

## CHAPTER 3

*Images and Realities*

A commonplace of Irish Ireland cultural analysis in the 1920s was that Ireland without the Irish language was spiritually deficient, even impoverished, the central impulse of a genuine separatism terribly thwarted. Indeed national existence was in serious jeopardy. Undoubtedly many of those who thought in this fashion were quite genuinely moved by a pained vision of the cultural deprivation complete anglicization could entail, appalled by the idea that the language could die in an independent Ireland, and truly fearful for the future. Some few others, however, were perhaps more concerned with the advance of Catholic power in the new state and were prepared to use the revival of Irish and a celebration of a narrow conception of the Gaelic way of life as a weapon to discomfort Protestant, anglicized Anglo-Ireland. Both groups, whether consciously or unconsciously, undervalued what was in fact the inheritance that the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had bequeathed to the citizens of the new state. For newly independent Ireland was endowed with a repository of myths, images, and motifs, literary modes and conventions cultivated to a degree that might indeed have been the envy of most emerging states in a century of infant, fragile nationalisms. The antiquarian literary and cultural activity of the

preceding one hundred years had offered Irishmen and women a range of modes of thought and feeling that could help confirm national identity and unity. So, when these imaginative assets are reckoned together with the social and national binding powers of an overwhelmingly homogeneous religious belief and practice, which provided a primary sense of identity, it can readily be seen that the new state was rich in integrative resources in spite of the vision of national fragility that Irish Ireland employed as an ideological weapon.

Throughout much of the nineteenth century Irish nationalism had accreted an iconography and a symbolism. Motifs such as shamrocks, harps, round towers, Celtic crosses, and sunbursts had become associated with patriotic feeling, and national sentiment had expressed itself in song, ballad, and rhetoric. The new state could draw on this repository of national motifs and feeling as it wished – the harp, for example, became the state's official symbol. Furthermore, at the end of the nineteenth century a feeling had developed that these familiar symbols of Irish identity had become hackneyed and vulgar. A new literary and cultural enthusiasm had sought what were thought to be more appropriately heroic emblems for a nascent nationalism. The new state inherited therefore both the more traditional symbols of national identity and the modes and motifs that were the fruit of the Literary Revival which had come to vigorous life when, from the 1880s onward, scholars, poets, playwrights, historians, and folklorists rescued much from the Gaelic past and reinterpreted that past in the interests of a raised national consciousness. It had indeed been that literary and cultural activity which, as the critic Ernest Boyd noted in 1922, had done "more than anything else to draw the attention of the outside world to the separate national existence of Ireland."<sup>1</sup>

The new literature that began to be produced in the eighties and nineties of the nineteenth century primarily affirmed the heroic traditions of the Irish people, directing their attention to the mythological tales of their past, to the heroes and noble deeds of a vanished age. When such literary antiquarianism had managed

to suggest a continuity of experience between past and present, a powerful propagandist weapon had been forged. Such occurred most notably in the poems and plays of W. B. Yeats, where the figure of Cuchulain, the mythological hero of the eighth-century epic, the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, and the figure of Cathleen ni Houlihan became associated with contemporary possibilities in a manner that suggested that the heroic could yet again dominate the Irish world. The heroic ideal, as presented in Yeats's poems and plays, in Standish O'Grady's versions of the mythological literature, in the translations of Lady Gregory, and in the many poems by minor poets of the Celtic Movement, entered the consciousness of twentieth-century Ireland as a metaphor of political hope. When, indeed, such heroic aspiration was allied with Catholic notions of sacrificial chivalry, which as Paul Fussell shows in his stimulating study *The Great War and Modern Memory* were prevalent in Europe before and during the 1914-18 war, the result was the fervent patriotic religiosity of Pearse's writings and his self-immolating political passion.

The 1920s saw a reduction in such heroic imagining. The business of reconstruction following civil war apparently lacked the exhilaration of a liberation struggle and could not be conceived of in such resonant terms. The dominant literary modes of the most adventurous writers became realistic if not indeed satiric. The efforts to write a modern Irish epic in English based on the matter of Ireland, which had absorbed many poets since Samuel Ferguson first set his hand to the task with the composition of *Congal* (published in 1872), seemed no longer likely to prove fruitful. In 1925 the young poet Austin Clarke published the last of his three attempts to write an epic based on mythological materials and subsequently abandoned the mythological past for a more personal, lyrical relationship with the Hiberno-Romanesque period in Irish history which received expression in his volume *Pilgrimage* in 1929. In such a transition, undoubtedly rooted in Clarke's own personality, one may perhaps detect a more general intimation of the failing powers of the mythological and heroic vision of the 1920s in the depressed aftermath of the

Civil War. While the struggle against England continued, the image of Cuchulain as the Hound of Ulster and the Fenian heroes as an exemplary Irish militia bore on contemporary experience with a striking pertinence, charging the work of even minor writers with national significance. In the wake of the Civil War, in a period of prudent recovery, images of heroic life began to seem like Irish stage properties, employed in literature when ceremony demanded. There was a general sense that the heroic age had passed. So P. S. O'Hegarty could review a biography of the patriot and freedom fighter Michael Collins in 1926 with a certainty that Ireland would not see his like again. Collins had embodied for O'Hegarty the energy of the mythic past, which the poet Alice Milligan had recreated in her poem "The Return of Lugh Lamh Fada": "That comes nearer than anything I know, than any words I can pen, to rendering how Michael Collins. came to Ireland in the post-1916 years and what he meant to her. . . . He stands out in the red years a veritable Lugh, outstanding, gigantic, efficient."<sup>2</sup> But the present could not contain him.

