

1990

Irish Literature: A Brief Survey

William T. O'Malley

University of Rhode Island, rka101@uri.edu

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O'Malley, William T., "Irish Literature: A Brief Survey" (1990). *Technical Services Department Faculty Publications*. Paper 23.
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Irish Literature

Remarks at Cranston Leisure Center, 20 October 1990.

I am delighted to take part in your series of talks on 'books and more books'. The wide range of topics is evidence of your vivacity and openness to the world of ideas. When I was asked to speak to you on Irish Literature, I was intensely eager to accept at this time because the invitation coincided with the realization that this year is the 50th anniversary of the death of the great Irish poet William Butler Yeats. Yeats was the dominant figure, during his lifetime, not only on the Irish scene, but on the broader stage of English language letters. Also of interest, is the connection between Yeats and the movement now known as the Irish Literary Renaissance which he founded, and Rhode Island. More on that subject anon.

Some wag has said that the only thing which keeps Ireland from being a third world country is its weather. The truth in this barb: the fact that Ireland has only recently emerged from its colonial heritage; that it is a small island no bigger than the state of Maine; with a population less than the greater Boston area, is recognized as a leader within the literary commonwealth of nations in the 20th century is a very remarkable thing indeed. My talk to you today will highlight some of the writers who have led Ireland into this prestigious company, their predecessors who have been influential within the English language tradition, and some few words on the state of literature in Ireland today.

GAELIC LITERATURE

As you may have guessed already, I am concentrating on that part of Irish Literature that is written in English. There is also a literature of more ancient roots, first written down in mediaeval times, in Gaelic [more precisely 'Irish']. This literature is still being written: there are authors who write, speak, and live their lives only through the medium of 'Irish'. Daniel Corkery, an influential teacher, writer and mentor of the Irish Literary Renaissance, calls this Ireland the 'hidden Ireland'. The study of this literature is of very little interest to the outsider, and, unfortunately is of very little interest to the insider--i.e., it is estimated that fewer than 500,000 Irish people can read and converse in Irish in Ireland today. This after mandatory teaching of the Irish Language in the Irish school system since the 1920s. It should be said however, that this language, in its phrases, interspersed within the daily life of Ireland does have a perceptible impact on the Irish writer in English today.

BACKGROUND

In the pantheon of English literature, Irish writers are more than prominent members. After Shakespeare [everyone must get in line after Shakespeare], and beginning with the introduction of the English language on a large scale into Ireland (Spenser was part of the conquering hordes), in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Irish born writers (descendents from those English settlers into Ireland, much as our Emersons, Thoreaus, and Whitmans were descended from those same families to bring about the American Renaissance--actually the birth of American literature), those Irish born writers of the Seventeenth Century, minor authors for the most part, with the exception of William Congreve, become the major writers of the 18th Century--Swift, Goldsmith, Sheridan. With these writers and others, the sense of place of Ireland, as part of the subject becomes a moving force within the work itself. Swift's "modest proposal", Goldsmith's "deserted village"--even his Vicar of Wakefield is imbued with an Irish aura--and Sheridan's gentry have an Irishness about them which is most pronounced. By the way, I invite all of you to attend this coming Spring, the URI Theatre Dept.'s production of Sheridan's *The Rivals*. If you have not already seen this play done, I think you will enjoy it. Its language, its humor, (it's as funny as the contemporary plays such as *Noises Off*, or anything by Neil Simon. The directors of this program would do well to explore a bus trip to URI for its various theatre productions.

OSCAR WILDE, NINETEENTH CENTURY

We can skip most of the 19th Century in this brief survey, mainly because the Irish writers of this period are not of the caliber of the English Romantics (Wordsworth, Keats, Byron, etc.) or the Victorians (Dickens, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy). Only in the area of 19th Century theatre do the Irish shine, but it is a faint light at best. The Irish are the best of a sorry lot of English-language dramatists. The only first rank Irish author of the century to my mind is Oscar Wilde. I would urge any of you who enjoy reading great biographies, to look into Richard Ellmann's biography *Oscar Wilde*. This biography won all sorts of literary awards, and will provide you with both a wonderful grasp of the man Oscar Wilde, but also a sense of the times in which he lived. Wilde's mother and father were both in their own ways, Irish writers who would repay even a cursory reading.

IRISH LITERARY RENAISSANCE

One of the most remarkable of all of the literary movements of the past 100 years, is the Irish Literary Renaissance, which is first documented as the "Celtic Twilight", and other such poetic labels. In fact, over 100 years ago, in the Providence Sunday Journal there began to appear articles, poems, and stories from some Irish authors on the activities of Irish writers, both in London and in Dublin, who were beginning to write on Irish themes, looking back to the old myths and legends of Ireland, rather than to the Classical period, or more recent English influences. Chief among these authors was a man called William Butler Yeats. Son of an Irish painter, educated in art school, he almost single-handedly (such

was the greatness of his genius, personality and influence), created what is now known as Irish Literature. Beginning as a rather unoriginal romantic poet of the 'aesthete school', he blossomed into the major poet of the first half of the Twentieth Century in the English language. Pound, Eliot, Stevens, Auden and others all pay tribute to the incredible force of this poet's work. For a poet whose natural inclination was the mystical, the esoteric, and the obscure, it is remarkable that his poetry on public subjects such as The Easter Uprising of 1916--"did those words of mine send out those men the English shot?", the Civil War, and on the movement he founded are still read with wonder and pleasure today.

"Louis MacNeice, himself a fine poet, wrote in 1941 that if he were editing an anthology he would include 60 poems by Yeats: "there is no other poet in the language from whom I should chose so many." Throughout a long career Yeats maintained an extraordinary level of excellence, gaining in power and perception to the end. One of his many fine late poems "The Municipal Gallery Revisited", a valedictory on his own life, his friends, and the Ireland he knew, was written after the age of seventy. A commanding feature of Yeats's poetry is its confessional nature. The poems move from personal experience to public pronouncements or philosophic meditations. Even when based on his esoteric thought they speak to the human condition, as in the oracular "The Second Coming". Opening with the striking figure of the falcon, it reaches the dictum, so often quoted, "THINGS FALL APART; THE CENTRE CANNOT HOLD." The imminence of the strange desert beast arouses awe and fear. We have all felt that fear; we need not know that the poem is based on a cyclical theory of history." [DIB?]

YEATS'S EASTER 1916

I would like to read to you my favorite Yeats poem. Its subject matter is the Easter Rebellion, when certain Irish revolutionaries attacked the British government forces in Dublin, during WWI. Less than a 1,000 men and women attacking the might of the British empire, led by Padraic

Pearse, a school master and poet, Thomas MacDonagh, a lecturer in English literature at The National University, Countess Markievicz, the first woman elected to the British Parliament, James Connolly, a trade unionist, and mentioned in the poem--Major John MacBride, the "vainglorious lout" who married the love of Yeats's life, Maud Gonne.

I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth Century houses.
I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered awhile and said
Polite meaningless words,
And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or a gibe
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club,
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

That woman's days were spent
In ignorant good-will,
Her nights in argument
Until her voice grew shrill.
What voice more sweet than hers
When, young and beautiful,
She rode to harriers?
This man had kept a school
And rode our winged horse;
This other his helper and friend
was coming into his force;
He might have won fame in the end,
So sensitive his nature seemed,
So daring and sweet his thought.
This other man I had dreamed
A drunken, vainglorious lout.
He had done most bitter wrong
To some who are near my heart,
Yet I number him in the song;
He, too, has resigned his part
In the casual comedy;
He, too, has been changed in his turn,
Transformed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.
O when may it suffice?
That is heaven's part, our part
To murmur name upon name,
As a mother names her child
When sleep at last has come

On limbs that had run wild.
What is it but nightfall?
No, no, not night but death;
Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said.
We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead;
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
I write it out in a verse--
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

IRISH POETRY AFTER YEATS

For those of you who are interested in Yeats, and his early connection with Providence, through the interest of the editor of the Providence Journal in the 1880s and early 1890s, should take in the exhibit now at the Providence Public Library, "W. B. Yeats and His Circle, 1865-1939". This travelling exhibit is supplemented by items from the fine Irish Collection at the PPL.

