The Celtic Twilight: Folklore and the Irish Literary Revival

Emma Russell

Abstract

Ireland's long-standing history as the repressed subject of a colonising power produced a nation permeated by an imperialist culture and lacking a distinct identity. In pursuit of a national ethos, Irish artists, namely W.B Yeats, Lady Gregory and J.M Synge, delved into an almost-lost heritage believed exclusive to the West of Ireland and the peasant population, and adopted it as the basis of a new national identity. Utilising the theories of Benedict Anderson as a framework, this article explores the motives of identity building behind the establishment of Dun Emer-Cuala Press by Elizabeth and W.B Yeats, and the role of independent printing presses in constructing an "imagined community" (Anderson 2006). Throughout this article I will examine the impact of the Literary Revival in shaping the publishing landscape in Ireland, exploring the press’s influence in paving the way for contemporary Irish publishers working independently of large British conglomerates.

Key Words

Irish Literary Revival, Identity, W.B Yeats, Lady Gregory, Synge, folklore, Dun Emer-Cuala, Dolmen Press
Introduction

“Wherever the old imaginative life lingers it must be stirred to more life, or at the worst, kept alive, and in Ireland this is the work of the Gaelic movement” (Yeats, 1961, 209).

Benedict Anderson argues that nations do not precede the beginning of time, but rather are born; often emerging from conflict and a struggle for meaning and coherency. The ideology of nationhood, although a relatively novel construct, is a predominant concern for most modern countries that wish to form a cultural and political identity. The dawn of capitalism and the expansion of print culture in the nineteenth century led to the rise of a national consciousness. Countries began to view themselves as autonomous forces deserving of a historical and cultural heritage distinct from others. For a colonised country the idea of a national consciousness poses a problem. The infiltration of an imperialist culture obscures a country’s sense of ‘self’ and, often, a cultural and political revival emerges from a desire to establish an identity free from foreign influences (Anderson, 2006). In Ireland, the advent of a literary Renaissance at the cusp of the twentieth century was spurred by such a quest. In search of liberation from British influences, the Irish public turned to the written word and print culture in forming a national consciousness. This cultural resistance was made tangible by the establishment of an independent printing press, Dun Emer, in 1902, and by the significant involvement of W.B Yeats and his sisters. As editor Yeats approved the work of many of his contemporaries and close friends, such as Synge and Lady Gregory, both of whom were avid supporters of, and contributors to, the movement.
The Renaissance was marked by a regression to an era before a modern and commercially oriented culture “organised by a few great nations” pervaded Ireland and drove out its traditional inheritance (Cullingford, 1981, 10). This inheritance came in the form of folklore and mythology; ancient legends susceptible to reconstruction according to the desires of those who employed them. Influential authorial figures became engaged in recounting peasantry tales of the West and translating ancient Gaelic folklore to be consumed by the public. In pursuit of a national ethos Irish artists delved into the past, to a pre-Christian era in which fairies and banshees roamed the land and mere mortals walked side-by-side with legends like Cuchulain and Queen Maeve. Fabricating an idyllic model of a community with a shared mythological heritage allowed the writer to become immersed in a culture detached from questions of religion and class and the modernist influences of imperial culture. Thus the Celtic Renaissance, driven by the dissemination of the printed word, presented pursuits on both a national and individual scale.

