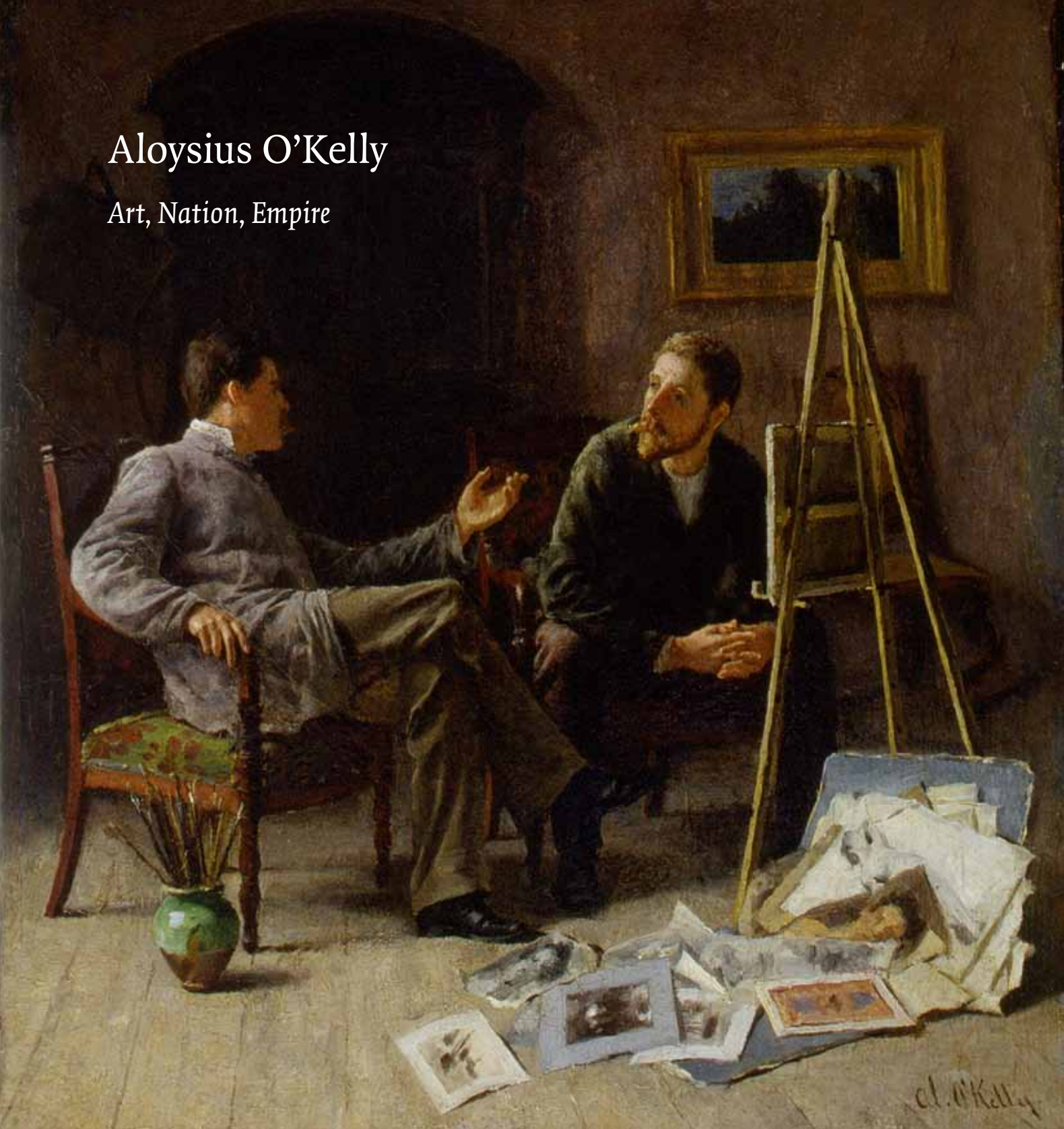


Aloysius O'Kelly

Art, Nation, Empire



Niamh O'Sullivan

Niamh O'Sullivan's critical biography of Aloysius O'Kelly's astonishing career as a painter, illustrator and committed Fenian uncovers a world hardly known hitherto except in the most caricatured versions. She gives an account of the O'Kelly and Lawlor families which is part of the internal history of Fenianism, the Land War and Home Rule in Ireland, showing in detail a series of interrelationships, some of them highly scandalous, which had various political repercussions, all of them characterized by the mix of secrecy and publicity that attended upon O'Kelly's dual career as anti-imperialist artist and as superbly skilled and yet highly conventional painter in Orientalist, Celtic and naturalist-realist idioms. In O'Kelly's work we see several worlds interfuse: imperial London, the post-Famine Ireland of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, North Africa torn by British wars and adventures, the increasing influence of the United States and Irish America, the artistic pre-eminence of Paris and, extending within these, the clandestine and shadowy network of revolutionary Fenianism. Niamh O'Sullivan analyzes O'Kelly as a painter operating in and influenced by these different contexts and forces. The result is a complete revision of O'Kelly's status and achievement as a painter and as an artist in whom political radicalism and aesthetic vision were often uneasily but always fascinatingly interlocked. This is a much-needed study.

Seamus Deane

Art, Nation, Empire

Aloysius O'Kelly

Art, Nation, Empire

Niamh O'Sullivan

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For Mick

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ABBREVIATIONS

AIC: Art Institute Chicago

AIHSNY: American Irish Historical Society, New York

AWSNY: American Watercolor Society, New York

BAC: Boston Art Club

c: centre

CD: Christie's, Dublin

CL: Christie's, London

CMAGC: Crawford Municipal Art Gallery, Cork

CNY: Christie's, New York

COCGD: Cynthia O'Connor Gallery, Dublin

COLL: collection

DVAAD: de Veres Art Auctions, Dublin

EXH: exhibition(s)

GGD: Gorry Gallery, Dublin

HLMGMA: Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art
(now Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane)

HOKFAD: Hamilton Osborne King Fine Art, Dublin

IAE: Irish Artisans' Exhibition

IEOL: Irish Exhibition, Olympia, London

ill.: illustrated

ILN: *Illustrated London News*

IPOC: Institute of Painters in Oil Colours

IRB: Irish Republican Brotherhood

JAD: James Adam, Dublin

JTL: Jeremy Taylor, London

LIT: literature

ll: lower left

lr: lower right

MGL: Mathaf Gallery, London

MPA: Musée de Pont–Aven

MPFAD: Milmo–Penny Fine Art, Dublin

NADNY: National Academy of Design, New York

NAI: National Archives of Ireland

NGI: National Gallery of Ireland

NLI: National Library of Ireland

NJ: New Jersey

nd: no date

np: no page

NY: New York

NYWC: New York Watercolor Club

PBD: Patrick Brown, Dublin

PAL: Phillips Auctioneers, London

PGL: Pym's Gallery, London

PROV: provenance

RA: Royal Academy

RHA: Royal Hibernian Academy

RIPW: Royal Institute of Painters in Watercolour

RSBA: Royal Society of British Artists

SAA: Society of American Artists

SD: Sotheby's, Dublin

SL: Sotheby's, London

SNY: Sotheby's, New York

SPBNY: Sotheby Parke Bernet, New York

TAB: Thomas Adams, Blackrock

tl: top left

tr: top right

TCD: Trinity College Dublin

UMB: Ulster Museum, Belfast

WAAD: Whyte's Art Auctioneers, Dublin

WAGL: Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool

wc: watercolour

WDANY: William Doyle Auctioneers, New York

ILLUSTRATION CREDITS

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Courtesy of the National Gallery of Ireland

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Turkeys

Courtesy of James Adam, Fine Art Auctioneers, Dublin

INTRODUCTION

Few artists match the painter, illustrator and political activist Aloysius O’Kelly (1853–1936) for interest and intrigue. Having established his reputation in the salons of France, his involvement in Irish republican politics — undisclosed addresses, false identities, dangerous liaisons, destroyed letters — became part of a pattern of secrecy that almost amounted to a double life. When he exhibited his *chef d’oeuvre*, *Mass in a Connemara Cabin*, in the Paris Salon in 1884, he used both the covert address of his brother, James O’Kelly, Parnellite MP and gunrunner, and the known address of the prominent revolutionary Communard, Henri Rochefort. Aloysius O’Kelly’s penchant for secrecy poses a major obstacle for present researchers attempting to reconstruct his career out of fragments, false clues and baffling records.