As the heroic strain in Anglo-Irish writing, which Yeats had employed for the purposes of high art as well as potent propaganda, and lesser poets had found appropriate to patriotic utterance began to dissipate in the drab unadventurous atmosphere of the 1920s, serious poets and writers like Yeats and his younger contemporaries began to turn to new ways of interpreting their experience. The heroic images and symbols drawn from the sagas that had earlier vitalized genuine art and political action began to achieve a ceremonial status in the public mind, became mere icons of received political and historical wisdom, were discharged of their energizing currents in anniversary and collected editions of various poets' work and in the schoolroom textbook.

In August 1924 the efforts to revive the Tailteann Games in Dublin, initiated, legend bore witness, by the Irish mythical hero Lugh Lamh Fada (Lugh of the Long Hand) around 1600 B.C. and continued until the twelfth century, were not entirely successful, for they did not manage to command universal support in the bitter aftermath of the Civil War. In 1929 Æ sadly bore

witness to the declining power of the heroic vision in Irish life. Reflecting on the work of Standish O'Grady, while declaring "the figure of Cuchulain amid his companions of the Red Branch which he discovered and refashioned for us is, I think, the greatest spiritual gift any Irishman for centuries has given to Ireland," he admitted ruefully, "I know it will be said that this is a scientific age, the world so full of necessitous life that it is a waste of time for young Ireland to brood upon tales of legendary heroes."<sup>3</sup> By 1935, when a statue by Oliver Sheppard, which portrays the figure of Cuchulain, was erected in the General Post Office, scene of the Easter Rising in Dublin, this process was almost complete, provoking from Yeats in his poem "The Statues," not a simple celebration of the heroic energy of the Celtic past and of the Easter Rising but a troubled question and an ambiguous affirmation:

When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side,  
What stalked through the Post Office? What intellect,  
What calculation, number, measurement, replied?  
We Irish, born into that ancient sect  
But thrown upon this filthy modern tide  
And by its formless spawning fury wrecked,  
Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace  
The lineaments of a plummet-measured face.

If the heroic vision of an Ireland the poet imagined "terrible and gay" was wrecked, as Yeats thought, by the "formless spawning fury" of the modern world or more probably by the mediocre dullness of the new democratic Irish State, the image of Ireland as a rural, almost pastoral nation, which had also preoccupied the writers of the Literary Revival, maintained its hold. In the 1920s it was the notion of the virtuous countryman that writers, artists, and commentators accepted as the legacy of the Literary Revival period, rather than the heroic aristocratic figures of the mythological cycles. A vision of rustic dignity and rural virtue was popularized in speeches, poems, plays and paintings. In the writings of Yeats and Synge rural figures had been employed as

images of wildness, pagan exuberance, earthy intuitive knowledge of deep-rooted things, but for many years less imaginative, more piously patriotic writers had produced countless poems in which peasants and farmers had appeared not to reveal human possibility but to exhibit the unspoiled simplicity of the essential Irish, who had for many violent centuries endured the ravages of climate and oppression. Poems of this kind had exploited conventional properties, such as the bog, hazel trees, streams, currachs, the hearth, primitive cooking utensils, ploughing, sowing, and rough weather, employing a verse technique that owed its simple repetitions and structure to folk song and its assonance and internal rhyme to the native Gaelic poetic tradition. They remained popular in the 1920s, and new poets took up the tradition, ready to exploit the prevailing literary fashion. They celebrated a version of Irish pastoral, where rural life was a condition of virtue inasmuch as it remained an expression of an ancient civilization, uncontaminated by commercialism and progress. In so doing they helped to confirm Irish society in a belief that rural life constituted an essential element of an unchanging Irish identity.

