that would be contradicted almost as soon as it was spoken. Everyone was buying papers and talking in agitated voices. We spoke to absolute strangers ... 'Do you think it is true?'. No one knew. We could not believe it. We had said that with the Chief – only the Chief – our cause must win ... We could not believe that Death himself had intervened and that the great days were over.¹³⁹

Parnell was 'only' forty-five when he died in 1891.¹⁴⁰ As leader of the Home Rule party for over a decade, he had come to be regarded by many nationalists 'as the man who had brought Ireland to the brink of self-government, the person who could lead his people into the promised land'.¹⁴¹ Understandings of

¹³² *Sunday Independent*, 19 Dec. 1937.

¹³³ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 108.

¹³⁴ Callanan, *Parnell Split*, p. xi; and Foster and Jackson, 'Men for all seasons?', p. 417.

¹³⁵ C. DeVault, "'The memory of Parnell': juridical and ethical testimony in "Ivy Day in the Committee Room", *James Joyce Quarterly*, xlix (2012), 511–26, at p. 521.

¹³⁶ L. Porter, *Popular Rumour in Revolutionary Paris, 1792–1794* (Basingstoke, 2017), p. 1.

¹³⁷ Porter, *Popular Rumour*, p. 5; and T. Shibutani, *Improvvised News* (Indianapolis, 1966), p. 17.

¹³⁸ Porter, *Popular Rumour*, p. 5.

¹³⁹ K. Tynan, *Twenty-Five Years: Reminiscences* (London, 1913), p. 345.

¹⁴⁰ *Dundee People's Journal*, 10 Oct. 1891.

¹⁴¹ A. O'Day, 'Max Weber and leadership, Butt, Parnell and Dillon: nationalism in transition', in *Ireland in Transition, 1867–1921*, ed. D. George Boyce and A. O'Day (London, 2004), pp. 17–34, at p. 29.

his specific leadership qualities were central to his political persona; as one newspaper observed after his death, 'Of late years the public have come to think of Mr Parnell as a masterful and self-confident man.'¹⁴² Even in the context of the split, one anti-Parnellite observed that 'nobody ever thought it would end so disastrously. There was infinite faith in Mr Parnell's luck for one thing.'¹⁴³

In these circumstances, pseudocide seems to have provided some Parnellites with a more satisfactory explanation of recent tumultuous events. In this light, the Chief's staged death could also be framed as the latest masterpiece of a political maestro who had already skilfully navigated British-Irish high politics for over a decade. This is suggested in the reports in the French and American press in 1900 that some believed that a cleanly shaven Parnell had, supposedly, attended his own funeral.¹⁴⁴ Indeed, *Le Temps's* Irish correspondent claimed to have been at Parnell's funeral and to have seen 'mocking smiles' among the mourners, with one 'venerable patriot' among the procession reportedly having insisted that the coffin they were following contained 'a dummy ... It's a clever trick he's playing, and won't England be surprised when she finds the dead Parnell coming back alive some years from now.'¹⁴⁵

Confirmation bias may also have played a role in this context. Parnell had been known, in real life, to periodically disappear, and this may have lent the legend credibility. 'He likes', wrote an American observer in 1891, 'to steal through crowded streets in a long, heavy Ulster and a small smoking-cap that effectually conceals his identity.'¹⁴⁶ That Parnell had also shaved off his beard on at least one occasion to evade recognition may have given the story further plausibility, as may reports of Parnell's alleged use of aliases and fire escapes in conducting his clandestine relationship with Katherine O'Shea.¹⁴⁷ That he had a reputation for deliberately staying out of touch with his parliamentary associates, 'know[ing] ... the enormous advantage sometimes of pulling wires from an invisible point', may also have been a factor (though this aloofness was a source of criticism during the split).¹⁴⁸ His death had also been incorrectly reported at least once before he died in 1891.¹⁴⁹ Moreover, in his final months, Parnell's political 'retirement' or even 'temporary withdrawal' (possibly to America) had been discussed; as a result, his absence was already part of public discourse.¹⁵⁰ Given that the apparatuses that late nineteenth-century states were developing to identify their own citizens were in the process of 'stabilization' only by c.1890, disappearing and/or adopting a new persona were, in reality, far from impossible.¹⁵¹ His long, if intermittent, association with South Africa could also have helped to enhance the plausibility of claims that De Wet was really Parnell in disguise.¹⁵²

