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CHAPTER 7

Irish Renaissance

Kathleen Heininge

Critics have several names for the movement that took place in Ireland at the turn of the twentieth century. Each name seems to suggest a different interpretation of the events at that time, and each interpretation, in turn, reflects a different idea of Ireland's relationship with the rest of the world. The Irish Revival, a term most often used to discuss the literary movement, implies that the greatness of a people can be resuscitated after it has been nearly lost, and is thus a term in keeping with a nationalist agenda. The Celtic Twilight, a term coined by W. B. Yeats, is a more sentimental and mystical rendering that suggests the illumination and reinterpretation of a previously underappreciated culture, and is a term in keeping with the transition from a romanticized concept of tradition to a modernist consciousness. The Irish Renaissance seems to be the term currently used most often, a term that appears to acknowledge the colonial (and postcolonial) implications of Irish history. Implying rebirth and renewal, a new beginning rather than a resuscitation, the term "renaissance" carries plenty of political resonance especially when deployed to refer to a movement that coincides with the various cultural elements of nationalism beyond literature. In fact, the use of "renaissance" seems to conflate the events that move from nationalism, through modernity, to postcolonialism. There is, then, a certain tension in the ways these terms are deployed, particularly when we examine the terms against each other and against the way "renaissance" is used traditionally.

The term "renaissance" is most often applied to the intellectual shift that characterizes a grossly oversimplified transition from the Middle

Ages to the modern world that took place between the fourteenth and the sixteenth century in Europe. This period is also often marked with an interest, sometimes bordering on obsession, with the classics, and a devaluation of national languages and culture. This aspect of “renaissance” thinking is fraught with tension because of the apparent paradox between the concerns with classic form and the desire for greater freedom of expression, a paradox that creates its own form of tyranny. This particular kind of tyranny is often at work in nationalist movements, where those who are involved in furthering nationalist agendas may become intolerant toward any ideas that may wend away from their own, a feature that characterizes the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation as well, both movements linked to nationalist agendas, particularly as they expressed themselves in England, Spain, Switzerland, and the Netherlands during the European Renaissance.

The very investment involved in choosing a term to describe what was taking place in Ireland indicates the kind of tension that is at work. Critical and historical interpretations of Irish history are, of course, guided by the motivations and positions of those doing the interpreting. A nationalist and literary perspective (which tends to prefer the term “Revival”) is that past glory has been lost and is now returning, and that return can be hastened by embracing Irish thought and language. A modernist perspective (which tends to prefer the term “Celtic Twilight”) is that there is and always has been a firm but undervalued national tradition, a tradition “of the people,” albeit a tradition that benefits from a new perspective. A postcolonial perspective (which seems to align itself with the term “Renaissance”) is that the glory has been previously usurped or quelled and is now being reclaimed and brought back to life; while still a nationalist perspective, this includes all aspects of Irish life, not just literary. The differences are subtle, but I do believe that they exist. Each term tells only part of the story about what happened in Ireland at the turn of the twentieth century, but “Renaissance,” as rebirth, does seem to take into account a more comprehensive and political notion of what actually took place.

The tension that plays among these terms is best understood by looking at the discrepancies in critical evaluations of the events. Little agreement exists about when the nationalist movement really began (as there is little agreement about when or even if modernity arrived in Ireland). Some, including W. B. Yeats, believe that nationalism truly began after the huge political scandal of 1891, when the Church denounced Charles Stewart Parnell, the dynamic and influential leader of the Home Rule movement, for his affair with a married woman, Kitty O’Shea. Parnell’s

career effectively ended at its apex, with subsequent political rambling centered on the issue of Parnell's immorality rather than on the viability of Home Rule. The disappointment resulted in factionalism that remained at work throughout much of the twentieth century, a factionalism most famously illustrated in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* when an argument about Parnell destroys the family's Christmas dinner. While the Home Rule movement was indeed part of a nationalist movement already in place, the country became much more vocal and engaged after the Parnell scandal, when the issue expanded beyond the battle between England and Ireland to between Church and Nation.

Looking back on the events of that time, Yeats wrote in 1923:

The modern literature of Ireland, and indeed all that stir of thought which prepared for the Anglo-Irish war, began when Parnell fell from power in 1891. A disillusioned and embittered Ireland turned from parliamentary politics; an event was conceived; and the race began, as I think, to be troubled by that event's long gestation. ¹

This is a stance that often includes seeing the Easter Rising of 1916 as the culmination of nationalism, and the events between that Rising and the Treaty of 1922 that separated Ireland into north and south as the failure of that nationalism. Yeats was not alone in this valuation, but although the sectarian split that came about as a result of Parnell's disgrace certainly added impetus to the nationalist movement, it did not cause the political upheaval that resulted in the Renaissance; the Renaissance was foreshadowed long before Parnell even rose to power.

Robert Fallis divides his book, *The Irish Renaissance*,² according to specific dates, and believes that the Renaissance began in 1880, and the Celtic Twilight in 1890, distinguishing between the two without examining the way the two movements overlap and without discussing the ways that nationalism intersects with these terms. Other critics believe that the nationalist movement began in "the mid-1880s, as a group of young, mostly Anglo-Irish cultural nationalists gathered around the aging revolutionary John O'Leary, and that it ended around the time of the establishment of the puritanical Irish Free State in 1922."³ Some believe, acknowledging that Yeats was key to the idea of the Celtic Twilight, that the more specific date of 1885, when O'Leary and Yeats met, signifies the Literary Revival. The opinions seem to rely on which aspect of the Renaissance a critic wishes to address and often neglect to consider the fact that there was tremendous overlap in a multitude of events and arenas.

