

GOING GLOBAL?

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No movement in painting, said W.B. Yeats, ever outlasts the impulses of its founders. He felt much the same about the Irish nation-state. Two of his great poems about the founding acts, “Easter 1916” and “Leda and the Swan”, are heavy with a sense of loss: the action which marks a birth also leads directly to war and death. If “the painter’s brush consumes his dreams” (Yeats, “Two Songs from a Play”, *Collected Poems* 240), and “our love letters wear out our love” then the very expressions of a national idea, once uttered, can never be fully recaptured by their authors. They might, however, be taken up, like baby Moses in his basket rescued by some Pharaoh’s daughter, in a different dispensation. Or they might, like the future worlds of Derek Mahon, lie dormant for years in a disused building or an abandoned technology.

In previous phases of Irish culture, a near-death-experience had often led to new vitality: the sense of an ending helped to suggest that something else might be beginning. In the cryptic words of Samuel Beckett: “Imagination dead. Imagine.” Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill’s figuring of Irish as the corpse that won’t stay dead but sits up to deliver one more final utterance is a recent variation

But it was Beckett who became the model for a culture that fed on abstinence. The less he had to say, the more wonderfully it was said. The shorter his texts, the richer the commentaries they evoked, like some famished Third World country which was the subject of endless international investigations. He was the author whose imagination was vivified by failure. It was success which he found difficult, as when he fled his home in Paris on the announcement of his Nobel prize in 1969 with the comment “quelle catastrophe” (Cronin 543). Tiger Ireland, likewise, never fully evolved literary forms for coping with affluence. That reluctance was due to many factors: the difficulty in photographing a still-moving object; an unsureness as to whether the prosperity was real and lasting; a desire first of all to look in the rear-view mirror and take the measure of that landscape which people were leaving behind (Kiberd 269-88).

It was the more popular forms of romantic fiction and crime novel which engaged with the bright lights and shiny surfaces of Tiger Ireland, as did a small but growing number of films.¹ Strictly literary artists continued to deal mainly with aspects of the recent or remote pasts. The more that international finance broke up old cultures, the more

1 Editor’s note: As Seán Crosson pointed out to me, some examples would be *About Adam* (Gerry Stembridge, 2000), *Goldfish Memory* (Liz Gill, 2003) and John Boorman’s *The Tiger’s Tail* (2006). For a good survey of these films see the chapter “Between modernity and marginality: Celtic Cinema” by Ruth Barton in *From prosperity to austerity. A socio-cultural critique of the Celtic Tiger and its aftermath*. Ed. Eamon Maher and Eugene O’Brien, Manchester UP, 2014.

necessary its sponsors in New York and London found it to celebrate writers who could supply vivid accounts of what had been erased. A major play such as *Dancing at Lughnasa* was both analysis and symptom of the underlying process, offering a myth of self-explanation to the diaspora in those cities, but some of Friel's earlier works on such themes had had nothing like the same success on these circuits. The brilliant books of McGahern also remained, outside of Ireland, a rather minority taste. His last great novel *That They May Face the Rising Sun* had its title altered by the US publisher to *By the Lake*, lest readers might think it a tour guide to Japan.

In so far as such versions of national culture triumphed abroad, they tended to offer simplified versions of Irishness. Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, with its storyline suggestion of a land as desperately interesting and as interestingly desperate as ever, fell on receptive ears. McGahern's inflected narratives never made it anything like as big. Whereas McCourt heightened colours to the point of caricature, McGahern took the view that Irish life was inherently so extreme that the artist must tone them down, if only to make them credible.

Yet, through the nineties and noughties, as Ireland became the most globalized economy in Europe, there was much talk of the worlding of Irish writing. More writers were living abroad and writing about 'abroad' than in the seventies or eighties. Emerging novelists made a point of setting entire works in New York, Berlin or Central America. The finest of all was, arguably, Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, an account of the international members of a cricket team in New York. It would take some straining to read its plot in terms of an occluded 'Irish' narrative, such as might be found in Banville's *Doctor Copernicus*. O'Neill, before it, had written a study of his mingled Irish and Turkish ancestry, *Blood-dark Track*, but as a long-committed New Yorker has long treated nationality as a sort of post-modern joke: "for years I was under the impression that Flannery O'Connor was Irish – a Kerryman, perhaps" (O'Neill 88). Early in *Netherland* the protagonist's wife discusses members of a tribe up the Amazon river who do not know that they live in a country named Colombia: but the same may be true of many of the novelist's fellow New Yorkers.² The minds of many Irish writers resident in that city were moving well beyond the national idea, yet most of them, as soon as they featured in a colour supplement, were renationalized as fast as any bank: "the Irish writer X."

