A Welshman on the Water: The Portrayal of In-Betweener Identities in Richard Doddridge Blackmore’s *The Maid of Sker* (1872)

Published during a time of rapid colonial expansion, Richard Doddridge Blackmore’s *The Maid of Sker* (1872) constitutes a conglomerate of fictional autobiography, historical and sensation novel. It takes the reader on a number of voyages to witness the most important British sea battles at the end of the eighteenth century. Considering the commencement of work on *The Maid of Sker* in the 1840s and the historical timeframe of the action itself, together with an elaborate portrayal of British national hero Lord Nelson, the novel provides a link for “the years between Trafalgar and the accession of Queen Victoria [when] romantic portraits of the navy provided moral exemplars for the domestic and imperial spheres” (emphasis mine; Fulford 162). Depictions of coastal life and images of the sea are central to plot development and character description, and include many involuntary voyages across the sea, such as the coming of age of the foundling girl Bertha ‘Bardie’ Bampfylde far from her family’s home, the drowning of African slaves on board a sinking ship and the impressment of four Devonshire men into the Royal Navy. To a degree, they all share the experience of the subaltern (cf. Spivak 41); instead of having a voice of their own, their voices are taken over by the opinionated narrator, David ‘Davy’ Llewellyn. He also maintains an outsider status from the good society based on a combination of his Welsh origin and his consecutive occupations as fisherman and sailor.

Although *The Maid of Sker* is by no means a premature post-colonial novel, and is, at times, rather the opposite, insights from post-colonial criticism are helpful to illuminate the construction of the narrator. Davy is what Gustavo Pérez Firmat calls a “one-and-a-halfer” and “translation artist” because he is “sufficiently immersed in each culture” on land and sea “to give both ends of the hyphen their due” (5). Applied to Davy, the term ‘culture’ translates to mean the different life styles, social orders and constructions of identities relative to their geographical distribution across land and water (cf. Bourdieu 118). His task is to negotiate between the Other and the familiar and their relative geographical distribution. With the help of one specific example from a vast body of high-Victorian sailor novels, the following analysis offers an insight into the utilization of the narrator’s voice in the construction of one-and-a-halfer identities on land and sea, as well as claims of ownership of the narrator over the narrated subjects (cf. O’Connor 242). It can be argued that the narrative style and character descriptions, with all their contradictions and repetitions, are the result of Davy’s in-between experience which, in return, has been determined by the hybrid geography of the
coast, an area marked by concurrency of the elements, being both solid and liquid.

1. The Old Fisherman and the Sea

The narrator David ‘Davy’ Llewellyn, addressed as ‘Old Dyo’ by the Welsh villagers, is “drawn from a living original whom Blackmore had known in his boyhood at Newton Nottage” (Elwin 266) who, from an English point of view, has been embellished with stereotypical idiosyncrasies of the Welshman for literary and ideological reasons. Jason Berger argues that especially during the years of the early nineteenth century, a noticeable shift occurred in the portrayal and significance of the common sailor, away from that of the “eighteenth-century comical dupe” towards one which presented him “in the role of both romantic hero and purveyor of knowledge” (30). The Maid of Sker was first published in 1872, at “the peak of imperialistic territorial expansion, however, only a very small part of the British . . . population could boast to have travelled outside of the country, let alone outside of Europe” (della Dora 288). Despite improved methods of transportation, the sailor of the high-Victorian novel nevertheless still constitutes a purveyor of knowledge for the lesser-travelled reader, mostly in areas such as “cultural others, . . . geographic spaces, . . . laboring [sic] experiences, and . . . social formations” (Berger 31). This argument relates to the previous notion of changing portrayals of sailors because The Maid of Sker is set between the years 1782 and 1801, the timeframe demarcating a zone of transition from the First to the Second British Empire. Displaying a great amount of wit, Davy is still partly the “comical dupe”, but he is also the knowledgeable, if opinionated, commentator on life in the colonies and the battles that secured Britain’s rise to an imperial power. In combination with the various settings, the fictional autobiography marks Davy as a hybrid story-teller. First, he combines two oral cultures from land and sea by his self-identification as Welsh bard and British sailor. Second, the transformation from an oral into a written account translates Davy’s imperial adventures and returns them back to the homeland for their consumption (cf. della Dora 288-9).