However, clear signs of a nationalist trend appear long before the end of the nineteenth century. The famine of the 1840s marked a change in thinking about Irishness and power; the certainty that England could not be relied upon for support was driven home to many, and autonomy was more desirable than ever. The nationalist magazine, *The Nation*, was published by Thomas Davis and Charles Gavan Duffy in 1842, and the Young Ireland movement began, although even that had its origins in Daniel O’Connell’s push to repeal the 1800 Irish Act of Union with Great Britain and his achievement in 1829 to allow Catholics to sit in the United Kingdom Parliament. Davis believed, however, in uniting the literary, cultural, historical, and linguistic in a nondenominational nationalism, taking O’Connell’s vision further than O’Connell had imagined. The recognition that Ireland needed to be able to stand alone, to rule itself, was gaining attention. Disagreement over how to bring that about prevented consensus, and tensions over secularism and the use of violence grew. Although Davis died in 1846 and O’Connell in 1847, those who followed, calling themselves the Young Irelanders, led a botched uprising in 1848, finally causing the group to disband. Many of the members later joined the Fenians.

The Irish Republican Brother (IRB) grew from the Fenian movement of the 1860s, focusing on active revolution. Their concern was to wrest control from the British and the Protestant landowners. The Sinn Fein movement centered on politics, intending to change the way industry, agriculture, and the constitution functioned in Ireland. The labor movement, led by James Connolly, attended to the workers, hoping to unite them to support Irish industry and change the Parliament. The claims that Connolly made for his Party are consistent with the desires of many leaders in the past, including Michael Davitt (leader of the Land League), Parnell, and Daniel O’Connell. Writing in 1896, Connolly exhorted:

Fellow workers—the struggle for Irish freedom has two aspects: it is national and it is social. Its national ideal can never be realized until Ireland stands forth before the world, a nation free and independent. It is social and economic; because no matter what the form of government may be, as long as one class own as their private property the land and instruments of labor, from which all mankind derive their subsistence, that class will always have it in their power to plunder and enslave the remainder of their fellow creatures.⁴

The idea of a nationalism that extended to all facets of Irish life never quite died, however. Nationalism was no longer merely a political stance. Nonetheless, each organization was separatist in its goals and approaches, and intolerance became the rift that prevented true effectiveness.

In 1884, Michael Cusack founded the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) in an effort to promote Irish sports, fearing that the traditional games were being forgotten. Not only did he want to revive hurling and Gaelic football, but he also wanted to include the “man of the street” in athletics, promoting sports for those other than the leisure classes. While the first two objectives of the association were to organize Irish sports by Irish men and to set up official rules for Irish gaming, the third and final objective was much more inclusive: “To devise schemes of recreation for Irish people.” With that objective, the GAA involved itself in much more than simply sports, producing literary and propagandist pamphlets, financing speakers, and encouraging both child and adult education about Irish music, dance, and language.

One of the coincident (and tyrannical) endeavors of the Renaissance was the revival of the Irish language. The Irish language had fallen into disuse for practical and economic reasons; leaders as far back as Daniel O’Connell insisted that the people could not succeed even within Ireland because the English held most of the real power, and the English did not understand (and had no intention of learning) Irish. In order to remain economically viable participants in their own country, to say nothing of the rest of the world, Irish citizens learned English. In colonial practice, the ruling people impose their language on the colonized, partly for fear of allowing communication (and subversive behavior) in a language that the colonizers cannot understand. By many accounts, children were punished for speaking Irish, and teachers were punished for teaching Irish, presumably ensuring that future generations would not be exposed to Irish. Documents such as Douglas Hyde’s “The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland,” published in 1894,⁵ insist that the Irish people should “cultivate what they have rejected, and build up an Irish nation on Irish lines,”⁶ in turn rejecting England and all things English. Supporting the foundation in 1893 of the Gaelic League, Hyde exhorted the Irish to revive the language that they had forsaken:

We must teach ourselves to be less sensitive, we must teach ourselves not to be ashamed of ourselves, because the Gaelic people can never produce its best before the world as long as it remains tied to the apron-strings of another race and another island, waiting for *it* to move before it will venture to take any step itself.⁷

He foresaw that the advent of a new Irish education would be tied to the language itself, that a people’s consciousness could be forged anew by thinking in a different language, and that ultimately the salvation of the Irish people would come about through a literature in the native

language. His position was nonnegotiable, intolerant of any other points of view, and in his extremism he had difficulty convincing large numbers of people to his vision. The revival of the Irish language as a practical tool for everyday life has largely devolved into an academic exercise outside of certain parts of Ireland known as the Gaeltacht, where only Irish is spoken. It is suggested in many Irish language classrooms, however, that as an academic exercise, Irish is taught to more Irish people today than at any other time in history, as people study it all over the world. The argument is whether the language is living or dead, an argument that becomes that much more interesting when we consider again that many in renaissance movements value classical languages over idiomatic or national languages. Latin and Greek, both languages that were deader than Irish in the nineteenth century, were taught by the English-run schools, an irony that was not lost on the people of Ireland. If Irish is a dead language, does it become a “classic” language? Is it the national language if most of the people in the nation are not fluent in it? The majority of people who are thought to be central to the Renaissance had no Irish; were they, then, not really participating in a renaissance?

