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Modernism's Irish Klaxon

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Modernism's Irish Klaxon

The major thrust of my paper this evening is to consider an aspect of the cultural life of a new statelet, The Irish Free State, at its very beginnings, while it was forming itself out of the ashes of civil war that followed the winning of partial independence from Britain. To me, it is indeed remarkable, that in the midst of this political turmoil, Dublin saw the creation of some literary and other journals which filled the need to broadcast new independent voices within the developing state.

“Little Magazines” are really a 20th century phenomenon—they actually ushered in the Modern Movement, and take the name from the greatest of the little magazines, the **Little Review** that was published by Margaret Anderson in Chicago, but given international scope by the genius of Ezra Pound. It was suppressed when it published portions of Joyce's **Ulysses**, but it had a far-reaching impact long beyond its prairie roots. It spawned hundreds of imitators from the 20s to the present. Hoffman, Allen and Ulrich's seminal work **The Little Magazine**, published in 1946 is still the best and most comprehensive treatment of the little magazine. They define the genre as such: “A little magazine is a magazine designed to print artistic work which for reasons of commercial expediency is not acceptable to the money-minded periodicals or presses. Little magazines are willing to lose money, to court ridicule, to ignore public taste...” Essential sources for Irish little magazines include the recently published **Irish Literary Magazines** [2003] by Tom Clyde, the four volume work by Alvin Sullivan entitled **British Literary Magazines** [1986] and Barbara Hayley's **300 Years of Irish Periodicals** [1987].

Tonite we are concerned with the 24 month period in 1923-1924 that can be book marked on one end by the torching of Sir Horace Plunkett's mansion outside of Dublin on Jan. 29, 1923, and at the other end, by the demise of the national newspaper and long lived defender of Home Rule, **The Freeman's Journal**, on Dec.19, 1924. This 24 month period brought to fruition four new journals which would take their part in the nation-building effort: **Dublin Magazine**, **Irish Statesman**, **The Klaxon**, and **To-morrow**. In order to be more concise and to avoid confusion in this paper, I have used the editors' real names rather than their pseudonyms: James Starkey wrote and edited under Seumas O'Sullivan; George Russell used a number of pseudonyms in addition to AE; A. J. "Con" Leventhal used the pseudonym L.K. Emery; and Francis Stuart contributed to **The Klaxon** and edited **To-morrow** as H. Stuart.

James Starkey's **Dublin Magazine** published its premier issue in August 1923 and continued regularly until Starkey's death in 1958. It was an even-handed and high-minded literary journal of often impenetrable dullness. Many of the cast of characters we are concerned with tonite became occasional or regular contributors to the **Dublin Magazine** [Leventhal and Ussher particularly, the others on occasion].

The **Irish Statesman**, was founded by the self-same Sir Horace [with financial support from some wealthy Irish Americans]. Plunkett was an outspoken, if well-meaning Unionist, who had thrown his support behind the Irish Free State government; indeed, he became a senator, and thus became a target of the Irregulars. A major aim of his **Irish**

Statesman was to maintain the privileges of the “ascendancy” and to present the point of view, particularly the liberal view, of the Anglo-Irish within the new state. George Russell, appointed editor by Plunkett, continued to almost single handedly edit the **Irish Statesman** from its first issue in Sept. 1923 until its demise in 1930. Although primarily a journal of political opinion, it is best remembered today for also publishing the major Irish writers of the period [most prominently Yeats and Shaw].

The Klaxon was the first “little” magazine published in the new Irish Free State. It is dated Winter 1923/1924, but it was reviewed in the **Irish Statesman** on Jan. 17, 1924, so it probably was published during the first week of Jan. 1924. The editor, A. J. Leventhal gives a brief view of its beginnings in a festschrift for James Starkey. Starkey had agreed to publish in an early number of his **Dublin Magazine** a lengthy article on Joyce’s **Ulysses**. Leventhal tell us:

“I had got as far as correcting the galley sheets when word came that the printers in Dollards would down tools if they were required to help in the publication of the article. At that time, the very name of James Joyce set the righteous aflame with anger, provoking an odour of sanctimoniousness that seeped into the printing presses of Ireland...My disappointment was so great that together with F. R. Higgins, I started a little magazine **The Klaxon** which did not last beyond the first number and in which was printed a truncated version (to save cost) of my assessment of **Ulysses**...It soon became clear to me that I had judged [Starkey] unjustly and that his plans for the magazine would have come to nought if he had resisted the all-powerful compositor’s union. A little later when a number of us launched yet another short-lived review, **To-morrow**, the same

problem presented itself with a different printing house and we were compelled to send the manuscript across the water where printers are less censorious.”

The Klaxon is a well-printed, nicely designed little magazine, with a decorative Vorticist-like cover, professional looking yet decidedly avant-garde. The selection of articles provides a good insight into the concerns of the radical intellectuals at that time in Dublin. The young intelligentsia, like others elsewhere, were captivated by the spirit of Modernism, with its pervasive sense of alienation from the previous generations.

The Klaxon contains 27 pages of text, with a frontispiece picturing a “Negro Sculpture in Wood”, and the distribution of space allotted to the seven contributions is informative in the extreme. Just what did the editors think they were proving by publishing this first and only issue? Leventhal says in his editorial entitled “Confessional”: “We railed against the psychopedantic parlours of our elders and their maidenly consorts, hoping the while with an excess of Picabia and banter, a whiff of dadaist Europe to kick Ireland into artistic wakefulness.” This statement is typical of the posturing of most new little magazines, this sense of a breaking completely with the past and embracing all that is new. George Russell would have none of this. His review of **The Klaxon** hovers between the avuncular and the patronising: “Here Irish youth is trying desperately to be wild and wicked without the capacity to be anything else but young.”

With six pages devoted to editorials, poetry and two minor prose pieces, the remaining space is allocated as follows: 9 pages to Arland Ussher’s fine translation of Brian

Merriman's 18th century Irish poem **The Midnight Court**; 7 pages to the "The Ulysses of Mr. James Joyce" by Leventhal; and the final 5 pages to "Picasso, Mamie[sic] Jellett and Dublin Criticism" by Thomas McGreevy. This misspelling of Jellett's names [both family and given] continued to haunt her throughout her life.

What is of interest here is not so much how Irish little magazines are similar to their counterparts in London, New York, Paris, and elsewhere, but how they differ: how cultural and political factors influence the content and how historical forces determine the content and reception. Those Irish cultural and historical factors include the continuing obeisance that nationalists [and many unionists] gave to the centrality of the Irish language as a cultural wellspring. Another is the attempt to escape from the cultural hegemony of imperialist London with forays elsewhere [chiefly towards Paris and the Modernists], coupled with the need to belittle the cultural accomplishments of the oppressor. This last is often imbued with an overwhelming sense of inferiority. These concerns [language, nationalism and cultural independence] are all in evidence in **The Klaxon**.

Of first importance in **The Klaxon** is the prominent space given to Arland Ussher's translation of a portion of Brian Merriman's **The Midnight Court**. If we recall that Leventhal admits to reducing the length of his own article [we should note that Starkey was originally willing to print Leventhal's entire article] so that Ussher has the most space and the most prominent place of all of the seven contributions by far [it was given one-third of all the space available], and promised continuing installments of the poem in

future issues. The notion that Ireland, to reach its potential as a separate, cohesive, independent nation, would need to nurture its ancient language was generally accepted by the young intellectuals. The twist is that few of these intellectuals had any deep capacity for the language, and that the language movement, and much of its recovery of the literature of the past, was imbedded in the Celtic Twilight's emphasis on elite aristocratic heroes and the insipid lyricism endemic of late Victorian and Edwardian times. **The Klaxon** rejects that Twilight tone, yet provides for the nationalists' need to link to their common past, albeit in translation. Rather than the presentation of aristocratic heroes, Merriman's poem, with its Rabelaisian overtones, deals with the dilemma of young women without a sufficient pool of eligible young men to pair off with, of women having to marry impotent old men, of clerical celibacy, and sexual freedom: subjects not often emphasized so frankly in other available Irish texts. Frank O'Connor's own translation, published in the 40s, was banned by the censors. Ussher's entire translation, with an introduction by Yeats, was fully published two years later in London in 1926. Some sources credit Ussher with the earliest translation but I have seen mention of an American translation published in Boston in 1897.