Dozens of poets, as well as novelists, had chosen to set parts of a work in some overseas place, for purposes of comparison and contrast with Ireland. The contrapuntal narrative was all the rage in lyric sequences by Harry Clifton, Derek Mahon, Thomas MacCarthy, Paul Muldoon or Medbh McGuckian, as in novels by Joseph O'Connor or Hugo Hamilton. At the same time, the 1990s was the decade in which it became fashionable to be Irish across the world, as people used the post-modern pub, the spectacle of Riverdance, the music of Enya or the memoirs of McCourt to

2 For a brilliant analysis of the book in this light, see Stanley van der Ziel 60-76.

connect with their inner Paddy. Many overseas authors began to turn to Ireland, as Borges and Pinget had done in the era of high modernism, for setting and for theme. In the subsequent decade, Vargas Llosa wrote a novel about Roger Casement and Enrique Vila-Matas wrote a Joycean homage in *Dublineseque*.

By 2010 the immigrants who had been arriving in numbers since the affluence of the late 90s started to appear in novels, plays and films – but most often in rather restricted roles, as examples of what were condescendingly termed “the new Irish” (i.e. those who had learned enough Hiberno-English to tell customers in pubs and restaurants “you’re grand!”). There was, nonetheless, a sense of expectancy: as if it could only be a matter of time before the fusion-food of restaurants would be accompanied by inflections of hybridized poetry or experimental narratives produced by the immigrants themselves.

Ireland, as it approached the millennium, was indeed a multicultural place. Even the *Evening Herald* found it profitable to issue an enclosed newspaper in Polish on Tuesdays. Evangelical churches for Nigerians opened in many places, as did mosques for Muslims (in the rural west as well as in Dublin). The capital city came to a standstill for celebrations of the Chinese New Year. And a grand-daughter of one of the Vietnamese boat people took first place in Irish in the country’s Leaving Certificate examination.

There were new kinds of writing addressed to the question of hybrid identity in poetry by Heaney and McGuckian, in plays by Friel and Doyle, in stories by Maeve Binchy and Claire Keegan; but in the novel, the form in which one might have expected to find subtlest explorations of the encounter with the Other, there was little enough. Many talented younger novelists had abandoned the attempt to describe a whole society (despite that society still being rather small) and preferred to focus on this or that sub-group: a cluster of graduates from a college class, the workers in a single restaurant, the members of a rock band, and so on. One of the best of these, Keith Ridgway, summed up the technical problem in titling one of his books *The Parts*. It was as if writers now focused novels, as once they had short stories, on outsiders and on the “submerged population groups” beloved of Frank O’Connor. Within Dublin, nobody was trying to write a ‘Wandering Rocks’, let alone a full-blown panoptic portrait in the style of James Plunkett’s *Strumpet City*.

Even more remarkable was the disinclination of novelists to deal with the culture brought to Ireland by the newcomers themselves. The concentration was, rather, on making these people “more Irish than the Irish themselves” – as happened to the Normans of the 1300s – by offering them crash-courses in Irish Studies. Irish novelists who had been educated in the revisionist years after the 1970s, during which so many elements of the national narrative had been erased, were seizing on new arrivals as pretexts for teaching themselves what they should have known anyway.

