January 2010

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Recommended Citation

doi:10.21427/D7K990
Available at: https://arrow.dit.ie/icr/vol12/iss1/7
'TO ENLIGHTEN AND ENTERTAIN'
Adventure narrative in the *Our Boys* paper

Michael Flanagan

**Introduction**

The form of popular literature known as the ‘Boys Own’ genre, developed in the latter decades of the 19th century and relates directly to certain concerns around the contemporary viability and perceived future of the Empire. The Boys Own genre was conceived as a response to the corrupting influence of the Penny Dreadful, with the first edition of the *Boy’s Own Paper* issued in 1879. *Boy’s Own* was soon followed by such papers as *Gem, Magnet, Boys of the Empire* and *British Bulldog* (Turner, 1948). These magazines were intended to supply the newly evolving middle-class of suburban England with suitable reading material for the next generation of young men, imbuing them with the qualities necessary for leadership in the fields of the business world, the church, the army and the navy. They were thus placed to join what the historian Martin Green (1980: 336) describes as ‘the Aristo-Military Elite’ who took their place as governors of Britain and the empire.

It should not be surprising that the material of the genre should reflect the concerns of this class and those who aspired to join it. These were conveyed through direct moralising, through public school stories, through sport and most importantly through the adventure story. These, generally in an exotic imperial setting, ranging from the jungles of Africa to the souks of Arabia, the baking plain of India, and the snowy wasteland of the Arctic, provided the backdrop whereby class, gender and British nationalist concerns might be passed on.

Launched by the Christian Brothers in 1914 to compete with the perceived imperialist propaganda of these British boys’ papers, and driven by the dual mission ‘to enlighten and entertain’ Irish children, *Our Boys* was a highly successful publishing enterprise which at one stage of its long existence (it ceased publication in the 1990s) outsold all other magazines combined in this country, becoming a veritable institution in the process of Irish boyhood. The influence of this magazine was to extend beyond the boundaries of Ireland as it was made available to the Irish communities of England, Australia, the US and even India, where it was distributed through the Christian Brothers’ schools.

Support for the revival of the Irish language, the GAA and the economic ideology of Irish Ireland in *Our Boys* placed the paper firmly in the vanguard of separatist thinking at a pivotal stage of national events. This was part of the rationale behind the foundation of this magazine: instilling an impressionable generation of Irish youth with the principles of nationalism, encouraging them to see themselves as uniquely
Irish rather than British, outlining the manner in which such nationalist idealism might be expressed and fostering their growing sense of Gaelic self-identity. Even Irish music was harnessed in this campaign: Irish ballads, many of which had a nationalist orientation, featuring extensively in the magazine.¹ The paper repositioned itself in the Free State era, lending its support to the conservative moral agenda of the Catholic church in such initiatives as the ‘Campaign Against Evil Literature’ of the 1920s.²

The late 1920s also witnessed the first appearance of a character who was to become an institution among Our Boys readers – Victor O’D. Power’s perennial favourite, Kitty the Hare, the traveling storyteller of Munster, heroine of the long-running serial (1924 to 1990) Tales Told in the Turflight (Flanagan, 2010). Historical fiction in Our Boys drew on the events of Ireland’s past, filtered through the prism of Catholic/nationalist experience: episodes of anti-Catholic persecution were particularly popular, having a latent resonance for the Home Rule and independence struggle that dominated Irish politics for the first decade of the magazine’s existence. Thus, the Cromwellian era became a standard setting as it allowed for a clear and unambiguous expression of the suffering of Irish Catholics at the hands of ruthless Roundheads. An example of this form of narrative would be The Child stealers (1917 to 1920), a long-running serial concerning the capture and enslavement of Irish children for a life of toil on the sugar plantations of the West Indies. Brother Canice Craven, who edited the magazine during the War of Independence and beyond, also drew on contemporary events for fictional material and during this period there were stories that featured hunger-strikes and the adventures of nationalist youth who were not afraid to oppose the British occupation of Ireland.

For all its stated mission to ‘enlighten and entertain’ with a pronounced emphasis on Irish Catholicism (the missionary was a common role model), the Irish paper also offered its readers the full range of conventional adventure stories that were available in its British counterparts. There was, however, one crucial difference in the manner in which the Christian Brothers presented this material: the heroic figure whose exploits dominated these tales was, more often than not, Irish – cowboys, detectives, schoolboys and even space explorers were all indigenous figures with whom Irish boys could identify, a nationalist version of the ‘stiff upper lip’ tradition of British adventure narrative. Thus the deeds of Sergeant Maloney of the Mounties, O’Malley the International Detective, the perennial schoolboy, Murphy (who first appeared in the pages of Our Boys in the 1940s) and Professor O’Callaghan and his fellow space explorers offered Irish boys local heroes with whom they could identify.