The sea has long been perceived “as a threshold between the known and unknown” (Berger 42). Being a man of land and water, Davy is able to play the part of the story-teller whose purpose it is to entertain and, at the same time, become the purveyor of what has formerly been unknown. Although the autobiography concerns Davy’s adventures between the years 1782 and 1801, the reader is warned from the very start against placing too much trust in the narrator’s own words:

My memory is still pretty good; but if I contradict myself, or seem to sweep beyond my
reach, or in any way to meddle with things which I had better have left alone, as a humble man and a Christian, I pray you to lay the main fault thereof to the badness of the times, and the rest upon human nature. For I have been a roving man, and may have gathered much of evil from fellow-men, although by origin meant for good. (Blackmore 2)

However, Davy counter-balances this aspect of narrative unreliability to a degree through the provision of detailed accounts of a number of historically verified, decisive sea battles against the French and Spanish. As a representative of the common man, he provides the reader with a view from rural Georgian Britain just as the Second Empire is emerging. Thus, David Llewellyn remains an authentic character, not despite his flaws, but because of them. One moment he holds a concrete set of morals and values, only to expose himself capable of subversion in the name of his love for humanity at the next best opportunity (cf. Blackmore 28).

Like the ebb and flow of tidal water, his story tells of numerous voyages and homecomings and his heart is never in the same place as his feet. When he is on land, he shows contempt for his neighbours and yearns for the open sea; whilst at sea he mourns his absence from Wales. Ironically, not once does Davy utter the near-mythical word *hiraeth*, which generally provides a litmus test for true Welshness, even within Welsh writing in English: “*hiraeth*, eg. 1. dyhead, dymuniad neu chwant mawr. Longing, nostalgia. 2. galar, gofid. Grief” (emphasis mine; “Hiraeth” 286). It follows that Blackmore is more concerned with giving voice to a low-ranking member of the Royal Navy, instead of portraying a Welsh character at length. Therefore, Davy’s character is largely informed by an English colonial view of the Welsh as a nation of semi-civilized Celts. Reader expectations, however, had changed significantly since the 1840s, the time of Blackmore’s first conception of the novel. “In an age of middle class snobbery, . . . Blackmore’s habit of writing about ordinary people of everyday life contributed to his unpopularity. The crowning evidence [was *The Maid of Sker*] because the autobiographical narrative was put into the unromantic mouth of an old fisherman” (Elwin 276). Thus, in the perspective of the literary market of late Victorian Britain, which showed an increased interest in the sensationalist aspects of rural Welsh characters found in neo-romantic novels (cf. Aaron 36-7), Davy was perceived as an old bore, too long-winded and thoroughly anti-romantic (cf. Blackmore qtd. in Elwin 267). This largely contributed to the failure of *The Maid of Sker* amongst the contemporary readership.

Davy’s aforementioned role as cultural translator correlates with his unreliability as a narrator. Hence, his portrayal of Bardie, the drowning slaves and the Devonshire savages are reflections of his one-and-a-halfer personality. As Pérez Firmat points out, “any linguistic or cultural displacement necessarily entails some mutilation of the original” (3). Although *The
Maid of Sker leans towards satire, in Victorian “English popular iconography”, as Law calls it, “the sailor Jack Tar . . . appeared in nautical melodramas as protector of the nation” (271). Davy is aware of the influence of displacement, as can be gleaned from his insight that in combat the French hope to find the British Navy “spoiled, by our being away from home so much” (Blackmore 380). The scattering of “old shipmates” on board different vessels across the world is one of Davy’s greater concerns, as it is difficult to uphold a unified national identity if a stable community and national territory are lacking (Blackmore 401). Service under the command of the most revered naval officer, Admiral Nelson, thus becomes a proxy for the absent homeland (Blackmore 398ff.). Davy’s descriptions of the Mediterranean Campaign of 1798 are interspersed with episodes of Bardie’s growing identity crisis at home in Glamorganshire. In the detailed account of the battle on the Nile, he reaches the height of his identification with Britain. Although he is far away from home, the victory implies that wherever the Royal Navy is to be found, so too is Britain, “[f]or my native land I had it, ever and continually, and in the roar of battle I was borne up by discharging it” (Blackmore 452).

2. The Foundling Girl and the Sea

In stereotypical Victorian fashion, the novel revolves about the discovery of the noble origins of the Maid of Sker, the foundling girl Bertha ‘Bardie’ Bampflyde. The return to her family with the help of Davy forms the sensational part of the plot, even though she is absent from Davy’s adventures most of the time. Her absence is motivated by the plot development because Davy repeatedly leaves Wales for great lengths of time. Even though he constantly refers to the girl throughout the novel, her actual appearances are contained largely at the beginning and end of the novel and, thus, create a frame for the action. Consequently, the reader encounters her in three arrested stages of development: early childhood, adolescence and young adulthood. It is not Bardie’s destiny to discover her true identity on the Welsh side of the Bristol Channel. Instead, her identity is laid out for her and she only has to step into the various roles that have been carved out for her by the three important men in her life, all of them sailors, all of them claiming a right of ownership over Bardie: her foster father Davy, grandfather Sir Philip and future husband Rodney Bluett. This very much compares to other Blackmore titular heroines, such as Clara Vaughan (written 1853; published 1864) and Lorna Doone (1869). “Lorna’s destiny is not to discover herself in any absolute sense but only to discover a noble and lustrous lineage,” Merchant writes (249). Instead of finding themselves, the heroines are only allowed to discover to whom they belong. Just as Davy has been colonized by English ideology found in the Royal Navy, Bardie is colonized by a repeated
redistribution of male ownership of her (cf. Spivak 41).