While the political, sporting, and linguistic threads of the nationalist movement were being woven, so was the artistic thread. While there were certainly Irish artists, such as Sir William Orpen, Walter Frederick Osborne, Paul Henry, and John Lavery, who were making names for themselves, they were often products of English or French art schools, and the influence showed. Their artwork had nothing especially Irish about it. Seán Keating, a student of Orpen, began to be drawn to Irish subjects somewhat, but his work at first tended to the realistic and the political. Jack Yeats, brother to William Butler Yeats, is the artist credited by many with having been the first truly “Irish” artist, depicting the life of rural, peasant Ireland in ways that no one had done before. His father, John Butler Yeats, painted portraits with a modicum of success, but Jack painted scenes of funerals, of horses, of swimming races on the Liffey (the river that runs through Dublin), of boxing matches, of people on the street. Bruce Arnold claims that Yeats saved Ireland “from nineteenth-century caricature and gave it an embodiment which was serious, and which lasted. It is within the purpose and the act of doing this that a substantial part of his greatness lies.”⁸ Later, artists such as Keating and Henry also began to draw from the west of Ireland for their subject matter, and the very idea of Irish painting changed.

The artistic vein clearly ran in the Yeats family, and although W. B. Yeats is the better-known brother for his contributions to the Revival, he does not represent the beginning of the literary nationalist movement. Much

evidence exists to the contrary. In the late 1850s, Dion Boucicault wrote plays that began to support nationalist goals, rejecting the formulaic representations of the Irish that had been the tradition in plays written by the British and even in his own earlier plays. In the theater, the stage Irishman depicted a version of Irishness that the world consumed before the Irish had a say, most often portrayed in English drama as a figure of comedy, with his drinking and his “abuse” of the English language and his endless cheerfulness masking an underlying insidiousness. C. G. Duggan has quite thoroughly traced the history of the stage Irish figure in English-speaking drama (primarily that written by the British) from its earliest manifestations up through the first third of the twentieth century, giving the most complete analysis of who that figure is. Quoting a publication in 1913, Duggan tells us:

The Stage Irishman habitually bears the general name of Pat, Paddy or Teague. He has an atrocious Irish brogue, perpetual jokes, blunders and bulls in speaking, and never fails to utter, by way of Hibernian seasoning, some wild screech or oath of Gaelic origin at every third word: he has an unsurpassable gift of blarney and cadges for tips and free drinks. His hair is of a fiery red: he is rosy-cheeked, massive, and whiskey loving. His face is one of simian bestiality with an expression of diabolical archness written all over it. He wears a tall felt hat (billicock or wideawake), with a cutty-clay pipe stuck in front, an open shirt collar, a three caped coat, knee breeches, worsted stockings, and cockaded brogue-shoes. In his right hand he brandishes a stout blackthorn, or a sprig of shillelagh, and threatens to belabour therewith the daring person who will tread on the tails of his coat. For his main characteristics (if there is any such thing as psychology in the Stage Irishman) are his swagger, his boisterousness and his pugnacity. He is always ready with a challenge, always anxious to back a quarrel, and peerless for cracking skulls at Donnybrook Fair. . . . The first stage representation of Irishmen was clearly drawn from the life.⁹

The fact that, as late as 1937, Duggan could think that this representation was true to life tells something about the pervasiveness of such representations, images which, it is important to point out, people other than the Irish were perpetrating. These are the versions of “Irishness” that the Irish, especially the cultural nationalists at the beginning of the twentieth century, were desperately trying to eradicate, recognizing as they did that audiences accorded an element of truth to these stage versions.

In response to such stereotypes, Boucicault wrote plays such as *Arrah-na-Pogue*, *The Shaughbraun*, *The O’Dowd*, *Colleen Bawn*, and *Robert Emmet*, which were very popular in both Ireland and London, although

Boucicault's audiences rarely understood what he was trying to do, accustomed as they were to comic representations of the Irish. They had come to anticipate what an Irish character would be, a stage trope that required only a preconditioned and thoughtless response. In spite of Boucicault's attempts at recuperation of the stage Irish figure, audiences often laughed, regardless of what his characters might have been trying to do. Robert Hogan cites an anecdote related in Townsend Walsh's *The Career of Dion Boucicault*: "[Boucicault] acted in many roles, and even when he was attempting to play a great dramatic role, everyone thought he was hysterical because of his 'great Irish brogue'."

Once, however, he essayed the title role in his *Louis XI*, and the results were disastrous:

At first the audience sat in dumb amazement; then came titters and giggles, and finally roars. Never did monarch receive less grave and reverent treatment. Boucicault's brogue came out thick and strong. . . . As the tragedy—or, more properly speaking, the tragic farce—progressed, John Brougham, who loved a good joke better than anything else in the world, began to exaggerate the unctuousness of his own fine, natural brogue. Next John Clayton, an Englishman and the son-in-law of Boucicault, who was playing Nemours, felt in duty bound to fall in with the others, and he too assumed a broad brogue. The rest of the company, either out of deviltry or catching the infection, became Gaelic instead of Gallic, degenerated into an orgy of Hibernian dialects. . . . People laughed till the tears ran down their cheeks.¹⁰