The School Story
A boy enters school in fear and trepidation, but usually with ambitions and schemes; suffers mildly or seriously at first from loneliness, the exactions of fag-masters, the

discipline of masters and the regimentation of games; then makes a few friends and
leads for a year or so a joyful, irresponsible and sometimes rebellious life; he even-
tually learns duty, self-reliance, responsibility and loyalty as a prefect, qualities usu-
ally used to put down bullying or overemphasis on athletic prowess; and he finally,
with regret, leaves school for a wider world, stamped with the seal of an institution
which he has left and devoted to its welfare.

This is the conventional format of the public school story. Behind this brief out-
line there are, however, many variations. During the inter-war period it is considered
by many commentators that while the institution of the public school itself came in for
much criticism as a bastion of outdated concepts of privilege and class, the genre of
the school story was to reach new heights of popularity across the class structure, rep-
resenting an ideal of masculinity which appealed to millions of boys in Britain and Ire-
land who would never have the opportunity to attend such an institution (Mack, 1941).

In 1921 D.C. Thomson of Dundee entered the market for boys’ papers. What
became known as the Dundee publications, which included the Rover, the Wizard
and the Hotspur, went on to capture the imagination of boys in all parts of these
islands and achieved massive circulation figures against a background of trade slump
and labour depression. The school story was a highly popular element of the Thom-
son style of publishing and it is remarkable the extent to which their range of topics
and those of the Boys Own Paper share the same basic thematic structure.

There were two principal methods of presenting this genre. One was to take a
school as the initial starting point and treat the protagonists as characters who
revolved around this central focal point, complete with ivy-clad walls and venerable
towers. The second was to take one individual boy, allow him to be the centre of
activity and have the other elements – staff, allies, enemies and the building itself –
become subject to a series of events in which his personal experience was the chief
catalyst. Examples of the former style of school story from the British tradition
include such famous institutions as St Frank’s, St Jim’s and Greyfriars. Individual
boys who went on to have stories dedicated to themselves include Harry Wharton
and, of course, Billy Bunter. Harry Potter, a modern version of the standard school
story, albeit with the addition of a magical element to the narrative structure, may be
said to be an example of this also.

In Our Boys we find that the narrative conventions of the Irish version of the
genre were little different from the public school material as circulated in the British
magazines available in Ireland. The boys did play hurling or Gaelic football, but they
also played cricket and rugby. In general they existed in the same male-dominated,
enclosed and timeless world as their British counterparts. They all developed a way
of life that may be defined as hierarchical, masculine and competitive. The boys of St
Sylvester’s used the same language as the pupils of St Frank’s and St Jim’s. Exam-
pies of this apparently international form of communication include such public
school gems as ‘old bean’; ‘By George’; ‘What the Dickens!’; ‘you old rascal’; ‘By
Jingo’; ‘great pip’; and that great perennial – ‘We’ll teach the bounders!’

In September 1940 Our Boys published the first Murphy school story. This was
the beginning of a tradition that was to last for many decades. The series, by William
Hickey, was still to be found in the magazine in the 1970s. Murphy was the main
character in each of these stories, along with his friends, Bailey, O’Dwyer, Jackson,
Mahony, Curtis and ‘the Rajah’, the type of character without whom no school story
An interesting amalgam of British public school and the GAA, ‘Revenge’ (June 1930) was a tale of an ongoing feud between the Fatty Fagan’s form – the Fourth – and their arch rivals of the Fifth form. In this picture (Figure 1) from that serial we see the confrontation between the two groups, on the issue of – well, what else but that perennial source of conflict – tuck!

would be complete, a stock figure of colonial exoticism. They constituted a group known as the ‘Ayes’, engaged in a never-ending struggle with Faye and his cohorts, of the ‘Bees’. Though set in a school called St Ignatius, each story bore the name of the eponymous Murphy in its title. Examples include: ‘Murphy’s Masterpiece’ (February 1941), in which our hero takes up the art of novel writing and submits a love story in a writing competition held by a local newspaper; ‘Murphy the Sweep’, in which he disguises himself as a chimney sweep in order to gain entry to the study of the Bees and steal their tuck (this was in revenge for the fact that their rivals had stolen a march on Murphy and his chums in the Christmas issue of the magazine, ‘Murphy and the Christmas Party’). Other titles of this period included ‘Murphy and the Crab’ (September 1940), ‘The Bike that Murphy Built’ (October 1940) and ‘Murphy and the Fireworks’ (November 1940).