Bardie’s childhood in Wales presents her to the reader as a toddler. Just before a great storm hits the Glamorganshire coast, Davy finds the girl asleep on the floor of a dinghy stranded on the beach (Blackmore 14). She says she is two years old and speaks English that is accented by French words and phrases, which greatly puzzles Davy (Blackmore 17). This, together with the fact that Bardie takes an instant liking to her rescuer, quickly leads Davy to determine that she cannot be British, because “no British child ever shows gratitude” (Blackmore 33-4). The judgement becomes even more pronounced in Davy’s comparison of Bardie to his granddaughter, Bunny, who he describes as her opposite. Both are shown to be naturally inquisitive, but whereas beautiful and smart Bardie is the recipient of all of Davy’s affection, Bunny is described as fat, stupid and unduly nosey and, therefore, is repeatedly beaten (Blackmore 125). This differentiation is based on Davy’s enchantment with the mysterious Other (cf. Pérez Firmat 41). Narrating the girls as each others’ foils, he creates a hierarchy, claiming the mid-position for himself. As Bardie has come from the ocean and is a mystery beyond certain knowledge, she is placed at the top, whilst Bunny is entirely landbound and provides no mystery at all, which forces her into an inferior position. Davy comfortably places himself in the middle because he is at home in both worlds. A further reason for the differential treatment of the girls lies in their different age and social status (Blackmore 35). Although Bardie’s origin is uncertain, Davy deduces by her speech patterns and manners that she must be of noble birth. Thus, she receives a different education than Bunny, and as can be expected from his previous division of affection for the girls, Bunny’s education will ultimately remain inferior and elementary to Bardie’s:

Accordingly this homeless maiden’s time was so divided, that her three parts were provided for, one after the other, most beautifully. She made her rounds, with her little bag, from Sker to Candleston Court, and thence to Master Berkrolles at my cottage, and back again to Sker, when Moxy could not do without her. (emphasis mine; Blackmore 345)

The division of Bardie’s time and space, however, remains unified because congruence between class and geography is retained. Under the tutelage of Lady Bluett at Candleston Court, Bardie receives an anachronistic Victorian education that equips her with the appropriate knowledge and behaviour required of matrimonial companions to upper class gentlemen (Blackmore 346). After a while, she is then given into the care of the schoolmaster of Newton Nottage who is responsible “for giving her mind its proper training” (Blackmore 346). In other words, at the village school, Bardie receives a middle class education that would enable her to fend for herself, independent of a husband if she were so unlucky to
remain orphaned and without a respectable family tree that would enable an honourable marriage. These two branches of her education represent society, nurture and Englishness. Candleston Court places a restraint on her mind; Newton Nottage village school restrains her body. This side of her education is then complemented by the third branch as she leads a peasant life in the care of Moxy Thomas, a friend of Davy’s. At Sker House “there was play, and the sea-air, and rocks to climb over, and sandhills, and rabbits and wild-fowl to watch by the hour” (Blackmore 346). The Welsh household represents a life outside society and in harmony with nature. Here, she is under no physical constraint, and her mind acquires a natural wisdom. Were Bardie to receive only one of these three branches of education, she would become entrapped, both in mind and body. Instead, she is allowed to develop in the relative terms of the Victorian imagination of the ideal woman, and becomes more fully realized than Bunny. Bardie’s education is organized according to the British class system, and with the three locations of her education being representative of nobility, bourgeoisie and peasantry, her location also alternates in relative position to land and sea. The more cultivated education of the upper class is placed further inland on equally cultivated soil, whereas Sker House is located near the beach, representing a return to the natural state of life.

The final part of Bardie’s character development, the prospect of ever finding a suitable husband, is introduced at the time when she begins to divide her affections between Davy and Rodney Bluett (Blackmore 351). It is a moment of transition in her life and Davy realizes for the first time that his ownership over the girl will end sooner or later. Although she has been aware of her status as an orphan since early childhood, Davy impresses upon her that her parents, for all that can be expected, are drowned, and for as long as nobody knows of her origins it is unlikely that she will ever marry proper to her rank (Blackmore 356; cf. Fielding 80). The sea has claimed the solidity of a proper family tree that would allow her to marry noble Rodney Bluett. If Bardie were to live at sea then Davy could provide her with a suitable identity, much like he did unknowingly for her brother Harry Savage/Philip Bampfylde. But as she is land-bound, she cannot establish a stable life without possessing proof of her origin and social rank. Bardie complains to her secret lover, Rodney,