The O’Kelly family — Aloysius, James, Charles and Stephen — and their cousins, the Lawlors, constitute an undeservedly forgotten family network of artists and political activists in nineteenth-century Irish cultural history. The O’Kelly brothers all started out as sculptors, trained by their uncle, John Lawlor, a Fenian sympathizer who also worked (with characteristic family consistency) on the Albert Memorial. The Fenian legacy passed to the O’Kelly brothers, all of whom, other than Aloysius, were imprisoned for republican activities. Aloysius was closest to his eldest brother, James J., flamboyant journalist, member of the Supreme Council of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and long-term Member of Parliament for North Roscommon. While enrolled in the *École des Beaux-Arts*, Aloysius was deeply embroiled in James’s scandalous private life, becoming, at one point, a kind of surrogate husband to one of James’s pregnant wives. From early childhood, Aloysius lived and breathed a heady mixture of art and political sedition not only in Ireland, Britain, France and the United States, but also in outposts of empire, such as Egypt and Sudan.

From the beginnings of Fenianism to the death of Parnell, Paris was the foreign capital of Irish nationalism. O’Kelly’s early skill as an artist led to his being accepted by the highly competitive *École des Beaux-Arts* in 1874 — a striking achievement for a figure from the Irish art world — further enhanced by his admission to the prestigious studio of the doyen of academic realism, Jean-Léon Gérôme. O’Kelly also studied with the outstanding portraitist, Joseph-Florentin-Léon Bonnat, thus adding to his pedigree as an emergent artist in the 1870s.

During the long summer breaks from the *École*, artists from all nationalities made their way to Brittany, in keeping with the cult of peasant realism that swept through the salons. The rival aesthetic of modernity engaged few Irish artists in France, where they tended to identify with the more naturalistic modes of representing rural experience. It was in Brittany that O’Kelly learned to reconcile a range of styles derived from both traditional and avant-garde art, in effect blending academic, realist and *plein-air* elements into an innovative mode of rural naturalism. The range of his skills is evident in his application

of contrastingly iridescent Impressionist-type techniques for his outdoor subjects and more traditional academic techniques for his indoor scenes. His eclecticism was place-specific — naturalist in France, realist in Ireland and Orientalist in North Africa. His true originality, however, lies in the political dimension of his art, most marked in the mode of his representation of individuals and communities in transition. In the case of the Breton community, for example, he portrayed the social evolution over a fifty-year period from acute poverty to the condition of an industrious, healthy and self-respecting people. Though drawn to the rural periphery in both France and Ireland, O'Kelly countered the primitivist condescension of many of his contemporaries, and offered a fascinating instance of a linkage between stylistic versatility and political radicalism.

Aloysius O'Kelly was, in a sense, a radical realist who forged new and original connections between art and anti-colonial politics. Although, aesthetically, he remained loyal to the basic conventions of realism, he was, politically speaking, the most radical Irish artist of his era. However, the difficulty of matching his political opinions to his artistic calling and his different responses to the challenges of political and artistic representation remained an unresolved feature of his work, leading to the many stylistic swerves in his career.

From France, O'Kelly returned to Ireland in the early 1880s to the coveted position of 'Special Artist' to the *Illustrated London News*. Here he stamped his stock of subversive images on the pages of that powerful organ of empire. As a gifted illustrator, he applied his now considerable abilities to the contested political terrain of late nineteenth-century Ireland, giving a new visual expression to the harsh realities of Irish rural life. By 1879, the western seaboard was on the verge of serious famine. O'Kelly's paintings and illustrations led the *Freeman's Journal* to declare him 'the most important of modern artists', and his work as occupying 'exceptionally high rank'.¹ His disparate but impressive overseas connections ensured that his narratives of an immiserated Irish peasantry's survival and gradual empowerment were projected to the exhibition venues and drawing rooms of London, Paris and New York.

Although it is not easy to read ideological positions from paintings or illustrations, the conviction which O'Kelly brings to his images of Ireland — the plight of the people, the colonial landlord system, the escalating violence, state coercion, the imprisonment of the leaders of the Land League, the suppression of the Ladies Land League, British reprisals, and the land courts — led to their being seen not just as representations at one remove, but as active interventions in the events themselves. Originally appearing in the *Illustrated London News*, many of them were copied in leading international newspapers as well as in Land League propaganda publications. Indeed, O'Kelly's spirited black-and-white illustrations attracted the attention of Vincent van Gogh, who avidly collected his work as an art form of the people. The most innovative aspect of O'Kelly's Irish work was his alternative vision of the West, replacing romantic and primitive ideals with the collective energies of an emergent nation. He was to the fore in fusing a topographical with a

symbolic mode of representation, thereby giving visual form to a national culture that had yet to realize its self-image on canvas or print. This was achieved by abandoning the traditional Celtic emblems of Irishness (the round tower, the wolf hound and the harp) in favour of a new ethnographic realism (the *cliaibh*, the donkey and the red petticoat) — perceived now as visual clichés, but then seen as breakthrough emblems of a resurgent nation. His paintings thus functioned as moral allegories for freedom, dignity and industry — part of the empowerment of the Irish peasantry that found its way into the radical politics of the Land League. This transition is also found in O’Kelly’s portrayal of the Breton peasantry (Synge, we remember, also travelled from Brittany to the West of Ireland). O’Kelly’s delineations rehabilitated the peasantry from the crude stereotypes that had imprisoned them.

The ‘Other’ was not confined to the European periphery but took on a more ominous form in the Middle East or North Africa. Viewed from a postcolonial perspective, the refined racism of Orientalist painting poses a number of problems for what might be considered an Irish Orientalism. As in Ireland, O’Kelly refrained from sensationalizing the ‘extremism’ or ‘fanaticism’ of Islamic culture. His North African and Middle Eastern paintings reveal a predominantly ethnographic interest, and are largely free of the seductive eroticism and exotic violence that were used to justify domination. The ‘new’ Orient — with its echoes of classical civilization and Christian learning — is a key to understanding O’Kelly’s version of Orientalism; through a heightened ethnographic realism, his eastern scenes attempted to reclaim for history painting a prestige it had largely lost.

Moreover, O’Kelly’s alignment with the anti-imperial jihad, and his association with the anti-British Egyptian nationalist movement, makes him an unusual Orientalist. In 1883, both James and Aloysius were drawn into the vortex of violence surrounding the Mahdi in Sudan, James as war correspondent for the *Daily News* and Aloysius as illustrator for the *Pictorial World*. With them were a group of French revolutionaries and socialists known to Aloysius during his time in Paris in the 1870s. Their collusion in the ‘holy war’ against the British in North Africa was seen by militant Irish nationalists as part of an imaginative Fenian internationalism which sought to extend anti-colonial activities beyond the confines of Ireland. Aloysius’s subsequent adoption of a *nom de pinceau*, among other manoeuvres, also indicates an open political activism. This culminated on his return to Ireland in an (unsuccessful) attempt to offer himself as a candidate for election as MP for South Roscommon in 1897.