**The History of the Irish Printing Press**

In his work *Imagined Communities* (2006), Benedict Anderson emphasises the importance of the printing press and the publication of literature in forming a cohesive and shared national understanding. The quest for self which, inevitably, occurs in all occupied cultures is habitually driven by a print culture which makes the dissemination of national literature possible. This is certainly apt in the case of the Celtic Renaissance. The printing press, once controlled by Britain and utilised as a vehicle for cultural imperialism, came to be a vital instrument in circulating ideology of the allegorical folk inheritance of the Irish.
From its conception, the history of the Irish book was intrinsically bound to the undertakings of London printing presses. The production of the written word in Ireland during its first century was shaped by the interference of the king’s printer, which maintained complete sovereignty over Dublin’s only press – Dublin University Press. It wasn’t until 1690 that the king’s printer began to lose its supremacy and Ireland finally began to gain autonomy over printing practices. Population growth in the 18th century resulted in widespread demands for literacy, the expansion of educational facilities and increased print production. In response to the changing social and cultural landscape Dublin presses improved their output and the printer’s and stationer’s guild, the guild of St. Luke, was established in 1672. Further improvement in the 19th century resulted in provincial presses emerging in small towns around Ireland and thus the country, once solely an importer, became a major exporter of literature throughout Europe. This new-found independence over printing practices was irrefutably influential in moulding the future of the Irish book. Increased circulation and availability of the printed word ensured literature shifted hands from the privileged elite to the masses, quickly becoming “an integral part of the public sphere” (Murphy, 2011, 12). The press ensured social, cultural and political ideology reached a larger audience and became a vehicle of civil and national understanding. Print was no longer a neutral medium but was “part of, and reflected, the political and social trends of early modern Ireland” (Murphy, 17). In the same vein, printed literature was not exclusive to the literate. The written word became a means of communal sharing and groups would gather in rural communities to read together, forging a connection between print culture and traditional Irish oral heritage.
Despite the increased opportunities offered to the public, however, Irish writers still faced a major dilemma. Notwithstanding the efforts to maintain autonomy over printing practices, dependency of post-colonial Ireland on Britain endured. Irish writers were faced with a choice. They could opt to publish with one of the small provincial presses and reach a limited Irish public, or they could turn to the London publishing houses guaranteed to deliver wide circulation of their material. In such a fragmented cultural sphere the writer had an obligation to disperse the folklorist tales of the West and to construct an identity worthy of the Irish people, and yet in order to achieve this they were left with little choice but to turn to the major commercial companies in Britain. There were, of course, publishing houses in Dublin during the 19th century, such as James Duffy & Sons (1835) and M.H Gill & Sons (1856), but neither maintained a strong enough link to Renaissance writers to provide an appropriate platform for their folklorist tales. M.H Gill & Sons, for instance, published W.B Yeats’s anthology *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland*, yet gave priority to its Catholic and nationalist writings, leaving Yeats with little choice but to turn to Walter Scott Publishing in London to produce *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888) and *Stories from Carleton* (1889). I would argue, therefore, that although many Irish writers relied heavily on British publishing houses, this reliance was borne out of necessity rather than preference. Given the choice, Irish writers would have jumped at the opportunity to disseminate their work through Irish means, but limited resources and the lingering legacy of colonialism resulted in the inevitable move towards British publishing houses.
Dun Emer-Cuala Press

The Cuala Press, formerly Dun Emer Press, founded by Elizabeth and W.B Yeats in 1902, was destined for nationalist involvement. The press aimed to satisfy a public who were growing restless and demanding new modes of representation. Originally named after Emer, the wife of the ancient hero Cuchulain, the press was renowned for its “expression of national pride” and proved extremely influential in constructing a new narrative for the people (Skelton, 1964, 371). Dun Emer-Cuala was established at the precise moment for Renaissance writers, providing an effective platform and ensuring “every letter of type was set up for the glory of Ireland” (Marriner, 1953, 6). The press posed as a safeguard to the production and distribution of Irish literature and worked to counter-act negative portrayals of the Irish rife in British publications such as *Punch* magazine. For the Irish writer it provided a national platform, allowing folklorist tales to reach an Irish audience, and liberating them of their dependence on British publishers who ensured wide distribution, yet “showed little interest in young Irish authors” (Genet, Mikowski, Garcier, 2006, 32).