“As if I did not know indeed! . . . I ought to know, if anyone does, what your uncle and your mother are. And I know that they would rather see your death in the Gazette than your marriage with an unknown, nameless nobody like me, sir.” (Blackmore 409)

She is deeply frustrated by not knowing her origins, “for it was her sensitive point that she could not tell anyone who she was” (Blackmore 397). Until Davy delivers her to her family tree and its corresponding territory, there cannot be stability in Bardie’s life. Furthermore, she
Rita Singer          British English

has acquired the skill to assume the masque of Welshness when talking to English strangers which is evident in the first encounter with her grandfather (Blackmore 397). The ability to hide behind Otherness, and her insight into the motivation of Rodney’s uncle and mother, is the result of Bardie’s education, which has provided her with knowledge beyond the boundaries of class and national identity.

The eventual return to her family retraces Bardie’s departure from Devonshire in reverse order as Davy takes her across the Bristol Channel in the very boat in which she had arrived in Wales (Blackmore 451-3). He then reveals her identity to her grandfather, Sir Philip, before she is handed to her future husband, Rodney Bluett; it is significant that the girl is not privy to the conversation that establishes her origin (Blackmore 456). Whereas the first voyage across the watery divide of the Bristol Channel had destroyed Bardie’s birth-identity, it is the second that restores her to her heritage, but only on the basis of the narrative of three seamen who also re-distribute their respective ownership over the girl. Davy finishes his story of Bardie with a short remark about her visits to the substitute family of her childhood in Newton Nottage (Blackmore 471). Re-established as a noblewoman by the men around her, she independently chooses to cross the class divide.

3. The Drowning Slaves and the Sea

Although the sinking of the slave ship Santa Lucia in a storm before the Glamorganshire coast is mostly confined to one chapter (Blackmore 44-9), the imagery used and Davy’s reflections on the drowning slaves are relevant for the later portrayal of the Devonshire ‘savages’. Furthermore, the solemnity of the incident is heightened by the following chapter as it also contains descriptions surrounding the fatal accident of five village boys. The parallel narrative of fates leads to an unintentional translation of a drowning at sea to a drowning on land/sand. This act of translation creates a zone of transition, enabling (Christian) feelings of pity across racial boundaries. From a twenty-first-century perspective, Davy’s opinion of the dying slaves is nothing short of intolerable. His cynicism marks him as a member of a society based on Christian values, but not practising them outside their highly exclusive community. However, these chapters shed light on Victorian readings of race and slavery long after the Slave Trade Act of 1807, which prohibited the trade with, but not the ownership of slaves, and the final abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire in 1833.

The incident of the sinking slave ship is set five years before “[o]rganized abolitionism began in May 1787” (Drescher 47). However, Davy’s observations form an anachronism as they are representative of a Victorian rather than an eighteenth-century attitude towards race
because, as Chater points out,

[b]eyond the law, there is no evidence that black people in their everyday dealings with the general population were discriminated against more than any other immigrant minority. Certainly there are occasional references to the dislike of black people, but there are similar views expressed about the Irish, Jews and, especially, the French. Religion, rather than race or nationality, was the major source of discrimination, both legal and social. (75-7)

The ‘Victorianization’ of the characters is also evident in the later portrayal of the Coroner (Blackmore 68-79). Despite the equal treatment of free black people in comparison with other immigrants to Britain towards the end of the eighteenth century, a discrepancy appears regarding the treatment of black slaves. It was only in 1788, for the first time in British history, that “the British political system was asked to treat Africans as fellow human beings in a foreign land rather than as factors of trade and production” (Drescher qtd. in Drescher 50). In *The Maid of Sker*, the perception of racial difference between free white man and enslaved black man is acted out in a geographical division between narrator and narrated subject, expressing the newly developed scientific racialism of mid-nineteenth-century polygenists (Chater 77, 82), who demanded the strict separation between different races in order “to prevent intermarriage and promote discrimination against individuals of mixed origin” (Arendt 64). However, Davy’s cynical reflections on race expose the self-serving economic interests of social-Darwinist anthropology that teaches binary opposition between a white master race and a black race of slaves (cf. Arendt 65), whilst hiding behind the smokescreen of Christian scripture as an excuse for racism directed at the Other (represented by the slaves and Devonshire savages) and the limiting of pity for the Self (Davy and the Thomas boys).