Since the passing of Yeats there have been a number of Irish poets who are still worth the reading: chief among the second generation is Patrick Kavanagh, who died in the mid-60s. His long poem, *The Great Hunger*, a title which calls to mind the label given by those peasants of the 1840's and 50s who suffered through the great potato famine which caused over a million deaths and as many emigres from Ireland within a decade. The population was halved during that decade, leaving psychological scars on the populace for generations to come. Kavanagh's poem, is concerned with a different hunger, the hunger of the countryman for a better life, encumbered by impoverished emotions and intellect. It remains a powerful poem even today.

Of interest to us today however, are some poets from Northern Ireland, both Protestant and Catholic, who have international reputations. Chief among these poets is Seamus Heaney, born in 1939, son of educated Catholic farming family, who holds both the prestigious Coolidge Chair at Harvard University and the Poetry Chair at Oxford University. Another Catholic poet, John Montague who was born in Brooklyn, but returned to Northern Ireland as a child, has written some of the best poetry on the Northern 'Troubles' to come out of Ireland in the last 20 years. Montague's poems have the personal immediacy as well as the historical scope evident in Yeats's poem which I just

read. I recommend that you read Montague's *The Rough Field* if interested in the Northern question and contemporary poetry.

IRISH DRAMA SINCE THE FOUNDING OF THE ABBEY THEATRE

It is really in the area of the theatre that the Irish have continued to excel in contemporary letters. Indeed they lead the way within the sphere of drama in English. Since Yeats and Lady Gregory founded the Abbey Theatre at the turn of the Century, what has since become the national theatre of Ireland, many Irish dramas have been performed on that stage- John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, and *Riders to the Sea*; Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, *The Plough and the Stars*, and *The Shadow of a Gunman*, as well as the plays of Yeats, Denis Johnston, Paul Vincent Carroll and others.

On a contemporary basis, there are a surprising number of young playwrights who seem to have the talent and staying power for future work. Brian Friel, whose play *Translations* was performed at Trinity Square in 1982, is a powerful forerunner of these young playwrights: Frank MacGuinness, and Tom Murphy. MacGuinness' *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, performed in Boston in 1987 is one of the most powerful plays of recent years. The Boston theatre world often finds room for Irish productions.

The most influential of all contemporary dramatists, regardless of language, is of course the Irishman Samuel Beckett. Educated at Trinity College Dublin, a lecturer in French literature at Trinity in the late Twenties, and a secretary to James Joyce in the Thirties, Beckett, with the production of his play *Waiting for Godot* in the early 50s, has influenced all of literature to an incredible degree. I make no claims to understanding Beckett completely--and am often reminded of what one critic said of *Waiting for Godot*: "that it is a two act play where nothing happens twice". I can say that anyone who is privileged enough to be able to see a Beckett performance (rather than reading his work), will find that his work is rich in humor and language.

In sum, from Goldsmith and Sheridan in the 18th Century, through Wilde in the 19th Century, through Synge, O'Casey, George Bernard Shaw in the 20th century, to the present dominance of Samuel Beckett, Irishman have dominated the English language theatre. It seems that with the latest generation that dominance may continue.

IRISH FICTION

All of Twentieth Century literature is dominated by the presence of one writer, more than all others: James Joyce. His experiments with narrative, his interest in the psychology of his characters, his creation of the 20th Century anti-hero (Mainly Leopold Bloom, but including others), is mimiced by all who have come after him. The educated reader is well rewarded by reading his short stories *Dubliners*, and his novel *Ulysses*. His experiment *Finnegans Wake*, or his novel of the psyche is read by specialists. It took Joyce 15 years to create this unread work. But his technique, narrative style, are everywhere to be seen now in the modern novel.