The social reality of the countryside was more dynamic; unheroic, hardly bucolic, and involved with change in ways which were eventually to disrupt it entirely. Indeed any study of the social profile of Irish society in the 1920s as the new state began to exercise its authority must impress upon the student the overwhelming nature of the problems that a government would have faced if it had attempted real social reorganization in the countryside. For example, overcrowding in housing was not simply confined to urban areas but was endemic in many rural counties as well, particularly in the west of the country. Most of the rural population lived in three-room dwellings, and this was true for each size of family from two to eleven persons. The three-room dwellings referred to in the census of 1926, from which these facts were adduced, were most frequently the whitewashed Irish thatched cottages, single-storey dwellings, seldom more than one room deep, with a kitchen, where a family ate, entertained

themselves, met for gossip and talk with neighbours, a sleeping area, and a parlour for important family occasions. This form of dwelling, much loved of poets and playwrights as the heart of Irish pastoral with its permanently burning turf fire as image of its primeval vitality, was the setting throughout much of the country for a scarcely idyllic way of life in which thousands of Irish parents sought to raise their children in dignity despite the difficult circumstances. In 1926 (reckoning on current estimates in other European countries that defined families having more than two persons per room as living in overcrowded conditions) County Mayo had 43 percent of its population in such conditions, Donegal 40.8 percent, Kerry 38.9 percent, Galway 31.4 percent, and Sligo 30 percent, revealing that rural Ireland as well as urban was faced by a serious housing problem.

Between 1911 and 1926 the housing of the rural population had, however, improved somewhat, though clearly emigration had played its part in ameliorating the problem in a cruel way. There had been a decrease of 42 percent in one-room dwellings, a decrease of 33.9 percent in two-room dwellings, a decrease of 5.8 percent in three-room dwellings, and an increase of 34.1 percent in four-room dwellings. Despite such improvements, the overcrowding in Irish housing was aggravated by the high fertility rate of those Irishmen and women who did marry. As outlined in chapter one, Irish social patterns were characterized both by late marriage and by the large numbers of men and women who chose to remain single or to emigrate. What seems remarkable by contrast with this evidence of Irish inhibition and repression is the fact that the practice of raising large families also characterized Irish social life, particularly in the west of Ireland. The reasons for this apparent anomaly in the Irish character have troubled demographers, and the explanations are necessarily complex.<sup>4</sup> Be that as it may, in 1926 the figures for Irish fertility showed that married women under forty-five years of age in the state reared on an average 18 percent more children under five years of age than in Northern Ireland, 36 percent more than in Canada, 41 percent more than in Denmark, 44 percent more

than in Australia, 70 percent more than in the United States, and 85 percent more than in England and Wales.

Implicit in idealized literary portraits of Irish rural life in the early decades of the twentieth century was the assumption that a traditional culture still intact, inherited from a rich past, would surely compensate the Irish countryman for any discomforts he might be forced to endure in his humble but heroic condition. Again, the social reality was less exhilarating than the writers presumed. Certainly Irish rural life, particularly in the west of the country, retained aspects of the traditional Irish civilization that predated the Famine and the fairly general loss of the Irish language in the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> The old tales and legends were still remembered by *seanachais* (storytellers) in parts of the west, a repository of ballad, song, and historical legend had been handed down, the people still observed ancient pre-Christian shibboleths about fairy-thorns, holy wells, the rites of the agricultural year, the calendar customs, magic cures, pishogues (or superstitions), and the lore of the countryside. Folk festivals, folk drama, and mummers and local saints' days still enlivened the work year. Homes were furnished with the chairs, stools, settle beds, kitchen dressers, bins, cooking utensils, the woven wickerwork baskets and cradles, the artifacts wrought from the ubiquitous osier, that were all the staple images of the Abbey Theatre's rural sets. Cooking was often still performed on the open hearth, where food was suspended over turf fires and the housewife baked her family's daily bread. Milk was churned at home, sometimes in the ancient dash-churn which came in various forms in different parts of the country and, since the previous century, in horse or donkey driven dash-churns which lightened this heavy domestic load on the woman of the house. Ropes were still twisted from local materials, from straw, hay, rushes, bogwood, horsehair. The traditional tools of Irish agriculture were still employed, the spades mostly produced in spade-mills established in the nineteenth century, but sometimes even the ancient wooden implement was used. Grain was harvested sometimes with the sickle, more usually with the scythe, and then threshed with a flail, though in some few

places this task was performed using the ancient method of beating the grain with a stone. The hiring fair, where young agricultural labourers bearing their own spades sought to be hired by wealthier farmers for the season of May to November, was still a feature of Irish rural life well into the 1930s. Traditional means of transport and carriage still dominated the rural scene: the horse or donkey-drawn cart, even, where the land was poor and rough, the sledge or slidecar. Women could still be seen carrying huge burdens on their heads as they had been for centuries.

When Irish writers turned to rural Ireland to discern there an unsullied tradition, they naturally highlighted those aspects of that life which suggested an undying continuity, an imperviousness to change, an almost hermetic stasis that transcended history. In so doing they were popularizing a notion of tradition that ignored the degree to which Irish rural life by the early twentieth century was as involved with the processes of history and social change as any other. For the Irish countryman of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, while forced by economic circumstances as much as by inclination to retain ways of life that the writers could proclaim as time-honoured traditions, also showed himself adept in acts of adaptation, innovation, and even exploitation. He was ready to use horse-driven threshing machines, prepared to experiment with steam, and in the 1930s he began to welcome the tractor, which would render the agricultural labourer increasingly redundant, into his rural world. By the 1920s the countryman and his family had willingly accepted mass-produced articles of clothing, boots, and shoes. Their diet represented not a traditional set of recipes and ingredients but an intelligent adaptation to post-Famine agricultural conditions, substituting for the milk and potatoes of pre-Famine times, grain, eggs, and occasionally meat as the staples and by the 1920s a ready acceptance of town bakers' bread, which on important occasions replaced the breads cooked on the cottage fire. The bicycle had introduced a new mobility to the Irish countryside, and life in the long dark winters was made more agreeable by

the widespread use of commercially produced paraffin oil lamps which replaced the traditional rushlights.

