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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

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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. ■