Recognizing the difficulty with trying to change stereotypes overnight, Boucicault included some familiar comic stage Irish figures, such as Conn in *The Shaughbraun* and Myles-na-Coppaleen in *The Colleen Bawn*, but he begins to tweak these figures so that they have a subtle, sly power that they exert over the more powerful characters. He also includes Irish characters whose roles grow increasingly complex, while he explores themes that invite greater thought about the stereotypes that we accept, such as those in *London Assurance* and *The Octoroon*. Without Boucicault's work in redeeming "Irishness" as more than comedy, there would not have been a sympathetic audience for Standish O'Grady's 1878 work, *History of Ireland*, a literary retelling of the legends of ancient Ireland that is often pointed to as the beginning of the Celtic Twilight, as it led to a resurgence of interest in the old stories. O'Grady's seminal work, in turn, led the way for Lady Augusta Gregory and John Millington Synge as well as Jack Yeats to explore the lives and stories of the Irish rural population, especially in the west of

Ireland, resulting in plays, paintings and books that changed the way the rest of the world saw Ireland. Finally, without Boucicault, the work of the Irish Literary Theatre and then the Abbey Theatre would not have been possible.

The Irish Literary Theatre (ILT), the precursor to the Abbey Theatre (which is still Ireland's National Theatre), was created in 1899, and survived until 1901. Its aim was to raise the quality of drama being written and performed in Ireland, so that the stereotypes that even Boucicault perpetuated might be erased. Drawing from Hyde's doctrine, Yeats believed that an Irish Theatre, a national theater, would necessarily elevate the people through better representation, and when people began to see themselves in a better light, they would raise themselves as well. The Revivalists claimed as part of their project the reclamation of the stage Irish figure, insisting that they wanted a National Theatre that showed characters who were representative of the true Irish person and that they wanted to eradicate the figure of ridicule that was most often found on the Irish stage. Lady Gregory's often-cited statement upon the establishment of the "National Theatre," bears repeating:

We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism. We are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us.¹¹

The Abbey project was, as much of twentieth-century Irish drama has been, concerned with getting at the "truth" of the Irish character, showing to the world who the Irish really were, revealing some authenticity that has been clouded by the "misrepresentations" of the English, and indeed by the Irish themselves, Boucicault included. Their project was embraced by the audiences and critics as much as by the playwrights, and plays continued to be upbraided throughout the twentieth century because of their failure to succeed in presenting authentic Irishness. Adrian Frazier points out that it might seem absurd, to those for whom theater has never been central to a nationalist movement, to judge a play, a work of imagination, on whether it represents reality or not, on whether it remains true to the type of a particular people. However, since Yeats had assured his audiences that "he was going to show the Irish people who they really were,"¹² their judgment, according to Frazier, was fair: audiences and critics took umbrage at further "misrepresentation." Far from believing Oscar Wilde's exhortations that "Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art,"¹³ the Irish have

traditionally demanded an element of truth to the characters who purportedly represent them on stage. With great fervor, critics have disparaged plays on the grounds that the characters that are represented are not truly Irish, that these “people” would never be found in Ireland, and that therefore they should not be presented on the stage, as though that stage were necessarily the site of performance for nationality, rather than for creative explorations of various intellectual or imaginative issues. The desire for “truth” and the fury at finding something portrayed that seemed untrue is arguably¹⁴ at the base of the famous “riots” surrounding the performance of John Millington Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* and *In the Shadow of the Glen*, but certainly does not stop there. Many other plays were attacked, albeit less spectacularly, on the same grounds. So while the ILT is often touted as the beginning of the Revival, it is clearly neither the beginning nor the end of nationalist concerns, nor is it the beginning of the Renaissance. Too much of the Renaissance way of thinking was already prevalent before the ILT ever began, but it certainly motivated the foundation of the ILT.

The point here is that none of these various crusades, literary, linguistic, social, or political, occurred by itself, without any influences or trends in other areas, and at the time that all of these events were occurring, none of them referred to itself as part of a Revival or a Renaissance; the term was largely applied after the fact. Each element contributes to a greater, somewhat convoluted picture, and that picture is the impulse toward nationalism and away from colonial submission, an impulse tending toward what becomes known as the Renaissance. The literary and social dimensions overlap each other in motivation and result. Inherent in each of these nationalist programs is the belief that something has been allowed to die, something which must be not only revived but renewed, reborn. Mythology and folklore were being retrieved from a nearly lost consciousness of the people, but being applied in new ways. Music, dance, and sports were being remembered as glorious forms of communication and connection and were to replace the “stilted” music, dance, and sports of the British. The reintroduction of the Irish language would result in the renewal of Irish thought, according to the reigning position.

What, however, is Irish thought? How does one define Irishness? The search for and the articulation of identity is at the heart of much of the nationalist movement, a fact which obliquely supports Declan Kiberd’s theory that Ireland was not truly a nation before it became diasporic, and that it is only through being identified by non-Irish, by the “Other,” that it actually came to recognize itself as a coalesced country, with traits

