

CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Elizabeth Bowen

The Last September

Presented by: Paul Stewart

Set in the late Summer of 1920, *The Last September* reflects one of the most politically and socially turbulent times in Ireland during the twentieth century; the Irish War of Independence, sometimes known as the Anglo-Irish War (1919-21). Moreover, it does so through the prism of a single Anglo-Irish, Protestant family who are members of the privileged landowning class whose social and political ascendancy is ended by the war and the subsequent demise of British rule as the southern counties of the island of Ireland gained autonomy as the Irish Free State. As the family appear to continue their lives of tennis parties and delicate flirtations amidst secure, rural opulence, the surrounding Cork countryside is witness to conflict as the Irish Republican Army and British forces – including the paramilitary police, the Black and Tans – engage in sometimes fatal forms of guerrilla war. However, the novel addresses these troubling events only obliquely as the lives in the ‘Big House’ of Danielstown and their milieu seem to go on oblivious, or deliberately ignorant, of the upheavals that will eventually see their way of life quite literally go up in flames.

The novel's ostensible focus is on Lois Farquar, niece to Sir Richard and Lady Naylor who own the ancestral home that is Danielstown, a large, rural estate that had been in the Anglo-Irish, Protestant family for generations. Lois, 18, has recently left school and neither her future nor, in many respects, her identity has been settled. Laurence, nephew to Lady Naylor, is also in the house for the summer whilst on holiday from studying at Oxford. Lois's bright but often uncertain demeanour is counterpointed by Laurence's undergraduate cynicism. The last days of summer are punctuated by two visiting parties; the Montmorencys (Hugo, who had once been in love with Lois's mother and whom Lois briefly considers as a possible love interest, and his ailing wife, Francie) and, later, Marda Norton, an old family acquaintance who, at the age of 29, is about to marry into a family in England. Nearby, a British Army barracks provides a steady stream of acceptable young, lower-ranking officers about whom young women, such as Lois and her friend Livvy, can entertain thoughts of romance and marriage. Lois begins a liaison with a young subaltern, Gerald Lesworth, of whom the Naylor family do not approve due to uncertainty about his family background and prospects.

In many ways, this basic premise of the novel rather reminds one of the works of an earlier time, as if Jane Austen had crossed the Irish Sea. Like Austen, Bowen is keenly attuned to the subtle interplay of thoughts and feelings within seemingly inconsequential meetings and to a sense of decorum and the maintenance of proper manners. Unfortunately, the decorum and manners of the Big House occupants cannot, or will not, address the momentous forces of change which are supposedly kept at bay by the high walls of the estate. Those walls may suggest isolation and security, but they are far from impregnable as, for instance, when Lois's path is crossed by a determined looking man in a trench-coat late at night: "It must be for Ireland he was in such a hurry; down from mountains, making a short cut through their demesne". Lois assumes this figure is on her uncle's land to dig up buried guns and ammunition for the Republican cause. The figure's apparent passion for a free Ireland is one that Lois cannot understand, as "She could not conceive of her country emotionally". She decides to keep the incident to herself lest she cause

inconvenience. Similarly, Lady Naylor tries to “make a point of not noticing” anything untoward even though her guest, Francie, wonders whether “we will not be shot at if we sit out late on the steps [of the house]?”; an attitude that Sir Richard thinks means Francie is “getting very English” in her views of Ireland (23).

As members of the Protestant Ascendancy, the Naylor family occupy a complex space of competing centres and peripheries. As Anglo-Irish landowners, they once enjoyed centrality within Ireland but largely through a peripheral relation to British Imperial hegemony. With the rise of Irish Nationalism, the family is being made peripheral to a newly emerging (largely Catholic) polity. Simultaneously, socio-political shifts within Britain after the First World War mean the beliefs and manners of the Anglo-Irish are becoming obsolete. The Naylor’s choose to meet these shifting socio-political environments by turning a blind-eye to what is happening; a tactic that is reflected in the style of the novel itself which repeatedly slips into ellipsis in the narrative and dramatic events – such as Marda being shot and slightly wounded by a Nationalist renegade and the final conflagration that see the ‘big house’ of Danielstown burnt to the ground.

LANGUAGE: English

CENSORSHIP STATUS: