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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

THE DECLINE OF THE ANGLO-IRISH
ASCENDANCY AS DESCRIBED IN *THE CAPTAINS*
AND THE KINGS BY JENNIFER JOHNSTON

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Jennifer Johnston was born in Ireland in 1930, as the daughter of the dramatist Denis Johnston. She has so far written nine novels, a number of short stories and four plays. By critics, Johnston has been considered to be a so called Big House novelist. The Big Houses, i.e. the manor houses of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, are often used as "a metaphor which might allow the author to explore the socially disintegrated world of the Protestant Ascendancy" (Brown, 110).

Of Johnston's novels, five have a Big House setting, and she writes about members of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy when their days of glory are over, or at least will be over in a short time. They live at a Big House somewhere in Ireland, preferably Co. Wicklow, south of Dublin, where they lead usually quite isolated lives, spending their time playing the piano, preferably Chopin, and talking with ghosts from the past.

All this fits in very well with her first published, secondly written, novel, *The Captains and the Kings*. There the old man Charles Prendergast lives a lonely life as the last one of his family in the Big House of a village somewhere in Wicklow around 1970. His isolation is disturbed by the friendship with a boy from the village, Diarmid Toorish, a friendship that starts innocently but ends up with Mr Prendergast being unjustly accused of pederasty, just before he dies.

This essay will show how Jennifer Johnston uses the protagonist of the novel to portray the decline of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy in modern Ireland, but also how she at the same time is using the frame of the Big House metaphorically to describe a person's withdrawal and seclusion from the world. After a short explanation of Big House fiction the essay will deal with the history of the

Anglo-Irish in connection with the novel, and later on show how Johnston's symbolism is working. If nothing else is told all references given are from the primary source.

Considered a Big House novelist Jennifer Johnston is part of a tradition starting with *Castle Rackrent* by Maria Edgeworth, published in 1800, "the first "Big House" novel set on an Ascendancy estate, the first Irish family chronicle, and the first fictional book to make Irish history and politics central to its story and theme" (Cahalan, 16). The tradition continued during the 19th century with writers like Somerville and Ross, and in this century with Elizabeth Bowen, Molly Keane, William Trevor, John Banville, Aidan Higgins and Jennifer Johnston.

Big House fiction is thus still a living genre, but as the conditions for the Ascendancy have changed, the fiction has changed as well. After the breakdown of the landlording system in Ireland the Big House became an object of lamenting remembrance, but lately, it has been used as a scene for the drama of modern man's isolation (Lubbers, 17). Isolation is, according to Terence Brown, one of the main experiences of the Anglo-Irish (111), and it has been reflected in the Big House fiction. Jennifer Johnston is certainly no exception from this, and the theme of isolation is always present in her novels.

To understand this isolation of the Anglo-Irish, it might be necessary to get an insight in their history. The Normans invaded Ireland in the 12th century and settled down mainly around Dublin, but colonizers from England later on spread over the country. The Irish remained Catholics after the Reformation, while the Anglo-Irish had turned Protestants, usually Anglicans, except the Presbyterian northern English and lowland Scottish who colonized

Ulster, the northern province.

For centuries the Protestant minority had the leading political power in Ireland, and in periods the Catholics were severely oppressed and persecuted. The Protestants owned the land, and they built the "Big Houses" on their estates, where the Catholics were their tenants. Catholic Emancipation and a series of Land Acts during the 19th century transformed the society, however, and in the beginning of this century landlordism was mainly a thing of the past (Lubbers, 17).

The term "Anglo-Irish" is dubious, as it is not certain which people it includes. Usually it has in view the descendants of the English colonizers, but throughout history quite a few Protestants have participated in the Irish fight for independence. To many of the Protestants in the south it was a shock that they after independence in 1921 were seen as strangers in the land their families had lived in for centuries (Brown, 106-107), but the Protestants in the north would on the other hand still not consider themselves to be anything else than British. The "native" Irish, the Catholic peasants, looked upon their landlords as foreigners, whereas they abroad were seen as being Irish, and this ambiguity is a distinct feature of the lives of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy.

These ambiguous people have, nevertheless, meant a great deal to Irish culture. For example, the early years of the 20th century saw the growth of a movement that tried to revive the Gaelic culture. Part of this cultural nationalism was the Anglo-Irish literary revival which mainly was the work of a few people from the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, sharing an interest in Irish folk tales and Celtic mythology - W.B. Yeats, AE (George Russell),

George Moore and Lady Gregory (Bourden, 68).