That claims and counterclaims of conspiracy had long surrounded Parnell could also have been a factor in conditioning Irish responses to pseudocide narratives about him. Nationalists had viewed the Parnell Commission of 1888–9 as a conspiracy between the government and *The Times* in which the Chief was the intended target.¹⁵³ Likewise, during the early stages of the divorce crisis, many of Parnell's supporters saw developments in terms of 'another phase in the conspiracy against him.'¹⁵⁴ As the split deepened, Parnell himself framed events in terms of a Liberal-inspired scheme.¹⁵⁵ In this context, the story of his pseudocide may have functioned as a counter-conspiracy theory, in which the Chief, like Napoleon before him, was the architect of this *ruse de guerre*. Moreover, part of the story's appeal may have reflected the fact that it required very little of those who heard it, since it was

¹⁴² *Glasgow Evening Post*, 9 Oct. 1891.

¹⁴³ *Sunday Sun*, 11 Oct. 1891, cited in Callanan, *Parnell Split*, p. 181.

¹⁴⁴ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 21 Oct. 1900.

¹⁴⁵ *Le Temps*, quoted in *San Francisco Call*, 21 Oct. 1900.

¹⁴⁶ R. M. McWade, *The Life and Public Services of Hon. Charles Stewart Parnell* (Philadelphia, 1891), p. 86.

¹⁴⁷ *Brighton Gazette*, 23 Aug. 1906; *Irish Independent*, 29 July 1937; and N. O'Ceallaigh Ritschel, *Bernard Shaw, W. T. Stead, and the New Journalism: Whitechapel, Parnell, Titanic, and the Great War* (London, 2017), p. 69.

¹⁴⁸ McWade, *Charles Stewart Parnell*, p. 88; and De Nie, "'Our dead chief'", p. 109.

¹⁴⁹ *Toronto Daily Mail*, 12 May 1887.

¹⁵⁰ *Weekly Dispatch* (London), 25 Jan. 1891; and *Herald of Wales*, 7 Feb. 1891.

¹⁵¹ J. Caplan, "'This or that particular person': protocols of identification in nineteenth-century Europe", in *Documenting Individual Identity: the Development of State Practices in the Modern World*, ed. J. Caplan and J. Torpey (Princeton, 2002), pp. 49–66.

¹⁵² D. McCartney, 'Parnell and the South African connection', in *Parnell: the Politics of Power*, ed. D. McCartney (Dublin, 1991), pp. 125–36.

¹⁵³ F. S. L. Lyons, *Charles Stewart Parnell* (London, 1977), p. 395.

¹⁵⁴ Lyons, *Charles Stewart Parnell*, p. 463.

¹⁵⁵ Callanan, *Parnell Split*, pp. 208, 211, 227.

predicated on the assumption that Parnell himself would judge when the moment was right for his return.

Taken together, all this suggests that for some at least during the 1890s and 1900s, stories that Parnell was not dead may have amounted to more than a deluded unwillingness to accept reality or as a good yarn. In their survey of scholarly literature on the subject of rumours, David Coast and Jo Fox have noted that 'far from being hapless victims and unwitting conduits for rumour, the common people emerge ... as active agents, with the ability to mobilise rumour for their own ends'.¹⁵⁶ For some people who engaged with stories of Parnell's pseudocide, it may have performed a range of functions that were, at some level, constitutive of the capital's Parnellite subculture during the difficult post-1891 years of the split – providing a contestatory or subversive discourse in the face of anti-Parnellite political dominance, creating a body of privileged knowledge that fostered a sense of interpersonal intimacy and shared endeavour, and underpinning a form of Parnellite eschatology that offered hope to the faithful.¹⁵⁷

This was clearly very different to the stories of pathetic, limpet-like 'peasant' faith that British newspapers favoured. Responses to the legend in Ireland seem to have been characterized much more by doubt and uncertainty than simplehearted belief. Rather than the legend being a product of folk mindsets, it seems to have originated and primarily circulated in Dublin, then one of the principal cities of the British empire. As a result, it was a modern phenomenon. And even for those Dubliners who were more emotionally invested in the idea of Parnell's return, their response was based on the view that the Chief had performed a Houdini-esque act of political escapology, rather than that he had somehow magically transfigured himself into a slumbering king who would be resurrected one day.