In common with its British counterparts, there was a marked change of emphasis in this serial as opposed to earlier examples of the genre in the 1920s and early 1930s. The illustrations, for example, indicate a broadening of the appeal, as can be seen by comparing ‘Murphy’ and the St Sylvester’s stories. There is not the same
stress on distinctive dress, nor is there the same wide employment of the clichéd language that may be considered as stereotypical of the public school story.

Tosh’s account (1991) of the social phenomenon of the mid-Victorian period onwards, ‘the flight from domesticity’, describes the context of the understanding of the ideal of Edwardian manliness, with particular reference to the empire and the entire structure of the adventure story for boys. It may be argued that the fantasy of attending a public or, as they were termed in Ireland, a boarding school, is another aspect of this development, this sub-genre performing some of the function of the adventure story or the mystery in the serial magazine for boys. In broad terms attending public school involved the opportunity of sharing many of the conventions of the frontier, detective or thriller genres. The school story may be seen as yet another setting where heroic masculinity might assert itself. Apart from such obvious features as, for example, autonomy from home – the dream of every pre-teen attempting to assert his individuality and define his own identity – and the opportunities for adventure in the realm of sport – a major aspect of the literature – there were certain narrative conventions which rarely changed and which addressed boyhood wish-fulfillment on a deep and even, it may be argued, subliminal level.

The boys who attended boarding schools had opportunities to ‘have adventures’ that were not available in the ordinary course of events. They were removed from the security of home and the familiar certainties of domestic routine. There was no shoulder to cry on in the corridor of the public school, no sympathetic maternal support to fall back on. Schoolboys had to assert themselves in several parallel masculine systems: with their peers, both friends and enemies, and with their teachers. There was a constant air of competition, both sporting and academic. If a boy could survive in such a male-dominated milieu – he was, almost by definition, a hero.

**The Western**

The story of the Western is the story of America. Although formed by folk tales, national dreams, popular songs, yellow press reportage, dime fiction and outright lies, the Western is rooted in the historical realities of what took place during the gradual advance westward, in the nineteenth century, of the United States of America. While couched in terms of the coming of civilization, the rise of law and order or the establishment of community values, the Western is essentially about conquest. Cavalry conquer the Indians, pioneers conquer the wilderness, lawmen conquer outlaws and individuals conquer their circumstances. But with each conquest, another stretch of territory, whether geographical or philosophical, comes under the hegemony of the United States of America and the evils of the past fade away into prehistory.

It is commonplace to suggest that the Western serves the same function for Americans that such national bodies of myth as the *Odyssey*, the epic of Gilgamesh, the *Nibelungenlied*, the *Morte d’Arthur* or the plays of Shakespeare do for their respective cultures. Indeed, it would be and has been easy to take any of these and retell them in terms of cowboys, cattle barons and range wars. The crucial difference is that, with the arguable exception of Shakespeare’s history plays, these concentrate, as the Western does not, in mythologising events of the remote, legendary past. The Western deals with a time that, when the genre was thriving, was within living memory. Indeed, even before the cinema came along, the dime novelists and tall-tale-spinners were creating the Western form while the West was still being won. Many of the best-known West-
ern characters – General Custer, Buffalo Bill, Wyatt Earp, Jesse James – are as famous as they are because they abetted their own myths, some even living long enough to cash in on the fame won by their exploits. Indeed, the ground rules of the genre had been established by James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking* cycle long before the historical period during which almost all Westerns are set (Newman, 1990: xv).

The disappearing frontier is the most powerful and persistent myth in American history. It is not a sectional myth but a national one. America does not have ‘Easterns’ or ‘Southerns’, which *would* be sectional. They have Westerns, since America was, at the outset, *all* frontier. America (and, by proxy, the readers of Western stories in such outlets of popular culture as dime novels and serial papers, both American and European) experienced over and over again the excitement of a ‘birth movement’ when the new world was broken into, tamed, absorbed. James Fenimore Cooper created the archetypal figure for this movement when he sent his Hawkeye, in chronologically ordered novels, from the forests of New York to the Great Lakes and then to the western prairies where he died. After Hawkeye, other figures stood for the whole frontier experience: Daniel Boone, Kit Carson, Davy Crockett, Buffalo Bill. These men began in reality, but ended in myth (Willis, 1997: 14).