The Gaelic revival was part of the fight for independence, a fight that was disturbed by the outbreak of the First World War. There was no conscription in Ireland but a great many Irishmen fought in the war, nevertheless. They were promised that Ireland would get Home Rule after the war, and that participating meant helping other small nations to guard their independence.

All of Jennifer Johnston's novels deal with war in one form or another, and she is frequently returning to the First World War. Common for her characters who have participated in the war is the disillusion about a war that was supposed to be glorious but turned out to be a slaughter.

This disillusion is certainly shared by Mr Prendergast in *The Captains and the Kings*. He cannot cope with his memories from the war, and even in his old life he prefers not to think about it. He describes his time as a soldier to Diarmid in this fashion: "A temporary fit of madness. A situation arose when it was impossible [sic]... a lot of people died. It was to have been the war to end all wars" (27). Diarmid wants to know what he did to get a medal, but gets disappointed when Mr Prendergast just says that he survived. And when Diarmid continues to be interested in the medal Mr Prendergast says: "It's not something I really care to be reminded about" (28).

That the First World War was one of the death-knells to the life-style of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy is symbolized in *The Captains and the Kings* with the death of Mr Prendergast's brother Alexander. The way he is portrayed he is like an archetype of the life of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy as it used to be. Even as a ghost he walks around being dressed for playing tennis, "his

whites... as usual, immaculate" (86). As a boy he admired Cromwell - who has a very bad reputation, indeed, in Ireland because of massacres and persecutions of the Irish Catholics - and he took the privileges of their family for granted, e.g. that the train should stop just above the yard gate when there were passengers for Kill House (72). In the end of the novel Mr Prendergast is telling the pestering ghost of his brother: "Your bed, my dear Alexander, is six feet deep. Somewhere that is forever England" (109). As Alexander was hit by a shell in Gallipoli it must be a metaphorical grave he is talking about.

After Alexander's death everything is going downhill at Kill House. Mr Prendergast starts roaming around the world in hope of being able to escape a reality that he cannot handle, the father withdraws into senility and the mother is constantly regretting that it was her favourite son who died, "her mind absorbed by the past, by one man's brief and beautiful life" (90).

Her surviving son is also regretting that it was his excellent brother who was blown up by a shell. All his life he has been compared with his elder brother, and in the mother's eyes he was never up to the mark. Instead of encountering his scornful mother, and the life after the war, he starts to run, moving from one country to another but never finding peace. When he eventually settles down at Kill House he is reading books as aimlessly as he has been running around the world. He does not get real peace in his mind until in the very end of the novel, when he seems to have come to terms with his past and the ghosts have vanished.

During the Second World War Ireland remained neutral, to the annoyance of Britain and many of the Anglo-Irish in Ireland who were used to think of the British army and navy as theirs. They

saw the neutrality as a disgraceful unconcern about what happened to their English relations (Brown, 173).

The Second World War did not directly affect Mr Prendergast's life as he was travelling in Mexico and the U.S. during the war years, but he came back to find a Europe that had changed dramatically:

... tired people desperately trying to build a new world. It seemed, at that time, as if it might be going to be a world in which there would be very little place for people like the Prendergasts. (11)

Between the World Wars a great many things happened in Ireland. The Easter Rising in 1916 led to the War of Independence in 1919-1921, and the Treaty in 1921, which gave Ireland the status of a Free State, but also partitioned the country as six counties in the northeast were excluded from the Free State and remained in union with Britain. As many people were not pleased with the Treaty there was a civil war in 1922-23. The Free Staters won the war and later on Ireland declared itself a Republic, but the partition is still an open wound. The civil rights movement in Northern Ireland during the 60s ended up in the recent troubles there, and the violence started around the time *The Captains and the Kings* is set in.

All these troubles in his homeland do not seem to have had any impact at all on Mr Prendergast. His indifference to the politics of Ireland might seem surprising, but one explanation is, of course, that he did not spend his time in Ireland during the War of Independence and the Civil War. After the First World War he

went to Oxford, and when he left Oxford he started his travels around the world which continued till after the Second World War.

Still, one would have expected that he would show some interest in the domestic affairs of Ireland. But the only time the politics of Ireland are mentioned in the novel is when Mr Prendergast is talking with his old friend in Roundwood, and the friend says:

'You know, now I've never said this to a soul before, but I'd never have believed we'd have made a go of it the way we have.'

The old man looked at him, puzzled. 'We?'

'You know, the Irish. Dev and all that lot. I bet you never thought back in 1916 that things would turn out like this.'

'I never gave it much thought.'

'Neither did I, old man.' (83-84)

According to Terence Brown this is an indifference to the independence that was typical of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy:

Ideologically, the Protestants of Ireland apart from certain few individuals who had been aroused by an enthusiasm for Gaelic revival and the cultural renaissance, had in the decade before independence made almost no effort to comprehend the nationalist cause.

(106)

Before independence the Protestants in Ireland had been bound together by unionist politics and religion, but the landowners,

the farmers in the north and the businessmen became split as a group, only sharing "a sense of isolation and of political impotence" (Brown, 109).

Consequently, the political power of the Protestant minority in southern Ireland was gone with the independence. However, many of the Ascendancy just continued their lives, as if nothing had happened. They continued their social world with sailing, dancing, hunting and the club (Brown, 109-114).

With the loss of the political influence came the loss of financial power. In *The Captains and the Kings* Johnston depicts how the financial power has moved from the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy to their former inferiors.

In order to keep the house alive old Mrs Prendergast had sold the land, hills, fields, bogland and wood to men who had been her husband's tenants and labourers. (12)

The Protestants have now diminished in southern Ireland. As Terence Brown points out many of them chose to leave the country after independence (116).

In *The Captains and the Kings* the new generation of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, Mr Prendergast's daughter Sarah and the Rector's children, have chosen to live in England. And they are certainly not continuing any traditions from the past. Sarah shows no interest at all in Kill House, or Ireland, and old Mrs Prendergast's jewellery she will never use. The Rector and his wife have given all the silver to their children, but the Rector's wife presumes that they are not using it.

On the Irish countryside many of the Big Houses are ruins

today. This is also a likely fate for Kill House in *The Captains and the Kings*. Though Mr Prendergast insists on staying, he will be the last Prendergast in Wicklow. Other Big Houses are being sold to the nouveaux riches from Dublin and the former inhabitants are moving to modern bungalows instead, like the old friend Mr Prendergast meets in Roundwood (82).

Kill House is already falling apart, which is mentioned several times, for example when the yard is described:

The cobbles were covered with a fine coating of moss. The window of what had been the harness room had been without glass for many years. The evening ground mist was filtering its way between the tumbledown buildings.
(31)

The decay of Kill House is emphasized by the fact that nearly all characters in the novel are old, and their age is pointed out several times, e.g. Sean has problem with his teeth and the Rector's wife has arthritis and needs help to get up from the chair. The ghosts excluded, the only young characters are Diarmid and one of the two guards that are coming to Kill House to arrest Mr Prendergast, Guard Conroy.

Mr Prendergast feels with irritation the process of dying, and he is continually worrying about the way he will die. The slow death of his wife Clare scares him, and he would prefer to die like his brother Alexander, blown up by a shell: "If he could strike the ground open and be swallowed, how splendid. No debris" (49).

The name of the Prendergasts' Big House is symbolizing the

theme of decay and death. 'Kill' or 'kil' is a common component in Irish placenames, an anglicizing of the Irish word 'cill'. As 'cill' is Irish for 'churchedyard' (Ó Siadhail, 279) the name of the house thus has connotations to death both in Irish and English. And there is little life left in Kill House.

To keep himself and Clare alive, Mr Prendergast had closed the house room by room, floor by floor. Rows of unused keys hung on the wall by the kitchen door, under the coiled and silent bell springs. Only Nellie remained, indoors, and Sean, in the garden. (12-13)

After the deaths of Nellie and Clare Mr Prendergast is all alone in the house, with the only company of Sean, who is living in a cottage of his own.

Kill House still inspires the villagers with respect, for example in the end of the novel Mrs Toorish has "taken care to dress herself suitable for her visit to the big house" (105), and Guard Devenney is very uneasy about arresting Mr Prendergast, being sure that it will mean troubles for himself.