Of course, the paucity of evidence renders these conclusions necessarily tentative in nature. Reconstructing the origins, history and influence of the Parnell pseudocide legend in its Irish setting is extremely difficult; in part, this is because of the private, often oral and semi-covert modes of communication associated with the transmission of such narratives. But it is also because the life cycle of the Parnell myth was comparatively short. As an active legend, it seems to have been operative for a little more than ten years. Its waning partly reflected the death of one of its key promoters, Parnell's mother, in 1898, as well as other central figures in the story of the split. As the Irish academic, politician and playwright W. R. Fearon (who had been born in 1892) put it later, 'As events became woven into history men asked themselves when Parnell would return. Gladstone's death in 1898, the passing of Victoria in 1901 – all these brought whispers of his reappearance. When Capt. O'Shea died in 1905 it was said the long period of disgrace was over and the truth would be made known at last'.¹⁵⁸ But the decline of the legend was also the consequence of changing political circumstances in the years around the turn of the twentieth century, which gradually undermined the political rationale for such stories.

With the reunification of the Irish Parliamentary Party (I.P.P.) in 1900, the legend of Parnell's return lost much of its utility. When the various post-Parnellite nationalist factions were engaged in internecine conflict during the 1890s, the Chief's reappearance served a clear and obvious political purpose. But the reunification of the I.P.P. under John Redmond, which 'was intended to mark the drawing of a line under the controversies of the split' more generally, meant that the idea of Parnell's triumphant return as a providential saviour who would reunite Irish nationalists was now unnecessary.¹⁵⁹ Instead, the romantic image of the pre-split Parnell, leading a united movement, gradually gained ascendancy. In truth, the Parnellite party itself had quite early on during the split sought 'to distance itself from the issues of 1890–91 and to laud the pre-split Parnell who had led an unbroken movement'.¹⁶⁰ Although Parnell's legacy was contested by the different wings of Edwardian nationalism, a counterfactual interpretation of the 'lost leader' was becoming increasingly influential by the 1920s. In this context, Parnell became a symbol of a 'lost unity among nationalists'; indeed, it

¹⁵⁶ Coast and Fox, 'Rumour and politics', p. 226.

¹⁵⁷ A. Ghosh, 'The role of rumour in history writing', *History Compass*, xi (2008), 1235–43, at pp. 1236, 1238, 1240; and Coast and Fox, 'Rumour and politics', p. 227.

¹⁵⁸ *Sunday Independent*, 19 Dec. 1937.

¹⁵⁹ Callanan, 'Parnellism of James Joyce', p. 75.

¹⁶⁰ F. Callanan, 'Parnell, Charles Stewart', *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, ed. J. McGuire and J. Quinn (8 vols., Cambridge, 2009), vii. 1071–87, at p. 1078.

was claimed that had his ascendancy continued after 1891, it might have 'prevented the unsatisfactory future' that actually occurred.¹⁶¹