What is the essential appeal of this myth in the context of the Western serials that appeared in *Our Boys*? According to Cavelti (1977) the heart of the Western myth is an essential energy, yet though the intrinsic dramatic vigour and unity of the Western formula plays the major role in its success, this is not the whole story of the Western’s popularity, for we must still ask why a particular artistic form or structure of conventions possesses dramatic power for the audiences who enjoy it, and what sort of dramatic power this is. There seem to be two levels on which this question can be answered. First, we can refer a particular form to some universal conception of types or genres, based presumably on innate qualities or characteristics of the human psyche. According to this approach, followed by various literary theorists from Aristotle to Northrop Frye, a particular work or group of works becomes successful insofar as it effectively carries out an archetypal structure, which is in turn based on either innate human capacities and needs or on fundamental and universal patterns of experience. Using such a universal system as that suggested in Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* (1971), it is fairly simple to outline the relationship between the Western and archetypal forms. The Western is a fine example of what Frye calls the *mythos* of romance, a narrative and dramatic structure which he characterises as one of the four central myths or story forms in literature, the other three being comedy, tragedy, and irony. As Frye defines it, ‘the essential element of plot in romance is adventure’, and the major adventure which gives form to the romance is the quest. Thus the complete form of the romance is clearly the successful quest and such a completed form has three main stages: the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die; and the exaltation of the hero (Frye, 1971: 186). These characteristics certainly fit the Western. The central action of chase and pursuit dramatises the quest, the climactic shoot-down embodies the crucial battle, and the movement of the hero from alienation to commitment is an example of the ‘recognition of the hero, who has clearly proved himself to be a hero even if he does not survive the conflict’.

Other characteristics of romance, as Frye defines it, are also clearly present in the Western: the struggle between hero and villain; the tendency to present both figures
as coming not from the town but from the surrounding landscape; the way in which the hero’s action is commonly associated with the establishment of law and order. These qualities also relate the Western to romances of many different cultures and periods. The central form of romance is dialectical: everything is focused on a conflict between the hero and his enemy, and all the reader’s values are bound up with the hero. Hence the hero of romance is analogous to the mythical messiah or deliverer who comes from an upper world, and his enemy is analogous to the demonic powers of the lower world. The conflict, however, takes place in, or at any rate primarily concerns, our world in the middle (Cawelti, 1977: 92).

An interesting example of the Western genre in Our Boys is a series involving the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, specifically Sergeant Moloney and His Mounties. There are several aspects to this series that are worthy of note. Firstly, the standard of writing, by Margaret Griffiths, was of an extremely sophisticated level for this genre. The names of the Mounties are exclusively Irish. To a boy who may have been unaware of the exact origins of this quasi-military force and the fact that Canada was in fact part of the British international family in the year the series first appeared, 1930, it could have been interpreted that Ireland, or some type of Irish force, enjoyed a measure of control over the Great North West. It is Griffith’s vivid descriptions of the mountains, lakes and rapids of this territory which give the stories much of their flavour. She is no less an interesting narrator: her accounts of the variety of characters are rich and full of human detail – murderous outlaws, honest miners, simple woodsmen, savage Eskimos, sly French-Canadian trappers, noble (and occasionally evil) Indians, and of course, the heroic figures of the Irish Mounties: the eponymous Sergeant Jack Moloney, Corporal Laurence Burke, Trooper Joe Mahony, Captain Paul Kelly, and their leader, the man who presided over law and order in the vast spaces of this wilderness, ‘Iron Hand’ O’Brien, District Commandant for the Yukon Territory.

Though not ‘American’ in the conventional sense of the word, it is in fact the ultimate North American narrative, fulfilling such criteria as being set in the wilderness and concerning the struggle between good and evil in a lawless, frontier milieu. Furthermore, it is interesting in the context of issues of masculinity to explore the manner in which the Royal Canadian Mounted Police are portrayed as figures of order: uniformed, structured, organisational men against the background of a wild, harsh and unforgiving landscape. There is also a certain irony in the fact that this is essentially an imperial genre; British juvenile literature choosing to take this theme as a form of ‘conditioning’, and often in fact programmatic, depicting the frontier as a place where men could prove themselves and learn the resilience they would need to rule an empire, with the figure of the Mountie being one of the quintessential emblems of male, imperial order (Crang, 1998: 75). Yet in the case of Griffith’s stories they are, even the senior officers, exclusively Irish! This may perhaps be interpreted as a popular literary version of Irish masculine wish-fulfillment.