that are common to many of its people.¹⁵ Those diasporic Irish came to be identified as Irish by the same outsider who needed to categorize them, and without the perspective of the “Other,” Ireland would not need to interrogate its own angst about identity and autonomy. The relationship with the “Other,” however, is complicated by the question that remains at the heart of this discussion: who gets to be Irish? How can the “Other” be determined when “Irish” cannot? Indeed, lying behind many of the projects to define Irishness are the issues of emigration and exile: are those who no longer live in the country still considered Irish? The list of Irish dramatists who have written many of their works while living abroad is long and impressive, including George Bernard Shaw, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Sean O’Casey, Emma Donoghue, Thomas McGreevy, Padraic Colum, Austin Clarke, James Stephens, Paul Vincent Carroll, and Hugh Leonard. Who gets to wear this badge of Irishness? Who qualifies as the “dispossessed”? Does exile necessarily mean a forfeiture of national identity? When Boucicault writes plays about the Irish for London or American audiences, does he qualify as an Irish playwright? When James Connolly, the leader of the Irish Socialist Republican Party, is raised in Scotland by Irish parents but never actually settles in Ireland, does he qualify as an Irish leader? These questions are inherent to most of the discourse about Irishness. There are scholars now who have “splintered” off from discussing the Irish in Ireland alone, who are discussing art and literature and history and culture in terms of the Irish-Americans, the Anglo-Irish, the Irish in Australia, the Irish exile, the diaspora, and, in a move that is, curiously, only fairly recent, the Irish in England. The implicit assumption in these discussions is that these people are not “really” Irish, that somehow they have not earned or retained the privilege of being considered Irish.

In the 1910s, George Birmingham (a.k.a. Canon Hannay) wrote several books with titles such as *Irishmen All*, *The Lighter Side of Irish Life*, and *An Irishman Looks at His World*, all of which attempted to define who the Irish were and describe what they were about. Making some fascinating and sweeping generalizations to explain bemusing behavior of the Irish people, he created pictures for us of the various Irish types, including policemen, priests and ministers, farmers, publicans, officials, and servants. (Jack Yeats illustrated many of these “types” for us.) In Birmingham’s work, the Irish type, as indicated by what position a person holds in society, that is, by what he or she does for a living and what class he or she belongs to, is somewhat different from the concept of type that came from England, where (as C. G. Duggan points out throughout his book on the stage Irishman) the type has more to do with personal

traits and actions than with social position. Birmingham included in these works commentary on the Irishmen who came from various regions, particularly from the North or the South, noting differences between Belfast and Dublin men. His analysis allows for regional distinctions that were virtually ignored by non-Irish writing about the Irish, distinctions that indicated the need for the Irish to define themselves rather than allowing others to do so, since they demonstrated an awareness of differences that were otherwise missed. He claims that the Irish themselves prefer those who will conform to a particular Irish identity:

Irishmen . . . dislike erratic personalities. We prefer men who are true to type. We recognize without resentment the existence of various types and we are on the whole fairly tolerant. In Ireland a man may be a Protestant or a Catholic, a Nationalist or a Unionist, without suffering any serious inconvenience. He may choose his fold, but he must be a sheep. We do not like wild animals. And, unfortunately, the man of letters is usually, the man of genius always, an eccentric creature who cannot be kept in an enclosure. He insists on looking at things from odd angles and seeing them not at all as other people see them. He keeps on describing things and drawing pictures of them, not as we know they are, nice and clear and flat, but as they appear to him through distorted glasses of his absurd temperament, all messed up with each other. We do not want people of that kind among us. It is far better for them to go away somewhere else, to London or to New York; which, indeed, is what such Irishmen generally do.¹⁶

Many people have participated in the project of identifying an Irish type. W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and John Millington Synge, Brendan Behan, Sean O'Casey, James Joyce, Seamus Heaney, George Bernard Shaw, Edna O'Brien, Lord Dunsany, Frank O'Connor, Eavan Boland, Austin Clarke, John B. Keane, Terry Eagleton, and Thomas Cahill have all attempted such books which try to illuminate Ireland and the Irish; some are written as tourist books, claiming that they will reveal the "truth" about what Ireland is like and often including pictures and bits of poetry or song; others are written as autobiographies that reveal the truth about what life is like in the "Emerald Isle." Some of them are comic, a wry look at the amusing quirks of a people and a place, and some are serious, purporting to set the record straight. A remarkable number of writers spend time discussing the Irish people, both explicating and defending, trying to express whatever it is that represents that kernel of being, that essence, that makes someone Irish.

Becoming the site of much more than play, the representation of the Irish in art turned into a kind of acclamation of identity and reclamation

of a power that the Irish felt had been taken from them. This reclamation consisted of more, however, than just an establishment or creation of a positive Irish identity, as it included a repudiation of all things English as well and portrayal of Irish identity became grounds upon which the Irish would accuse each other of a lack of patriotism, faithlessness, and treason. It is interesting that, as Declan Kiberd says,

Those peoples who *had* constructed themselves from within, the French for instance, never accused their bad citizens of being “unFrench”: but throughout the nineteenth century delinquents were often called “unIrish”, because Irish nationalism too often defined itself by what it was against.¹⁷

It became a political stance to consider oneself Irish, with all that might entail, from a hatred of all things English to a return to the Irish language and an insistence on buying only Irish-made products. Many mocked such efforts as fanatical, while others embraced them, and they became a source of contention among the Irish who could not agree on what it might mean to be Irish. The discussion surrounding the question of limiting Irish identity is at times absurd in its impossible goals:

According to *Samhain* [Yeats’ magazine published in 1904] what makes an Irish writer is not that he writes in Irish, pleads the national cause, expresses Irish morality, or creates typical Irish characters; not even that he is inspired by Irish literary traditions; certainly not that he executes in his plays the will of the people, or any will but his own. It becomes difficult to see what is left for a writer to do who wishes to be Irish. For Yeats, however, that person’s wish should be to make himself not Irish but a writer. Do that and he would be Irish enough. Ultimately, Yeats says, only five or six people have the right to call themselves Irish, people who usually belong, he believes, to the leisured class (read Protestant population), whose thought is *harder* and *more masterful* than that of others; these have, he adds, an *essential nearness to reality*.¹⁸

