TERENCE BROWN, *Editor*

Cultural Nationalism 1880-1930

The cultural nationalism that governed much of the most significant literary and intellectual activity in Ireland between 1880 and 1930 was a force distinct from, though intimately involved with, political nationalism. Cultural nationalism may be taken to mean that conviction (which originated in eighteenth-century Germany, and which was fanned into general life by the fervour of Romanticism) whereby the essential, spiritual life of a people is assumed to subsist in its culture, bequeathed to it from antiquity and prehistory. Language in such an understanding of national identity is what bears the gifts of the past into the present and supplies a living link with a racial spirituality. Indeed, the spirit of a people is vital in their language and in the legends, literature, songs and stories which that language makes available.

As such, cultural nationalism is a useful, even energizing, adjunct to a struggle waged primarily in the interests of a political nationalism whose aim is simply that of legislative independence. And in Ireland the relationship between the two forces was largely of that order. Cultural nationalism offered a rationale according to which the political struggle for independence could be prosecuted with a heightened sense of justification (although, it is necessary to add, many of those who were active in the interests of cultural nationalism would not have seen the matter in such stark terms).

In Ireland the materials necessary to generate a sense of the country's distinctive cultural inheritance were fairly ready to hand by the end of the nineteenth century. Over a century of antiquarian and philological researches, in which European scholarship had played a major role, had unearthed the literary and cultural remains of the Celtic past. French scholars, Ernest Renan (1823-92) and Marie Henri d'Arbois de Jubainville (1827-1910), had given intellectual weight to the idea of the Celt, which had been popularized by Matthew Arnold's derivative though influential essay of 1867, *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, German philological enterprise had rescued texts and grammar from obscurity and, in such translations as Kuno Meyer's *The Voyage of Bran* (1895) or *Four Old Irish Songs of Summer & Winter* (1903), had made this work readily available to the literary imagination.

What crucially was lacking, however, was a distinctive Irish language in which the Irish spirit might be discerned and nurtured. The Gaelic tongue, which had remained in widespread use until the end of the eighteenth century, was facing extinction one hundred years later, the tragic Famine of the later 1840s a *coup de grâce* from which it seemed scarcely capable of recovering. Accordingly, one of the most fraught debates of the period 1880 to 1930 was whether a distinctive Irish identity might be forged in the English language (the mother tongue of most of the island's inhabitants) or whether the revival of Irish was a 'necessity' (in Douglas Hyde's formulation) if the idea of Irish nationhood was to be anything more than a political expediency.

The Irish Literary Revival was a movement that sought to supply the Ireland of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with a sense of its own distinctive identity through the medium of the English language. This movement's main writers and thinkers believed that a general awareness of the splendours and riches of Gaelic literary antiquity and of the residual fires of the Celtic way of life (still burning in rural districts, particularly in the West) would generate a sense of national self-

worth and of organic unity, which would give to the political struggle a dignity and purpose it would otherwise lack. Indeed, W. B. Yeats, its primary propagandist, believed that the cultural movement was even a substitute for political activity, and he identified its origins in the trough of political disillusionment that followed the collapse of Parnell's parliamentary campaign for Home Rule in 1886 and his death in 1891. Young men, Yeats believed, took to culture when politics failed them.

Yet, in a predominantly catholic country, it was primarily Irish protestants who involved themselves in this crusade or whose work contributed to it. Among them were Standish James O'Grady (a unionist in politics, but a powerful popularizer of ideas about the Celtic past), W. B. Yeats, AE (George Russell), Lady Augusta Gregory and Douglas Hyde. The reasons why these individuals became so enamoured of things Celtic, so obsessed with the 'matter of Ireland', bears some brief examination, for it was uncharacteristic in the period, if not unknown, for members of their caste and class to be so in quite the ways they were.

Protestant Anglo-Ireland, the ruling elite in nineteenth- century Ireland, had throughout most of the century viewed both Irish political and cultural nationalism with nervous distaste. With rare exceptions (Samuel Ferguson and Thomas Davis), protestant Irishmen had resolutely espoused, when culture interested them at all, an imperial and cosmopolitan view, epitomized in the writings of the great unionist historian, W. E. H. Lecky (1838-1903). That a movement should have developed in which members of the protestant elite supported the cause of an Irish cultural nationalism has drawn much study and comment.