I would recommend, however, another novelist who I am sure most of you would enjoy reading. James Stephens, who was born in the same year as James Joyce (1882) in Dublin wrote many poems (all, to my taste, extremely bad), but also wrote two modern masterpieces: *The Crock of Gold*, and *The Charwoman's Daughter*. Both are fanciful in nature, both humorous and loving, with the characters leaving you with the feeling of meeting a dear friend.

Generally speaking, the 20th century Irish writer has not excelled within the genre of the novel. The short story was an early vehicle for the Irish writer, and was developed quite successfully in Ireland. One thinks primarily of Sean O'Faolain and Frank O'Connor immediately here. Sean O'Faolain who was born in 1900, just had his latest novel published in the U.S. *And Again?* The premise of this novel is that the protagonist is living his life in reverse (begins at old age and grows into childhood, with the catch that as he is going in reverse, he has no memory of what went before him-his old age). It is an interesting work which you can find in your local library.

FRANCIS STUART

My favorite Irish author is Francis Stuart--another old-timer, born in 1902, and like O'Faolain is still going strong. He has written over 40 books during his long career, yet he is still virtually unknown in the US. His latest novels, published since the early 70s are indeed his best. The autobiographical novel, *Blacklist Section H*, published in 1971, recounts Stuart's life as a student at Rugby, his marriage at the age of 18 to the beautiful Iseult Gonne, the illegitimate daughter of Yeats's beloved Maud Gonne, his involvement in the Irish Civil War and subsequent imprisonment for two years, his early career as a writer, coupled with chicken farming and horse racing in the 30s. With the breakdown of his marriage to Iseult, in 1939, he took a position in Germany as a lecturer in English literature at Berlin University. His most powerful novels are a result of his transformation by this experience in Nazi Germany during the war. As a national from a neutral country, Stuart was in a unique position of

observing Nazi Germany, from the inside during the war years. Stuart survived the bombing of Berlin, and was subsequently imprisoned by the French after the war, with the thought that he may have been a collaborator.

As an Irishman of revolutionary leanings, as his imprisonment during the Civil War would attest, and as a member of a family with strong ties to the nationalist movement, Stuart worked with many Irish exiles in Germany during the war years, who hoped to attack the English--the old saw that "England's difficulty is Ireland's Opportunity" is in operation here. In any case because of this association with the outsider Stuart's reputation has suffered in England. One thinks of his ex-brother-in-law, the Nobel Peace Prize winner Sean MacBride, who was one of the Founders of Amnesty International. This distinguished international jurist and statesman, was in the 1930s, the chief of staff of the IRA, and in many ways a constant

spur in the English side. When he died 18 months ago, the Daily Telegraph castigated his memory as a murderer. This the Nobel peace laureate!

Francis Stuart's novels since: *The High Consistory*, *A Hole in The Head*, and *Faillandia* are powerful vehicles for his visionary and mystical writings. I recommend him to you.

JOHN BANVILLE

Finally, I would like to mention the novelist John Banville. He has written many novels but it is only recently that his work has received wider critical acclaim. This year's nominees for the Booker Prize (The British equivalent of the National Book Award, or the Pulitzer), includes Banville. Banville has written a number of novels recently which have as its metier the scientific world--what with Doctor Copernicus, Kepler, and *The Newton Letter*. Banville's interest in science is at a slant: trying to locate that kernel of truth in modern society- if it is there, or if it is to be found. He says:

One of the things that fascinated Einstein was the fact that mathematics was invented by man and yet the world obeys its rules. This means either that we only see that segment of the universe that agrees with our rules, or, more interestingly, that we impose something on the universe in order to see it.

These words of Banville, seem to me to aptly express the concerns of the role of the artist that Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett have so clearly evoked for 20th Century artists. How does art influence life, if at all. What stance does the committed artist take in order to be true to both his art and to life. These questions, best formulated by Irish writers in the 20th Century, continue to be considered by

the latest of Irish authors.

CONCLUSION

I hope, that my few words, outlining some of the major figures and concerns of Irish literature will interest you sufficiently to reader re-read these writers. In any case, I thank you for your attention, and wish you God speed. Thank you.