Arland Ussher

Arland Ussher was born in 1899, of distinguished Anglo-Irish stock [one, a bishop, was particularly remarkable for his scholarly reading of the Bible and determining, apparently quite incorrectly, that the age of the earth from day one of the creation until his time in the 17th century was 4,004 years. Actually he had it figured out to the exact day of the week and hour of the day. His calculation was successfully used as authority in countering Darwinian claims in the 19th century]. Ussher, here appearing under Percy,

was a product of an English public school and attended Trinity without taking a degree. In addition to his facility with Irish he was an independent philosopher, indeed he refers to himself as a philosophical belle-lettrist. For a time between the mid 20s and the late 30s he was running the family farm in County Waterford, but he extricated himself and removed to Dublin where he was an enigmatic figure, writing on existentialism, cultural subjects, and folktales: writings that have an aphoristic and mystical bent to them. His **The Face and Mind of Ireland** [1949] and his **Three Great Irishmen** [on Shaw, Yeats and Joyce, published in 1952] are well worth the reading today. He was, like Stephen Mackenna the translator of Plotinus, one of those non-aligned Irish philosophers of a republican bent.

C.J. Leventhal

The next article is Leventhal's appreciation of **Ulysses**. This is, quite simply, a straight forward embrace of Modernism. He defines Modernism as "tradition breaking into new molds and expressing life from a new angle with a changed vision." Leventhal is interested in persuading, in illumination rather than polemic, providing a useful narrative summary, and a justification of why **Ulysses** is so remarkable, why it is already a great book, a new classic. Obviously, by this time, nearly two years after its publication in Feb. 1922, **Ulysses** was still difficult and costly to acquire [Russell in his review of **The Klaxon** in the **Irish Statesman** admits, that he has only read those excerpts of **Ulysses** published in the **Little Review**]. It was controversial in the extreme and subject to censorship at the grassroots level. Leventhal at this time is already a committed Modernist. A francophile with an extraordinary background: "His undergraduate studies at Trinity College were interrupted when he joined the first Zionist Commission

immediately after the first world war and spent a year in Palestine where he helped to found the **Palestine Weekly**. He was invited to join the London Office of the Jewish National Fund where he became associated with the **Zionist Review**.” His subsequent return to his studies at Trinity eventually resulted in a PhD degree. He was to succeed Samuel Beckett, as a lecturer in French literature at TCD in 1932. With his international outlook and experience, Leventhal eschews the parochial for the Modern. His sense of pride that Joyce is an Irishman, writing about Dublin, in the vanguard of all that is great in modern literature is palpable, yet as he says “It is not necessary for an artist to develop on his native soil to produce his best work.” He downplays what he calls Joyce’s “grossness” to emphasize that, “The style alone is sufficient to attract readers. The quaint Greek compounds, the melodious words, the rare vocabulary, apart together from the profundities and indecencies, will keep **Ulysses** alive for posterity.” This first defense of **Ulysses** published in Ireland, avers that it is an Irishman who has created this internationally acclaimed work, and brings fame to this new nation. Leventhal links **Ulysses**, not to London, but to the Bible, the Greek epics, Schnitzler, Appolinaire, the Dadaists. Through Joyce, Ireland is taking its place among the nations.

Thomas MacGreevy

The third longest contribution, Thomas McGreevy’s “Picasso, Mamie [sic] Jellett and Dublin Criticism” was written by yet another francophile, who was an accomplished poet, often linked with Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey as a triumvirate of “Irish Modernists”. This article, like Leventhal’s, is a defense of Modernism with an embrace of the Continent, but it also shows that underlying colonial’s sense of inferiority when it criticizes all things English.