The tragic drowning of the slaves is introduced by a description of the abrupt change in weather at the end of “Chapter IX: Sand-Hills Turned to Sand-Holes”. Davy reveals his knowledge of foreign lands and incorporates the immensity of the then still young British Empire into the confined dimensions of the Glamorganshire coast (Blackmore 39, 43). The comparison becomes a work of translation, as he likens the rising storm to the hurricanes he had experienced as a young sailor in Africa and Ceylon. It follows from this act of translation that the Welsh coastal landscape becomes distorted and enlarged to become a place where the weather is more savage and dangerous than anywhere else on the coast of England. By the same act of translation, the comparison with the Welsh coast weakens the wilderness and savagery of the distant shores. The translational aspect of the weather phenomena in this chapter works as an introduction to the narrated opposition between the ship wreck and the
death of the Welsh boys. For almost the entire length of “Chapter X: Under the Rock”, Davy watches the sinking Santa Lucia from the shore, which is then followed in the next chapter by the ‘drowning’ of the Thomas boys in a sandslide. At first glance, the two incidents on land and at sea appear without any connection and significance for the further development of the plot. However, they connect on two levels. First, the episode creates space for a moral evaluation regarding the differentiation between Africans and Britons. Second, a sinister parallel is created by another, much later sandslide in Devonshire which, eventually, helps Davy to restore Bardie to her family. However, these chapters are mainly concerned with the portrayal of attitudes towards premature deaths via different styles of narrative, cynicism and pathos, which mirror their geographical location relative to the narrator.

From the shore, Davy watches the sinking Santa Lucia and the ensuing mayhem as the crew abandon the ship to her fate:

The truth of it was, . . . that nearly all the ship’s company acted as was to be expected from a lot of foreigners . . . . They took to the boats in a kind of panic when first she [the sailing vessel] struck among the sands in the whirlwind which began the storm. . . . [T]hey hoped, no doubt, to land well enough, after leaving the stupid negroes and the helpless passengers to the will of Providence. (Blackmore 45-6)

Already in the first pages of the novel, Davy gives ample evidence for his general xenophobia, especially with respect to the French, and it is, therefore, particularly mystifying as to why he takes an instant liking to Bardie (cf. Chater 77). Here, he also de-humanizes the black slaves, describing them as “cuttlefish in a lump of froth”, only to confess later, “Poor things! they [sic] are grieved to die as much, perhaps, as any white man; and my heart was overcome, in spite of all I know of them.” (Blackmore 46). Once more Davy reveals his double-edged nature, his conflicting opinions marking him as a one-and-a-halfer with two contradictory sets of moral values. His account wavers between pity and scorn, revealing an unstable perception of Otherness between (in-)difference and familiarity. As a sailor in the Royal Navy, Davy’s encounter with diversity is always under the premise of war, meaning that he sees a threat in Otherness, whilst being enchanted by its mystery. However, Davy imagines Africans as entirely un-mysterious. Consequently, he cannot but interpret diversity as difference that is threatening the British homeland. Anything the black man does, he does out of obstinacy and deviousness. In other words, Davy rejects those traits that are most prominent in his own personality.

If it had pleased Providence to drown any white men with them . . . beyond any doubt I had rushed in . . . ; and as it was, I was ready to do my very best to save them if they had only shown some readiness to be hauled [sic] ashore by a man of proper colour. But being, as negroes always are, or a most contrary nature, no doubt they preferred to
drift out to sea rather than Christian burial. . . . But several came ashore next tide – when it could be no comfort at all to them. And such, as I have always found, is the nature of the black people. (Blackmore 46)

Black people are denied selfhood because, from Davy’s point of view, they remain on the other side of the border. Watching them drown is so particularly unsettling for the xenophobe Davy because he is denied a process of categorization and stereotyping by way of national identity, except for the broad factor of race. Additionally, Davy reveals his double standards particularly by calling himself “a truly consistent and truth-seeking Christian (especially when [going] round with [rotten] fish on a Monday morning among Nonconformists)” who feels bullied into pitying dying heathens (Blackmore 47). The irony is certainly not lost on the reader that Davy has already revealed that the only reason he goes to church on Sunday is for his vanity and his wish to be on good terms with the other villagers of Newton Nottage (Blackmore 30). The reflections on the reputation of black people reach their absurd climax as Davy is struck by a sudden wave of rheumatism which forces him to acknowledge that he was not born to be a hero, breaking entirely with Victorian constructions of heroic seamen in literary biographies (Blackmore 48; cf. Hamilton 396-7).

The tragedy of the foundering ship is greatly contrasted by the following description of the occurrences surrounding the deaths of the Thomas boys in “Chapter XI: A Wrecker Wrecked” (Blackmore 49-56). The boys’ father, Evan Thomas, has heard that a ship is sinking before the coast and wants to make profit by other people’s misfortune by scavenging for flotsam on the beach and remains oblivious to the fate of his sons, despite the warnings from his youngest son and Davy (Blackmore 53-5). By chain of association, Davy connects the darkness of skin of the drowned slaves to the fate of the brothers. Furthermore, the tragedy that is about to strike the Thomas family is mirrored by the shifting sands. Solid ground suddenly turns to terra infirma and Watkin, the youngest son, is forced to assume the role of head of the family when his father succumbs to drink. Other than in the description of the sinking ship, the atmosphere surrounding the attempts to rescue the brothers rendered in emphatic speech, which furthers the difference between the black men and women and the white boys. Whilst nobody had come to the rescue of the drowning people on board the Santa Lucia, due to the colour of their skin, half the village are busy attempting to rescue five boys who had gone scavenging on the beach (Blackmore 55).