The idea that there are only a few people who have earned the “right” to call themselves Irish, transcending any ethnic or native origins, birth, race, or even geography, seems ludicrous, but it is emblematic of the weight put (by the Irish themselves) on the labels that were being given and on the recognition that the labels received. The paradox is that while only the members of the leisured class get to call themselves Irish in Yeats’s terms, because their thought is “harder” and “more masterful” than that of others, the characters portrayed in the practice of his “Irish” colleagues to represent the typical Irish were, almost invariably, members

of the peasant class, as the Abbey Theatre produced primarily plays dealing with the rural, “simple” peasantry. Looking back from the perspective of the end of the century, a critic can see that,

If England was urban, Ireland had to be rural. If England was industrial, Ireland had to [be] pastoral. Instead of looking clearly at Irish life in all its diversity, the new cultural movements tended to look for an Irishness that was defined in these ways, and that therefore excluded much of the reality of Irish urban life.¹⁹

The argument over how to look for Irishness continued throughout the life of Field Day, an influential theatrical organization in Derry that began in 1979, as Seamus Deane urged the Irish to try to get past the same old dissensions:

The Irish character apologetically portrayed by the Banims, Griffin, Carleton, Mrs. Hall and a host of others has been received as the verdict passed by history upon the Celtic personality. That stereotyping has caused a long colonial concussion. It is about time we put aside the idea of essence—that hungry Hegelian ghost looking for a stereotype to live in. As Irishness or as Northernness he stimulates the provincial unhappiness we create and fly from, becoming virtuoso metropolitans to the exact degree that we have created an idea of Ireland as provincialism incarnate. These are worn oppositions. They used to be the parentheses in which the Irish destiny was isolated. That is no longer the case. Everything, including our politics and our literature, has to be rewritten—i.e. re-read. That will enable new writing, new politics, unblemished by Irishness, but securely Irish.²⁰

Concerns about Irishness and its portrayal, its “Hegelian ghost,” despite the “worn” character of the “oppositions,” must be resolved before anything new can be written; yet the warning itself appears to reinscribe the same concerns that it supposedly seeks to mitigate. What does it mean to be “unblemished by Irishness” and yet still remain “securely Irish”? According to Foucault, “one of the main moral obligations for any subject is to know oneself, to tell the truth about oneself, and to constitute oneself as an object of knowledge both for other people and for oneself,”²¹ and this is precisely what the Irish dramatists of the twentieth century were trying to do.

While for Boucicault attempts towards exonerating the stage Irish figure of ridicule may not have been overtly political, these attempts were certainly political for Yeats and those who are known as the Revivalists, contrary to their original claims. They asserted that they

were not political, that their work was, again, “outside all the political questions that divide us,”²² but the literary (and cultural) movement was inherently political. It was certainly more than just rhetorical. The politics at work here are the same politics behind whether the movement is called the Revival or the Celtic Twilight or the Renaissance. They wanted to unite all the different factions of nationalism under the aegis of drama. The schizophrenia of the Revivalist position is demonstrated by Yeats, who, as we saw earlier, ties the Revival to Parnell’s downfall but at the same time insists that the Revivalist movement cannot be political, acknowledging that the political element would prevent their efforts from being purely Irish; he knew that the political nature of the GAA and of the Young Irelanders led those groups to the sectarian rifts to which they were subject, and he wished to unite Ireland rather than divide it. When the literary movement meets the revolutionary movement, despite equally nationalist beginnings, the completely different agendas are evident. While the two efforts may seem to be the same, the tension lay in the perceived desired results. The Revivalists were attempting to unite Ireland into one idealized culture, but not everyone had the same ideal; tensions remained not only because of sectarian differences, but also because of differences in class, education, and vision. The Theatre, for example, came into conflict with Hyde’s position over the debate about language: shouldn’t a national theater be in the national language? If so, what is that language? Again, the majority of the people involved in the theater had no Irish at all, including W. B. Yeats. The argument illustrates perfectly the conflict between nationalism and modernity: Does a Revival only harken back to a glorious past, without looking towards a successful future? Daniel Corkery, a later disciple of Douglas Hyde’s, maintains the argument that the loss of the Irish language equates to a loss of Irish thought, insisting that there was a Golden Age to which Ireland could harken back, and that there is a language that, once recovered, would serve as the means for reclaiming Celtic glory.²³ The desire to return to that glorious past is in direct conflict with a world where the isolation of nationalism becomes increasingly undesirable.

Few people were unaware of the fact that English would take them much further in the world than Irish ever would. In 1900, W. B. Yeats wrote:

Side by side with the spread of the Irish language, and with much writing in the Irish language, must go on much expression of Irish emotion and Irish thought, much writing about Irish things and people, in the English language, for no man can write well except in the language he has been

born and bred to, and no man, as I think, becomes perfectly cultivated except through the influence of that language; and this writing must for a long time to come be the chief influence in shaping the opinions and the emotions of the leisured classes in Ireland in so far as they are concerned with Irish things, and the more sincere it is, the more lofty it is, the more beautiful it is, the more will the general life of Ireland be sweetened by its influence, through its influence over a few governing minds.²⁴

The differences between the various elements appear to be irresolvable. David Krause discusses the crucial flaw in the aggressive nationalist agenda, the determination to view literary independence as a threat to political independence, a misconception that can only be attributed to nationalist paranoia. That unfortunate collision between the principles of the Renaissance and the principles of the revolution illustrates why art and ideology are incompatible forces, not only in Ireland but in all countries exposed to excessive nationalism and rabid patriotism.²⁵

Krause further summarizes F. S. Lyons, who believes that the conflict between what he saw as completely opposing forces, the political and the cultural, resulted in a necessary condition of anarchy.²⁶ Tracy Mishkin notes, “many community leaders were interested not in realistic representations but in idealized portraits because they wanted to enlist literature to fight prejudice. This clashed with the writer’s desire for artistic freedom, which did not necessarily favor realism either.”²⁷ It is the clash between nationalism and modernity, the Revivalists beckoning to the past and the revolutionaries looking toward the future. The literary became the political.