Of course, as Griffith's 1911 night-time encounter suggests, the legend did not disappear entirely, though after c.1900, references to it in Ireland were increasingly framed in antiquarian terms: hence de Blácam's 1941 allusion to the 'queer legend'. And, in a connected but distinct offshoot, the story lived on via its adoption and adaptation by a succession of influential Irish writers. Although Michael Moses does not discuss the pseudocide narrative in his consideration of Dracula as the undead Parnell, it is consonant with his overall analysis.¹⁶² The legend may also have influenced George Moore's controversial 1911 story *The Apostle*, in which Christ is depicted as having survived the crucifixion and to be living quietly for several decades in a desert monastery, only then to learn from the apostle Paul of the unwelcome news that he has been elevated to the status of the resurrected son of God.¹⁶³ It certainly influenced Lady Gregory's play *The Deliverer* of the same year (Gregory having, as already noted, apparently encountered people in turn-of-the-century Galway who told her that 'he is living, he is living').¹⁶⁴ *The Deliverer* is an allegory of the fall of Parnell set at the time of the Biblical exodus from Egypt, in which the Parnell-Moses figure is first sacrificed by the Irish/Israelites before he is resurrected. 'Look!', they cry, 'He is living yet.'¹⁶⁵ Abby Bender has recently read the play as 'an intervention in the intense debate about how "authentic" Irish culture could include Anglo-Irish politicians and writers'. If so, the figure of the returned Parnell failed to strike a chord with audiences in late Edwardian Dublin, who found it 'incomprehensible or unpalatable'.¹⁶⁶

No such problem faced Lennox Robinson's rather more literal (and successful) rendering of 'the supposed return of Parnell' in his 1918 play *The Lost Leader*, in which the Chief returns amid the turbulence of post-Easter Rising Irish politics.¹⁶⁷ Its theatrical success was arguably due, at least in part, to the residual familiarity among Irish and British audiences with the now half-remembered legend that inspired the play. As this article has shown, the legend also became part of Joyceland, one of 'the found-shards of a once-tangible Dublin'.¹⁶⁸ There is even a suggestion that Samuel Beckett's 1933 short story 'Echo's bones' features an oblique reference to Parnell's pseudocide.¹⁶⁹ As late as 1950 Hugh Leonard (who later went on to write the television series *Parnell and the Englishwoman*) wrote the one-act play *The Man on Platform Two*, in which the Chief is in the process of being smuggled out of England by his supporters, via Waterloo Station.¹⁷⁰

If this literary afterlife has been the principal way in which the otherwise forgotten legend of Parnell's pseudocide has survived, there have still always been a few people in Ireland who have remained unconvinced, notwithstanding the passage of time and all evidence to the contrary, that Parnell really was buried in Glasnevin in October 1891. As a young Roy Foster was told 'categorically' by an audience member when delivering a public lecture in Waterford as late as the 1970s, 'Parnell was never in that box!'¹⁷¹

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In the final chapter of his 1977 biography of Charles Stewart Parnell, F. S. L. Lyons observed that it was the heaviness of the lead casket inside the oak outer coffin that bore the Chief's body back to Ireland

¹⁶¹ Kelly, *Fenian Ideal*, p. 254; Valente, *Myth of Manliness*, p. 72; Murphy, *Parnell Myth*, p. 33; D. G. Boyce, "'The Portrait of the king is the king": the biographers of Charles Stewart Parnell', in *Parnell in Perspective*, ed. D. G. Boyce and A. O'Day (London, 1991), pp. 284–309, at p. 285; Foster and Jackson, 'Men for all seasons?', pp. 421, 422; *Donegal News*, 6 July 1946; and *Cork Examiner*, 5 Oct. 1991.

¹⁶² M. V. Moses, 'The Irish vampire: Dracula, Parnell, and the troubled dreams of nationhood', *Journal X*, ii (1997), 67–111.

¹⁶³ G. Moore, *The Apostle: A Drama in Three Acts* (Dublin, 1911).

¹⁶⁴ A. Bender, *Israelites in Erin: Exodus, Revolution, and the Irish Revival* (Syracuse, N.Y., 2015), p. 64.

¹⁶⁵ A. Gregory, *The Collected Plays*, ii: *The Tragedies and Tragic-Comedies of Lady Gregory*, ed. A. Sadlemyer (New York, 1970), pp. 2, 277, quoted in A. Bender, 'Lady Gregory's Bible lessons: *The Deliverer* and *The Story Brought by Brigit*', *Princeton University Library Chronicle*, lxxviii (2007), 142–62, at p. 152.

¹⁶⁶ Bender, *Israelites in Erin*, p. 45.

¹⁶⁷ M. Steinman, *Yeats's Heroic Figures: Wilde, Parnell, Swift, Casement* (Albany, N.Y., 1983), p. 79.