From its inception, Yeats was heavily involved in the press and relished the role of official editor and gatekeeper, refusing to publish material which failed to contribute to the Celtic Revival. The printing press enabled him to carry out his nationalist agenda through the dissemination of his contemporaries’ work and he exploited this opportunity by publishing folklorist material such as Douglas Hyde’s *The Love Songs of Connacht* (1904), Lady Gregory’s *A Book of Saints and Wonders* (1906) and all of close friend J.M Synge's work (Hutchinson, 1987). The press was also a vehicle through which he could print his own material and he selected his book of folklore poetry, *Seven Woods*, as the presses’ first publication. This advantage allowed him to give freedom back to the Irish writer whilst maintaining his position at the forefront of the Celtic Renaissance.
Dun Emer-Cuala’s primary concern was disseminating ideology rather than gaining fame and notoriety in Britain, and there is little doubt that without the independent publishing company the archive of Irish national literature – material which focused on the mythology and legend of ancient Ireland – would not be as considered and purposeful as it is today. The private press, therefore, achieved its aim of bolstering the Revivalist movement and prospered as the “main champion and vehicle of imaginative literature” (Skelton, 1964, 368).

**Literature of The Celtic Twilight**

The revival of folklorist tales and the reconstructed sense of communal empathy served two functions: it sought to provide the public with a cultural heritage through which they could construct an identity, and it allowed the Anglo-Irish writer to situate themselves in an environment distanced from the class conflicts of a divided nation. In an Ireland acutely segregated on religious and cultural scales, the Anglo-Irish individual remained an outsider and suspect in the eyes of the natives. Yeats himself refers to an “Anglo-Irish solitude” which “moulded and shaped his whole life and his art” (Watson, 1979, 87). The sentimentalising of the rural landscape was, to a great extent, a means of compensation for the Anglo-Irish writer who found himself with a lack of “social bonding” (Watson, 43). To writers such as Yeats and Synge, the peasants of the West were the inheritors of the Celtic tradition and it was solely through their efforts that Ireland’s history survived. In their portrayal of the rural natives, Synge and his contemporaries presented the embodiment of wisdom and
knowledge. The rural inhabitants were primitive, and yet there was a beauty in this unassuming lifestyle; a vigour and ability to endure not found in the rest of Ireland. Through a process of association the isolated writer positioned himself in a society still connected to a dying cultural past, in what Benedict Anderson coins an “imagined community” (2006).

Of all the writers of the Irish Literary Renaissance, Yeats remains the principal figure. It proves impossible to avoid an encounter with his literature in investigating the work of revivalists. His material has been relentlessly scrutinised and appraised, particularly with regards to its residence at the heart of the Celtic Renaissance and his revolutionary poems and plays, in addition to the innumerable volumes of critical essays he produced, have ensured he is positioned as the father of the Literary Revival. Yeats himself boldly claims that in 1897, at the dawn of modernism, he “began an active Irish life” (Yeats, Explorations, 1962, 235). A strong desire to create a national narrative is evident in his early work and manifests itself in the vision of “an epic Ireland of ancient myth and legend, and in the folk and fairy” (Watson, 1979, 92). Arguably the most ‘Irish’ of his work, and from which the Renaissance has been christened, The Celtic Twilight explores ancient folklore from various sources in the West of Ireland. The figures recounting the tales are, in themselves, shrouded in mythical qualities. In the opening chapter A Teller of Tales, the reader encounters Paddy Flynn, a “little bright-eyed old man” who Yeats comes across “asleep under a hedge, smiling in his sleep” (Yeats, The Celtic Twilight, 1962, 5). Paddy, Yeats reveals, is the source of many of the anecdotes featured in the book and although he maintains a gaiety uncharacteristic of his age, his eyes betray a melancholy. It is in spite of, or perhaps because of, this sadness that he joys in recounting the time his mother was visited by Columcille, the occasion he
saw a banshee or how he is “annoyed” with the fairies (Yeats, 1962, 6). This introductory chapter sets the scene for the entire text of mythological retellings, and it is evident that one message prevails throughout: “No matter what one doubts, one never doubts the faeries” (Yeats, 1962, 7).