First, however, it may be interesting to consider, the attention given, in this grouping of journals, to the importance of the visual culture. The Irish are often accused of having no visual sense or culture at all, or at least that sense is always subordinated to the literary. Russell, a painter himself, is always generous in noticing the arts and drawing attention to whatever is going on in Dublin. He gives regular space in the **Irish Statesman** to the visual arts in spite of his antipathy to Modern art. James Starkey, who was married to the accomplished artist Estella Solomons, reproduced the work of contemporary Irish artists in many issues of **Dublin Magazine**, and provided regular notices on the current art scene. One of **To-morrow**'s editors, Cecil Salkeld, trained as an artist in Germany, writes on "The Principles of Painting" in the two issues of **To-morrow**, and prints two Expressionist-like woodcuts for **To-morrow** [one of which, "Cinema," is reproduced in the 1991 exhibition catalog **Irish Art and Modernism**, where it is misdated]. The second issue of **To-morrow**, somewhat incongruously includes a lengthy article by Arthur Symons on Daumier. It is noteworthy that a new nation, poor in resources, recovering from a revolution against a powerful neighbor and a civil war, should give as much attention as it does, disproves the canard of Irish insensitivity to the visual arts.

The title of McGreevy's article suggests multiple purposes: to notice the recent work of the Irish cubist Mainie Jellett; to show that Picasso and the best of the Moderns have gone from Cubism onto better things; and to inform Dubliners that they should pay attention to what is going on on the Continent and not look for England to set the cultural pace. Many of the younger Dublin painters such as Paul Henry and his wife Grace Henry

[the one credited with loaning the African sculpture used as a frontispiece] certainly took a modernist approach in their painting, but it is generally considered by all that it is Mainie Jellett who introduced modern painting to Ireland. McGreevy is not impressed by “Miss Jellett” and wonders “one would have thought that by this time our young artists would have taken up, and got over, cubism.” At the same time, according to McGreevy, the Dublin critics should have absorbed the principles of Modernism and not be shocked by Jellett’s work. Yet, it is neither “Miss Jellett” nor Picasso that concerns McGreevy the most: of greater import is to warn against the perfidious and backward influence of all that is English. Three quotes from McGreevy:

”There are a dozen first-rate painters in Paris today (there is only one in Dublin, and there is none in London, as usual).”

or

“Our art teachers are in the grip of the English tradition—the worst of all traditions in painting, not excluding the German.”

or

“That Gainsborough could make such concessions is a sign of the curious inability of the Englishman ever to be more than half an artist. Spencer, Marlowe, Dryden, Landor, and Keats are perhaps the only exceptions; and Webster, who may have been an Irishman. Practically all the others are moralising snobs as much as they are artists, Chaucer and Shakespeare and Shelley and Reynolds as well as G.F. Watts and Mr. John Galsworthy and the detestable Doctor Johnson. There is no artistic conscience in the country whose greatest genius could have written both **King Lear** and **King Henry V**. That Ireland, in spite of Anglo-Irish provincialism, can produce a consistently artistic, unmoralising,

ungenteel genius, even in modern times, is, I believe, clear, in the light of the literary achievement of Mr. Yeats, Mr. Joyce and Mr. George Fitzmaurice.”

This youthful braggadocio, with that undercurrent sense of inferiority nurtured by years of marginalization and colonial rule, is quite evident here. McGreevy, after a career as a poet, became an art critic, and art administrator, ending as the Director of the National Gallery of Ireland, the preserver of much of the art that here he so explicitly derides. He too, could not leave well enough alone: upon his return to Ireland in the late 30s, he added an “a” to the spelling of his name, becoming MacGreevy, where he was previously a Mc.