The Celtic Twilight, perhaps, is the embodiment of that tension. Thought by many to be the forerunner to the Revival, it is the part of the 1890s that romanticized all things Celtic as mystical and mysterious but did so in order to give a foundation to the concept of Ireland’s future greatness. Truly the step-child of Standish O’Grady and the child of W. B. Yeats, the Twilight is the period during which the fairy world was given literary credence, and the old stories took on new sociological significance. The stories, some myth and some legend, gave the Irish a common past upon which to rest a confidence in a better future, according to many (especially Yeats). In his introduction to Lady Gregory’s collection of Irish tales, Yeats explains:

the Irish stories make us understand why the Greeks call myths the activities of the daemons. The great virtues, the great joys, the great privations come in the myths, and, as it were, take mankind between their naked arms, and without putting off their divinity. Poets have taken their themes

more often from stories that are all, or half, mythological, than from history or stories that give one the sensation of history, understanding, as I think, that the imagination which remembers the proportions of life is but a long wooing, and that it has to forget them before it becomes the torch and the marriage-bed.²⁸

If, as Terry Eagleton explains, “Modernism springs from the estranging impact of modernizing forces on a still deeply traditionalist order, in a politically unstable context which opens up social hope as well as spiritual anxiety,”²⁹ then the Celtic Twilight is the modernist move at the end of the nineteenth century. In considering the sidhe (the fairy world) and the heroes (such as Cuchullain and Finn McCuill) as credible parts of Irish history and literature, the past is brought into contact with the future. The politically unstable context opens the space to allow such elements viability, in that the stories themselves provided hope for the future, samples of the ways that the Irish, in that mythic, originary past, attained and retained power and strength. The faeries, for example, while appearing magical and mystical, allowed for ways that the Irish could both explain a lack of control over their lives and imagine autonomy in both the past and the present. The Irish were also in a position of power because they alone had the understanding of the ways of the *daoine maithe*, the good people. The inexplicable, such as menopause, puberty, and uppity women, was always explained by blaming the faeries, and appeasing the faeries could mitigate such things.³⁰ Through looking at the past, one could see that the future could be both planned and preordained. The heroes function in much the same way, establishing a history of glory for Ireland, and by reexamining their stories, the Irish can be assured of future glories. In its use of the past to illuminate the present and to give hope for the future, the Celtic Twilight is in essence the beginning of the Modernist movement in Ireland.

Tensions also exist between the modernist and post-colonial perspectives. In a discussion that has most recently been debated in a collection of essays called *Ireland in Proximity: History, Gender and Space*,³¹ both the modernist and the post-colonial approaches have been accused of being revisionist. Gregory Castle suggests that the “modernist dilemma,” “the gap between experience and its representation,” (and thus perhaps the gap between the political and the literary, the Celtic Twilight and the Revival) is actually part of the tension of post-colonialism, transforming “the revolutionary energies of the Revival into a reactionary nostalgia for ‘archaic,’ pre-colonial origins.”³² With this definition, however, modernity appears to be a subset of post-colonialism, cause and effect, in almost a fluid, albeit disruptive, transition from a secure culture to one that

encounters dissonance and alienation, whether that dissonance be caused by industry, war, post-colonialism, or something else. What Castle calls “the uneasy relation of tradition to modernity in colonial Ireland”³³ complicates the idea of modernity because of the tensions between colonialism and nationalism in Ireland at the turn of the century. Where one aspect of European modernity is the struggle to define the individual subject in its relation to its own society, post-colonialism requires an assertion of the individual subject in relation to the dominant society, and can only work where nationalism is also at work. However, the nationalist movement tends to rely upon tradition, eschewing the idea of allowing new traditions to dominate for fear that those traditions are tainted by the colonizers. The tension between these terms is the same tension at work between the terms we have been discussing: Revival, Celtic Twilight, and Renaissance. The cultural, the political, the traditional, the modern, are all part of the arsenal deployed to forge a nation, but they are an uneasy complement to each other. If we consider the post-colonial situation in Ireland in terms of both the nationalist and modernist movements, we might be able to see what is gained by referring to this movement as a renaissance. Certainly the implicit belief is that there is something to be renewed, some mythic originary past to which to revert (Corkery’s Golden Age of language, for example), and the assumption is that if we can only transcend whatever force is holding us down (whether it be external oppressors of culture and language or internal disconnection with history), we can return to a previously forsaken glory. The concept of renaissance incorporates many of the elements discussed here, in critical ways. As Krause notes, “The rebirth of a nation’s literature . . . is not an immaculate conception. It is a painful process of renewal that grows out of attrition and contention, a civil war of violent words and conflicting aspirations.”³⁴ Revival, in its concept of near-death, only goes so far, suggesting as it does that the culture had to be resuscitated; renaissance, in its acknowledgment of continuity with the past, seems to acknowledge the contentious nature of that rebirth and renewal, without ignoring the colonial influence that has been wrought. After all, the need for rebirth relies upon the past as well. Post-colonialism, in its awareness of two sides to the conflict, is a fuller interpretation of the Irish situation. The originary imagined past was disrupted by another force, and one cannot look beyond that influence to see what the originary past might have been; post-colonial theory supposes a kind of pre-authenticity that nationalism has yet to acknowledge, a sense that the true Irish nation has been interrupted and