But Mr Prendergast does not inspire people with the same respect. Not at all like his mother used to:

Mother would never have tolerated a situation of this kind. No one knew better how to keep them in their place. Mother would never have changed with the changing times and all, bar a few of them, would have bowed before her arrogance. (113)

The strong position of the Church of Ireland, the Anglican church in Ireland, is also decreasing. The Rector in the village, James Evers, is portrayed as a ridiculous figure with a fancy dress who did not have the ambition to do anything else than follow in his father's footsteps. Hardly anyone comes to his services, "Ten on a good day" (33), and the Rector is complaining about the changing times: "When I was a young man the Church was the backbone - no, more than that - the nerve centre of a healthy society" (52). Johnston shows how the once so influential church is falling behind the Catholic with a humouristic episode:

The bell on the Catholic church struck four and hurrying after it, trying desperately not to be left behind, the slightly deeper bell on the Protestant church. It had always been the same. No matter what adjustments the verger made to the clock he had never succeeded in encouraging it enough so that one day it might beat its rival by a neck and amaze the village. (104)

After independence a movement calling itself The Irish Ireland strived to bring forth what they saw as specifically Irish elements: the Irish language, the old Gaelic culture and Catholicism. The Protestants with tight bonds to England were not seen as being fully Irish, to the displeasure of many of the Anglo-Irish (Brown, 106).

The uncertainty the Anglo-Irish are having about their nationality is one of the themes that is frequently recurring in Johnston's works. This ambiguity is present, indeed, in *The Captains and the Kings*. There are for example differences between

Mr Prendergast and the native Irish in the way of speaking. Mr Prendergast's English accent is exemplified when Sean is thinking about him with resentment: "'Mawnin', Sean, Evenin' Sean,' in his bloody West British accent" (24). Sean speaks Irish English himself, which is shown in phrases like: "Amn't I after telling you..." (47 and 63) where he uses an idiom from Irish, which is a distinctive feature of Irish English. He is using cleft sentences in a way also typical for Irish English, e.g. "And if it's sacking me you are..." (75). Diarmid's accent is hinted at with: "I'm not an eejit" (54) and: "Divil a bit of discussing" (55). Mr Prendergast reveals an ambivalence as to whether he counts himself as a Celt or not, e.g.: "I don't often eat boys. Never Celts. They're stringy" (14) and: "The trouble with us, as I see it - Celts in general, I mean - is that we tend to exaggerate" (17).

Worth noticing is also the fact that the only people in the novel he likes or respects are Diarmid and Father Mulcahy. He detests "the indestructible goodwill of the English middle-class" (10), the Rector he holds in contempt and he seems to be turning to Continental Europe rather than England when looking for culture, reading books in French and German for example.

The native Irish in the book are, with the exception of Diarmid and Father Mulcahy, depicted in a pretty crude manner. They are selfish and greedy, quite disagreeable people indeed, whereas Mr Prendergast is described in a much more profound way. This is most clearly shown in the end, when Mr Prendergast and Father Mulcahy are talking over Mr Toorish's head while Mr Toorish is rattling some coins in his pocket. Together with the priest Mr Prendergast can discuss music while Mr Toorish is "ducking his head this way and that, adding up things and translating them into money" (115).

The unpleasantness of the people around Mr Prendergast stresses his alienation. They are seen from his point of view and their materialism might be hard for him to understand because he never had to save and scrimp for his survival himself, as he points out: "'Never had to worry about money... Not enough for, well, you know, flamboyance... but enough to get by on'" (103).

Mr Prendergast is thoroughly portrayed, and the reader might feel sympathy for him as it is possible to understand his behaviour, in spite of the fact that he is not a very nice person. He treated his poor wife in a quite awful way and he does not care for his daughter. He is rude to the Rector and his wife, when they are trying to show him some concern. The only person he is nice to is Diarmid, but when Diarmid asks him for help he does not offer him any. It is not until Diarmid on his own initiative settles down at Kill House that he gives the boy some inadequate help, but when Kill House is invaded in the middle of the night, Mr Prendergast hands Diarmid over to his parents, making the boy feel that he has been betrayed.

In a way, this is what Diarmid feels already the first time he asks for the old man's help. Mr Prendergast appreciates Diarmid's friendship, but all the initiatives for the friendship are taken by Diarmid. When the boy asks for his help, he becomes afraid that he will be involved in other people and withdraws, "Exasperated that even now, at the fag end of his life, after all his precautions, someone could touch him, make him feel uneasy pain" (59).

Mr Prendergast's refusal of helping Diarmid makes the boy leave in anger, and he does not return until his parents are about to send him away. This time he gets the old man's help, possibly

because he has already settled down in the nursery when Mr Prendergast finds him in the house, and perhaps also because Mr Prendergast can handle his fear for emotions better this time, as they can withdraw fully in the nursery.