There would be grounds for believing that these writers had simply fallen under the spell of a compelling and fortuitous literary opportunity. In all their writings on the matter of Ireland (and this is especially true of Standish O'Grady), there is an enthusiastic ardour, a buoyant rhetoric that suggests an enraptured discovery of something primal, enthralling in its strangeness. Such an explanation was gratifying to nationalist *amour propre*, for it suggested that even the colonial elite could not blind itself to the incomparable riches of the Irish cultural inheritance, thereby giving substance and aid to political separatism; and in such terms, catholic Ireland, largely supportive of political nationalism, occasionally seemed willing to accept the Literary Revival as a contribution to the more important struggle.

However, it is as an aspect of the dynamics of a late colonial society that the Irish protestant elite's interest in things cultural can more convincingly be explained. Since 1829 and the Catholic Emancipation Act, the protestant elite and its unionist politics had endured recurring crises. The Famine of the 1840s, the Disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1869, the Land War of the 1880s and the threat of the Home Rule Bill of 1886 all had impelled a formerly secure and arrogant caste to ponder its future with less than equanimity. A nascent Irish political nationalism, predominantly catholic in complexion and Gaelic in aspiration, was increasingly prepared to view the Anglo-Irish protestant world as simply the alien culture of a garrison society. The doctrines of the Irish Ireland movement, propagated with especial force by D. P. Moran (whose idea of a 'Battle of Two Civilizations' caught a widespread mood) insisted that Ireland's authentic cultural nationalist identity was unquestionably as a Gaelic and catholic nation, in which the Anglo-Irish, English-speaking protestant could have no part. So pervasive was this attitude in nationalist Ireland that even Douglas Hyde (son of a Church of Ireland protestant clergyman) fell under its influence. Indeed, his 1892 lecture, 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland' (which led to the foundation of the Gaelic League in 1893, an organization dedicated to the revival of the Irish language), argues that Gaelic is crucial to Ireland's distinctive survival. But, in the contradictions and confusion of its argument, this lecture suggests how problematic a thing it was for a member of the protestant Anglo-Irish social caste to espouse the cause of Irish Ireland, since a key element in that movement's ideology was the catholicism of the Irish people and the inauthenticity of the protestant Irish.

In contrast to Douglas Hyde, other descendants of Anglo-Irish landowners, of professional men and protestant clergy, conscious to lesser and greater extents of the threat to their social standing from the increasingly self-assured and powerful majority, sought to popularize a view of Irish identity that might soften the stark outlines of politics, class and sectarianism in the benign glow of culture. Writers like O'Grady, Yeats, AE and Lady Gregory wrote therefore of an ancient Ireland, heroic and self-sacrificially magnificent, in which

unity of culture was manifest in a pagan, mythic, rural paradise. In their work, prelapsarian Ireland knows nothing of the political and sectarian strife of the modern; its simple grandeur and other-worldliness are a rebuke to the reductive and strident voices of the aggressively political nationalists. The authentic Celtic tradition, in such a view, was organic and coherent, aristocratic and individualistic. As such, it could be exploited in their writings as a powerful symbolic corrective to the sectarian, exclusivist, democratic and collectivist doctrines of Irish Ireland and modern Irish political nationalism (from which Yeats and his fellow-workers had much to lose).

Nevertheless, the fact that the Literary Revival probably had its opportunistic and self-interested aspects should not obscure the movement's idealism. Lady Gregory, Yeats and AE genuinely believed that in their works they were giving Ireland what it needed, that they were indeed saving the political nationalists from themselves and from the sterile materialism of a merely political creed. While the implicit condescension of such a stance can seem unattractive — a cultivated form of the white man's burden — it *was* the source of much enthusiastic, energetic, genuinely patriotic activity, which made the publication of such works as Standish O'Grady's *History of Ireland: The Heroic Period* (1878-80), Douglas Hyde's *Love Songs of Connacht* (1893), and Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902) landmarks of Irish cultural history.

The Irish Literary Revival and its English-language-based cultural nationalism therefore can be understood in relation to these debates about identity and language, a developing sense of colonial insecurity and a nascent aggressive political nationalism. The idealism of both, and their anxiety to achieve cultural self-respect, must also be seen as characteristic phenomena — the crises of the late Victorian period.

Late Victorian British society was marked by a social crisis bred of the threat posed to an increasingly insecure middle class by a large, industrial proletariat, and also by a philosophical and religious crisis, the consequence of new scientific modes of thought. A characteristic Victorian figure was therefore the anxious, perplexed, literary man, whose certainties of class and creed had been undermined by the generally calamitarian mood and by reductionist scientific scepticism. Such a figure in late Victorian Britain was often the child of devoutly evangelical parents, whose chiliastic creed and enthusiastic religiosity he had forsaken, under the twin assaults of social unease and scepticism, for generalized calamitarian anxieties and for 'culture', conceived of as a civilized and humanizing force.