In her book *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva says that we encounter the stranger in others in order to uncover the hidden, 'untransacted' parts of ourselves. In countries like France, she observes, right-wing parties are forever projecting the national culture as the one which newcomers should embrace, whereas leftists care more for the culture which incomers bring with them. Modernity works best, of course, when cultures receive such equal attention from all parties as to permit a genuine possibility of newness and fusion. Something like that process was observable in the early years of the Celtic Tiger from 1996 up to 2002. Many who arrived in Ireland showed a deep interest in traditions still quite new to them, but they also carried the memory of their own pasts and a willingness to share them. After 2002, there was less fusion and less thoughtfulness. The country fell in thrall to a heedless consumerism, while many of the incomers showed little interest in the lore of their ancestors or in the traditions of Ireland. With eyes only for the main chance, many people (in the most repeated phrase of the time) "lost the run of themselves."

By 2002 the old currency had made way for the Euro. All banknotes which had once borne images of writers from Scotus Eriugena to Joyce disappeared. They were replaced by featureless bridges and buildings which already had the look of the Lubyanka about them. The loss among many Irish people of a confident sense of who exactly they were made it more difficult for some to deal confidently with the Other. The shyness of novelists to deal directly with the immigrant experience stands in telling contrast with the classic works of the literary tradition: *Gulliver's Travels* (a study in defamiliarisation), *Castle Rackrent* and *Ulysses* (which consider the experience of being Jewish in Ireland), Beckett's trilogy and McGahern's stories (both authors constantly exploring alterity).³ These writers all came out of a monocultural land and yet somehow – perhaps because of that – they managed to explore Otherness. *Ulysses* comes, after all, to a grand climax when a thirty-eight-year-old man of eastern aspect invites a twenty-two-year-old graduate back to his kitchen for cocoa. It is hard to imagine any student accepting such an invitation now. The capital city in Joyce's time allowed people to dice with their own strangeness, but now in the age of *The Parts* it is filled with suburbs and shopping-malls, designed to protect people from those very chance encounters which are the life-blood of most good stories.

By 2000 the sources of that provincializing effect were New York and London, whose editors nonetheless remained ravenous for 'Irish copy'. This had long been the case. Exactly a century earlier, W.B. Yeats had warned writers that they were faced with a choice between expressing Ireland or exploiting it.⁴ The expression of a country to its own people could be fraught with excitement and risk, while the exploitation of that material for overseas audiences could bring rapid cash rewards. Yeats, accordingly, sought to bring the centre of gravity back home, by establishing not just a theatre but

3 For a caustic and amusing analysis of this contrast see the unpublished doctoral dissertation by Doljanin, "The Figure of the Outsider and the Immigrant."

4 W.B. Yeats, Letter to the Editor, *The Leader*, September 1900.

publishing houses in Dublin. For all his charisma as a cultural leader, his efforts in the area of publishing were not hugely successful. Even in the 1960s, a quarter-century after his death, there were few publishing houses, except for some gathered around coteries of poets; and the work of leading novelists was displayed by Dublin bookshops in alphabetical sequence alongside that of overseas authors – O'Brien next to O'Hara, McLaverty beside Mailer. Although the first chair of Anglo-Irish Literature was founded at University College Dublin in 1964, the booksellers of Dublin for the most part had not yet decided that Irish writing in English was a distinct category.

All that would change in the seventies and eighties, as 'Irish Studies' came into their own. But some of the cooler, more hip young writers wanted things both ways: they wished to appeal to a national constituency, even as they questioned its underpinnings. *Paddy No More* was the title of a successful collection of their writings from a Dublin publishing house.⁵ Many of the writers included sought an international style. They mocked the Abbey theatre's annual revival of a play by Synge or O'Casey for the busloads of summer tourists. They wanted to be counted one with Borges, Broch and Benjamin – not Davis, Mangan and Ferguson. Yet, even in their impatience with the national idea, they somehow gave it continuing recognition, density, gravitas. And, of course, their ability to tell a good story won them deserved audiences overseas, as well as at home.

Irish writing remained high-fashion in subsequent decades. At one point in 1998, there were seventeen Irish plays being staged in the Greater London area. These plays allowed English audiences to address, at a safe remove, their own unresolved national question, and the fear that they were late-comers to the fashion-parade of nations.⁶ (Their National Theatre, after all, had opened only in 1978, three-quarters of a century after that of Ireland). 1998 was also the year in which the Cross of Saint George replaced the Union Jack at many sporting events; and when the Belfast agreement sketched the prospect of devolved home-rule parliaments not just for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales but also for England itself.