By 1895, four years after Parnell’s political demise and death, it would seem that things had unravelled politically and personally for O’Kelly. He emigrated to the US where he reconnected with the exiled Fenians of his youth, and with painters he had known in Brittany twenty years before. Although he was hailed in New York as ‘the famous Irish artist’ and immersed himself in the Irish community there, true to form, he made contradictory attempts both to assimilate into, and escape from, North America.² His connections in New York were impressive, and his American portfolio beguiling, yet his

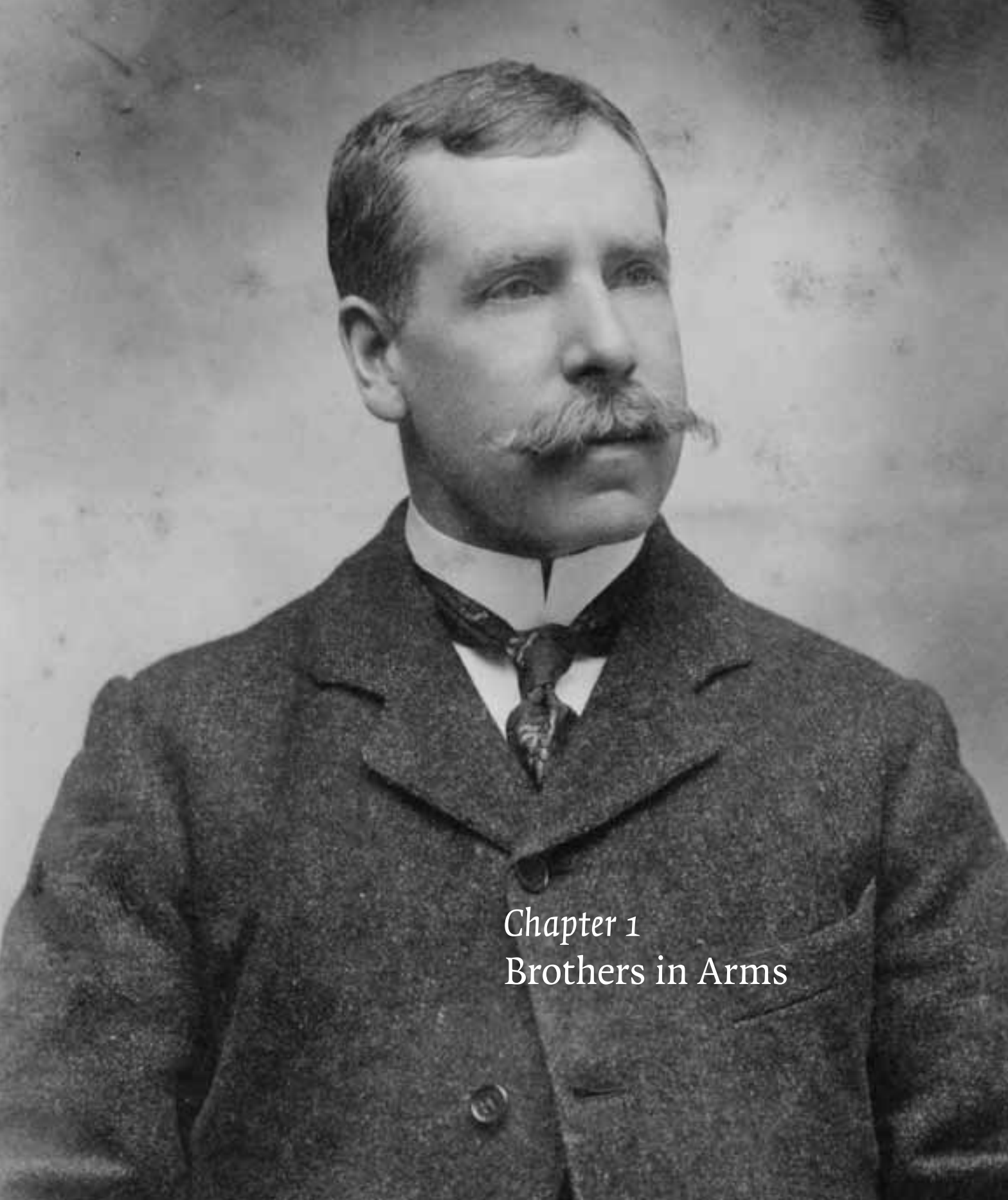
late work betrays an intensely nostalgic relationship with his political and artistic past, to the extent that when he returned to Ireland again, aged seventy three, he was still pressing his case for the establishment of a national school of painting. There followed a final sojourn in Brittany, before he returned to America where he died in 1936.

O'Kelly's importance as a nineteenth-century Irish artist is only now fully appreciated. By the early decades of the twentieth century, he was, perhaps, an exemplar of the contradictions that dogged his work, leading to its appearance as both innovative and anachronistic at the same time. His desire to combine new modes of political and artistic representation — a defining political imagery — remained undiminished throughout his long life. Yet, his commitment to realism in an age of emerging modernism, and his frustration at being unable to find a new idiom to provide the new state with its own self-images, led to the undeserved demise of his reputation in the twentieth century. This book attempts to restore his once commanding place among those who gave an emergent Irish nation the power to represent itself.



Endnotes

- 1 *Freeman's Journal*, 2 June 1888.
- 2 *Gael*, July 1899.



Chapter 1
Brothers in Arms

Previous page:
 Fig. 1.1
 Photograph of
 Aloysius O'Kelly (c.1899)

Fig. 1.2
 Fenian Centres (1867)
 left to right:
 J. I. C. Clarke, James
 Clancy, James J. O'Kelly,
 Maurice Sarsfield Walsh
 and Stephen O'Kelly



Aloysius O'Kelly was born to John and Bridget Kelly in Peterson's Lane, Dublin, in the shadow of Westland Row church, in July 1853. His father, a blacksmith and dray maker, had moved from Roscommon to Dublin as a young man. He had done well in the capital, acquiring a beer shop on Cumberland Row, where he served drink to the dockers, carters and mill workers struggling to rear families in the tenement houses of the south inner city. In time, he bought a row of labourers' cottages; the family ascended into the lower middle classes. But John's business had suffered as his health declined. In 1861, after a long illness, he died. Bridget, herself in poor health, moved to London with her five children: James, Julia, Stephen, Charles and Aloysius.

The young widow had connections in London, notably her brother, the sculptor, John Lawlor ARHA (1820–1901), a former student of the Royal Dublin Society's Schools, who had emigrated to London in 1845 and studied for a time at the Royal Academy Schools. A genial and witty man-about-town, more devoted, it was thought, to the drawing room than the studio, Lawlor, nonetheless, had built a serious reputation in the 1850s.¹ In 1851, Henry Weekes maintained that the young Irishman was 'not surpassed by any in the whole

[Great] Exhibition for the modelling of the female flesh', and his prize-winning *Bathers* caught the attention of the Prince Consort, who purchased it for the Royal Collection.² Yet, even as his reputation grew in England, Lawlor had continued to cultivate it at home. His early work, executed in the late 1840s and early 1850s, notably *The Mourners* (1848) and *The Emigrant* (1853), engaged with Irish themes, and he continued to exhibit in Dublin and to accept commissions from Irish clients.³

When Bridget and her children arrived in London, Lawlor was at the peak of his career. He was living in 233 Stanhope Street, off Hampstead Road, an increasingly fashionable part of the city. But there was more to Lawlor than met the eye. He had been a supporter of Young Ireland, a mainly middle-class, nationalist grouping, which had split from Daniel O'Connell's Repeal Association in 1846 and, two years later, staged an abortive insurrection. Lawlor executed a bust of one of the Young Irelanders, William Smith O'Brien (whose fiercely militant leader, John Mitchel, was later painted, posthumously, by Lawlor's young nephew, Aloysius). By the 1860s, Lawlor was a supporter of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), or Fenians, an oath bound secret society formed by ex-Young Irelanders in 1858. His London home was a safe house for those in the movement.