The portrayal of Diarmid with his red hair and working class background could be seen as a stereotyped symbol for modern Ireland pressing in upon the old world. He is indeed thrusting himself on Mr Prendergast, but possibly he is more a personification of Mr Prendergast's past, than a symbol for the modern times. He has an old name - the Irish for Dermott - which is a name with connection to Celtic mythology. The love story of Gráinne and Diarmuid with the love spot is one of the most famous stories from Irish mythology (Kennedy, 24).

Diarmid is obsessed with the past he finds in Kill House - the medals, the paintings, the soldiers - and he is the one who turns Mr Prendergast's mind on his youth again, who wakes up emotions inside him that he has carefully tried to repress throughout the years. For example, the first time when Mr Prendergast takes Diarmid to the nursery he is remembering the day when the telegram telling about the death of his brother arrived: "No thought of Alexander had entered his head for years and now it was as if the young man was there, inside his hand [head?], tearing down walls expertly built by time" (40).

The past is always of great importance in Johnston's novels: "... [it] is fascinating as a notion in itself, and many of her characters find themselves disturbed by ghosts from the past" (Lanters, 228). Mr Prendergast has all his life tried to escape his past, but in his old age it impinges on him. And after Diarmid's arrival to Kill House, Mr Prendergast can no longer act

unimpeded by the voices from the past. Sometimes he is moved back to earlier days himself, but the ghosts of his mother and brother are cutting in on his present life during this summer, and even his wife Clare appears as a ghost one day.

Diarmid is not only stirring up the past, but his arrival sets off a series of events that breaks Mr Prendergast's ordinary routines and he seems to be reviving. "The child had, somehow, halted for a while the inevitable, dreary process of dying" (64). When Diarmid in the beginning of the story calls him an old cod, he is laughing for the first time in years (27), and when Diarmid has taken refuge in Kill House and they are preparing to put Sean out of action Mr Prendergast feels he is actually enjoying himself (79). When he is taking the whiskey bottles to Sean's cottage he feels a "great flower of happiness ... growing inside him..." (80-81). But maybe Diarmid is not halting the process of dying. The reviving of Mr Prendergast can be seen as a part of that process, as it is common that people revive just before death.

There is also an interplay between the changes of the seasons, especially Clare's roses, and this process of dying. The story starts in late May, with the roses in the garden just about to open. It is the beginning of summer, a time for life. The rosebuds open and are blossoming through the time when Diarmid is coming to Kill House, to swim in the lake and to play with the soldiers in the nursery together with Mr Prendergast. The day when Sean is telling Mr Prendergast that Diarmid will be leaving for Dublin the good weather that has lasted through the summer is gone: "A wind from the west tossed the arms of the trees and forced Clare's rose bushes to dance ungainly dances. Shreds of pink, yellow and red chased each other over the wet grass" (62). This day there is also

a shift in the story - it is the day when Diarmid runs away from home and hides in Kill House, the beginning of the coming disaster.

The story ends in the afternoon of September 20. It is then autumn, the time of the year when nature is dying, and it turns out to be the day when Mr Prendergast dies.

In these last September days the old man and the boy are playing with the soldiers as they have done all summer, but more intensely. They are reconstructing famous battles just as Mr Prendergast used to do with his brother. The games in the nursery are an escape from the world that neither Mr Prendergast or Diarmid want to face, it is a way of isolating themselves, just as Shari Benstock points out:

It is in this closed, secret, room that the real world - the one which demands that both of them come out of hiding and assume their natural roles, each to accept his respective responsibilities - is put aside in favour of the fictional landscape of the battlefield. What begins as a pastime, a diversion, is to become by accident rather than design a real battle, and military conventions adumbrate the sorry defeat that is the novel's conclusion. (214)

Shari Benstock considers the recurrent wars of different kinds in Johnston's novels as metaphors for the alienation and isolation of the artist, of a writer (217). It is true, indeed, that most of Johnston's protagonists in some way are trying to or have tried to become writers, but in *The Captains and the Kings* there are no

would-be writers. However, Mr Prendergast have artistic ambitions at the piano instead, and to play seems to be the only occupation he really enjoys in his old days.

Usually he plays Chopin, the composer usually being played in Johnston's novels. It is probably not a coincidence that Johnston lets her characters prefer Chopin, and Mr Prendergast makes a parallel between Chopin's homeland and Ireland. "Frederic Chopin ... born in 1810. He was a Pole. Poland is a country with a history not unlike our own. Tragic and violent" (18). Chopin also lived as an exile for most part of his life, as many Irish artists have done, and Mr Prendergast's travels around the world could be seen as a sort of exile as well.