Irish protestantism was afflicted in the period by markedly similar experiences, so that developments within it can be seen as local variants of the broader British crises. In the work of O'Grady, for example, we see a mind formed by the fervent evangelicalism of his immediate family background, disturbed by a profoundly anxious social vision (the Irish 'mob' becomes the equivalent of the English proletariat) and by a sceptical, speculative intelligence. Yet from his evangelical childhood he brings a rhapsodic fervour, expressed in an elevated prose style. Indeed, the apocalyptic note struck in O'Grady's prose, so characteristic of late Victorian literature, is one that recurs throughout the writings of the Irish Literary Revival, often with obvious echoes of the evangelicals' millenarian obsessions. Furthermore, that commonplace of nineteenth-century English literary history, whereby in literary and cultural activity imaginative young men found a substitute for the discipline and sustaining warmth of an intellectually indefensible evangelical fundamentalism (Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* is the classic English account), had its analogue in protestant Ireland.

John Millington Synge, then, was an entirely typical Victorian when he found his childhood faith undermined by Darwinian evolutionism and when he substituted for that faith, literary and cultural interests:

> Soon after I had relinquished the Kingdom of God I began to take a real interest in the Kingdom of Ireland. My patriotism went round from a vigorous and reasoning loyalty to a temperate nationalism and everything Irish became sacred. (*Autobiography*)

What was distinctive in such an Irish pilgrimage, however, was that in Irish cultural nationalism such a young man could find a vital, socially significant mode of thought and feeling that fully compensated for what had been lost. A Matthew Arnold in Victorian Britain might seek spiritual sustenance for an era of doubt and great social unease in ideas of Hellenized aestheticism, a John Ruskin in a moralizing socialism; but neither had the opportunity to participate in a movement that charged literary and cultural activities with that absolute sense of social significance that nationalism gives to its adherents.

There were, too, in the cultural nationalism of the Revivalist (a term with obvious evangelical associations) things that made it readily explicable as an enterprise with roots quite simply in an Irish protestantism, troubled by the spirit of the age. The eager Celticism of its adherents in part can be explained by the fact that the anglican Church of Ireland had long asserted its own Celtic purity, doubting the Irish authenticity of the Roman communion in a claim of an apostolic succession stretching back to Saint Patrick himself. So the idea of the Celt was not merely the possession of European and British ethnology; it had been the received wisdom of the Church of Ireland since the days of Archbishop Ussher in the early seventeenth century. Moreover, the Irish language had been a familiar property in the Church of Ireland world, where it was valued as a useful tool for the proselytizer. For many Irish protestants, therefore, Gaelic was an accepted accomplishment of assumed utility, even as the emergent catholic, nationalist middle class was earnest to forget its antecedents in and its duties to a Gaelic-speaking peasantry, whose own language it had largely abandoned. In such a context, Lady Augusta Gregory, a compelling figure in the Revival, who acquired Irish in adulthood and who made it a daily practice to read from the New Testament in that language, is less of an exotic than she might appear.

For two further reasons, cultural nationalism was attractive to Irish Victorian minds seeking a sustainable and imaginatively satisfying spirituality. It was largely immune to rational penetration and it gave religious sanction to literary endeavour.

The structure of thought encompassed in the term cultural nationalism is one that allows for a mystical, indefinable sense of spirit (*geist* in German) present in a people, even when it is not immediately observable to the eye of unbelief. Late Victorian petit-bourgeois Irish society — the small farmer on his plot, the fisherman at his trade — may seem an unlikely repository of an ancient spirituality, distinctive and essentially Irish, but so, the doctrine states, it must be. Therefore cultural nationalism, in its unlikely yet compelling claims, has its occult aspects, its capacity to satisfy minds hungry for mystery in an increasingly unmysterious and materialist world. It must assume that the spirit that vitalized a Cuchulain is still dynamic in a reality less obviously heroic than the prehistoric, and it must stimulate a quest for his analogues or avatars in such figures as a Charles Stewart Parnell, or in the figure of a modern revolutionary. So in Irish cultural nationalism we see an illogical blend of radical fervour and occult yearnings, mingled with an evangelical certainty and excitement.