Lawlor, then, was living a compartmentalized life — the public life of an artist who thrived on visibility and recognition (and the patronage of the powerful), and the secret life of an Irish republican exile. Ironically, given his commitment to ending British rule in Ireland, he secured work on the statuary of the new Houses of Parliament and the Albert Memorial, a collective work overseen by Sir Gilbert Scott.⁴ The Memorial, according to Stephen Bayley, was designed 'in a manner fitting for a nation which prided itself on its eminence in the areas of civic utility, social progress, benign legislature and international benevolence'.⁵

Lawlor now became a father figure for Bridget's children, particularly her sons, each of whom, to a greater or lesser extent, would live as he lived — as public men with hidden lives, moving from one world to the other, knowing when and where *not* to be seen or heard. He encouraged all four boys to interest themselves in the arts. He had taken James, the eldest, as an apprentice in the late 1850s; James spent two years with Lawlor, but interrupted his studies when his father became ill. On his return to London in 1861, James resumed his apprenticeship, and, successively, Stephen, Charles and, finally, Aloysius served their time in Lawlor's studio. James was to abandon art for politics, but Stephen and Charles became successful sculptors. Stephen was particularly distinguished, producing several important public monuments in the United States.⁶ In an early account of the artistic accomplishments of the Kellys (as they were then called), the *Daily Graphic* noted that while James was a very fine artist, Charles was the one to watch out for.⁷ Only Aloysius was to become a painter rather than a sculptor.

While Lawlor gave them all opportunities to develop their artistic talents, the older boys came to him already politicized. Even before the family had left Dublin for London, James was using his uncle's address for his own seditious purposes.⁸ (Later as an artist, Aloysius

is also listed in *Kelly's Directory* as residing there.) At 15 years, James had been sworn into the IRB by James Callaghan in A. M. Sullivan's editorial room at the *Nation*, and soon became known as a 'Fenian of the extreme sort.'⁹ There, he had formed a close friendship with John Devoy, later to be a key figure in the Fenian leadership.¹⁰ According to some accounts, James and Devoy had used the family forge to make pikes. Back in London, in late 1861, he started to organize in earnest, becoming head of the movement there. His trusted lieutenants were his first cousin and co-apprentice in their uncle's studio, Michael Lawlor,¹¹ his brother Stephen, and his friends, James Clancy and Joseph (Joe) I. C. Clarke.¹² These young rebels formed close political as well as personal ties. Michael Lawlor married Marianne Agatha Clancy, sister of James Clancy, herself no milk-and-water revolutionary. And, James, in time, married Harriet, sister of Joe Clarke, the future journalist, playwright and poet.

According to one anecdote, the Lawlor-O'Kelly, sculptor-Fenian, effected an unusual marriage of art and politics.¹³ Masterminded by James (now *alias* Smith) they had guns, purchased in England for insurrection in Ireland, stashed inside religious statues and transported across the Irish Sea. Once, when Michael's wife, Marianne, was escorting one such shipment, the head of a statue broke to reveal a protruding weapon; undaunted, she whisked up her skirt, and swept the gun underneath. The consignment was safely delivered.

In the early 1860s, several of the young men in this group set about acquiring military skills in preparation for the fight for Irish freedom. Clancy joined the Royal Engineers (where he operated as a successful recruiting agent for the Fenians). He deserted to join the Rising in 1867. Following his involvement in the attempt to free republican prisoners from Clerkenwell (during which 12 were killed and over 50 wounded), Clancy was arrested for shooting a detective and sentenced to life imprisonment. It would be over ten years before James O'Kelly could secure the release of Clancy, who then emigrated to the United States.¹⁴ And this was the pattern. One by one, James, Stephen and Charles O'Kelly, Devoy, Clarke and Clancy, all ended up in the US (joined by Aloysius in his middle age).

The other O'Kelly boys, though less prominent than James, were also deeply involved in the Fenians. Stephen, the second brother, was active in the 1860s and, perhaps, later. When Stephen was a child, their mother (a splendid, intellectual woman, according to Devoy) had been in bad health and was obliged to keep him home from school to help with the younger children, Charles and Aloysius. At this time, Stephen was mentored (in more ways than one, probably) by Devoy, and he too rose in the movement.¹⁵ In 1867, he was photographed with Joe Clarke, James Clancy, Maurice Sarsfield and James, an indication of the level at which he was active. In February 1866, Stephen was arrested in Dublin as a suspected republican under the Habeas Corpus Suspension Act, but discharged in October, on the condition that he return to England.¹⁶ In custody, he was described as 'rather a smart intelligent young man' who has the 'capacity to prove dangerous.'¹⁷ Following the failure of the 1867 Rising, the exodus of Irish political activists from Britain to the US took Stephen to America.

According to a Dublin Metropolitan Police report of 1895, Charles emigrated to America in the late 1850s where he entered the Mexican Cavalry and 'earned distinction as a soldier

[and] never took part in Irish politics'.¹⁸ While there is some truth in the account of his military career, the chronology of his political career is completely askew, given that he was not born until 1851. Nevertheless, Charles was as committed as the rest, and he too was arrested for Fenian activity. When he returned to London, he lived at 40–41 King Street, London, one of the many addresses of George Sinclair, stone and marble mason, and dealer in works of art. King Street was renamed Shaftesbury Avenue; this reveals that Aloysius shared the same address, at least from 1887. It would appear that Charles married into the Sinclair family.¹⁹ The joint Sinclair/O'Kelly address is an indication of the close connection between Aloysius and George Sinclair, his dealer. Moreover, Laddingford House in Kent (the address given by Aloysius to numerous exhibition venues in the 1880s) was also owned by Sinclair. It seems reasonable to complete the circle by suggesting that it was in Sinclair's marble and stone works that those gun-carrying scabbards were assembled, and that all the O'Kellys were implicated.

Aloysius is not known to have been arrested, but he too was a Fenian. A more elusive artist would be hard to find. Throughout his life, he remained connected to the underworld of republican politics. Secret addresses, disappearances, invisible ink, false passports, swapped identities, false names, destroyed letters were all part of a pattern of secrecy, the apparatus of Aloysius's double life.

