

**INTRODUCTION**

The Irish Revival, which took place between 1891 and 1922, was an extraordinary era of literary achievement and political ferment. This period generated not only a remarkable crop of artists of world significance, but also a range of innovative political thinkers and activists, among the most influential that Ireland has produced. In contrast to the darker nineteenth century, the Revival stands out as an intense phase of intellectual rejuvenation that fashioned a new civic culture outside the scope of institutional religion, the colonial state and conventional politics. It created multiple forums in which intellectual exchange and artistic excellence were encouraged, and where freedom of expression was upheld. Yet many of the achievements, complexities and nuances of this largely progressive and intellectually inquiring moment remain hidden. The aim of this publication is to provide a set of readings and keynote statements to reflect the range and intensity of cultural exchanges.

Most of the significant figures of the time made ample use of the newspapers and literary journals to promote their views and various causes, and to take part in contemporary cultural debates. Even high literary figures like W.B. Yeats and James Joyce embraced popular journalism as a means of engaging with the political ideas of the time and influencing opinion. Meanwhile, anti-establishment figures such as Alice Milligan and James Connolly, who did not have access to the mainstream press, set up their own newspapers. Yet despite the wealth and importance of this material to the shaping of modern Irish culture, many of these formative essays remain out-of-print, uncollected and unavailable to all but a select readership. At a time of national
introspection during the Decade of Commemorations, and in response to a welcome trend of greater public familiarity with recently-available archival sources—such as the 1911 census and Bureau of Military History files—this volume, it is hoped, will facilitate a deeper engagement with the many and varied voices of the period.

The intention here is to return to the moment that produced these texts and to see the contributors as they saw themselves: to recognise the sense in which each contribution to the developing debate was at the mercy of its moment of enunciation. It seems appropriate, as we reflect on the various significant centenaries being marked over the coming years, that the writings of those who shaped the country should be available. As key eyewitness accounts of the period (some taken as far back as the late 1940s) become available, an opportunity to engage in-depth with hitherto unknown sources presents itself. The hope is that the perspectives and insights of unjustly neglected writers and texts can be made current again, to citizens, to commentators and to all who partake in, or care about, national debates. Many of the important contributors to the national conversation a century ago were characterised by a marked idealism but also by a conviction that ideas could become a basis for practical action: a deep investment in the future was born out of an intense engagement with the past. Nearly all of them lived intensely in the present moment; took ideas more seriously than their own careers; and contributed brilliantly to debate. Few of them made much money but most of them were as intellectually enriched by the critiques of their opponents as by the thinking of their allies. They savoured the value of dissent, and openly challenged the established ideas and practices of the day.

Many of their contemporaries were so engaged in action that they left no memorable texts: but they should not be forgotten. Nevertheless, this was a supremely articulate generation, whose members, writing in the heat of the moment, had some sense that they were also addressing their successors. Readers of these pages will quickly recognise that many of the ideas and challenges that the Revival
generation faced have their own iterations in the present moment. In this regard, their debates about citizenship, dissent, personal liberty, education, political accountability, and sovereignty have the potential to vivify national deliberations in post-Celtic-Tiger Ireland. As the Irish Revival demonstrated, moments of stasis can also give birth to moments of profound creativity and social change. These essays and articles illustrate the extraordinary reawakening of intellectual life and the rebirth of civic action in Ireland, decades after a devastating famine, and in the wake of the political implosion which followed the Parnell era. They demonstrate admirably the ability of a society to diagnose the political and cultural ills that beset it for over a century, and show how ideas and civic participation could change reality. The best of them impel us to imagine our futures as audaciously as they imagined theirs.

If anything characterises the era it is the belief that the gap could be closed between ideas and actions, between the aims of artists and the ideas of the wider community. This extraordinary generation of dynamic people thought about and agitated for a range of political ideas including: political sovereignty, female suffrage, the rights of the working classes, agricultural co-operation, unionism, republicanism, and pacifism, among others. As people variously questioned the coercive forces of empire, Christianity, capitalism, patriarchy, militarism, industrialism and nationalism, they discovered new modes of thinking and living in the alternative forms of socialism, theosophy, feminism, pacifism, and Celtic spirituality. Some even chose to reinvent themselves by adopting a ‘new’ ancient language. Yet we should not be seduced into thinking that the Revival was a great communal moment of liberal and harmonious revelation. There were serious ideological differences between many who considered themselves to be ‘Revivalists’. Undoubtedly much of the cultural activity was of a progressive nature and was enabling in its definition of alternative pathways for the Irish to follow on the challenging journey into the modern world. But there were also Revivalist figures who saw in the project of reconnection with the ancient past an opportunity

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to advance more conservative agendas. Further, there were prominent thinkers who felt that the entire Revivalist project was bogus and fraudulent. Within these pages the wide spectrum of debate is given a hearing. While the aim is to reveal something of a Revival *zeitgeist*, we have been keen to explore points of contention and divergence, and to present the vigour of fractious debate as it unfolded over the period.