can be regained. The Revival behaves as though there is an accessible, authentic originary past, one that can be recaptured and celebrated by all who are Irish. The possibility of what Françoise Lionnet calls “transculturation,”³⁵ the inevitable crossing over of cultural elements that are unavoidable when two cultures rub against each other for any length of time, is unacceptable to Revivalists, who prefer to believe that all that has occurred during colonization can be wiped away by boycott. Colonialism is not one-way; the cultural slippage is on both the colonizer and the colonized. Whether England had ever achieved dominance in Ireland, the very proximity of the two countries would have caused some transculturation. As Lionnet points out, analyzing more specifically the consequences of French colonialism, “‘inferior’ or subaltern elements contribute to the evolution and transformation of the hegemonic system by producing resistances and counterdiscourses,”³⁶ just as much as the hegemonic elements contribute to the subaltern cultures. The dream of an untainted Irish culture can never be more than a dream or an academic exercise.

With nationalism (and thus with the Revival), the assumption is that the glory must be reclaimed. With modernism (and thus with the Celtic Twilight), the assumption is that there is a firm tradition from which a new perspective arises. With post-colonialism (and thus with the Renaissance), the assumption is that the previous and potential glory has been usurped or quelled. Each term tells only part of the story about what happened in Ireland at the turn of the twentieth century, but the idea of “Renaissance” does seem to take into account more than just the literary or political or cultural movements that took place. Nonetheless, as one critic has said, “Renaissance is a beautiful word. We use it even when we are not sure what has been reborn.”³⁷

Notes

1. Tracy Mishkin, *The Harlem and Irish Renaissances* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998), p. 35.
2. Robert Fallis, *The Irish Renaissance* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1977).
3. Mishkin, xiv.
4. James Connolly, “To The Irish People,” *Irish Socialist Republic*. 1896, 97–100.
5. Douglas Hyde, “The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland,” *The Revival of Irish Literature* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1894), 115–161.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
8. Bruce Arnold, *Jack Yeats* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1998), ix.
9. C. G. Duggan, *The Stage Irishman: A History of the Irish Play and Stage Characters from the Earliest Times* (New York and London: Benjamin Blom, 1937), p. 289.
10. Robert Hogan, *Dion Boucicault* (New York: Twayne, 1969), p. 39.
11. Lady Augusta Gregory, "Our Irish Theatre," *Modern Irish Drama*, Ed. John P. Harrington (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1991), pp. 378–9.
12. Adrian Frazier, *Behind the Scenes: Yeats, Horniman, and the Struggle for the Abbey Theatre* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA and London: University of California Press, 1990), p. 7.
13. Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski*, Ed. Bernard F. Dukore (New York and Chicago, IL: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), p.628.
14. G. J. Watson, *Irish Identity and Literary Revival* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 71.
15. Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).
16. George Birmingham, *An Irishman Looks at His World* (London, New York, and Toronto, ON: Hodder and Stoughton, 1919), p. 118.
17. Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, p. 141.
18. Frazier, *Behind the Scenes*, p. 105.
19. Fintan O'Toole, *The Ex-isle of Erin: Images of Global Ireland* (Dublin: New Island, 1996), p. 107.
20. Seamus Deane, "Heroic Styles: The Tradition of an Idea," *Ireland's Field Day* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), p. 58.
21. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House Vintage Books, 1979), p. 177.
22. Gregory, "Our Irish Theatre," pp. 378–9.
23. Daniel Corkery, *The Fortunes of the Irish Language* (Cork: The Mercier Press, 1968).
24. W. B. Yeats, "Irish Language and Irish Literature," in *The Collected Works: Volume X: Later Articles and Reviews*, Ed. Colton Johnson (New York: Scribner, 2000), p. 47.
25. David Krause, *The Regeneration of Ireland: Renaissance and Revolution* (Bethesda, Dublin, and Oxford: Academia Press, 2001), xii.
26. Krause, *The Regeneration of Ireland*, p. 110.
27. Mishkin, *The Harlem and Irish Renaissances*, p. 14.
28. W. B. Yeats, "Cuchulain of Muirthemne," in *Explorations* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1962), p. 10.
29. Gregory Castle, *Modernism and the Celtic Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 2.
30. Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* (London: Penguin Putnam, 2000).

31. Scott Brewster, *Ireland in Proximity: History, Gender and Space* (London: Routledge, 1999).
32. Castle, *Modernism and the Celtic Revival*, p. 36.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
34. Krause, *The Regeneration of Ireland: Renaissance and Revolution*, p. 45.
35. Françoise Lionnet, “‘Logiques métisses’: Cultural Appropriation and Postcolonial Representations,” in *Postcolonial Subjects: Francophone Women Writers*, eds. Mary Jean Agreen (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 321–43.
36. Lionnet, p. 323.
37. Mishkin, *The Harlem and Irish Renaissances*, p. xiii.