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Draft Remarks on "Twentieth Century Irish Literature" to Friends of the Jamestown Philomenian Library, Jamestown, Rhode Island

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DRAFT remarks at Jamestown Library, 920318

Good evening.

Thanks etc.

It isn't only on St. Patrick's Day that people gather to hear about Ireland and her Literature. It is a fairly common occurrence, even in remote places on this earth. The purpose of my remarks is to provide some background as to why this is so, and why it is so remarkable.

It is not my intention to overpraise the contribution of the Irish in general, because I don't believe that their achievement in many areas is that significant. Certainly not so in science or industry, music or dance. But the achievement in literature within the English language is remarkable indeed, when one considers that Ireland is the geographic size of the state of Maine, with a population

of less than that of the Boston metropolitan area, one tenth the size of Great Britain. One wag has said that if it were not for its weather, Ireland would be considered a third world nation. In spite of this, the Ireland of today has a flourishing (not necessarily profitable) book publishing industry, a number of successful national, regional, and local newspapers, and a national and regional theatre which is vibrant, experimental, popularly supported, and frequently praised.

I would like to focus my remarks on the dramatic achievement of Irish writers, as a means of illustrating the overall achievement of the Irish in the field of literature.

IRISH DRAMA

Shakespeare's career can be likened to that of the Gutenberg Bible. It is rightly said that the first book printed with moveable type epitomizes the highest that can be reached in the art and craft of bookmaking. Gutenberg was so talented, understood all of the intricacies of his craft, that he set the standard, never achieved again, with his first book. While there are predecessors of Shakespeare, he mastered the craft of drama, the genre in all of its forms, that no one who comes after can even consider to reach a like mastery. He wrote masterpieces by the dozens. It is no shame to be compared to Shakespeare and be found wanting. That said, I would maintain, that if it were not for Irishmen, there would be no history of English drama worth studying. Since Shakespeare, all of English drama is dominated by Irish writers.

My definition of a great dramatist, is one who writes

great plays; whose plays are continually performed to the delight of audiences. This is a fairly easy thing to identify and justify, when you compare definitions of what is a great novel, or a great poem, or a great essay.

I like this definition particularly well because it emphasizes another aspect of dramatic literature which is worth noting--that is the text is meant to be performed for an audience, rather than simply read. If we consider productions, amateur, college, repertory or commercial within a 75 mile radius of Jamestown (including Boston), during the last 20 years, I have been able to see more than 20 productions of Irish plays. I will mention some specifically as we proceed.

Contemporaries of Shakespeare participated in the great Elizabethan wars in Ireland, which resulted in the settlement of many English adventurers on Irish soil. Edmund Spenser, Sir Philip Sidney, Walter Raleigh all participated in these wars. A good part of Spenser's Faerie Queene was written in Ireland. Within a hundred years of this development at the end of the Seventeenth Century Irish born writers were having their impact on the English stage.

In the Restoration theatre, 3 names stand out: Congreve, Wycherley and farquhar. Congreve and Fraquhar are Irishmenn. The Way of the World, and the Beaux Stratagem are performed with regularity. I say some mention recently of a local production of Congreve's Way of the World.

Three plays dominate English theatre in the 18th Century: She Stoops to Conquer, School for Scandal, and The Rivals. Oliver Goldsmith and Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the authors are of course Irish. A year and a half ago URI theatre produced The Rivals, the others as frequently if not as recently.

The wasteland that is known as 19th century theatre did not begin to be recultivated until the arrival of Oscar Wilde in the 1880's. This witty Irishman has something in common with Goldsmith in that both of them have written masterpieces in three genres: Drama, fiction and poetry. Goldsmith's is an interesting achievement to expand on because he writes on Irish themes in his great elegiac poem The Deserted Village--heere he uses as a background the displacement of the peasants from the land in favor of grazing and ranching, and his sentimental novel The Vicar of Wakefield is a thinly disguised Irish setting.

In Oscar Wilde's case along with his popular plays like the Importance of Being Earnest, Lady Windermere's Fan, A Woman of No Importance, he wrote the poem The Ballad of Reading Gaol, and the novel The Picture of Dorian Gray. Their facility within multiple genres is often used to denigrate their accomplishment.

Overlapping Wilde's career as it reached its tragic close at the end of the Nineteenth Century, we find two parallel careers of George Bernard Shaw and William Butler Yeats. Shaw continues the tradition of Congreve, Sheridan, and Wilde of the Irishman conquering the London stage. For the first three decades of the Twentieth Century, there was no more dominant presence than that of Bernard Shaw. Three years ago, the Rhode Island Shakespeare Company produced Shaw's classic play Saint Joan at their venue off of Bellevue Avenue. His so-called Irish play John Bull's Other Island is often in production.

Each of these dramatist epitomizes what is best of the English theatre. In each century, the best representatives happen to be Irish, even if the themes, settings, and background blend into the dominant culture of England.

I would like to return to another strain of influence which will help us to understand why that dominance continues up to today.