The Detective Story
The spaces of detective fiction are always integral to the texts of detective fiction. The spaces of the genre are always ‘productive’ of the crime they contain and structure, forcing the detective to engage with the setting she/he inhabits in order to understand and therefore solve the crime. To the detective ‘there is no stone in the street, no brick
in the wall that is not actually a deliberate symbol — a message from some man, as much as if it were a telegram or postcard’ (Crang 1998: 51). The detective is thus set up as an interpreter of urban life, rendering the spaces of the city legible. For instance, Sherlock Holmes ventures out to find knowledge about mysteries, often by going off into the darkest recesses of the city, into the opium dens and backways. In the foggy London of Holmes, the central landscape features are the opaque mysterious goings-on in such hidden realms. Hidden because although Holmes goes into them, as a master of disguise — the reader rarely follows. The city is a riot of meanings, of significance, where the minutiae speak volumes to Holmes — but a city that cannot be read by us unaided. Holmes, however, can go anywhere, moving freely and bringing order out of this chaos. The lights of Baker Street are beacons of hope and reason. Holmes is the embodiment of ‘epistemological optimism’, the hope and possibility that the city can be interpreted and understood through the power of reason.

Holmes is the original ‘Great Detective’. He helps us to make sense of the city, to understand and to rationalise in the midst of confusion. This genre has a strong appeal to the youthful reader, especially boys. The detective is essentially a loner. As the adolescent boy experiences the isolation of development, caught somewhere between one state and another, he identifies with the ability of the detective to triumph over adversity, to enter the forbidden zone, the underworld, to return with his heroic status enhanced. This aspect of the genre had a particular relevance as the time of school attendance was gradually increased from the 1920s onwards and boys who in a previous generation would have found themselves in the local mill or mine (if English) or the local grocery shop or on an emigrant ship (if Irish) now found themselves in an educationally-motivated extended childhood. Many of these boys were attracted to the concept of the detective as ‘intelligent hero’. Detective stories literally answered questions; fed the need to seek the extraordinary in the everyday.

These detective stories are a plea for science not only in the spheres conventionally associated with detection (footprints, traces of hair or cloth, cigarette ends), where they have been deservedly influential on forensic practice, but in all areas. They reflect the widespread optimism characteristic of their period concerning the comprehensive power of positivist science. Holmes’s ability to deduce Watson’s train of thought, for instance, is repeatedly displayed, and it owes nothing to the supernatural. Once explained, the reasoning process always appears ‘absurdly simple’, open to the commonest of common sense (Belsey, 1997: 236). This is an appealing trait to the adolescent boy – he is himself at the ‘game’ stage, a level of development where rules apply, and where hierarchies, whether at home or school, dominate. Within his peer group each individual seeks both to conform and to assert individuality within the accepted range. It is here that the cleverness of the detective, allied to his heroic status, can indicate a way of not only surviving in the various settings through which the adolescent must negotiate — as the detective negotiates the gray area where every-day life and the forbidden zone, the underworld, interact — but can transcend mere survival, and in the form of identification, in the process of solving the ‘puzzle’, elevate the act of interrelationship to a superior plane where the boy is in control, where each week, albeit in the realm of fantasy, he ‘wins’.

The producers of the boys’ papers were not slow to recognize the appeal of the detective. By the 1920s Sexton Blake and Nelson Lee were two of the most popular of what has been termed ‘the office boy Sherlock Holmes’ (Turner, 1948: 159). Other
famous sleuths in the British papers included Dixon Brett, Nick Carter and Falcon Swift. As cinema began to expand as a medium of entertainment during this period so too did the figure of the detective become a standard character in the Saturday afternoon pantheon of childhood heroes. The detective was an equally ubiquitous figure in *Our Boys* from the period of the magazine’s inception, and by the 1920s and 1930s every issue contained at least one story that would qualify under this heading.

Like the school stories, they can be divided into two main types – involving either closed or open settings. In detective literature the ‘closed setting’ (variants of which included airplanes, trains, ships and of course, the narrow confines of the rectory or big house) had the advantage of limiting the body of suspects and (usually) simplifying social differences. The ultimate purpose of this form of setting was to emphasise the thrust of the plot – from order through disorder to a final state of order. The smaller the world under examination, it was felt by some critics, notably W.H. Auden, the more effective will be the state of restored order (Hayne, 2000: 76). A good example of this genre which featured in *Our Boys* is a story entitled ‘The Train Tragedy’, which ran March to May 1931.

The long-running O’Malley series typifies the open setting. In this series, written by C. Kirwan and first appearing in *Our Boys* in 1927, we find a hero to whom there are no barriers. Far removed from the narrow confines of drawing room, cloister or family gathering, O’Malley wanders the world in his motor yacht, *Topsail*. He is accompanied on his international adventures by his trusty assistant, Cullen. We are never told their first names, nor are we informed of the forename of the person to whom each episode is recounted.