Nevertheless, Mr Prendergast never feels really pleased with his piano-playing, until the very last time he is playing. In his memory there is his brother who never was pleased with his accompaniment and the mother who told him to practise more. When they are coming back as ghosts they are still complaining, and that he never reaches fulfillment is yet another aspect of him never getting anywhere in his life.

The isolation in the nursery room becomes even stronger as Mr Prendergast actually locks Diarmid in. Mr Prendergast asserts that it is for Diarmid's safety, so he will not feel tempted to go downstairs where he might be seen by someone. More plausible is that it is the only kind of safety Mr Prendergast knows about. He has never managed to cope with the problems in his life, as the only solutions he has found have been escape and withdrawal. There is a parallel with the locking in of Diarmid and Mr Prendergast's own withdrawal at Kill House, and as Shari Benstock states it is one of the central themes of the novel:

The question posed by this novel, as in the ones that follow, is whether by one's seclusion, isolation, one is locking oneself in or keeping others out. (214)

Mr Prendergast does his best to keep others out with locking himself and Diarmid in. Too late he considers that the solution to Diarmid's problems might instead be communication, to talk to Father Mulcahy, and the locking in turns out to be unsuccessful as Kill House is intruded upon in the middle of the night.

Mr Prendergast's problems seem to be his unwillingness for communication. He actually expresses his resentment for it: "Why torment yourself with face to face confrontations? Why try to communicate? This terrible post-war urge" (33). Nevertheless, his friendship with Diarmid is communicative, and it is through that he eventually comes to terms with his past.

Because something important happens at the very end of the story, as the pestering ghosts eventually disappear and Mr Prendergast reaches perfection at the piano. He does admit that he actually feels something for Diarmid: "I loved the boy. Do love. Yes" (121). Mr Toorish understands this as an admission to pederasty, whereas the priest says: "Thank you for saying that, my friend" (122). Father Mulcahy comprehends how important it is for Mr Prendergast to admit his emotions for someone. All his life Mr Prendergast has carefully locked his emotions in, and now, at the very end, he takes a step out from the isolation. And doing that means that he finally gets peace in his mind.

His betrayal towards Diarmid, because he does not offer the boy any real help when his parents intrude in the middle of the night,

provokes the unjust statement the boy makes at the police station. Perhaps it is the total humiliation this statement causes that is finally making it possible for Mr Prendergast to open himself to his emotions. To Diarmid the ending of the story is not all that bad either - Father Mulcahy will see to that he gets the opportunity to go to a good school and in that way get a better future than the one his parents are forcing upon him.

Jennifer Johnston is treating the theme of isolation, seclusion, withdrawal, through the whole body of her writings. In *The Captains and the Kings* the Big House is used as a metaphor for the isolation of Mr Prendergast. At the same time the story is telling the history and the decline of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, with Mr Prendergast as a symbol for his class. As has been stated in this essay the course of his life follows the course of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. It is also shown in the novel how this once so powerful class has lost its influence during this century.

Apart from the isolation theme, Johnston's work is also concerned with the past.

... its importance may be related to an awareness that the present divisions in (Northern) Ireland would not be so wide if people could liberate themselves from the past, and that the persistence of past experiences ("remember 1690" and all that) is at the root of the present problem. (Lanters, 228)

Maybe this is to read too much into the novels of Jennifer Johnston. Nevertheless, all of her characters are preoccupied with the past, just as the Irish often are accused to be. And this

preoccupation is not making them happy.

Mr Prendergast does not get peace in his mind until he faces his past and comes to terms with it. In the end of the novel he has lost people's respect and he has been humiliated, being unjustly accused of a scandalous crime. But perhaps he has, in this way, left the past of the Ascendancy behind him, because, as he is playing the piano while waiting for the guards, the ghosts of Alexander and his mother are for the first time not complaining. They are not even there:

No Alexander, no mother, not even Clare. No-one disturbed his peace.... He made his way over to the piano. Books of music were in piles all over the top. Some fell on the floor as he searched. Eventually he found Chopin's Nocturnes. He began to play. He felt as if he had never played like this before. The music came leaping out from under his fingers and filled the world.

(122)

Though Mr Prendergast dies when the guards arrive, the ending of the novel is, nevertheless, not altogether sad. Eventually he played Chopin with perfection.

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