The lure of national cultures seemed to have been rediscovered after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. The collapse of the communist project led the radical analyst Tom Nairn to remark on how few people, through the twentieth century, had proved willing to die for a social class compared with the millions who had died for country (Nairn 59 ff.). The richness of Marxian philosophy had come to a dead end. What was needed, Nairn suggested, was a commensurate sophistication in the literature of nationalism, so that its more positive potentials might be explored. Social democrats began to talk up the need for some form of nation-state, not only to project identity as

5 William Vorm was the editor, the short stories were published by Wolfhound Press in Dublin, including writers like Juanita Casey and John Montague but also Neil Jordan, Dermot Healy and Lucille Redmond.

6 This interpretation was first suggested to me by Harold Fish, who served for some years as Director of the British Council in Dublin.

a counter-weight to globalization, but also to express values of the decolonizing world. They noted rather wistfully that the transnational ideals, which had animated the United Nations upon its foundation in 1945, had not been fully developed, as that organization itself became a mechanism for recognizing newly-independent nations. Less than fifty existed in 1945 but by the century's end there were more than two hundred. Yet all through those intervening decades, while nation-states blossomed, languages had continued to die. As had been the case with Ireland, nations were what filled that empty space which lost languages left behind. In an era of rapid globalization, they exercised much less economic and political power than their leaders liked to believe, being often little more than devices for the psychological compensation of dispossessed peoples. Nevertheless, in the eyes of some more radical commentators, the nation-state had its uses. In its early days it had assisted peoples in containing and controlling the catastrophic onset of modernity; now, in its venerable age after 1989, liberal social democrats such as Tony Judt hoped that it might act as some sort of brake on the depredations enacted by global capital.

Such hopes soon appeared naïve. By the time affluence (of a sort) came to Ireland, the ethical programme of the nation had been all but exhausted. The theory of national revival seventy-five years earlier had been based on the understanding that culture, politics and economics would all work together to promote freedom in conditions of decent self-sufficiency; but these three forces never quite coincided. There was no economic lift-off in the early decades of the state and the weakness of the political elites after the Civil War led to a brokerist, clientelist politics, in the conduct of which various sections of society were 'bought off'. The sub-groups so courted did not include intellectuals or artists: rather these were driven out of the public sphere by censorship and belittlement. They never fully re-entered that sphere to create a more thoughtful type of nationalism or a considered lay theology.

The result of this, over time, was a denigration of national tradition by many intellectuals. By 1969, when a tax-holiday was proclaimed for artists, and by 1981, when the government offered artists an annual stipend in *Aosdána*, the corrosiveness had passed from artists into the mass media. Weak and uncertain politicians now often buckled under pressure from journalists as once they had blanched under the influence of the Catholic Church. The lack of a strong lay theological tradition made it difficult for many to process the liberal doctrines of the Second Vatican Council; and the steady erosion of older religious practices (pilgrimages, pattern days, stations of the cross) led to a privatization of everything from religious practice to consciousness itself. There was no longer an ethical language available for use in the public sphere (other than that employed by artists). Most politicians who talked, as Patrick Pearse had once done, of a patria to be served, would have been laughed to scorn by journalists; and the Irish Republican Army helped to discredit the language of 'patriotism' by their casual slaughter of civilians.

In September 1997, it had been announced that there was not a single postulant registered that year to study for the priesthood in the Dublin archdiocese (Twomey 142); and a couple of years later it emerged that the number of lawyers in the country now surpassed that of priests for the first time since records began⁷. “Money is the new Irish religion” proclaimed a feature in the *Sunday Times* of 2000 (Kenny 176). The old religion, though hierarchical and repressive in many ways, had provided some of the social glue which held communities together. Although commentators often complained of the state being used by church authorities for their own purposes, the truth was that from its uncertain beginnings an impecunious government had used the Catholic Church as a sort of alternative welfare system in everything from education to health care. The older religion of popular devotionism had helped people in conditions of adversity “to preserve an inner detachment from worldly success and from personal tragedy” (Twomey 176); but in the new state a moralistic Catholicism reduced religion to a civil ethic, stripped of most of its visionary majesty.