Cultural nationalism invests the records of the past with the spiritual charge of the sacred. Archaic texts are not simply archaeological remnants; they are chapters in the sacred book of the people. The modern Irish writer (often from a background where protestantism had been a religion of the book) is in fact a scribe at work upon a sacred manuscript, his own creation capable of being subsumed in the greater text. There is then, not surprisingly, a recurrent suggestion that the Revival itself was composing a sacred book, its writers merely the priests of a sacred order. At such moments in cultural nationalism, the occult and literature combine to produce a heady brew indeed. George Moore satirized this aspect of the Literary Revival in his autobiographical account, *Hail and Farewell*, but the book itself is ambivalently insecure about its claims to be the sacred text of the movement. That even so sardonic a mind as George Moore's was tempted by the religious sanction that cultural nationalism lent to the act of writing suggests how powerful a narcotic it could be.

In aspiring to participate in the composition of a sacred book of the people, of course, the Revival writers were taking a large step away from the realism, naturalism and subjectivism that had characterized much late nineteenth-century English literature. Their own cultural nationalism encouraged that departure in several further ways.

First, the belief that literature could serve the people by revealing in its sacred pages the true soul of the race, hidden by contemporary appearances under the shroud of convention, meant that writers invested the legends and myths of the past with symbolic powers. So the Irish Literary Revival saw Cuchulain not simply as a mythological personage, but as a figure embodying the truly Irish spirit. Accordingly, his portrayal in modern literature lifts the veil of appearance to reveal a higher reality. As such, Cuchulain appears in the Revivalists' writings as a symbol, his presence a revelation of occult,

esoteric truths; and, in so doing, he wrests literature away from mere realism or naturalism. As an image of a universal principle in the Irish world, he transcends any mere subjectivism. For he is so much more than simply a passing mood in author or reader. Cuchulain is the manifestation of an objective, communal reality.

Secondly, the Revivalists' literary involvement with the remains of a primitive people gave an obviously textual, non-realistic quality to their writings. To read their redactions, translations, versions of myth and folk-tale is to realize almost continuously the literariness of literature, that a book is always a book in the making. The *Love Songs of Connacht*, for example, achieves its effect in part by printing Irish and English together. Most of its early readers knew little or no Irish, and the old Gaelic script gave to the experience of reading the work, one imagines, a sense of archaic, esoteric things rendered assimilable by an act of translation. The work is as much a celebration of that act, a testament to literary power, as it is a book of love lyrics.

In its moving away from the dominant modes of nineteenth-century literary production (in which the realist novel had pride of place) towards symbolism, objectivity and the self-reflexive text, the Irish Literary Revival has seemed to many to be intimately associated with the early stages of Modernism. The thrust of its social vision made its role in the broader theatre of the international Modernist movement even more secure.

In seeking as cultural nationalists the essence of the Irish people in the past, in mythology, in an ancient rural civilization, the writers of the Irish Literary Revival revealed themselves as profoundly reactionary, their conservatism seeking confirmation in aristocratic, all too literary nostalgias about race and religion. The Irish people were not the contentious, sectarian, democratic, modernizing men and women encountered daily in the streets, but a heroic Celtic race, sublimely unfitted for the squalid compromises of the modern world. So powerful was the mesmeric attraction of this dream of essence, beside which the refractory problems of mere existence paled into insignificance, that even the revolutionary Patrick Pearse fell under its sway. In his writings we see a committed social visionary and political activist, distracted by images of antique chivalry and archaic purity of creed and blood, a mind compelled by apocalyptic imaginings to deeds of desperation. Indeed, it could be argued that the martyr Pearse had the courage of the Literary Revival's radical conservatism, taking its aesthetics seriously as politics.

It is not surprising that this grandiose, magnificently insubstantial sense of Irish identity should have drawn impatient criticism. George Moore's *Hail and Farewell* contains passages of sustained and malicious satire on the absurdities of the Revivalist's enterprise, although Moore had done his bit to portray Ireland as essentially rural and naively quaint in his *The Untilled Field*. D. P. Moran directed the barrage of his aggressive scorn on the fey trivialities of the Celtic Twilight school (for whom Ireland is an occult secret whose mysteries are best glimpsed in the crepuscular lyric). But it was in the writings of James Joyce that the movement as a whole was to endure a withering, searchingly intelligent critique.