F.R. Higgins

Leventhal’s co-editor, the poet F. R. Higgins, is a man of varied and considerable achievement. Like Leventhal, he was already an experienced journalist. During his short life [he died in 1941] he edited many journals, but most notable was the first Irish woman’s journal entitled **Welfare**. As with most new journals **Welfare** received little support, so Higgins renamed the second and final issue **Farewell**. He was active in the labor movement, and became a business manager at the Abbey Theatre in the last years of his life. Higgins is a minor poet, and the poetry selections in **The Klaxon** are minor as well. In addition to his own poem and another by a G. Coulter [who Leventhal says “stilled us with a song mellowed in gaol.”]. Francis Stuart who contributes the poem “North” to the issue, had also been amnestied from jail a few months before. “North” is not one of Stuart’s best efforts, yet Stuart was a very fine poet, and had won many prizes for his poems before abandoning poetry for prose in the 1930’s. He is the author of over

20 novels, his masterpiece being **Black List, Section H**, published in 1971. He is one of the most controversial of any Irish author in the 20th Century: imprisoned for his part in the civil war, later again by the French immediately following WWII for his work as a Republican broadcaster from Berlin back to Ireland. Publications during his lifetime span 75 years from a poem published in **Aengus** in 1919 when he was 17 years old, to a collection of poems, **Arrows of Anguish**, published in 1995. Sinn Fein published a lecture by Stuart in March 1924, entitled **Nationality and Culture**. In it he echoes many of McGreevy's concerns. For example, the language:

"I don't want to enter upon a discussion on the language question—in any case, I don't feel I yet know enough about the question to enter into it, nor is it necessary here. It seems to me that the English language (which it must be remembered, is also the language of America) is one of the few English things which it would be well for us to keep, but certainly not at the expense of our own language."

Elsewhere in the pamphlet he says:

"England may be good enough for the English and English cities may be suitable to a money-mad, sterile civilization, but will it do for us?"

Is it any wonder that Russell employs such a condescending attitude towards statements such as McGreevy's and Stuart's?

The Klaxon editors exercise a good deal of sophisticated editorial control, not always evident in coterie publications. While it seems to have been ignored by one and all [other than Russell's notice, I found no contemporary mention of **The Klaxon** anywhere], it is a significant publication, not only because it was the first little magazine

of the era, but also because it captures the real concerns of the young intellectuals in the Dublin of its day. Those same intellectuals continued to play a central part in the cultural life of Ireland in writing, academia, theatre, and philosophy right up through the end of the 20th Century with Francis Stuart's death in 2000.

Just a brief and final word on **To-morrow**. In contrast to **The Klaxon**, **To-morrow**, the second Irish little magazine seems to have had no editorial control whatsoever, as it was captured by that genius for controversy W.B. Yeats. Its chief significance today is the furor it caused by contributions from the older generation [Yeats' erotic poem "Leda and the Swan" and Lennox Robinson's story "The Madonna of Slieve Dun"]. The editors, the same cast of characters that we find in **The Klaxon**, have however learned to capture public awareness, and capitalized on the fact that they had to go abroad to get it printed [in perfidious Albion]. This controversy provided **To-morrow** with some well needed publicity prior to publication, so that it was eagerly awaited and widely read and commented on when it finally appeared in Aug. 1924. **To-morrow** is of historic importance in Irish literature as it published Yeats, Joseph Campbell, Liam O'Flaherty and other prominent Irish writers, not the least of which is the appearance of a poem by Blanaid Salkeld, the mother of the editor Cecil Salkeld. Only in Ireland would a son put his Mum prominently into an avant-garde journal.

The magazine, the literary journal, and the little magazine, continued to play a central role in the cultural life of Ireland in the 20th century. The continuance of **Dublin Magazine**, **Envoy**, **The Bell** and many others, have all played a part, as **The Klaxon** before them, in interpreting Ireland for Ireland and for the outside world.

Thank you.

WTO'M 7oct03 [this version presented at Providence College to ICARI on Oct. 7, 2003]

NOTES and SOURCES

Margaret O'Callaghan's article superbly documents the influences of the language question and the nationalism question in the **Irish Statesman**, and Anthony Olden gives all the background needed in his article on **To-morrow**.

Tim Armstrong covers McGreevy's article in his essay in the Cork UP collection of essays on the Irish Modernists.