¹⁶⁸ D. H. Akenson, *Conor: a Biography of Conor Cruise O'Brien* (Montreal, 1994), p. 13.

¹⁶⁹ J. Bates, *Beckett's Art of Salvage: Writing and Material Imagination, 1932–1987* (Cambridge, 2017), p. 216.

¹⁷⁰ *Irish Independent*, 29 May 1989.

¹⁷¹ Foster, *Paddy and Mr Punch*, p. 42.

that 'gave rise almost at once to the wild rumour that it contained only rocks and that Parnell himself was not really dead and buried after all'. The 'legend of the lost leader was to live on for many years' Lyons observed, and even affected people not otherwise 'given to hallucinations'.¹⁷²

Perhaps because the rumour seemed so 'wild' to Lyons, he did not dwell on it. He was, after all, a 'historian who wishe[d] ... to pierce beyond the legend' of Parnell; to 'demystify' it, as Roy Foster later observed.¹⁷³ Moreover, Lyons's career to this point reflected the preference of many Irish historians of his generation for political history, in which the emphasis 'tended to be on the politics at the top' in the decades before 1914.¹⁷⁴ The study of rumours, strange stories and conspiracy narratives was not considered then to be the subject of serious history.¹⁷⁵

In fairness to Lyons, the advent of interdisciplinary methodologies, often influenced by non-historians, has opened up new approaches in the fifty years since he wrote, while the digitization of historical material has provided ways to explore printed primary sources on a scale unimaginable in the 1970s. Rather than, as was once common, viewing rumours and/or conspiracy narratives as 'irrational and unsubstantiated' forms of knowledge, the philosopher Radek Chlup has recently suggested that 'mythical modes of reasoning' are 'far more pervasive in modern political and cultural discourse than we commonly admit and that the difference between mainstream discourse and conspiracy narratives is not one between "rational" and "mythical" thought but rather one between different types of mythical thinking'.¹⁷⁶ The legend of the return of the Chief certainly coexisted alongside, but arguably also fed into, the longer-lasting mythical discourses of Parnell as an 'enigma' and as the 'lost leader'. Rather than simply being fantastical, Parnell's future return can also be regarded as a complex and multifaceted narrative, one that drew on real elements of Parnell's biography and sought to address perceived inconsistencies in accounts of his death. If hope and grief helped to fuel it, so too, in all likelihood, did doubt, humour and scepticism. In this way, it reflected how at least some people tried to make sense of the world in which they lived. And from this perspective, it can also be viewed as suggestive of how such narratives might fruitfully be integrated into how we write about Ireland's past in the future.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷² Lyons, *Charles Stewart Parnell*, p. 603.

¹⁷³ F. S. L. Lyons, *The Fall of Parnell, 1890–91* (Toronto, 1960), p. 309; and R. Foster, 'Lyons, Francis Stewart Leland', in *Dictionary of Irish Biography: From the Earliest Times to the Year 2002*, ed. J. McGuire and J. Quinn (9 vols., Cambridge, 2009), v. 667–8, at p. 667.

¹⁷⁴ A. C. Hepburn, 'Politics and Irish Life, 1913–1921: Provincial Experience of War and Revolution', by D. Fitzpatrick, *Irish Economic and Social History*, vii (1980), 119–21.

¹⁷⁵ Ghosh, 'Role of rumour', p. 1235.

¹⁷⁶ S. Aupers, "'Trust no one": modernisation, paranoia and conspiracy culture', *European Journal of Communication*, xxvii (2012), 22–34, at p. 23; Chlup, 'Conspiracy narratives', p. 220; and M. Butter and P. Knight, 'General introduction', in *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, ed. M. Butter and P. Knight (Abingdon, 2020), pp. 1–15, at p. 4.

¹⁷⁷ On this, see D. M. Leeson, 'British conspiracy theories and the Irish war of independence', *Éire-Ireland*, lvi (2021), 176–208. Also see J. McConnel, 'The franchise factor in the defeat of the Irish parliamentary party, 1885–1918', *Historical Journal*, xlvii (2004), 355–77.