O’Malley travels extensively, the range of his adventures stretching across the globe, encompassing such diverse locations as the South Sea Islands, the coast of Japan and the shores of North Africa. Having no obvious source of income and yet enjoying literally boundless freedom, he may be placed within the category of ‘gentleman adventurer’ or ‘amateur’. In the realm of popular fiction during the inter-war years he was in good company. Notable examples of this genre included Major Roger Bennion, property developer and intelligence officer, created by Herbert Adams and appearing in such stories as *Exit the Skeleton* (1928); The Honourable Everard Blatchington, gentleman of leisure, who was the hero in such works as *The Blatchington Tangle* (1926) and *Death in the Quarry* (1934), created by G.D.H. and M. Cole; Ludovic Travers, writer and gentleman of leisure, created by Christopher Bush and appearing in *The Plumley Inheritance* (1926); and Dorthy L. Sayer’s Lord Peter Wimsey, connoisseur and gentleman of leisure, who first entertained readers of popular detective fiction in *Whose Body* (1923) and made his final appearance in *Busman’s Honeymoon* (1937) (see Ousby, 1997: 88–9).

Both Frank O’Meara, the detective of ‘The Train Tragedy’, and O’Malley come, literally, from the same school. What each detective has in common, the detective chosen to represent the closed setting of the genre and the older, more sophisticated O’Malley, of the open setting, is that their stories are redolent of the experience of school days. This is the Irish version of the experience – boarding school as opposed to public school – but the conclusion can nevertheless be drawn that there is very little difference essentially in the philosophy of either national educational institution: the ultimate intention of each system was to produce an ethos to support the middle class affiliations of the target audience. In this *Our Boys* was no different to *Boy’s Own*. The
following extract from ‘Death Knives of Sicily’, though describing the adventures of two young Irish detectives in the Sicilian hills, could, with its gung-ho philosophy, colonial spirit and classical references, be taken from any British boys paper of the period:

Sicily is an island well endowed with natural beauty and the primitiveness of the Sicilians themselves invests them with a charm that is very pleasing to a blasé city man. We enjoyed our trek from Catania immensely. The weather was magnificent, and we strode up hill and down dale with hearts as light as air. The knapsacks on our shoulders held sleeping-sacks and four days’ provisions. We did not like to over-burden ourselves, as we hoped for some hospitality from the shepherds on the mountain slopes.

As we advanced further, our task grew more difficult. Our track became steeper and steeper, and soon we found that we could not retrace our steps. We were lost in the hills. We had seen very few people on our tramp. An occasional shepherd or goat-herd in picturesque attire who gave a surly answer to our hearty ‘good day,’ and then resumed piping on their flutes. They put us in mind of our schooldays when we had been reading Virgil and Theocritus.

We imagined we were back in the days when Daphnis and Menalcas were piping to the nymphs in the valleys. Most certainly we never connected the peaceful pastoral scenes with the orgy of blood-spilling we were soon to witness.

Night fell rather quickly, and Cullen said we should turn in. We had done something between thirty and forty miles that day, and were a bit tired. So after a hastily-prepared supper, we shooed the lizards away and tucked ourselves into our bags under the shelter of two rocks on the mountain-side. We were soon fast asleep. (Our Boys, June 1927, vol. XIII, p. 661)

Hearing a shot which came ‘from an old fashioned gun’ O’Malley is suddenly awakened during the night. This initial shot is followed by several more. Waking Cullen, O’Malley is at the point of dismissing this nocturnal disturbance as nothing more than a shepherd firing at wolves when the night air is rent by a piteous screaming in the distance, ‘women and children crying out in the hills in the grey dawn’.

When O’Malley and his assistant go to find out the source of the frightening sounds they discover, on the floor of a ‘mean kitchen’, the body of ‘a fine young shepherd and his wife riddled with bullets’. Shocked by the sight, O’Malley resolves to investigate. Making local inquiries he is informed that the unfortunate young couple were killed as a result of a long running vendetta. There then follows a tale that could be regarded as typical of the ‘outdoor’ detective abroad. He discovers the reason for the ferocity of this local feud and resolves the issue. This is an example of what might be termed the deus ex machina element of the detective’s role in this form of narrative structure: coming out of the landscape, in this case through the mobility of his yacht, Topsail, the western detective intervenes in the affairs of this foreign culture, where he briefly finds himself. The intervention is invariably successful, order is restored and he either returns to his own culture or moves on in pursuit of further adventure and in search of more mysteries to solve.