The aftermath of the sinking of the Santa Lucia and the death of the Thomas boys is drawn to a close through an official enquiry and the contrasting performances of the two burials. Even in death, the black people and the white boys are marked by different rites and signs. This is best reflected by the English Coroner saying, “The law requires no Christian
man . . . to touch pitch, and defile himself. Both in body and soul, Master Clerk, to lower and defile himself!” and that white skin is a “Christian colour”, equating blackness of skin with the antichrist (Blackmore 69). According to British law at the time, slaves were property like chattel, who, by drowning, had robbed their owner (cf. Drescher 50). And just like perished cattle, their corpses are counted and disposed in a ditch:

Also other darkish matters, such as the plight of those obstinate black men when they came ashore at last . . . . And, after all, what luck they had in obtaining proper obsequies, inasmuch as, by order of Crownor Bowles, a great hole in the sand was dug in a little sheltered valley and kept open till it was fairly thought that the sea must have finished with them; and then, after being carefully searched for anything of value, they were rolled in all together and kept down with stones, like the parish mangle, and covered with a handsome mound of sand. And not only this, . . . a board well tarred (to show their colour) was set up in the midst of it, and their number “35” chalked up; and so they were stopped of their mischief awhile, after shamefully robbing their poor importer.

But if this was conducted handsomely, how much more so were the funerals of the five young white men! (Blackmore 94-5)

Even in death, the black Africans remain objectified as numbered property. Questions of ownership over the slaves outweigh selfhood even beyond their death. Thus, the images surrounding the burial of the Thomas boys serve as a foil because the burial rites that are carried out for them involuntarily criticize the hypocritical conduct of Davy and his fellow countrymen and women.

Incidentally, Blackmore himself was a supporter of the American South and not in favour of black people’s enfranchisement, particularly in the USA (cf. Budd 82). Dating from 1884, a private letter to a friend, the US-American poet Paul Hamilton Hayne, gives ample evidence for Blackmore’s personal politics:

Most of us Britishers are glad that you have at last a Democratic President [Grover Cleveland], who will, I hope support the rights of the poor crushed South. For my own part, I do not understand the difference between Dem. & Rep; except that the latter are hostile to you and worshippers (theoretically) of the blessed Nigger, perhaps through strict avoidance of him. He seems to be a horrible pest among you, & destroys your tranquillity. (Blackmore in Hench 202)

However, in the construction of Davy’s narration, Blackmore is not interested in a declaration of human rights or a contribution to the anti-slavery movement because Victorians had “been well conditioned to view colored [sic] people as distinctly lesser . . . and presumptively unable to manage their own affairs” (Claiborne 169; cf. Haller 1323). Blackmore is more concerned with passing critical commentary on the usually public proclamation of Christian ethics, whilst limiting compassion to a choice number of people, i.e. Anglo-Saxons. “Whether for or against slavery, anthropologists could not escape the inference of race subordination, either in
the monogenistic degeneracy theory of Blumenbach or the polygenistic stance of Louis Agassiz” (Haller 1323). The politically conservative Blackmore puts unprogressive personal opinions into Davy’s mouth which he could not otherwise have expressed publicly, especially in the case of “fanatics and reformers, both political and religious” (Budd 67, 68). In other words, Blackmore may have meant well, but inadvertently reveals his own racism, because Davy’s rhetoric relies on cynicism and pathos, which are indicative of the very moral double standards that are revealed in Blackmore’s private correspondence. Therefore, the narrative voice combines British imperialism with a critique of the failure of Victorian values, such as grace of charity and piety, particularly arising from within the middle classes (cf. O’Connor 221). Furthermore, Blackmore extends his criticism to the print media as a public mechanism to mollify society’s guilty conscience (Blackmore 100). After the publication of a newspaper article on the sinking of a slave ship before Newton Nottage, Davy suddenly finds himself promoted to village hero and he readily embraces his new role because “this paper had got the story of it – for not much less than half was true” (Blackmore 101). As one of their midst is hailed publicly as a hero, the article helps soothe the village conscience regarding the unceremonious dumping of the slaves in a mass grave by the beach, whilst making a sinister celebration of the Thomas boys’ burial. The solidity of the communal conscience is then restored by the fabrication of an alternative truth, very much after the fashion of Davy’s autobiography.

