

Publishing the Irish Identity

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Abstract

Ireland at the turn of the 20th century was experiencing a postcolonial shift. The society had become entirely integrated with British culture and was now facing a period of disarray and the struggle to identify what it truly meant to be Irish. This article explores the role of the publishing industry in identifying that Irish identity. Largely run by the writers themselves, the industry movements represented, as publishing often does, every aspect of this struggle. It was a time of nationalist conflict and the role of the publishing industry had the power to either diminish or create a nationalist identity. The interplay between what Ireland was as a colony, what Ireland could potentially have been and how this was viewed in Ireland, Britain and around the world are explored within the frameworks of Pierre Bourdieu, Linda H. Peterson and Pascale Casanova.

Key Words

Ireland, publishing, colonialism, nationalism, W.B. Yeats, Irish Literary Revival, Dun Emer/Cuala Press

Identifying the culture of Ireland

Ireland's literary movement at the turn of the 20th century, known as the Irish Literary Revival, was built upon the idea of inventing a shared cultural community which encompassed and publicised the literary works of its nation. The motives behind this were threefold. The first aim of the movement was to define what exactly the Irish literary and wider cultural identity was. This was intrinsically linked with the need to establish an Irish nation free from its place as a commodity of the British colonial empire. The book industry in Ireland was English at its core. It was created for, and by, an elitist Protestant Ascendancy. In Bourdieu's terms, Ireland at the turn of the century comprised of two cultural fields in one geographical space. The field of the majority had a music, literary and artistic culture and language of its own, produced for, and by, those within the Gaelic field of cultural production. In a separate, but infringing, field existed the elite: the descendants of Protestant landowners and the powers at be in the colonial state. The elite corresponded with a cultural field beyond their geographical domain, one which was overwhelmingly British. So much so, that the only fraction of Irish culture entertained by this Protestant Ascendancy, was that of Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw and other writers who had gone through the London channel of cultural production. This was the crux of the matter: in order to be culturally recognised, the Irish writer would have to conform and adapt to the conventions of a cultural field to which they did not belong.

This idea of belonging was undoubtedly part of the nationalist movement, but according to Pascale Casanova:

In a strongly politicised country that had long been accustomed to a nationalist struggle, the passage from political nationalism to cultural (and above all literary) nationalism amounted to pursuing the same ends by different means; or rather, the national and political question was precisely the issue that would split the literary world. (2004, 190)

This has long been the case with the nationalist invention of Ireland. In the most simplistic view, all those involved are striving to obtain an independent national culture. It is in the method of achieving this goal that discrepancy, of a political, religious, cultural and nationalist nature, lies. With regard to literature, Casanova splits the sides into their two cultural fields. The first, and most dominant was the the Anglo-Irish Protestant elite fighting to create and protect a culture, but only the culture which was their experience, by virtue of their British colonial connection. The other was the Catholic majority, on a quest for aesthetic realism, a return to the lost language and a representation of the Ireland they knew as true. The aim may be cultural, but the motives remain political.

Identifying the culture of the Irish

The second task was to present that cultural identity to Ireland. In this was a decision to be made, one which rested greatly upon the personal ideology or attitude of each individual Irish nationalist writer. The relationship between a writer and England as coloniser determined their path. Even in being indifferent to the British publishing model, the Irish writer was engaging with it by making a decision to function independently and to create their own model and standards. If an Irish writer decided to be published in London, it was usually in order to enable their work to reach an audience in Ireland or beyond. In this they faced several issues. In going outside Ireland to reach an Irish audience, they had to go through the gatekeepers of culture to get both to London and back to Ireland. Despite the fact that the Irish elite represented a minority of the population, celebrated a minority of the culture and essentially colluded with a British ideology in an Irish space, the writers that reached this cultural field were the writers who represented Ireland in Ireland, Britain and to the world. In many ways Irish culture remained stranded on the island, but in order to obtain an identity globally, Ireland had to take that culture and present it on a global stage. The Protestant elite were the gateway to London and, as Pascale Casanova rightly suspects, London fulfilled the third aim by providing the Irish writer's gateway to the world and thereby a vessel to convey the Irish nationalist identity globally. In order to get through these barriers, Irish nationalist writers faced the struggle of breaking down preconceived ideas about Ireland to allow their ideology to emerge and, subsequently, to find a British publisher which would support, or even simply facilitate, this endeavour. W.B. Yeats was disheartened at the ability of the London publisher to turn a professional Irish author into a "mere entertainer" (Kiberd, 1995, 3). The sense of Ireland as a breeding ground for a folklore of fairies, monsters and whiskey shenanigans was one which many wanted to abandon. It is clear that in order to regain control of its identity Ireland would have to retreat, reorganise and re-emerge. How they could separate from the coloniser upon which they had become so dependent remained to be seen. Choosing a British publisher was a concern for all authors, but made even more difficult for an Irish author on the basis of the marketability of the perceived culture. Larger publishing houses like Macmillan or Longman enabled wide distribution and financial reward if successful, but they did not cater for the Irish ideals and were generally keen to exploit the Irish stereotype. The Ireland that Britain had created, and the world revered, was not one in which the common Irishman recognised himself. At best, an Irish writer could reach out to a publisher with sympathy for the Irish plight or support for the Revival. This sense of self was something which Yeats endeavoured to rectify.