Indeed, not only was some social change evident in the countryside in signs of adaptation and modernization but aspects of rural Ireland's life, the sports of hurling (which was of great antiquity) and football (which had been long played in Kerry), had been enlisted in support of the nationalist cause which in fact brought the rural world increasingly into contact with large-scale national organization and political movements.

Perhaps even more suggestive of the way the world of the towns and the cities was penetrating the countryside in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Ireland was the readiness with which rural dwellers quickly adapted to notions of respectability and social conformity that derived from the town. As living conditions improved somewhat and more and more small farmers abandoned the practice of keeping their livestock with them in the cottage (a practice once widespread in the peasant societies of Europe) and as numbers of them moved to the houses with loft bedrooms and slated roofs provided by the Congested Districts Board (founded in 1891) and by the commission which took over its work in 1923, and as others in the relative affluence of the years 1914-18 expanded their houses or converted them to two-storeyed structures or even built the two storeyed stone houses that date from this period all over the country, the life of the countryman became socially more akin to that of his town cousins than it had been even in the recent past. The parlour in the country cottage or small house, as in the shopkeeper's house in the town, became the place where the best pieces of furniture were displayed, where, as photography became popular, the family portraits were exhibited, where even a gramophone might appear and collections of china ornaments would rest on sills behind the ubiquitous lace curtains. On the wall would hang, gazing at the lares and the penates of the home, pictures of the pope and of Irish patriots and heroes that were the mass-produced icons of country- and town-dweller alike.

The towns to which the countryside was beginning to approximate in fashion and social forms were in 1926 mainly the many small collections of shops which served as service centres for the inhabitants of small surrounding rural districts. They had most developed<sup>6</sup> on the basis of the distance that could easily be traversed in the course of a day, spread out evenly across the Irish countryside about ten miles apart. Their population was in each case under 3,000. Larger towns of 3,000-10,000 persons were normally about thirty miles apart; the regional capitals, Dundalk, Athlone, Waterford, Limerick, Tralee, Galway, Sligo, Derry, are at least sixty miles apart. Small towns and villages which were either rebuilt after the ravages of the seventeenth-century wars or were laid out by paternalistic landlords in the eighteenth or early nineteenth century were the commonest elements of the Irish urban scene. Often near a large demesne, where the country house may have been converted into a convent or monastery, they usually comprised a main street with two- or three-storey houses on either side, where shopkeepers both resided and did their business. Sometimes there was a marketplace or a town square and perhaps a small market hall. Some of the larger towns boasted a courthouse built in the classical style. The only recent buildings in such towns would have been the workhouses that were built in Ireland in the 1840s and 1850s under the Poor Law system, National Schools, hospitals, military barracks, railway stations, and the Catholic churches that were built in the post-Famine period declaring by size if not by their position in the towns that they had overtaken the Church of Ireland houses of worship in social importance. By the 1920s many of the towns were in a state of some dilapidation since often they depended on rural areas which were enduring population decline for their economic life blood. Indeed these many small and medium-sized towns in Ireland were to see little physical change or population increase until the 1960s.

The life of most of these towns was by the 1920s thoroughly anglicized and considerably modernized. As Neil Kevin (Don Boyne) wrote of Templemore, County Tipperary, his native town, in 1943:

The fact that the overwhelming majority of the people in Ireland are in step with the rest of the English-speaking world is not deducible from the literature that is written about Ireland. . . .

Modernized countryside has not yet become "typically Irish" in print, though, out of print, it certainly is. The country town with a wireless-set in the houses of rich and poor, with a talkie-cinema, with inhabitants who wear the evening clothes of London or New York and dance the same dances to the same music - this town has not yet appeared in Irish literature, but it is the most typical Irish country town.<sup>7</sup>

The main activity of such towns was commerce conducted by family-owned concerns in shops retailing specific goods. Change which dated from about the First World War was at work in this world as it was on the small farm:

But recently a draper's life had consisted in moving and dusting, and dressing-out vast piles of tweed, cutting up innumerable lengths of grey calico and army grey shirting, measuring and trimming great quantities of single-width coarse frieze for conversion into the everlasting suits that farmers wore on Sundays, and like quantities of thick white flannel, which their wives made into sleeveless waistcoats or bawneens. Heaps of smelly corduroys, nailed boots, and wide-awake hats, all one model, had made up the stock-in-trade. The day had nearly drawn blood that put twenty pounds in the safe. And, suddenly, there was this new era of readymades, artificial silks, general fancies, and light footwear.<sup>8</sup>