That rule-bound Catholicism underwent its final collapse in the years of the Celtic Tiger; but in fact the scandals of clerical child-abuse dealt a knock-out blow to what were already enfeebled institutions. Vocations to the religious life began to fall, as we have seen, as early as 1967; and between 1971 and 1991 the average number of children in most families dropped from four to two, as the papal teaching on contraception was increasingly flouted. The commitment of even the more conservative sort of Catholic was eroded by the scandals, since the abuse of children for many constituted an ultimate betrayal of trust. The problem for the wider society, however, was that it had evolved no satisfactory liberal humanist code with which to replace that of the exploded religious institutions. One dire consequence was that, as Catholicism weakened, the more predatory kinds of capitalism began to triumph; and there were few voices, apart from those of artists and some independent-minded reporters, to offer any probing criticism of the new materialism.

The financial crisis which beset the global system after 2008 demonstrated just how ill-fitted the legal frameworks of even the more powerful states were to cope with predators. Yet leaders tried as best they could to cope in a national way with a transnational challenge, regulating the degrees of pain experienced by many vulnerable groups. Nobody, however, found a satisfactory way of curbing the ultimate authors of the affliction. Things hadn't been intended to pan out like this. Those in Ireland who had abandoned nationalist pieties and religious practice in the later years of the twentieth century had believed that they were getting something valuable in return: individual freedom and material well-being. By 2010, as unemployment rose to almost half a million and the economy was micro-managed by the European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund, these promises rang a little hollow.

7 *The Irish Times*, 2 April 2002, 12.

Sometimes, when a people are about to surrender a culture, outsiders come to its rescue. It was T.S. Eliot, a young man from St. Louis, Missouri, who saved English poetry in the 1920s, abetted by other outsiders such as Ezra Pound and W.B. Yeats. In the previous generation, the English novel had been reconfigured by the American Henry James and the Polish Joseph Conrad, as it would be by Joyce in following years. All cultures which survive well do so because they are open to injections of life from without.

Migrants into a new country often expend their deepest energies on adjusting to the new place; and it used to be left to their children or grandchildren to create an art which explored fusions between the family's older traditions and those of the new country. These days, however, things can happen much faster. It would not be altogether surprising if immigrant writers from Africa or Eastern Europe reopened a dialogue with figures such as Cuchulainn or Deirdre. They may well find new meanings in those mythological characters who exist still as buried memories of that landscape in which their people are choosing to live. The model of what Eliot did in 1922 is clear enough: in *The Waste Land* he described a fallen, jaded city, emptied of serious human encounter; but by invoking *The Faerie Queene* and *The Tempest*, the Fisher King and Brahma, he showed how seemingly lost traditions could flow like tributaries back into a resacralised landscape. The fate of the land – with fewer crops being grown every year, but endless ranches being created in a mode of big-farmer pastoralism – suggests a people who no longer feel themselves married to rock and hill. What they desire, at best, is a pleasant view of 'scenery'. Land ownership has become even more important than land use, in ways which would still not be true in France or Italy, whose farmers take pride in bringing home-grown fruits and vegetables to local markets. It is interesting that younger entrepreneurs, many of them women, have drawn a lesson from visits to these countries of continental Europe, setting up successful franchises in artisan foods.

Reviewed against that wider context, Eamon de Valera's radio broadcast of 1943 extolling rural values takes on an insurrectionary intensity. It insisted, in effect, that leaders such as he were not content simply to manage rural decline but were intent on reinvigorating the land. At a time when tens of thousands were leaving every year, and when many who remained showed a disinclination to reproduce themselves, this was a defiant rather than sentimental speech. Many bishops in their pastoral letters of the 1940s warned communities against selfish bachelors, cautious maids and elderly parents blocking the marital hopes of the young – these were the very images used in de Valera's speech in a more positive key, but they could be employed in a more negative mode by bishops as warning rather than vision (Kenny 177). Some cultural critics even wondered whether there might be a link between the censorship of creative art (lamented by Beckett) and the growing refusal to procreate (which his art seemed to endorse). By the 1950s, in a book titled *The Vanishing Irish*, a priest named John O'Brien said that if the decline in population continued, "the Irish will virtually disappear as a nation and will be found only as an enervated remnant in a

land occupied by foreigners” (Kenny 176). One bishop predicted that the people would “vanish like the Mayans, leaving only their monuments behind.” The exclusion of most intellectuals and artists from the national project, under conditions of censorship, robbed de Valera and the bishops of potentially influential allies in his debate.