Identifying an Irish Writer

W.B. Yeats in many ways sat on the fence between Ireland's two cultural fields. A mass of contradictions, he was born into the Anglo-Irish Protestant elite but his politics were in line with the nationalist movement and, although his cultural ideals did not favour resurrecting the Irish language, he made it his mission to create a uniting Irish cultural identity.

W.B. Yeats was editor of the Dun Emer/Cuala Press from its founding in 1902 until his death in 1939. The press was run by his sisters Lily and Elizabeth and was part of the wider Dun Emer industries which declared in its prospectus, "The idea is to make beautiful things [...] Everything as far as possible is Irish. The designs are also of the spirit and the tradition of the country [...] The printing has been concerned with the issue of works of genius."(Miller, 1973, 16) The Dun Emer Press published first editions of Yeats's work and a selection of the best writers in Ireland; this selection was generally determined by Yeats himself. Yeats was deeply invested in the publishing process; financially, personally and politically. His editorial motivations were based upon ideas of an aesthetic of high literary content and production values. The writers published were chosen by him and him alone, resulting in many arguments with his sister Elizabeth. He was a meticulous editor and followed the process from its inception to publication. His involvement was driven by the need to establish a press which was heavily influenced by, and implicated in, the creation of a nationalist identity. Yeats was an integral part, and in effect an initiator, of a national artistic movement. He clearly strived to create a whole literary culture with Dublin at the heart in order to showcase a national pride. It was a venture filled with fractious tension, struggle for control and various other sibling issues. Following the passing of Elizabeth Yeats in 1940, John Masefield wrote to Lily with his condolences, "We have always felt that your sister did very much make your brother what he was, and to keep the Irish movement linked with the progress of the arts rather than with violent political upheaval" (Lewis, 1994, 182). The idea was to accumulate, produce and disseminate literature of a nationalist esteem, or simply literature which would reflect the conventions of the Irish ideals and values on a global stage. "It was the grand destiny of Yeats's generation to make Ireland once again interesting to the Irish, after centuries of enforced provincialism" (1995, 3)

In October 1901 Yeats declared:

All Irish writers have to decide whether they will write as the upper classes have done, not to express but to exploit this country [...] for the most part a writer or public man of the upper classes is useless to this country till he has done something that separates him from his class. (1995, 137)

Writers at the turn of the century recognised that they needed to gather an Irish audience. The struggle of authorship was akin to the plight of the female author as theorised by Linda H. Peterson as a quest for literary quality, critical acclaim and financial viability (Peterson, 2009). The Irish writer was battling to find their place as a minority in the publishing industry as women had before him and fellow postcolonial writers were alongside him. They faced the implications of writing for the Irish public with literary integrity or going through London to a critical stage and financial reward. As a postcolonial writer, they had a certain duty to represent their culture.

But there is an issue with assigning a culture to a person which is different from the one with which they identify. George Bernard Shaw is widely considered an Irish writer, dramatist and critic but politically he was largely invested in the British interest. He was a leader of the Fabian society, founder of the London School of Economics and sat on the London City Council as a Progressive at the turn of the century. His views were very much Anglican and, as a Fabian, generally in favour of imperialism on an international front and gradual socialist reform within the empire. Not exactly in keeping with the typically perceived ideology of a suffering colonial Irish scribe which had been subscribed to writers like Shaw. In many ways he did identify himself as Irish but the 'Anglo' prefix formed most of his day to day life, and in a political sense his opinions on Irish nationalism took quite a detached standpoint. He felt the injustices of colonial Ireland, but was pragmatic rather than romantic in his considerations on a solution to the Irish question. Published in London, he wrote tales of Ireland and donated his manuscripts to the National Library. Shaw was politically British and culturally Irish. Then there was Oscar Wilde. While nationalism and advocacy of Irish culture were rampant in Wilde's multifaceted political ideals and broadened cultural horizons they are beyond the scope of this essay. Wilde serves only as an indication of the movement towards a nationalist, legitimized Irish identity which had moved from the Anglo to embrace the provincial. Wilde, raised in London, widely travelled and culturally rich embraced the patriotism of Irish nationalism. Davis Coakley takes the view that Wilde enjoyed the title of 'Irish author' and the charm which came alongside it, he wanted to be identified as an Irish writer; an identity different to the culture he had known as a boy in London. He continued to be published in London and served as an ambassador rather than an active nationalist. Coakley puts forward the idea that in establishing this identity he found respect. Additionally, there was George William Russell, a poet and painter who went by the pseudonym AE. From County Armagh, he identified himself as a nationalist and became greatly involved in the literary revival through his introduction to Joyce and Yeats. Throughout the early 20th century he faced the same issues as Yeats in terms of publishing and had works with both the Dun Emer and Macmillan in London. With writers it was a question of choice, identity, self-preservation and self-sacrifice. They could