The Celtic Twilight is said to have kick-started the revival and inspired other literary figures to employ the tales of the peasantry in their work. Lady Gregory credited the text with inspiring her Gaelic translations. In her encounter with Yeats’s peasants from Sligo, Lady Gregory became enchanted by the “reality and dignity of the native poetic tradition”, coming to the realisation that in the heart of rural Ireland, against all odds, a folk culture lingered, breathed to life by the tales and anecdotes of the locals (Coxhead, 1961, 44). From 1900 she began the assemblage and translation of the oral tales of the peasantry from Galway; a community with which she was intimately familiar owing to the years of her girlhood spent there. Her work was driven by a deep awe in the local’s enduring and unquestioning faith in the existence of an elusive mythical world, and a desire to reconnect the Irish public with the Gaelic tradition. In search of anecdotal tales she travelled to Inishman where she discovered an almost untouched peasant culture in which ancient legends lived on in the memories of the locals. She recalls, for example, of how a centenarian told her, with the conviction of a man recounting a story of the utmost logic, of how Cuchulain had fought with, and killed, his own son.
Just as Yeats is positioned as the father of the Renaissance, Lady Gregory’s predominant work, Cuchulain of Muirthemne (1904), ensured she was firmly established as the mother of folklore. Her efforts in translating the Gaelic oral culture was with the aim of providing a print tradition allowing the Irish public to consume the folk ethos of the countryside before the culture died with the locals. Her work achieved this aim and was published by Dun Emer-Cuala at the request of Yeats, who was deeply involved in Lady Gregory’s work and attributes her to capturing “the ancient heart of Ireland” and the “quick intelligence, the abundant imagination, the courtly manners of the Irish country people” (Yeats, The Celtic Twilight, 1962, 7). Each of her two books, Gods and Fighting Men and Cuchulain of Muirthemne, had gone into four editions by the outbreak of WW1, evidence of the publics’ desire to consume Irish folk culture. Lady Gregory's folk translations formed the basis of many of her contemporary’s work, and through the propagation of her printed legends, she ensured the tales of the peasantry remain alive today.

J. M Synge was another author captivated by the peasants of the West and claims that it was through Lady Gregory’s Cuchulain that he found the dialect he was searching for in his own work. Synge’s work is heavily embedded in the simultaneously coarse and enchanted pastoral landscape. Ireland’s rural setting, post-famine, was one greatly altered by economic struggles and emigration patterns. Contrary to the allied community often depicted in Revivalists’ work, the peasants of the West were governed by a model of self-preservation and often entangled in land disputes. Although writers such as Yeats and Lady Gregory heavily draw on the peasantry as a means of restoring splendour to the image of Ireland, Synge’s involvement, it can be argued, is more personal. The hardship and struggles of the
natives deeply informed Synge’s art, providing a model through which he could explore the personal and cultural conflicts with which he was afflicted. His travels through the Aran Islands and the subsequent folk tales he acquired form the basis for much of his work, such as *The Shadow of the Glen* and *The Playboy of the Western World*. The latter, in particular, glorified the savagery of the Irishman in “both deed and word” and utilised the “emotional and imaginative vitality” (Watson, 1979, 83) of the locals as the basis for the conflict between the idealised image of the natives and the loneliness and destruction of the peasant lifestyle. This conflicting relationship between folk-ethos and violence allowed Synge to explore his own personal ambiguities and can be understood in terms of his divided sensibility. However, to a public recovering from the pejorative English stereotype of the Irish, Synge’s idealisation of a wild and violent landscape lay too close to the savage depictions common in British publications. Synge’s detachment from the Catholic middle class and his inability to predict, or to understand, the negative reaction his work evoked is suggestive of the gulf between the Ireland of his imagination and the tangible Ireland; fragmented, conflicted and angry. Synge’s connection to Yeats and Dun Emer-Cuala Press, however, ensured publication of his work throughout Ireland, despite widespread public anger and his stigma of “the watcher from the shadows” (Watson, 1979, 42).

