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Irish Free State Little Magazines

[paper to be presented on July 25, 2002, **Places of Exchange** Conference, University of Glasgow, by William T.O'Malley]

This paper is part of a broader study of literary and political journals that began publication as the Irish Free State was creating itself in the midst of a civil war. My plan today is to place the first little magazine in the Irish Free State, **The Klaxon**, within its historical context. The period that I am interested in, 1923-1924, can be bookmarked on one end by the torching of Sir Horace Plunkett's mansion outside of Dublin on Jan. 29, 1923, and on 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. The **Irish Statesman**, was founded by the self-same Sir Horace, an outspoken, if well-meaning Unionist, who had

thrown his support behind the Irish Free State government. The chief aim of the **Irish Statesman** was to maintain the privileges of the "ascendancy" and to present the point of view of the Anglo-Irish within the new state. George Russell, appointed editor by Plunkett, continued to single handedly edit the **Irish Statesman** from its first issue in Sept. 1923 until its demise in 1930. Although 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]. Considering the overall patronising elitism of its tone, it is no wonder that it failed to counter the expected threat of a Catholic triumphalism.

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. 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 the **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."

Russell's review of **The Klaxon,** hovers between the avuncular and the patronising: he says: "Here Irish youth is trying desperately to be wild and wicked without the capacity to be anything else but young."

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. These young intelligentsia, like others elsewhere, were captivated by the spirit of Modernism, and 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 with the past and embracing what is new.

With six pages of 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. The typo in McGreevy's article [both on the cover and on the title] may be attributed to the fact that McGreevy may not have seen proofs of the entire issue, and in the article he only refers to "Miss Jellett" without a given name. This could also be a sign of the compositor' revenge.

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 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 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 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 [they like Yeats had lost it], 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 the 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 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 directly in other texts. The entire translation, with an introduction by Yeats, was fully published two years later.

The next article worth discussion 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

publication, **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 excerpts of **Ulysses** in the **Little Review**]. It was controversial in the extreme and subject to censorship at the grassroots level. Leventhal at this time is running a Dublin bookstore, and is already a committed Modernist. A francophile with an extraordinary background [even before his matriculation at Trinity Dublin, as a young Zionist he went to Palestine and edited the **Palestinian Weekly** for a time], and he eventually was the successor to Samuel Beckett, as a lecturer in French literature at TCD. With his international outlook and experience, Leventhal eschews the parochial for the Modern. His sense of pride that it 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 Dadists. Through Joyce, Ireland is taking its place among the nations.

The third longest contribution, Thomas McGreevy's "Picasso, Mamie [sic] Jellett and Dublin Criticism" was written by 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 colonialist sense of inferiority when it criticizes all things English.

First, however, it may be interesting for this group 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, an amateur artist 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 most issues of **Dublin Magazine**, and provided regular articles 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]**. The second issue of **To-morrow**, 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 lead. 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.

Leventhal's co-editor F. R. Higgins is a man who should receive his due in a conference such as this. 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**. Higgins is a minor poet at best, and the poetry selections here 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. 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 McGreeevy's and Stuart's?

The Klaxon editors exercise a good deal of sophisticated editorial control, not always in evidence 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 of its being 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. In contrast, **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 capitalize on the fact that they had to go abroad to get it printed [in perfidious Albion]. But that's a story for another day.

Thank you.

WTO'Malley

NOTES and SOURCES

Hoffman and Ulrich does not include **The Klaxon** in [still] the standard bibliography. **Dublin Magazine** is described in the 'supplementary list' section containing other literary journals.

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.

Biographical material on Leventhal and Higgins taken from Welsh's Oxford guide and Henry Boylan's biographical dictionary.

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