Other examples of the O’Malley series include ‘The Rays That Killed – A Story of Political Adventure in Portugal’ and ‘Rogues of the Yellow Sea – A Stirring
Two stories that illustrate the international range and ‘open’ nature of the O’Malley series, ‘The Rays that Killed’ was published in May and ‘Death Knives of Sicily’ in June 1927. In ‘Rogues of the Yellow Sea’, from April 1927, O’Malley comes to the aid of a fishing village called Hong-Ju on the coast of the Yellow Sea. Pirates from China and Japan who come to steal the pearl oysters that flourished in the region are constantly robbing the poor fishermen of this village. O’Malley and Cullen assist local patrolmen to catch these poachers in the act of stealing, something they had previously been unable to accomplish, through using the speed of the Topsail and their own sailing expertise.
Episode among the Pearl Fishers’, both published in 1927. As in all the O’Malley adventures, our hero uses his superior intelligence to resolve wrongs and restore order. What is unique about this series is the fact that here we have an Irish detective competing on equal terms with the more conventional example of his English counterpart.

Science Fiction
The first episode of the long series Through the Realms of Space appeared in Our Boys in March 1929. It follows the adventures of Professor O’Callaghan and his companions as they voyage through the universe. Having stumbled upon a mighty energy source, one sufficiently powerful to directly counteract the pull of gravity, O’Callaghan has built The Conqueror, an all-steel vessel. Now, with his trusty companions – Denver, the Massey brothers, Dick and Frank, and Moore and Donovan – he is ready to undertake his fantastic voyage.

‘The extraordinary voyage’ is of course one of the oldest forms of narrative in the literature of popular fantasy. The medieval tales about the voyages of Sir John Mandeville, much reprinted in the post-Caxton era, were, during the age of Columbus and the discoveries, to develop into the full blown genre of the imaginary voyage. Much early utopian writing, such as Thomas More’s Utopia, Sir Francis Bacon’s New Atlantis, or Tommaso Campanella’s The City of the Sun, fits very neatly into this genre, and utopian comment was indeed a frequent element of these imaginary voyages. There were at least 215 stories of imaginary voyages published in Western Europe and America in the eighteenth century, of which Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels (1726) is undoubtedly the best known. Most of the stories of imaginary voyages written in the nineteenth century continued to be about the discovery of marvelous or mysterious people and places in the remoter parts of the world. There are nineteenth-century tales of imaginary voyages which discover lost races in every conceivable corner of the Earth’s surface, as well as a large sub-genre which finds them inside a hollow Earth, following the once fashionable theories of John Cleves Symnies (d.1829). Voyagers inside the hollow Earth found whole solar systems, the Garden of Eden, dog-headed humans, utopian societies, and prehistoric monsters. In one of the most interesting and impressive nineteenth-century examples, Mary E. Bradley Lane’s feminist Mizora (1890), the heroine, Vera Zarovitch, found an all-female society, lacking not only men, but also crime, religion, class, disease, domestic animals, and brunettes (brunettes were considered troublesome).

In 1895 alone seventeen examples of the extraordinary voyage were published. Charles Dixon’s Fifteen Hundred Miles An Hour (Britain) was a boys’ story about a German inventor who took some young friends with him to Mars, to meet Martians. Gustavus Pope’s sequel to his Journey to Mars (1894), Journey to Venus (US), was an early example of what became a cliché: the idea that Venus was the jungle home of prehistoric monsters and cavemen. Not all the travel was by spaceship: Edgar Fawcett’s The Ghost of Guy Thyrle (US) had a drug which allowed a scientist to roam at will in his astral body, to the Moon and the stars; while Tremlett Carter’s The People of the Moon (Britain) used the occult device of astral projection in order to explore the Moon (James, 1994: 14).

Jules Verne had an enormous influence on this genre. His major science-fictional ‘Voyages extraordinaires’ were translated into English soon after publication: A Jour-
ney to the Centre of the Earth (1863) appeared in London in 1872 and New York in 1874; From the Earth to the Moon (1865) was published in Newark, New Jersey, in 1869 and with its sequel Round the Moon (1869) in London in 1873 and New York in 1874; Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea (1870) was published in London and New York in 1873; and so on. He was also very widely imitated, in Europe and in the United States, and was an influence on the earliest American magazines some fifty years after his greatest works appeared (nearly all in the 1860s and 1870s). From its first issue in 1926 and for years thereafter, the magazine Amazing Stories had a drawing of Jules Verne’s tomb at Amiens on its title-page, the immortal Verne in the act of raising the lid of his tombstone to peer into his own future.