The traders who sought respectability discouraged haggling over prices and warily eyed their competitors as they dispensed credit to the farm community that could not have existed without it. A concern with social class absorbed their excess energies directing the better-off traders to ally with members of the various professions to found tennis and golf clubs, establishing these as the symbols of polite social improvement. Life for the successful shopkeepers and the professional classes was comfortable if unadventurous. Income tax was low at three shillings in the pound in the 1920s, as were costs in general. Domestic help was



readily available. Indeed, the census of 1926 reveals that nearly two-thirds of girls between thirteen and fifteen years of age who did not take up agricultural employment became domestic servants, helping to create a total of 87,000 such persons in the state as a whole. It was easy for well-placed, relatively prosperous people to ignore the social inequalities and problems of a society where the proportion of boys of sixteen and seventeen years who had no gainful employment was 28 percent, three times the proportion of such people in Scotland, England, and Wales, and the very large numbers of people, single women in particular, who were dependent on the productive work of others as they devoted themselves to the care of relatives. Of 899,000 females of twenty years and over recorded in the 1926 census, no less than 233,000, or over one-quarter, were widowed or single and without gainful employment. It allowed them to ignore a society where the number of orphans, widows, and aged persons was abnormally high, particularly in the west of the country. It allowed them also to feel a sense of class superiority to the landless labourers they saw in the marketplaces of their towns on hiring days.

Those Irish writers, painters, and polemicists therefore who chose to identify and celebrate an ancient rural national tradition in Ireland were required to ignore much of contemporary Irish social reality – the existence even in country districts of professional men and women for example (the 1926 census recorded 55,441, including 14,145 professed clergymen and nuns, 2,051 medical doctors, 16,202 teachers, 5,341 sick nurses in the state as a whole) or the increasingly modernized countryside that was reducing the numbers of farm labourers through redundancy – directing attention by contrast wholly to the tiny regions in the west of the country, where they could affirm that a vestige of ancient Gaelic aristocracy remained:

The racial strength of a Gaelic aristocratic mind – with its vigorous colouring and hard emotion – is easily recognized in Irish poetry, by those acquainted with the literature of our own people. Like our Gaelic stock, its poetry is sun-bred. . . . Not with dreams – but with fire in the mind, the eyes of Gaelic

poetry reflect a richness of life and the intensity of a dark people, still part of our landscape.<sup>9</sup>

There was something poignant in fact about the way in which so many Irish imaginations in the early twentieth century were absorbed by the Irish west, almost as if from the anglicized rather mediocre social actuality with its manifest problems, its stagnant towns and villages, they sought inspiration for vision in extremities of geography and experience. They looked to the edge of things for imaginative sustenance.

The 1920s saw the confirmation of the west, of the Gaeltacht, and particularly of the western island as the main locus of Irish cultural aspiration. John Wilson Foster has argued cogently that the image of the western island in pre-revolutionary Ireland had served as:

... a new creation myth for an imminent order . . . as the Gaelic Revival and new nationalism gained momentum, especially after the founding of the Gaelic League in 1893, western islands such as the Arans and Blaskets focused the place of impending awakening, providing a symbolic and it was hoped actual site where Ireland would be born again . . . The western island came to represent Ireland's mythic unity before the chaos of conquest: there at once were the vestige and symbolic entirety of an undivided nation.<sup>10</sup>

After the War of Independence and the Civil War in a politically divided island with a border truncating the country, the image of the creative unity of the west, the vision of heroic rural life in the Gaeltacht or on a western island served as a metaphor of social cohesion and an earnest of a cultural unity that transcended class politics and history. Islands of Gaelic-speaking people in a sea of anglicization, the Gaeltacht and the western island represented that ideal unity which nationalist ideologues had envisaged and prophesied, but which reality had failed to provide. Douglas Hyde advised an audience at a heady meeting in Dublin's Mansion House in 1926, after the publication of the Gaeltacht Commission's report:

Remember that the best of our people were driven by Cromwell to hell or Connacht. Many of our race are living on the seaboard where Cromwell drove them. They are men and women of the toughest fibre. They have been for generations fighting with the sea, fighting with the weather, fighting with the mountains. They are indeed the survival of the fittest. Give them but half a chance and they are the seeds of a great race . . . it will save the historical Irish Nation for it will preserve for all time the fountain-source from which future generations can draw for ever.<sup>11</sup>

Before the 1920s most literary studies of the Irish-speaking districts and of the west had been cast as voyages of discovery. John Millington Synge's classic *The Aran Islands* (1907) is both representative and apogee of the tradition. In such treatments the structural movement of the work is a journey from the bourgeois world of self to an almost prelapsarian innocence and community which the writer can enter or, as in John Synge's work, employ to highlight his own Romantic, melancholic alienation. In 1941 Seán O'Faoláin remembered his own introduction to the western island in 1918 in terms that powerfully evoke the imaginative attraction of this region to generations of Irish men and women. It was a release from self into community, and escape from prose to poetry, from complexity to simplicity:

It was like taking off one's clothes for a swim naked in some mountain-pool. Nobody who has not had this sensation of suddenly "belonging" somewhere - of finding the lap of the lost mother - can understand what a release the discovery of Gaelic Ireland meant to modern Ireland. I know that not for years and years did I get free of this heavenly bond of an ancient, lyrical, permanent, continuous immemorial self, symbolized by the lonely mountains, the virginal lakes, the traditional language, the simple, certain, uncomplex modes of life, that world of the lost childhood of my race where I, too, became for a while eternally young.<sup>12</sup>

Recollecting such bliss, the writer admitted to a "terrible nostalgia for that old content, that old symbolism, that sense of being as

woven into a pattern of life as a grain of dust in a piece of homespun."<sup>13</sup>

In the 1920s a number of literary works were published which attempted a more realistic treatment of the western island and the Gaeltacht, in a tradition that had begun with the short stories of the Irish-language writer Pádraic Ó Conaire and of Seumas O'Kelly. These were works of fictional realism written by men who know the Gaeltacht intimately. Novels such as Peadar O'Donnell's *Islanders* (1928) and *Adrigool* (1929) and Liam O'Flaherty's *Thy Neighbour's Wife* (1923) are works therefore not of romantic discovery but essays in rural naturalism and social criticism. What is striking about the work of both these writers, who wrote their novels with a vigorous socialist concern to unmask social injustice in the Irish countryside through literary realism, is that they both seem tempted by the vision of an Irish rural world that exists beyond political reality. At moments the Irish rural scene in both their works is allowed to occupy the same primal, essentially mythic territory as it does in the conceptions of purely nationalist ideologues. In both O'Donnell's and O'Flaherty's writings there are passages of epic writing therefore which obtrude in their realistic settings. At such moments class politics and social analysis give way before an apprehension of the west as a place of fundamental natural forces, of human figures set passively or heroically against landscapes of stone, rock, and sea in a way that makes their works less radical than they perhaps thought they were. There is implicit therefore in their writings a sense that Gaelic Ireland in the west is the authentic heroic Ireland in a way that confirms rather than contradicts the conventional image of the west as "certain set apart." The power of this conventional image was perhaps so great that it affected as intelligent a social commentator as Peadar O'Donnell and overwhelmed the turbulent anger of Liam O'Flaherty's social criticism.

So in the 1920s the sense of the western island and of the west as specially significant in Irish life became a cultural commonplace. Even an English visitor in 1924 fell under its spell:



The West is different. Its spirit was used by the intellectuals in the late struggle but it was never theirs. It seems to come from some primitive elemental force which smoulders on, like a turf fire, long after such movements have spent themselves. It is a permanent factor to the existence of which no Irish statesman can safely shut his eyes.<sup>14</sup>

The Northern Protestant naturalist R. Lloyd Praeger could declare:

If I wished to show anyone the best thing in Ireland I would take him to Aran. Those grey ledges of limestone, rain-beaten and storm-swept, are different from anything else. The strangeness of the scene, the charm of the people (I don't refer to the rabble that meets the steamer), the beauty of the sea and sky, the wealth of both pagan and Christian antiquities . . . all these help to make a sojourn in Aran a thing never to be forgotten.<sup>15</sup>

When in November 1927, forty fishermen were drowned in a storm off the west coast, even the *Irish Statesman* which had, as we shall see, its own reasons to reject the primacy of Gaelic civilization in Irish life, responded to the disaster in elegiac terms, aligning the journal uneasily with all those who thought the west the cradle of Irish civilization:

But the trawlers in which modern fishermen elsewhere go out to sea seem safe almost as the land compared with these frail curraghs which visitors to the west of Ireland see dancing on the waters. As one watched these curraghs and the fishermen on that rocky coast seemed almost like contemporaries of the first men who adventured on the seas, their Gaelic language and their curraghs alike survivals from ancient centuries. These western fishermen are a very fine type, full of character and vitality, and Gaelic enthusiasts from contact with these vestiges of the Gaelic past have tried to conjure up an image of the Gaelic world when the tide of life was high in its heart.<sup>16</sup>

The vision of the western island as the primal source of the nation's being received further confirmation in 1929 with the publication of Tomás Ó Criomhthain's work *An tOileánach* (*The*

*Islandman*). Works of this kind, in which an islander's reminiscences were recorded in written form by researchers and literary men and are then translated, came in a few brief years to comprise almost a modern Irish subgenre. *The Islandman* (the English translation) is one of the finest examples of this type of work, exhibiting a strong narrative sense and swift economy of style and discourse. A sense of an almost Homeric, heroically charged zest emerges from a keenly objective record of island life.<sup>17</sup> For any who might be inclined to doubt the primal rural superiority of the western world in Irish reality these accounts of work, feasting, death, play, fighting, and drinking could be proffered as ready proof. For in the pages of *The Islandman* it seems we are seeing island life not through the eyes of literary discovery or nationalist wish-fulfilment but from the cottages and curraghs of the islands themselves. The work has an exhilarating freshness about it, an impression of fundamental things, a sense of origins.