What cannot be gainsaid of the Literary Revival's achievement, however, is that, in creating for the first time an indisputably Irish literature in the English language, these writers gave the Irish people to know that the language of their daily social intercourse could be the basis of an internationally recognised body of creative writing. As such it *did* play its part in that raising of Irish consciousness which was a part of the process that led to legislative independence for most of the island. It also demonstrated that the English language in Ireland, influenced by its long association with Irish speech patterns and modes of thought, was a flexible, mature, subtle instrument, capable of great nobility and energy as well as of sardonic witticism and lyric intensity. Perhaps most importantly of all, it demonstrated, albeit in ways not all Irish people always have found congenial, that the English spoken in Ireland could be the means whereby a society reflected on itself.

STANDISH O'GRADY

(1846-1928)

from: HISTORY OF IRELAND (1878)

[In his *History of Ireland*, Volume One (1878), subtitled *The Heroic Period*, Standish O'Grady retold the story of Deirdre, whom the Irish Revival writers were to imagine as the Irish Helen. This tale, one of the Ulster cycle of Irish sagas, was to inspire works by W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, AE, Synge and James Stephens.]

CHAPTER XXV

DEIRDRE

'Yea, for her sake, on them the fire gat hold.'[1]
Swinburne

When Concobar Mac Nessa was called to the Ard-Rieship of Ulla[2] he celebrated his inauguration by a great banquet at Emain Macha, and all the knights of the Crave Rue were there, and the chiefs and kings of the Clanna Rury, and the kings and ambassadors of the tribes and nations of Erin that were favourable to his succession. There were also there noble ladies, and amongst them the bride of Felim, chief bard of the Ultonians.[3] It was a year of prophecies and portents, and Cathvah, the druid — he who had eaten of the nuts of knowledge[4] — the interpreter of dreams and omens — had announced that an age was then in its inception, which would be renowned to the ends of the earth, and the last age of the world.

That night the Ultonians feasted with more magnificence than had ever before that been used in Erin, and the sounds of revelry arose out of the vast and high Dûn[5] into the night, and the lights glared far and wide, and there was the sound of the harp and of singing voices, for Emain Macha was wholly given over to festivity.

Then about the time that the shrill cry of the cock is first heard, a rapid fear swept like a wind through the whole city, and smote an universal silence, and men held their breaths awaiting some prodigy. Anon there arose upon the night a shrill and agonizing scream, as of an animal pierced, that utters a cry in its agony. And three times the cry shrilled through the city. But simultaneously were heard low thunder-like mutterings, whereat the earth trembled; but this came from the Tayta Brac,[6] wherein was the warlike equipment of all the Red Branch; and aged warriors who had fought under Rury recognised that solemn warning, and they knew what shield it was that announced impending disaster. And, after this, there arose sounds of battle, crash of meeting hosts and shattering spears, the shoutings of warriors, and the war-cries of the Clans of Ulla, and between these noises was heard, far away, the roaring of the sea. Then the prodigy died away, and men saw the reflection of their own fear in the white faces of their comrades.

But in the king's palace the feast was broken up, and the king summoned a council of his great men, and there it was determined that Cathvah the seer should be interrogated concerning the import of the prodigy. Then Cathvah arose with his druidical instruments in his hands, and chanted the chant of divination; and under the power of that chant the veil that hides futurity was rent before his mind, and in a sacred phrenzy he walked towards the Grianan[7] of the women, and the king and his knights followed him reverently. Then he approached the bride of the chief bard of Ulla, singling her out from amongst all the women in the Dûn, and he stood above her and prophesied:

'No common child bearest thou in thy womb, O lady. Beneath thy zone, veiled yet in infancy, I see a woman of wondrous beauty, bright gold her hair, eyes piercing and splendid, tongue full of sweet

1. From A. C. Swinburne's 'Laus Veneris' (1866). In quoting this notorious poem in praise of illicit sexuality, O'Grady seems to be associating the Deirdre of legend with besotted erotic obsession.
2. The high-kingship of Ulster.
3. The inhabitants of Ulster. Crave Rue = Craodh Ruadh (The Red Branch).
4. In the next chapter of his *History of Ireland*, O'Grady tells how there is an invisible fountain in the heart of Ireland, seen only by the invisible Tuatha Dé Danaan. Around the fountain grow seven hazel-trees. Those who eat of the nuts of these trees are filled with knowledge.
5. A fortified dwelling.
6. The name of the armaments' store in Emain Macha (Armagh); from the Irish *Teité Brec(c)*. For suggested meanings of this name, see Tomás O Bróin, '"Craebruad": The Spurious Tradition', *Éigse*, 15 (1973), 103-13.
7. A sun-palace, set apart for the women.