But if Aloysius's life was shrouded in mystery, the life of James reads like a *Boy's Own* adventure story. The Dublin Metropolitan Police and the Royal Irish Constabulary monitored his movements, from one country to another, telegraphing ahead in cipher to ensure round-the-clock surveillance. But even though he was branded as a dangerous extremist, and subject to observation even later when a Member of Parliament, there was a lot about James they never knew. Notwithstanding the difference in age between James and Aloysius, it is remarkable that the chief secretary's papers record the existence of only three brothers: James, Charles and Stephen; nor do they mention their sister Julia who married Charles Hopper, brother-in-law of James Stephens, the 'Fenian Chief'.²⁰ While the police reports are informative and detailed, they are not exhaustive and are only partially cross-referenced; many associated documents have not survived, and occasionally the information is inaccurate. Charles, for example, is listed as having 'emigrated' while he was actually in custody.²¹ Despite his best efforts, James's correspondence was systematically intercepted; yet the authorities apparently remained ignorant of his relationship with Aloysius, whose correspondence one would expect also to have been monitored, given his coverage of the Land League in Ireland and of the war with the Mahdi in Sudan. Unfortunately, James's papers were destroyed, some by his wives, and later, others, by his cousins, on the basis that they were too incriminating to keep.²² Presumably, these included letters from Aloysius. Certainly, the two were very close, and remained so throughout their lives.

James led the authorities quite a dance. In 1863, following a short period of law studies at the Sorbonne, he set about acquiring military experience with the French Foreign Legion,

seeing active service in Algeria and Mexico. When James Stephens set the date for the Fenian Rising, the young soldier deserted. Following a number of hair-raising escapades, including an attempt on his life by a band of Mexican guerrillas, he arrived back in London, in time to register his disagreement with the proposed insurrection. According to the Colonial Office, James, both before and after the outbreak in March 1867, was one of the leaders of the conspiracy and subsequently became a key organizer and member of the Supreme Council of the IRB.²³ Following its failure, he was given the task of re-organizing Irish republicans in London, living what T. P. O'Connor, the nationalist MP, called 'the strange underground-life of the revolutionary'.²⁴ As Captain Martin, he also organized the IRB in various counties in Ireland, notably Mayo and Donegal, alongside Matt Harris and Edmond O'Donovan (later sitter to Aloysius). James was fully responsible for the purchase and transmission of arms into Ireland. In 1871, he was arrested for gun running, but he escaped to America. Capitalizing on his sideline experience as the London correspondent of the Dublin newspaper, the *Irishman*, he got a job with the *New York Herald*. His first major assignment was to Cuba in 1873 when he penetrated insurgent lines with the aim of arousing the sympathy of the American people for Cuban independence.

Throughout his life, James O'Kelly agitated against imperial practice worldwide. In his book, *The Mambi-Land* (1874), he was moved to declare that 'until I listened to Cubans giving vent to their hate of Spain, I never had any conception with what diabolical hatred one nation can look upon another.' His descriptions of 'a cowed people lacking the wherewithal to challenge the unscrupulous immigrants who rule with fists of iron' are redolent of colonial conditions in Ireland at this time. 'Dim, mystic and clothed in awful shadows', he wrote, 'there floats on the edge of the American continent an unknown country' — a description of Cuba as a legendary territory that could equally apply to Ireland.²⁵ He went on to describe it in terms that evoke Edmund Burke's concept of the sublime: 'the utter loneliness of the road, and the awful grandeur of the solitude, [which] produced in the soul a feeling of awe not unmixed with terror'.²⁶ It was an appalling journey of endurance until he arrived in Mambi settlements to find civilized, intelligent people, rather than the ferocious cannibals he had been led to expect. Riding daily with President Carlos Manuel de Céspedes and his men, O'Kelly, as a soldier and a revolutionary, imparted welcome strategic and technical advice to the rebels.

On re-entering Spanish lines, he was arrested, court-martialled and sentenced to death. Following international representations, this was commuted to imprisonment in Santander. False rumours that he had died at the hands of the Spanish caused an international outcry. His brother, Stephen — supported by James's employers on the *New York Herald* — organized diplomatic intervention at the highest level. On his release, the young adventurer must have been flattered by the extensive coverage of his demise; he read of himself as 'brave', 'witty', 'cultured', 'remarkably good-looking', and (prophetically) as a man with 'an unmistakable Celtic twinkle in his eye'.²⁷ This experience was a defining one from which he emerged with renewed revolutionary ardour.²⁸



Fig. 1.3
Edmond O'Donovan
as an Oriental
Watercolour on paper
57 × 40.5

With an ever-watchful eye on developments in Ireland, James and Devoy regrouped in New York and continued to work for Irish freedom. James’s career as a journalist in America was now at its peak. His advancement led to his appointment as Art Editor — a role in which he was able to assist his young painter brother, Aloysius. During the 1870s, while Aloysius’s career as an artist was developing, James advised him to whom he should sell and for how much. And, although Aloysius did not himself emigrate to the US until considerably later, he did exhibit in the National Academy of Design in New York as early as 1879, an event organized by James. During this time, James also represented Aloysius (as well as a number of other artists) in their dealings with American commercial galleries.



From John Devoy’s earliest encounter with Aloysius, it would seem that the youngest O’Kelly was cut from the same cloth as his brothers. Devoy recounts how, in 1861, on his first visit to London after joining an elite corps of the French Foreign Legion, he headed straight for the Lawlor-O’Kellys. When he stopped to ask the way from a group of children, a fight broke out, and one of them, a ‘characteristic specimen of the O’Kellys ... a stocky little fellow in a green frock, went fiercely at the other and with one thump made his nose bleed.’ When the victor escorted Devoy to the house, his grandmother took one look at the young pugilist and chided him for being up to his usual mischief.²⁹ From 8 years of age, then, Aloysius lived under the mantle of his man-about-town artist-uncle and his daring brothers: he was 10 when James joined the French Foreign Legion; 12 when Stephen was interned; 13 when the Fenians rose; 18 when James followed Stephen into exile to the US; 20 when James was sentenced to death by the Spanish. From as far back as he could remember, Aloysius lived and breathed that intoxicating mixture of art and revolutionary republican politics.