Different versions of the Revival have been produced at different historical moments. Some of the best critiques of the era were produced by people who were directly involved or who were in close proximity. Figures as diverse as J.M. Synge, Eva Gore-Booth, James Joyce and Sean O’Casey were central players but were not slow about highlighting some of the absurdities and exclusions of the movement. In the early years of independence, however, attempts were made to appropriate the Revival to suit the agendas of the time. Those who commemorated often sought to control the discourse in ways which made them seem the logical successors. In that process, much was forgotten—Connolly’s socialism; the dead in World War One; the role of radical women; the part played by the 1913 Lock-Out. Exclusive focus on the *literary* revival had the effect of cutting off the artistic energies of the period from the political forces that informed them, thereby transmogrifying the movement into an elitist one of high cultural exchange between a privileged few. In a parallel manoeuvre, certain revolutionary figures, notably Pearse, were singled out in hagiographical treatments as the saviours of the spiritual nation and the embodiments of Catholic martyrdom. By contrast, in more recent decades, the tendency has been to dismiss and demonise the Revival as the source of many Irish ills and a repository of many backward tendencies. Some critics, indeed, have been determined to remove one of the most innovative and progressive writers, James Joyce, from the Revival context that informs all of his work, on the basis that that movement could only ever produce insular, nativist art. Much, too, has been made of the apparent division between the ‘elite’ directors of the Abbey Theatre and the nationalist ‘rioters’ at Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World*. The fact
is that the conflicting groups were close enough to have the argument in a shared language, as part of the robust exchange of the times. It is ironic that Synge, whose play polarised so much opinion, can now be seen as the subtlest cultural commentator of all—he was, in the words of Jack B. Yeats, ‘a keen observer of political conditions’, as well as the author of the Abbey’s first global masterpiece. His words illuminate almost every theme explored in this volume.

It may well be the case that the challenge of extreme idealism so apparent in the Revival seems impossible to answer without feeling an adverse judgement by the past on the present. The resort to military action by some members of the Revival generation in one theatre of action or another—in Ireland or mainland Europe or even further afield—has also called forth adverse judgements by present thinkers on the people of the past. Whether as extreme idealists or as determined militarists, that generation may induce in many a sense of shame—based on a feeling that we in our bureaucratic risk-averse lives can never measure up to that extraordinary range of exaltation and ruination. Yet it is possible that many actions of the Revival generation surprised even their agents—it was probably as hard for them to believe in the reality of what they were doing as it would be for most of us to think of emulating them now—whether putting lives on the line in battle or writing global masterpieces. The 1916 Rising may seem almost inevitable to a reader of some of these writings but it took not just most of the authorities, but even some of its progenitors, by surprise. W.B. Yeats was unhinged by the moment, yet had in the past been a member of the IRB and went to his grave convinced that a play he co-wrote helped to bring about the event. In an earlier decade, he might have been a more active participant; in a later one, an arch-critic.

During the Revival, artistic creation and intellectual debate happened at breakneck speed. The catching-up with the American and French revolutions (and with the United Irishmen) was accompanied by moments of ideological surplus in which the protagonists far exceeded the norms and potentials of their own age. They often accused one
another of being ‘belated’ yet they were also futuristic—to such a degree that more than a century later we are still learning how to be the contemporaries of radical thinkers like James Joyce and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington. The Revival generation, even as it moved to a future that was exciting to the extent that it was unknowable, felt a need to establish a lineage with the past—with Celtic saga, bardic poetry, authors and orators, Grattan, Emmet—but this may have been because it was aware of the immense break with that past that its innovations represented. Not only did it temporarily divest some nineteenth-century leaders and writers (for example, O’Connell and Carleton) of much of their ‘afterglow’, but it may also have deprived the generations that followed of the sense of being able to make a significant contribution—the ‘mediocrity’ complained of by returned soldiers in Britain of the 1920s had its equivalent feeling in Ireland, perhaps creating the beginning of an unconscious resentment against a charismatic generation that had sucked up so much air from the future as well as the past.

Now may be the moment to reclaim the intellectual inheritance of the Irish Revival in all of its diversity and contradiction as an empowering, robust and creative republic of letters. The writings collected here belong finally to nobody—not to the various state elites who have claimed them, nor to other elites who ignore them, nor to the rebels who feel that they are theirs by default. But they are always available to those who want to attend to what their voices actually said. The less familiar texts make the over-familiar ones seem somewhat strange—almost as strange as they must have seemed to their original readers. And anyone who finds them strange is beginning to read them aright. We do not know them still—but they may yet help us to know ourselves.