choose to be regarded as advocates of the Irish cause or they could have that identity assigned to them by virtue of their surname. Regardless, to be an Irish postcolonial writer was to, at the very least, be a poster boy for the nationalist cause.

A new identity

There is a question as to how much the creation of a national cultural identity was being corrupted by the preconceived ideals of the Irish nation, and how intrinsically the colonial mentality waged on. Colonial Ireland had been in existence for over 800 years. It would take more than a signature on a treaty to eradicate its presence and it would be an impossible struggle to return to the pre-colonial culture after so many generations. The English authority had left, but the English themselves lingered: "It was less easy to decolonise the mind than the territory" (Kiberd, 1995, 6). As in all postcolonial nations there was a need to undo the colonial corruption of the Irish psyche. Seamus Deane describes the Irish literature published from 1900-1940 as an "attempt to overcome and replace the colonial experience by something other, something would be 'native' and yet not provincial, was a dynamic and central energy" (Eagleton, 1990, 3). The lure of being native but not provincial is an entirely Anglo-Irish notion, one which only exists because of a deep-rooted colonial presence. The Irish nationalist would have been satisfied with a provincial identity, one which yearned back to a lost folklore, language and spirit. It was the desire of a Protestant Ascendancy to create an amalgamation of culture to keep their ties with the civilisation of London and maintain diversified cultural fields. This is evident through Dun Emer's production of high quality Irish works, which represented the artistic talent and quality of craft in Ireland but were not made for, nor within the reach of, the Irish majority. They were created with an Irish audience in mind, but were sustainable thanks to British, American or Yeats's own finances (Pierce, 1995). Irish literary culture had been taken under the guise of celebration; it was wrapped up in shiny paper and placed on the top shelf and only became recognisable to the Irish people when it went through a London publisher and came across the channel as a paperback. The perceived goal was presenting the Irish culture to the Irish people, but in reality it was taking what the elite believed the culture ought to be, selecting the parts of the supplementary cultural field which they had critiqued and deemed worthy and presenting that globally. Oscar Wilde believed that Irish culture would emerge stronger by integrating with other cultures (Kiberd, 1995). He promoted the idea of becoming a multilingual nation, apparently overlooking the glaring truth that Ireland was already bilingual. Perhaps if they had spoken French rather than Gaelic in Connemara the struggle for provincial integrity could have been a very different battle. The loss of economic, social and political power was intrinsically linked with the loss of culture and language. In order to regain sense of self-sufficiency and confidence in the Irish capability to build and maintain

the former, the need to rebuild the latter was a priority. For those in the elite, the Irish language was only gained with the territory. It was not a part of Irish culture with which they identified and, as lingering colonial gatekeepers of Irish culture, their indifference did not bode well for the sustainability of the Irish language. The focus was always international recognition, but what use was that when the Irish people could no longer recognise themselves.

When it comes to Ireland from a standpoint of nationalism and literary agenda there is a constant conflict and often a certain duality of identity which causes Irish writers, publishers and readers to conform to various social roles. Roles, which they believe are a testament to their cultural values and nationalist views, but roles which are in turn conforming to a larger framework of roles in a wider colonial context. The nationalist quest has always been divisible between those who view it as a fight from the homefront against an oppressor and those who try to approach the issue through legislative or passive means. Postcolonial publishing in Ireland had the same division. At the turn of the century there were those who utilised the industry to produce newspapers, pamphlets and treatise to instigate a wave of reform and those who believed that creating a foundation of cultural quality and identity would serve a greater purpose. Politically, the nationalist cause has not been realised but culturally, the two fields have certainly built bridges and opened gates to create a unique postcolonial culture which has moved beyond a struggle to become a relationship.

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