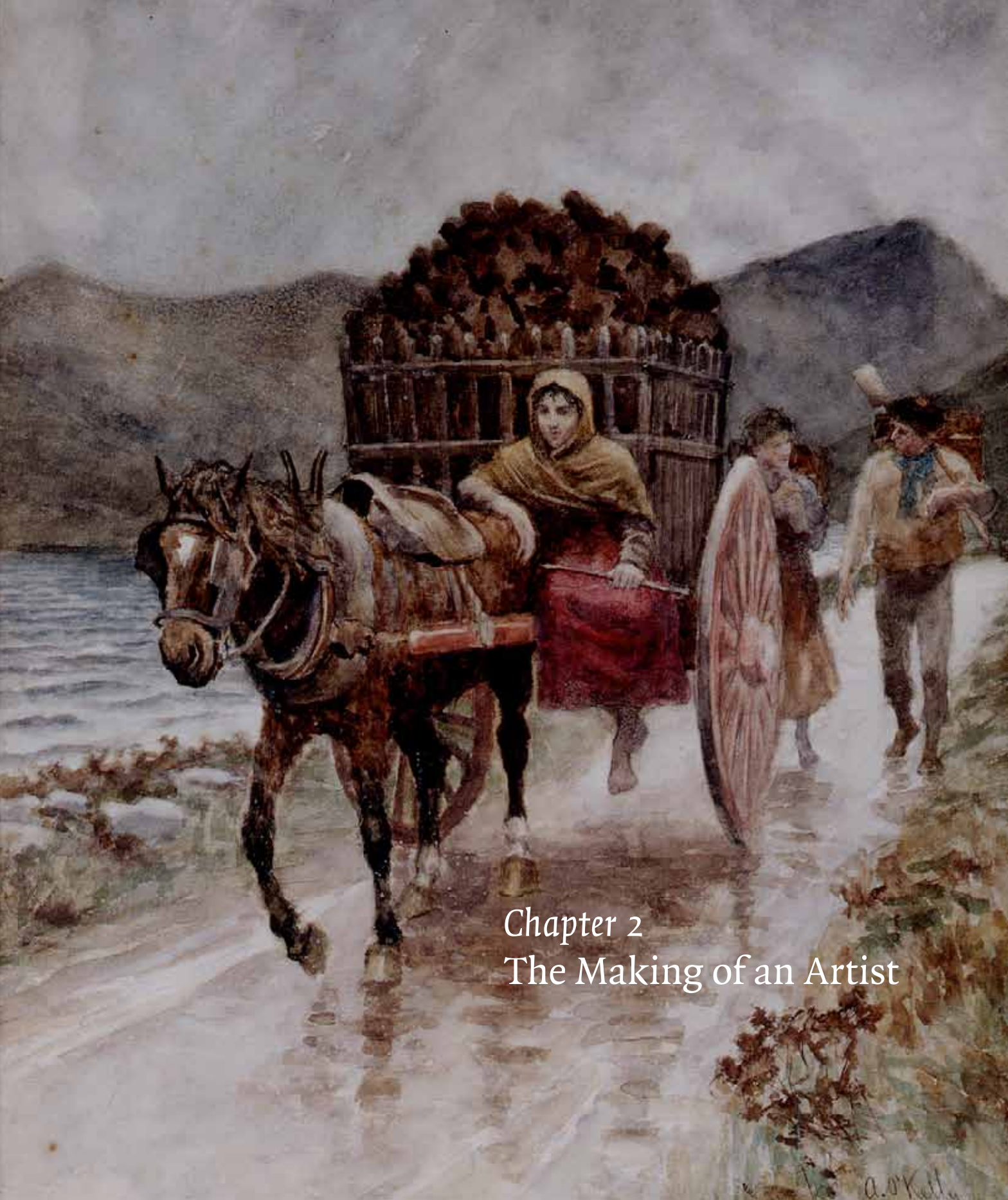
Endnotes

- 1 W. G. Strickland, *A Dictionary of Irish Artists*, 2 vols. (Dublin and London, 1913), vol. 2, 8–10.
- 2 Quoted in P. Murphy, ‘British Sculpture at the Early Universal Exhibitions: Ireland Sustaining Britain’, *Sculpture Journal*, 3 (1999), 64–73, 67.
- 3 For example, the statue of *Patrick Sarsfield*, for the city of Limerick, as well as busts of prominent politicians, such as John O’Connor Power, John O’Leary and of his own nephew, James, when the latter became a Member of Parliament.
- 4 Lawlor’s cornerstone piece was both technically and conceptually an outright failure — the central figure of *Engineering* being described as ‘lack-a-daisical’. Scott tempered his criticism of Lawlor’s ‘natural inaptitude’ by suggesting that the sculptor might wish to visit an actual engineering works ‘for the

purpose of gleaming hints which may tend to render his representation more perspicuous.' Quoted in S. Bayley, *The Albert Memorial: The Monument in its Social and Architectural Context* (London, 1981), 89.

- 5 Bayley, *Albert Memorial*, 12.
- 6 Stephen's work includes many Civil War memorials, notably that commemorating the 67th New York Infantry; the 86th New York Infantry; the 1st New York Light Artillery; and a monument at the Gettysburg National Military Park, Vincent. For further details, see *New York State Monuments Commission for the Battlefields of Gettysburg, Chattanooga and Antietam*, 3 vols. (Albany, 1900); and *Inventories of American Painting and Sculpture*, Smithsonian Institution Research Information System. In addition, he worked on the important *Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument* (1889) commemorating the men of Nashua who, during the Civil War, fought to preserve the integrity of the federal union (designed by the architect T. M. Perry, the sculptors were Caspar Buberl, Melzar Hunt Mosman and Stephen J. O'Kelly). He also executed some church sculpture, such as the *Angel Uriel* (1891), for the First Congregational church of Detroit. And working mainly in the Boston area, he did the plaster cast for the Pilgrim leader, Myles Standish, set on Captain's Hill, South Duxbury, which was finished in 1898, shortly before he died.
- 7 He executed a bust of Daniel O'Connell that was shown in Haverty's, Barclay Street, New York, its exhibition generating such enthusiasm that it stimulated a number of 'gentlemen [into] subscribing to have it copied in bronze and set up in Central Park. *Daily Graphic*, 10 April 1873.
- 8 Later, secret surveillance reports relate how, as a Fenian, James assumed the alias 'Captain Martin' (among others), lived with his uncle, and used his address to receive undercover mail, confirming the collusion of his 'respectable' uncle in maintaining links with his fellow conspirators. National Archives of Ireland (hereafter NAI), Crime Special Branch (hereafter CBS) 10754/S: Secret Report, Superintendent's Office, G. Division, Dublin Metropolitan Police, 3 August 1895.
- 9 NAI, Chief Secretary Office Registered Papers (hereafter CSORP), 904: Register of Suspects, Reel 8, vol. 18 (1892). In a List of Nationalist Members of Parliament giving Short Particulars about the Political Views of Each (prepared in Crime Special Branch), February 1887, he is described as 'A fenian of old standing. Said to be well up in the brotherhood. A demagogue and one of the extreme faction.'
- 10 In this milieu, James adopted the prefixed surname, O'Kelly, as being more 'Gaelic', less anglicized than the more common Kelly (and his younger brothers all followed suit).
- 11 Michael Lawlor modelled for the standing young man in his uncle's *Engineering* group while an apprentice in Lawlor's studio. In his own right, Michael exhibited at the Royal Academy (hereafter RA); Royal Hibernian Academy (hereafter RHA); Paris Salon; Grosvenor Gallery; and Exhibition of Irish Arts and Manufactures, Dublin. He also studied in Paris, where he associated with James and Aloysius in the 1870s and 1880s. It was with Michael that James spent his last years, dying in his house in North Kensington in 1916. In addition to several royal commissions, Michael executed the large statue of *Britannia* and the last *Portrait of John Redmond*.
- 12 Joseph Ignatius Constantine Clarke emigrated to the US in 1868, became a well-known writer and was prominent in Irish-American affairs. He was managing editor of Albert Pulitzer's *Morning Journal* (1883–95), editor of the *Criterion* (1898–1900), Sunday editor of the *New York Herald* (1903–06), and author of *Lady Godiva* (New York, 1902) and other plays. He went to Japan in 1914, and wrote a travelogue, *Japan at First Hand* (New York, 1918). 'The Soul of Nippon' appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, 102, November 1908.
- 13 I am indebted to Dr. Monica Lawlor, Áine Lawlor, Gerard Lawlor, Joe Kilkenny and John de Courcy Ireland for Lawlor family history.