At the turn of the century, the great poet William Butler Yeats, along with Lady Gregory founded what was to become the great national theatre of Ireland, The Abbey Theatre. Yeats wanted to emphasise Irish themes, locales, customs, rather than English, classical, or other customs. With due deference to Lady Gregory, Yeats was the imaginative and intellectual dynamo which drove forward the Irish Literary Renaissance. Rhode Islanders should be reminded that one hundred years ago a series of articles appeared over a four year period written by Yeats and published in the Providence Journal on Irish literature. The Journal published some of the earliest writings of this Nobel laureate, and all concerned Irish literature and customs. Yeats is primarily a great poet, but he did write many plays (I have seen some of his one-act plays performed by the Westerly group Moonlight Theatre, and by the RISC) one of which, The Countess Cathleen, transformed the young people and energized many in their subsequent war against the British government. Yeats later, after the Easter rebellion of 1916, penned the line "Did those words of mine sent out the men the British shot". It is impossible to overemphasize Yeats influence on the politics and culture of the new Ireland.

It is not too much to say that Yeats was the Irish Literary Renaissance. It seem to me that a Renaissance can be an event whereby a number of great writers inexplicably come together, producing great works. Or it can be a circumstance whereby an atmosphere is created when minor writers can produce great individual works. The Irish Literary Renaissance, it seems to me, is an example of the latter. There are so many wonderful books, poems, plays, created during the first two decades of this century that no other word can describe it. For example. to my mind, two of the loveliest pieces of prose written in this

century was written by a bad poet named James Stephens. His *Crock of Gold*, and *The Charwoman's Daughter* are still a delight to read. They are among my favorite books.

With the founding of the Abbey Theatre, Yeats provided Irish writers with an opportunity to write plays with Irish themes for Irish audiences. It was Yeats good fortune that his young friend John Millington Synge took up his offer and wrote *The Playboy of the Western World*. A Touring group of the Abbey came through Boston last winter with this play with only modest success. Twenty years later Sean O'Casey began submitting his masterpieces for Abbey consideration. Last year, Trinity Square put on O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*--it was one of the finest performances that I have seen Trinity do in many a year. Ann Scurria and Peter Geraghy were superb in the title roles. O'Casey's *Dublin Trilogy*, *The Shadow of a Gunman*, *Plough and the Stars*, and *Juno and the Paycock*, have all been produced in this area in the last 18 months.

Before we get to the present, there is another name that needs mentioning. I have already had occasion to mention two Irish Nobel Laureates in Yeats and Shaw. Of even greater influence than these two, is the influence of a third Irish Nobel laureate, and that is Samuel Beckett. I make no special claims at having a privileged understanding of Beckett, agreeing as I do with the critic who described his *Waiting for Godot* as a two-act play where nothing happens twice. Meaning is evident in experiencing his work (URI did *Godot* and some of his minor works in the late Seventies, the Westrely group has done *Not I and Act Without Words* recently). Beckett's control, imaginative ambiguity and humor are easily in evidence in production. Beckett is a major influence on all of contemporary international drama. It should come as no surprise that a writer who wrote novels with the characters with names such as *Murphy*, *Malone*, and *Molloy* would have some Irish influences in his plays.

Has this marvelous heritage been carried forward into the present on the Irish stage? In conclusion, I shall mention only Brian Friel who has been writing major works for the last three decades, and two "new" playwrights Thomas Murphy and Frank MacGuinness.

Brian Friel's latest play *Dancing at Lughnasa* will probably capture all of the 1992 Broadway Tony Awards. It first appeared at the Abbey Theatre, then was triumphant in London, before coming to Broadway. Friel's *Translations* was produced at Trinity in 1982, and there was a production of his *Aristocrats* at the Huntington Theatre last year. While I did not like the acting in the Trinity *Translations*, the theatrical impact of presenting two cultures [the old non-English speaking Irish peasants--who are however able to conduct conversations in Latin and Greek, and the monolingual English soldier engineers] is so immediate and moving. A wonderful theatrical device

which Friel used so well. I am not saying he uses tricks but that he uses theatre to its best advantage. Friel's most famous play, Philadelphia Here I Come, utilizes two actors to play parts of the same person--a trick used less effectively by Hugh Leonard in his Da.

And finally, we come to the younger generation of writers, now making names for themselves on the stage. I will take Frank MacGuinness first, simply because I have seen a production of one of his plays (Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme) which was performed in Boston in 1987. MacGuinness, like Friel, is from the north in Donegal, and has a special insight into and interest in the citizens of Northern Ireland. Is he saying that the mindlessness of that generation that went off to be slaughtered in the trenches of France, is the same sort of single-minded and murderous impulse of the paramilitaries?

I chose to end on Thomas Murphy because he has worked in what could be called ensemble work, with the Druid Theatre in Galway. I have only seen a play that Murphy wrote for Television last summer at the Peacock Theatre in Dublin. He is a presence I believe only in Ireland. Time will tell as to his travelling ability. What I do want to emphasize is that the regional theatre in Ireland (Druid again) is so vital. The intellectual force behind the Druid is a woman named Gary Hynes. As a recent graduate of the local college in Galway, she banded together with some actors (Mike Lally has gone on from here) and founded the Druid. It was the first interpreter of Thomas Murphy. Hynes, has gone on from there to the Royal Shakespeare in London, back to Dublin to become the Artistic Director of the Abbey Theatre.

It is only as it should be that in keeping with the purpose and intent of theatre, that to my mind, the most dynamic force, the person with the greatest moral and intellectual influence on the Irish theatre of today, is a young woman from Galway Gary Hynes. I could mention other minor writers, Brendan Behan, Dion Boucicault, Arthur Murphy, many others, but time runs short. Suffice it to say that the Irish presents, for better or ill, has been and continues to be a dominant force in the English theatre. \\

Thank you.