4. The Devonshire Savages and the Sea

Blackmore turns the perceptions of his English readership on its head in the construction of the coastal area of North Devonshire as the Welshman’s *terra incognita*. Davy behaves like the prototypical English colonizer in strange places as far away as India, but overall he speaks favourably in his descriptions of the Devonshire inhabitants. After all, they are British! Nevertheless, the county remains something of a frontier for it is also the home of Davy’s antagonist, the Parson Chowne, who keeps a tribe of “naked folk” as servants on his land (Blackmore 364). Their social and legal status is no different from the drowned slaves; they are forced into savagery and, hence, become part of Chowne’s personal possessions. Although Davy discerns between male and female members of the tribe and differentiates between individual appearances, the naked people are mostly viewed as a herd without any sense of order or culture. At first, he is even doubtful whether the tribe are indeed black people, or simply covered in dirt. At this level, the rhetoric places them beyond a determinable race, blurring identity markers for both Davy and the reader. Until the abduction
of four male members of the tribe and their subsequent washing (read: baptism into the world of the white man), the narrator is left in doubt. Eventually, by their impressment into the Royal Navy, they exchange one group identity of master-servant relationship for another and collect a national identity on the way. Davy’s and the savages’ mutual crossing of territorial boundaries turn the ship, with its floating microcosm of naval hierarchies, into a heterotopia for the recreation of British society (cf. Foucault).

Without losing the subjective language of the colonizer, the novel applies the discourse surrounding the formation of national identities also to questions of slavery and race. This does not mean that the enfranchisement of black people is suddenly embraced as a worthy cause, neither by Blackmore nor by his proxy, Davy. Instead, the portrayal of living conditions within the naked colony in Nympton first and foremost shows that Chowne’s rule of social neglect is another form of violence against a body of white people. This is reminiscent of Thomas Carlyle’s argument regarding the living conditions of the British working class as being much more deplorable than those of the provided-for slave (cf. “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question”). After all, even as late as the 1870s, the opinion was frequent that white slavery was infinitely worse than black slavery because at least the latter “was the case of a race of higher capacities ruling over a race of lower capacities” (Gladstone qtd. in Quinault 379). Second, the enfranchisement of the four abducted savages mirrors the verse “Britons never will be slaves” from James Thomson’s “Rule Britannia!” (1740), originally written in response to “the ‘enslavement’ of British crews” under the Spanish in the late 1730s (Hudson 566). Their service in the Royal Navy under the supervision of Davy forms the basis for a later identification with Britain. Nevertheless, the discrepancy between Davy’s narrative and the direct speech of the four men reveals an awareness of such a superimposed and, consequently, artificial process:

“You call it friends to steal us from our place, and people, and warm dry sands, and put us on this strange great wetness, where no mushrooms grow, and all we try to eat goes into it. And then you beat us, and drive us up trees such as we never saw before, and force us to hide in these dreadful things.”

Here he pointed to his breeches with a gaze of such hopeless misery, that I felt it would be an unkind thing to press him with further argument. (Blackmore 370)

Deriving from “staggeringly divergent lives, backgrounds, and opinions,” common sailors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were placed “in close confines for extended durations” with others, being “[f]orced to live together [facing] the choice of constant conflict or the forging of grounds of cooperation” (Rouleau 32). Torn from their community on solid land and experiencing displacement onto the unfamiliar sea, the ship turns into a thoroughfare for
identities, and is a place where Davy can transform the nameless savages. Hence, the taming of the four savages takes the form of internal colonialism, as it was generally experienced by the common sailor in the Royal Navy (cf. Rouleau 32). One by one, Davy creates the sailors Jack Wildman, Harry Savage/Philip Bampfylde and Cannibals Dick and Joe after his own image (Blackmore 370, 373, 385). But again they are marked by serfdom because, as naval soldiers, they are the armed extension of imperial Britain.