- 14 Clancy also wrote extensively about Irish political affairs. See *Ireland as She is, as She has been and as She ought to be* (New York, 1877), and *The Land League Manual* (New York, 1881). He was a journalist on the *New York Herald*, associate editor of the *Gaelic American*, and an active member of Clan na Gael; he was additionally editorial writer for Patrick Ford's *Irish World*, in which capacity he was described by Devoy as Ford's 'principal man'. See J. W. Gavan, 'New York Journalism, Old and New', *Old Castle Garden*, 3, 1 (1933), 15–18. Clancy was a trustee of the notorious Skirmishing Fund established by Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa in 1875 to augment offensives against Britain. One result of the fund was a split in Clan na Gael which did untold damage to the movement in the US, leading to the murder of Dr. P. H. Cronin, at whose trial Clancy was a key witness. See J. T. McEnnis, *The Clan-na-Gael and the Murder of Dr. Cronin* (Chicago, 1889).
- 15 John Devoy, *Recollections of an Irish Rebel* [c. 1929] (Shannon, 1969), 334.
- 16 NAI, CSORP 1866/17700. According to his charge sheet, he was a single, literate, Roman Catholic artist. I am grateful to Breandán Mac Suibhne for drawing my attention to this information. The warrant book, vol. 2, which contained details of his offence(s), is no longer extant.
- 17 NAI, CSORP 1866/17700.
- 18 NAI, CBS 10754/S Secret Report (1895).
- 19 As few records remain, and many of those that do are contradictory, and those who know anything about the Lawlor-O'Kelly family history have only patchy knowledge and recollection, it is difficult to be certain, but it would seem that when Charles died in 1899, his daughter was brought up by an uncle who was an antique dealer — presumably the same George Sinclair, brother of Charles' wife, Catherine (Kate) O'Kelly.
- 20 Although all three Hopper brothers, George, Charles and John, were members of the Fenian organization, Charles, according to Devoy, was the best. His shop in Henry Street was used as a rendezvous for the movement. See Devoy, *Irish Rebel*, 274.
- 21 NAI, 7306 R series, *Register of Fenians*.
- 22 Information courtesy of Dr. Monica Lawlor, granddaughter of Michael Lawlor, with whom James O'Kelly spent his last years.
- 23 NAI, CO 904, *Register of Suspects*, reel 8, vol. 18 (1892).
- 24 T. P. O'Connor and R. McWade, *Gladstone-Parnell and the Great Irish Struggle* (Philadelphia, 1886), 412.
- 25 J. J. O'Kelly, *The Mambi-Land or Adventures of a Herald Correspondent in Cuba* (Philadelphia, 1874), 159.
- 26 *The Mambi-Land*, 110.
- 27 *Daily Graphic*, 10 April 1873.
- 28 His account was later used to position the sympathy of the Irish for Cuba — a sympathy that in turn offered hope to Irish patriots. In 1898, Irish nationalists declared their support for the US in its conflicts with Spain at the turn of the century, following which America intervened militarily in Cuba, an intervention celebrated by Irish nationalists who associated Cuban oppression at the hands of the Spanish with their own at the hands of the British. Perceived as the 'Ireland of the west', the Cuban 'rescue' held out hope of American military intervention in Ireland itself. Michael Davitt fantasized that the US would give the Philippines to England in exchange for Ireland. See T. J. O'Keefe, "'Who Fears to Speak of '98?': The Rhetoric and Rituals of the United Irishmen Centennial, 1898", *Éire-Ireland*, 27, 3 (Fall 1992), 67–91, 72.
- 29 Devoy, *Irish Rebel*, 334.



Chapter 2
The Making of an Artist

a. o'Kell

Previous page:

Fig. 2.1

A Load of Turf, Connemara

Oil on canvas

127 × 101.5

In 1874 Aloysius O'Kelly turned twenty one and moved to Paris to study in the highly competitive *École des Beaux-Arts*. The standard of art education in England was low. The Royal Academy and South Kensington Schools offered relatively elementary training, while the other art schools had little or no standing at all. The South Kensington system had established a national curriculum, but taught design better than fine art. The Slade School, founded in 1871, had improved things somewhat, but advanced teaching was nowhere near the standard in Paris.¹ The French capital was the centre of the art world, and there the battle between tradition and the *avant-garde* climaxed in 1874, the year in which the Impressionists held their first exhibition, and the year in which O'Kelly enrolled in the *École des Beaux-Arts*.²

Paris was infinitely more exciting than London. Following the French defeat at Sedan in September 1870 and after a gruelling four-month siege, an interim government signed a treaty with the new German empire. And when, in March 1871, the people established a radical Commune, the revolution was confronted and defeated on the barricaded streets. The devastation of the war and of the Commune was gradually overcome, and the city's rebuilding programme, under Baron Georges Haussmann, Prefect of the Department of the Seine, brought to completion. Few artists supported the Commune; most fled the city, to return in the early 1870s, in the company of enormous numbers of first-timers, such as O'Kelly.³

Crucially, from the suppression of the Young Ireland rebellion in 1848, through the organization of the Fenians in the late 1850s and 1860s, and the land and Home Rule agitations of the 1880s and early 1890s, Paris was also a satellite city of radical Irish nationalism. Through these decades, Irish revolutionaries, engaged in what many French people considered legitimate action against the enemies of their country, were welcomed and sheltered in the city. Indeed, many French conservatives, who were generally suspicious of *les étrangers dangereux*, made an exception for the Irish, conceiving them to belong to *une nation opprimée*.⁴ Hence, when the British authorities sought the extradition of James O'Kelly for treason in 1868, the French refused to comply. Irish nationalist support for France in her fight against Prussia in 1870, including James O'Kelly's efforts to form an Irish brigade, strengthened goodwill towards Ireland and allowed Paris to become a focus of republican propaganda efforts.⁵ Still, if the authorities allowed Irish revolutionaries unusual latitude, they kept an eye on the movements of the more prominent among them, such as James Stephens, John O'Leary and James O'Kelly. Over time the *police politique* and the *sûreté nationale* developed an extensive surveillance operation, 'Irlandais Domiciliés à Paris et Soupçonnés de Fenianism'. Indeed, Aloysius, who travelled to France on James's passport, probably drew the attention of the secret police within a short time of his arrival in Paris, not least as one of the first calls he made in Paris was on Stephens.⁶

To be Irish, a radical, and an artist opened many doors in Paris. Although not all Irishmen in the city were revolutionaries, and most revolutionaries had an existence outside the expatriate underground (often in the arts, education and journalism), the assertion that

Irish artists kept themselves aloof from politics is difficult to sustain, given what we know about the Irish in Paris in the 1870s and 1880s.⁷ According to the poet, Eugene Davis, huge numbers of Irish writers, painters and journalists gathered together in the city, many living in the Pension Bonnery on rue Lacépède.⁸ In February 1885, for instance, a meeting of the London dynamiters, including a number of artists, took place. Many such men were part of a social circle that revolved around John Patrick Leonard, a '48 man, member of the French Academy, Knight of the Legion d'honneur, professor of English at the Sorbonne, international journalist, and friend of the president of the Republic. Leonard's circle included the writer George Moore (who counted Édouard Manet and Edgar Degas among his acquaintances), the artists John Mulvany and Nick Walsh, the novelist John Augustus O'Shea ('The Irish Bohemian'), and the celebrated journalist Edmond O'Donovan,⁹ each of whom can be linked to one or other O'Kelly brother. And, importantly, Irish radicals in the city did not exist in isolation from French and international revolutionaries who congregated in the French capital; for instance, Joseph Theobald Casey — the model for Kevin Egan in *Ulysses* — worked as a printer for Henri Rochefort's *L'Intransigéant*.