Amazing Stories was a product of a period that has become known as the Golden Age of science fiction. Much of this material was published in pulp magazines – the word referring to the cheap quality of the paper used in the magazines, although to many it also connotes the sensational nature of the material therein: Western stories, fantasy and the detective tale, along with science fiction, predominating in an American urban market hungry for escapism. The pulp magazine, with its brightly coloured cover, low price and sensationalist stories supplied this need. Other American science fiction magazines included Science Wonder Stories, Astounding Stories, Marvel Science Stories, Planet Stories and Galaxy Science Fiction (Ackerman, 1998: 107). In Britain science fiction material was published in Pearson’s Weekly and Pearson’s Magazine. The readership of these stories in the 1920s and 30s was generally young and primarily male, the language and narrative structure simplified to a fairly undemanding pulp vocabulary, such taboo subjects as sex being generally avoided (Nicholls, 1979: 285).

In introducing its own science fiction serial in 1929 Our Boys was replicating a trend popular in the British boys’ papers of the day. Champion, Boys’ Magazine and Boys’ Friend all featured tales of ‘planets and lost cities’, while the newcomers on the market, from the Dundee School – Hotspur, Rover, Adventure, Wizard and Skipper – were not slow to recognize the appeal of the fantastic to that generation of British boys whose only form of relief from the bleakness of poverty and slum was a weekly visit to their local picture palace and a trip to the newsagents to ‘follow-up’ the adventures of their favourite leisure paper hero (Turner, 1948: 148).

This is a genre that would not generally be associated with a magazine that has a conservative, traditional resonance in the public mind. The appearance of the O’Callaghan series indicates an editorial policy that was alive to the narrative appeal of such a story to the youthful reader, a trend that was noticeable in other juvenile markets such as Britain and America. This places Our Boys in an international context, side by side with not only the British boys’ papers but the American and British pulp magazines, broadening the range of narrative material and considerably increasing the appeal of the Irish magazine.

Conclusion
The very fact that Through the Realms of Space and the various other serials of conventional boys popular literature, detective, western and boy scout appear in Our Boys at this time, side by side with Irish Catholic devotional material and nationalist fiction, is an indication of just how eclectic the Irish paper was and a reflection of the insight which Brother Canice Craven possessed. Notwithstanding his involvement in a move-
Through the Realms of Space is a fine serial of its genre, well written, by Frank Diamond, which appeared in Our Boys on 19 June 1929. It has a clever balance between the need to inform, albeit along the lines of scientific speculation, and the requirement to entertain. In this latter aspect Diamond obviously knows his market: there is a good deal of tension, and enough of that amorphous quality which makes boys’ fiction work, the identification with the characters and their adventures, to keep the readers coming back for more.

Comment which might define arch conservatism today (the Campaign Against Filthy Literature) and the revisionist thinking that seeks to paint the Christian Brothers in a certain light, one driven more by the perceived proselytising nature of the Our Boys institution than the actual fact that there was much quality entertainment here also, it must be stated that these were excellent stories, as good as their overseas competitors, and at a point where Irish boys had precious little to emulate in their own culture, cinema screens being dominated by Hollywood and the British film studios; the leisure reading market controlled by Fleet Street and Dundee. It should be remembered that the standard depiction of Irish masculinity in these media outlets ranged from the stupidity of the stage Irishman to the maudlin caricature of the whiskey priest.

Our Boys at least made an effort to give Irish boys positive models of masculinity, ranging from the world weary sophistication of the international detective, O’Malley, to the autonomous survival skills of Murphy and his chums, to the intelligence and courage of Professor O’Callaghan, to the frontier ruggedness and heroism of the Irish Mounties. This process of identification with heroic archetypes even vaguely from native culture, though the narrative settings were quintessentially colonial, served a vital function at a time when national self-esteem was at low ebb. It should perhaps be remembered in the modern era that being Irish did not always
possess the international cachet that it does today.

The boys who read their fortnightly copy of Our Boys in the early decades of the Free State era, perhaps by candlelight in cottages on the west coast no different from those described by Victor O’D. Power (in his Tales Told in the Turflight series) or by hissing gaslight in the small towns of the midlands or perhaps by the more modern electric light in their suburban Dublin beds, all at least were given access to a world of fantasy that was unique to themselves, and experienced at least briefly the bond of companionship which was a cause for envy when they read Gem, Magnet or Hot-spur. There were Irish heroes too, not necessarily belonging to the past, consigned to the pages of history, but modern boys and men similar to themselves with names like Murphy and O’Meara, and it was possible to identify with them, to feel that you too could be a hero.

AUTHOR
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