In the difficult years of reconstruction after the Civil War, in the 1920s and early 1930s, the Free State government made few conscious attempts other than the encouragement of Gaelic revival to project a cultural image of the nation despite the resources they had inherited and might have exploited systematically. A direct espousal of rural civilization was to be the cultural contribution of Mr. de Valera in the following decade. The government granted an annual subsidy to the Abbey Theatre in 1925, to an Irish-language theatre, An Taibhdhearc, in Galway in 1928, and established a publishing venture named An Gúm in 1926 for the publication of books in Irish. Apart from these fairly minimal gestures the government seemed content to approve, where it did not simply ignore, the work of writers who dwelt in a conservative and nationalistic fashion on rural aspects of the country's life, while establishing a Censorship Board which would, it transpired, repress writings which might disturb conventional moral sensitivities.

But almost as if to confirm the symbolic significance of rural images in the cultural life of the state, in 1927 the Minister

for Finance received the recommendation of the Irish Coinage Committee, established to help implement the Coinage Act of 1926 under the chairmanship of W. B. Yeats. Those recommendations were that the Irish coinage, which was first issued in 1928, should bear the images of Irish animals and wildlife rather than the traditional hackneyed symbols of Ireland, round towers, the shamrock, and sunbursts. There were some objections to this decision from individuals who suggested that animal imagery was insufficiently Christian for the Irish nation's coinage. The choice of birds and beasts as the basis of an Irish coinage's iconography was in part dictated by the committee's desire that the coinage should be a unified series of images, but individual members of the committee were firmly persuaded that the images selected bore intimately on the rural nature of Irish life. "What better symbols could we find for this horse-riding, salmon-fishing, cattle-raising country?"<sup>18</sup> wrote the chairman, W. B. Yeats, and Thomas Bodkin, a governor of the National Gallery of Ireland and a subsequent director, concurred with his chairman:

Coins are the tangible tokens of a people's wealth. Wealth in the earliest times was always calculated in terms of cattle. Thence comes the word *pecunia*, money, derived from *pecus*, the beast. The wealth of Ireland is still derived in overwhelming proportion from the products of her soil. What, therefore, could be more appropriate than the depiction upon our coinage of those products?<sup>19</sup>

And so Percy Metcalfe's beautiful designs were issued in 1928, giving Ireland a coinage that depicted her agricultural, rural, and sporting life in the images of a woodcock, a chicken, a pig with piglets, a hare, a wolfhound, a bull, a hunter, and a salmon.

Irish painters of the period were also touched by the prevailing rural understanding of Irish identity. As Bruce Arnold has remarked, there is in the work of painters in the 1920s and 1930s, such as Paul Henry, William Conor, Sean O'Sullivan, and Maurice MacGonigal, "often an uncomfortable feeling of strain, a self-consciousness about what 'being Irish' meant."<sup>20</sup> From

the painters of this period, whom Arnold has broadly defined as comprising a school of "Irish academic realism," come those pictures of countrymen and women, fishermen, small farmers, turf stacks against cloudy skies, and cottages in secluded places, which seem so representative of the early years of independence. Paul Henry was probably the most popular of these artists, and his simple, often unpeopled landscapes seemed to express for many Irish men and women a sense of essential Irish realities. He was almost the official artist of the Free State – a painting entitled "Errigal Co. Donegal" was used as the frontispiece to the *Irish Free State Official Handbook* published in 1932. It pictures a small Irish village huddling beneath an austere mountain and a clouded sky. This official handbook, in fact, draws heavily for its illustrations on the work of Henry, Seán O'Sullivan, and Maurice MacGonigal, all artists absorbed by the Irish landscape.

So cultural life in the new state was dominated by a vision of Ireland, inherited from the period of the Literary Revival, as a rural Gaelic civilization that retained an ancient pastoral distinctiveness. This vision was projected by artists, poets, and polemicists despite the fact that social reality showed distinct signs that the country was adapting to the social forms of the English-speaking world and that conditions in rural Ireland were hardly idyllic. It is probable, as I have suggested, that this imaginative interpretation of Irish rural life, particularly as lived on the western island, served as an integrative symbol of national identity in the early years of independence. It helped to confirm people in a belief in Irish distinctiveness, justifying that political separatism which a revolutionary movement had made a linchpin of political life in the state. As such, it provided an imaginative consolidation of the new order in which a conservative, nationalist people in a society dominated by farmers and their offspring in the professions and in trade believed that they had come at last into their rightful inheritance – possession of the land and political independence.