To gain a place in the state school, the *École des Beaux-Arts*, was a major achievement, especially for foreign students who usually had to satisfy themselves with attendance at one of the many lesser *ateliers*.¹⁰ Competitive admission tests included assessments in anatomy and perspective, ornamental design and world history (requiring proficiency in highly particularized studio French), followed by two six-hour drawing examinations, conducted in a private cubicle. To this competitive environment O'Kelly committed himself in 1874. Few Irish students were accepted into the *École*: Augustus St. Gaudens, in 1867, and George Moore, in 1873, were O'Kelly's only predecessors (although in the same month, October 1874, he was joined by the Cork artist, Thomas Hovenden).¹¹

The *École des Beaux-Arts*, founded in 1648, was indisputably 'the western world's pre-eminent art school, and the model for international emulation.'¹² Supervised by the great *chefs d'ateliers*, Jean-Léon Gérôme, Alexandre Cabanel and Isidore Pils, it was an arduous course, October to July, six days a week, beginning at 7.00 a.m. Indeed, it proved too much for George Moore who reported that it 'required so painful an effort of will, that I glanced in terror down the dim and grey perspective of early risings that awaited me ... and told my valet on Monday morning to leave the room, that I would return to the Beaux Arts no more.'¹³

According to John Milner, the *École des Beaux-Arts* 'operated like an exclusive, largely independent and fiercely competitive club ... initiation into which involved intimidating rites as well as extra duties ... [including] every kind of ignominy and provocation' — slashing each others' canvases, pushing each other out of upstairs windows onto up-turned stools, and 'fencing' with 'loaded' paint-brushes on the model's dais in the

nude.¹⁴ Gérôme’s *atelier* was known as the most ‘riotous’ and ‘lewd’ of all. It is unclear how long O’Kelly endured this system; and, like many others, he does not appear to have matriculated. Until 1883, only seventy students were matriculated each year; the fact that only French students could compete for the most highly sought prize of all, the Prix de Rome, dissuaded foreign students from attempting the aggressively competitive matriculation. Still, that O’Kelly achieved a place in Gérôme’s studio would have given him considerable standing.

In his teaching studio — floor sloped to give students sight of the model — Gérôme attended every Wednesday and Saturday, commanding punctilious adherence to his instructions. Of all the painting *ateliers* in the École, his was the only one to confer the *cachet* of its master. From 1864 to 1904, he put more than two thousand students through their paces. The American artist, Stephen Wilson Van Schaick, maintained that, ‘unmerciful in judgement, he dominated by a singular magnetism.’¹⁵ Clearly, O’Kelly succumbed to Gérôme’s charisma, following in his master’s footsteps to North Africa and the Near East, emulating his highly finished Orientalist technique and style, painting the themes Gérôme made his own, and exploiting the promotional power of the print.¹⁶ Even when O’Kelly deviated in subject matter and style from Gérôme’s teaching, they continued to share, admittedly with different results, an interest in ethnographic realism.

Gérôme was described as ‘a noble example of what a master-painter of the nineteenth century may be: an artistic soul with a soldier’s temperament, a heart of gold in an iron body.’¹⁷ As an academic painter, Gérôme meticulously researched the settings, props and costumes for his paintings. But the skill on which everything was based was drawing from the live model: ‘if they can do that, they can do anything, if they cannot do that, they can do nothing; the painting of the nude is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end of art’, argued the American critic, Clarence Cook.¹⁸

As *aspirants*, students progressed from drawing from the antique to life study (as well as from mannequins and dead bodies). Life study was the foundation on which all other artistic, scientific, historical and literary skills were grafted. The preferred model was a well-defined male nude, selected primarily for his physique (although sometimes chosen also to exude ‘character’ for the study of expression). Such exercises were known as *académies*. The sequence went from drawing fragments to full casts; from parts of the human anatomy to the full figure; from profiles to three-quarter views of heads. O’Kelly’s *Male Study* (fig. 2.4) is one such academic exercise, in this case, the head and shoulders of an elderly man, painted under *atelier* conditions (the back of the canvas being later reused to produce a signed autumnal landscape). In the studio, the students ranged in a semi-circle around the model posing for the *académie* in order of seniority and ability. Whether the model was drawn or painted depended on the student’s proficiency. The more advanced students sat well back to study the full figure, while the less advanced sat up-front, focusing on the head and shoulders. The recovery of a preliminary study such as this is unusual enough — the drawn versions were discarded around the studio floors, and the

painted versions scraped down and reused; they were rarely finished and even more rarely signed.

Although the skills imparted cannot be denied, nor can the consistency of the teaching. Gérôme's methods were especially strict and academic. He witheringly dismissed the work of the Impressionists who, in 1874, the year in which O'Kelly became his pupil, mounted their first public exhibition. The concern of the Impressionists with the concept of contemporaneity, the fleeting effects of light and motion, unusual visual effects, and their distaste for outline and conventional colours were anathema to Gérôme, who stressed the importance of academic form and classical composition. Many of the École students spent their long summers away from the *ateliers* of Paris, in Brittany, in the thrall of Jules Bastien-Lepage — a man as scathing of Gérôme as was Gérôme of the Impressionists. O'Kelly spent extended periods in Brittany. And there, somewhere between Bastien-Lepage and Gérôme, in the realm of rural realism, he sought a reconciliation of styles.

Gérôme's technique, according to the accounts of some of his pupils, involved laying down the major outlines step-by-step. The artist, Julian Alden Weir, noted that he instructed his students to practise blocking-in and drawing the figure with short strokes in outline first, using simply the principal shade, striving for the action of the figure. Having established the overall impression, the drawing was completed before the modelling, and, finally, the shading was undertaken. Gérôme thus taught his students to draw clearly, correctly and volumetrically, before giving his attention to accurate tonal modulation. His practice was to work through several oil sketches, bringing different ones to varying stages of completion. He worked the individual figures, in order of importance, to a high finish. Interestingly, O'Kelly's *Kitchen, West of Ireland* (fig. 2.2), painted in the early 1880s, reveals three different stages of development: the standing girl is well-advanced, the man is only schematically sketched, while the seated woman is barely blocked-in.¹⁹

Gérôme's concern for visual accuracy made him deeply suspicious of the technical laxity he perceived in the work of the Impressionists; moreover, he believed that the very idea of working directly from nature, *alla prima*, diminished the intellectual act of art and reduced it to servility to nature. He was equally dismissive of *l'art pompier*, anything that smacked of official art, obscure spirituality and noticeable mannerisms. As an ethnographic realist, Gérôme produced paintings that are modest in size, meticulous, detailed, accurate and literal — all features of O'Kelly's illustrations and paintings. Only in rare instances (significantly in some of his North African paintings), does O'Kelly's work attain the lapidary finish of Gérôme's but, in the final analysis, they are both genre painters whose interests in accurate depiction dictated the type and appropriateness of finish. Whereas the revelatory light effects of Gérôme's *Egyptian Recruits Crossing the Desert* contrast dramatically with the shrouded effects of O'Kelly's watercolour (fig. 2.3), and even with his oil version of *A Load of Turf, Connemara* (fig. 2.1), in each case it was the scene itself, no less than the technique, that dictated the finish. In fact, when the occasion demanded it, both achieved a similar crystalline pellucidity. If Gérôme had come to Connemara, he could conceivably



Fig. 2.2
 Kitchen, West of Ireland
 Oil on canvas
 71.2 × 91.5

have painted O'Kelly's *Seaweed Gatherers* (fig. 4.3); just as when O'Kelly went to the Orient, he produced *The Harem Guard* (fig. 6.6) which could well have been by Gérôme.

Although Gérôme was demanding of his students, he offered considerable assistance to them outside the *École*, inviting them to his studio, putting in a word for them with the Salon. He also encouraged many of them to study with his colleague, Joseph-Florentin-Léon Bonnat. Bonnat ran a fee-paying, but not-for-profit, *atelier indépendant*, which he visited twice a week. Considered an outstanding teacher, Bonnat took many students recommended by Gérôme, including many foreigners, such as the Americans Edwin Lord Weeks, Charles Sprague Pearce and Thomas Eakins, and O'Kelly. Later pupils, notably Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Raoul Dufy and Henri Matisse, attested to the unusual breadth