**Contemporary Irish Publishing**

There is little doubt that Revivalist writers are greatly indebted to the large commercial publishing houses in Britain. Publishers such as A.H Bullen, Elkin Mathews and T. Fisher Unwin played a large role in disseminating Renaissance literature in the 19th and early 20th
centuries. However, it can be argued that Irish writers’ dependence on Britain greatly contributed to the compounding of stereotypical themes of ‘Anglo-Irish’ literature. Many theorists of contemporary literature bemoan the stigma of ‘postcolonial literature’ as an expired tradition exploited by foreign publishers searching for the stereotypical pastoral idyll. In his criticism of the demands of foreign publishers, Dermot Bolger recounts a conversation with a London publisher about a piece of Irish poetry he wanted to co-print, to which the publisher replied: “When I want to read about urban blight I read a poet from Hull and when I want to read about the countryside I read a poet from Ireland” (Bolger, 1993, 5).

Despite the expectations of the foreign publisher, Bolger maintains that a complex and ever-changing cultural and historical past has left the Irish literary landscape without a tradition. He argues that contemporary Irish writers are born in a society with little connection to the post-colonial influences of their literary predecessors, and therefore are liberated from the cultural discourse so heavily embedded in their work. In our modern society, Irish writers cover a broad spectrum of topics and employ a variety of landscapes from America, Britain, Europe, Northern Ireland and the Republic, ensuring their sole distinguishing characteristic is to “share nothing in common except originality.” (Bolger, 27)

The Dolmen Press

In 1951 Liam Miller founded the Dolmen Press with the aim of continuing Dun Emer-Cuala’s commitment to Irish authors. The Dolmen press was established during a period of print inactivity in Ireland and, just like the Cuala before it, sought to restore Dublin to its status of literary capital. One significant difference, however, was that Miller maintained a commitment to publishing important Irish authors living in Ireland, rather than
predominantly publishing those living abroad as the Cuala had done. Miller’s work was revolutionary and paved the way for other contemporary Irish publishers such as Peter Fallon’s Gallery Press, Michael Smith’s New Writer’s Press and Dermot Bolger’s Raven Arts Press, to name a few. This emerging generation of publishers moulded the literary and cultural Irish landscape by providing a platform for contemporary writers whose “main link [...] is their obvious desire to avoid the forms of “Irishism” (whether leprechaun or garrulous rebel) which have been so profitably exploited in the past” (Genet, Mikowski, Gercier, 2006, 82). By providing a platform for contemporary Irish voices, those distanced from the post-colonial society of early 20th century, the press unglued Irish writers from the stigma of the pastoral. The Dolmen Press’s commitment to challenging the connection forged between British and Irish publishers throughout the nineteenth and early 20th centuries allowed for the growth of a conflicting literary tradition, one distanced from political commentary on the North or the rural idyll of the countryside. Irish writers now see themselves not as social commentators but as artists with the freedom to create their own personal fictional universe and, in this sense, present a refusal to adhere to a structured tradition.

Therefore, I would argue that although the Celtic Revival and the subsequent efforts of Dun Emer-Cuala succeeded in carving a literary tradition, a tradition which was necessary in a society struggling to form a coherent national identity, the movement has little significance in a global landscape attempting to distance itself from the conflicts of a post-colonial heritage. Continuing the efforts of the Dolmen Press, 21st century Irish publishing has overthrown the shadow of previous trends and presents “a remarkably confident and
yet challenging and dissenting young European literature in the act of redefining itself and the world around it” (Bolger, 1993, 28) Although divergent in themes and resistant to categorisation, contemporary Irish fiction is often preoccupied with highlighting the failures of the country, “foregrounding its voices of dissent” (Foster, 2006, 259). It has, therefore, been argued that contemporary Irish publishing should be termed 'post-national' rather than 'post-colonial' as it presents a direct contrast to the work of the Celtic Renaissance, offering a “haunted or traumatised Irish society and deep-seated disturbances in the national psyche” (Foster, 2006, 259). Unlike the revival when the peasant became a “poetic mask” (Fleming, 1995, 1) for the construction of a literary tradition, contemporary Irish publishing has moved from concealment to exposure and, although the Irish publishing landscape remains concerned with self-discovery, it is infiltrated by works of a different kind: the dissenting material of a counter-movement.
References


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