But there were other symbolic properties that the new state had enlisted to sustain its sense of its national uniqueness. In

addition to the imaginative legacy that the recent past had bequeathed to modern Ireland in powerful images of heroism and idyll, the new Irish state was significantly blessed with a repository of national treasures that had either been unearthed in the preceding century or had entered into the popular consciousness at that time. Many of these treasures were associated with Irish Christianity in the Hiberno-Romanesque period, and they had become charged in the nineteenth century with a national as well as religious symbolism. Great works of art and craft, the Cross of Cong, the Ardagh Chalice, the Books of Kells and Durrow, had become identified with the Celtic genius. Lady Wilde, the mother of the playwright, had written in 1888:

Early Irish art illustrates in a very remarkable manner those distinctive qualities of Irish nature, which we know from the legendary traditions have characterized our people from the earliest times. . . . All these reverential, artistic, fanciful, and subtle evidences of the peculiar celtic spirit find a full and significant expression in the wonderful splendours of Irish art.<sup>21</sup>

So profound a sense of national significance became attached to the Celtic treasures, which were widely admired after the opening of the National Museum of Ireland in 1890, that its effects permeated Irish design work of all kinds in the twentieth century. Ireland, such work signified in bookplates, medals, jewellery, Christmas cards, Celtic lettering on shopfronts, letterheads, postage stamps, and tombstones, was once the centre of great artistic achievement, was dignified by the peculiar genius of her people, and could become so again.

By the 1920s enthusiasm among artists for Celtic design had perhaps passed its peak, the high point of the movement being the work that the Dun Emer Guild produced in the early years of the century. Nevertheless, at a popular, often rather crude level, Celtic designs continued to be associated with Irish national identity in the first decades of Irish independence. Indeed, the *Official State Handbook* published in 1932 sets the title on a front cover in pseudo-Celtic lettering against a background based on

the Book of Kells and contains plates of the National Museum's treasures, as well as reproductions of Irish landscape art. One aspect of the Celtic revival in arts and craftwork, however, maintained standards of unusual excellence well into the 1930s.

Many of the Irish treasures which fired the imaginations of designers and artists in the early twentieth century had been works of Christian art, associated with worship and piety. It does not, therefore, seem surprising that concurrently a group of artists, partly at the urging of that pious but practical patron and playwright Edward Martyn, had established a cooperative, An Tur Gloine (The Tower of Glass)<sup>22</sup> to provide stained-glass windows for Irish churches which made possible the very remarkable work of Harry Clarke, Michael Healy, and Evie Hone. These artists were to produce some of their finest church windows in the 1920s and 1930s. Certainly they had received part of their inspiration from the fairly widespread English and European interest in craftwork and religious art in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but the sense of Irish antecedents must also have stimulated them in their labours. Once again Ireland was becoming known as a centre of Christian art as Irish missionaries took their knowledge of this modern achievement abroad with them and as Irish stained-glass work received international recognition. As James White and Michael Wynne affirmed in 1961:

By the end of the 1920s standards in stained-glass production had so risen in Ireland that it could safely be claimed that this was one sphere of art in which we as a race had taken a commanding position and in which one could point to an individual Irish school. Could it be that these Irish artists had inherited an instinctive feeling for the gleaming colours and dark sinuous lines which make the Celtic illuminators the most remarkably creative beings produced in our island? This suggestion may seem far-fetched since twelve centuries separate the two groups. Yet comparison throws up many similarities, not least of which was a desire in both cases to suggest the sanctity and holiness of the saints and to see them as removed from the worldly ambience so attractive to artists in other mediums.<sup>23</sup>

In this chapter we have seen how images of heroic nobility lost their imaginative potency in the 1920s and how a largely conservative, rurally based society found its self-understanding expressed in minor literary and artistic works whose claims to attention now are often little more than a conventional rustic charm. It is good, therefore, to reflect for a moment on the achievements of these artists in stained glass who, without compromising high standards, managed both a measure of popular esteem and international reputation before we consider in the following chapter the defeats and distresses endured by those social groups and individuals who in the 1920s and early 1930s found the social and cultural character of newly independent Ireland less than inspiring.

## CHAPTER 4

### *The Fate of the Irish Left and of the Protestant Minority*

It might have been expected that the Catholic nationalist conservatism which dominated Irish society in the first decade of the Irish Free State's history would have met with some significant political opposition from two sources – from the forces of organized labour and from the ranks of the Protestant minority in the state. The former had, as their intellectual inheritance, the internationally minded writings of the socialist, syndicalist, and revolutionary James Connolly, executed after the Rising of 1916, and experience of the bitter class conflicts of 1913 in Dublin, to generate commitment to a view of Irish society which would emphasize class interests and divisions, rather than a nationalist vision of social and cultural unity transcending class. And Protestant Ireland, culturally and emotionally involved with the English-speaking world and recently represented in Westminster by the Unionist party, was naturally antagonistic to those definitions of Irish nationality current in the new state which emphasized the centrality of either Catholicism or the Irish language and the Gaelic past. The fact is, however, that neither organized labour nor the Protestant community was able to mount any effective political opposition to the dominant political,