After their first voyage with the Royal Navy, the four savages return to their community for the winter. The chapter is aptly titled “Exiles of Society” and illustrates their loss of home (Blackmore 380-7). “Even Jack’s wife . . . stood moping and mowing at him afar, as if his clothes made a sheep of him, while he with amazement regarded her as if she were only a chimpanzee” (Blackmore 383). Davy's civilizing mission results in an inner and outer diaspora for Jack, Dick and Joe. Harry Savage/Philip Bampfylde is exempt from that sensation of dislocation because, in his case, Davy has returned the boy to an identity which had already been his by birth. Among the other three savages a further divide exists. On the one side, there is Jack Wildman who is willing to become an imperial subject, a “Britisher”. On the other side, the reluctant Dick and Joe provide the accusatory counter-narrative to the civilizing mission. The successful civilizing of Jack Wildman serves as an example of integration into society on the basis of interest in a man’s well-being, and is reminiscent of Man Friday. He dies as a respected soldier and hero among his peers (Blackmore 417-21). Nevertheless, he remains an outsider, despite his openness, because he does not acquire the capacity for cultural translation and, thus, remains marked as Other (cf. Blackmore 388). Although restricted in his knowledge of British culture, Jack is not portrayed as an ignorant savage. Instead, he is repeatedly portrayed as gifted with natural wisdom, uncorrupted by society. Consequently, Jack is able to address questions which otherwise are deemed blasphemous, but reveal Britain’s own short-comings, especially where the story touches the subversion of religion to further one’s own cause (cf. Blackmore 388). Davy even grants him the privilege of an original voice, citing the verbatim copy of Jack’s confession after having been mortally wounded in the battle on the Nile (Blackmore 417-21). The signed confession of a dying man is symbolic of absolute truth, something which the subjective Davy cannot provide for his readers. This document then becomes the basis for the re-establishment of Bardie’s and Harry’s identities as Bertha and Philip Bampfylde from which follows the return to their original home. Jack’s revelation of the children’s past then becomes the basis for their future. All Davy was able to provide for them up to this point was an immediate present without the stability derived from ancestry and territorial origin. As mentioned above, Bardie
spent her youth divided between three houses and Harry in the non-places of the savage colony and the ships of the Royal Navy. Containing an area of overlapping information, the divergent knowledge of one-and-a-halfers Jack Wildman and David Llewellyn create a zone of translation and reaffirmation. Returning to Berger’s argument of the sailor being a carrier of knowledge, they provide missing information to identify and expunge elements of disorder from land-tied society (cf. Blackmore 430). Jack’s confession closes significant gaps in Davy’s knowledge regarding his wards on land and sea, so that he can eventually return them to their ancestral home. The family reunion then creates a rounded order with a coastal identity at its core.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of a handful of characters in Richard Doddridge Blackmore’s novel *The Maid of Sker* reveals how their portrayal is tainted by the one-and-a-halfer character of the unreliable narrator. In Davy, the role of the sailor as carrier of objective knowledge intertwines with his role as subjective story-teller. He is highly aware of his shortcomings and repeatedly reminds the reader not to trust him. This awareness is extended to the characterization of his ward Bardie, the reflections on witnessing a sinking slave ship and the taming of a handful of English savages. The identities of each of the characters are determined by an interrelation between land and sea and Davy’s own geographic position relative to the described subject.

Bardie comes to him across the sea and has lost her family identity. It remains for Davy to collect the necessary evidence before her return across the water to her innate identity as English noblewoman. But before doing so, he looks to it that the girl receives an education across three social classes. Not only does Bardie become an in-betweener of class, but also of nationality. The time of her youth is divided between her English protectors from the upper class, the Anglicized schoolmaster of middle class background and the Welsh peasant and foster mother, Moxy Thomas.

The geographical division between narrator and narrated subject is imminent to the characterization of the drowning slaves. Davy has acquired knowledge about black people on his many voyages to foreign coasts by observing strange lands from the sea. The situation in Newton Nottage produces a reversal of geographical distribution. As a member of the British Royal Navy, he is in the role of the colonizer who is objectifying the representatives of Otherness. Being geographically divided, Davy has found no means for cultural translation and the Other remains firmly locked inside a state of difference. Davy employs a trick of
narrative relocation from sea to land and, thus, is enabled to create a zone of translation by a parallel description of five village boys ‘drowning’ in a sandslide and the villagers’ reaction to the accident. Without embracing the black slaves, Davy still manages to re-establish their humanity by means of exposing the villagers’ outrageous handling of their dead bodies in harsh contrast to those of the dead Thomas boys.

Davy’s description of the English savages from Devonshire creates in-betweeners of nationality based on their kidnapping from their homes in order to serve in the Royal Navy. Although Jack Wildman wilfully adapts to British life, he remains locked between two opposing cultures to the last, much like savages Dick and Joe who entirely reject Anglicization, because their origin in a colony of naked folk places them on an inferior social level among their navy peers. Likewise, a return to their former life is denied them by their own families. Consequently, the three are able to comment critically on British culture and society, particularly in cases of contradictions between morals and actions.

Like many other Victorian novels, *The Maid of Sker* adheres in many points to a formulaic plot and a predilection for creating pairs of characters as each others’ foils. Nevertheless, Blackmore constructs David Llewellyn beyond the rigid confines of binary opposites. He narrates Selfhood and Otherness as constructivist identities that find their origin in coastal life. Service in the Royal Navy continually re-shapes his knowledge of the world so that the framework of cultural references is not determined by a rigid, essentialist structure but persistent change. Hence, Davy’s narration is not so much an expression of a contradictory character but, instead, an expression of conflicting systems of knowledge which he transports into the narration of his stories and the characters therein.
Works Cited