The state had been established after decades of dire uncertainty, but the cultural domain, in whose name the separatist agitation had been mounted, often seemed marginal. Yet major art-work, as we have seen, continued to lament that most elements of the promised Gaelic revival had never been achieved. *Amongst Women* ends when a man, an apologetic and furtive Fionn after the Fianna, drapes a tricolor over a dead comrade’s coffin. *Dancing at Lughnasa* shows just how little the old fire-festival now means to ordinary people. By the time these texts were written, the Irish had ceded most of their sovereignty – a subject of central value in Gaelic vision-poems long before it became a basis of their wars of independence. Like other European peoples, they were ruled by decrees as often as by traditions or by national codes. The Dáil lost much authority, not only to unelected administrators of the European Union but also to the requirements of multi-national companies.

Against that backdrop the vote by 94% of the people of the Republic in 1998 to ratify the Belfast Agreement seemed sensible. With so much sovereignty lost in a globalized economy, how much really remained to be surrendered in the Agreement? The old territorial claim on the six counties – which nationalists had once considered a force of nature on an island destined to be one, indivisible place – was now withdrawn. It was recognized that a county such as Antrim could be British or Irish or both at the same time. Clearly the British, in advancing the very notion of Ireland as an administrative unit, had been among the chief inventors of its modern version of nationhood, so it was reasonable to admit that there was a significant British element in the people’s identity.

It may well be that the Irish, having confronted their national question for well over a century, can more easily say farewell to the nation-state than the English, whose identity has been drained away first by the British and then by the European structures. But the English may well be arriving at the fashion-parade of nations at just that moment when the show is starting to close down. Nations will continue to exist for many decades as shells, and in even greater numbers, but they will be divested of real economic or political power. They will be increasingly regarded as anachronisms by people for whom a phrase such as “After Ireland” may represent an opportunity to move forward rather than the utterance of an adverse judgement. In its day, the national idea created many good things – a welfare state; a belief that virtue is social as well as individual; a conviction that something in us can survive our own deaths. But it also did serious harm, creating over-centralisation, bureaucracy, distrust of local culture and, sometimes, a real hatred of other peoples. The grand renaissance of culture known as the Irish Revival occurred in those decades just before the nation was embodied in a new state. There may well be a second cultural flowering in com-

ing years, as the political nation called Ireland dies and culture is once again seen to be the site and stake of all meaningful struggles.

Its prestige is still very high. The community believes that many kinds of leader have betrayed the public trust, but nobody says that about artists. Even in the years before the centenary celebrations of the Easter Rising, as young people left in their thousands and shop fronts were boarded up, there was a willingness to look to artists for pointers. As once again a rather innocent people's trust in a monoculture (this time houses) proved disastrous, they turned to artists for inspiration, as figures who might embody the popular longing for form far more successfully than the state had managed to do. Economic collapse, as in the 1890s and the 1980s, had proven one thing – that unemployment in a population educated to relatively high levels can be the very foundation for a revival of the arts. The Dublin of the 1980s had contained a thousand garage bands and the country as a whole nurtured many of the literary talents whose work has been explored in this book.

The children of the 1980s had inherited a strong sense of Ireland, even if many of its elements distressed them mightily. The generation which began to leave after 2008 had a more globalized sense of Ireland; and the prospect of decades spent servicing a debt they did not themselves create led many to opt out: instead of protesting in the streets, like their Greek or French counterparts, they simply emigrated to other parts of the English-speaking world. But, once outside, many learn in a sharpened way what it is to be Irish. They are now part of a worldwide conversation about their country's cultural meaning, much as was the Revival generation of exiles in London, Paris and New York. It may be doubted, however, whether all that many of the current wild geese will choose to "bring it all back home" as did the followers of Yeats and Gregory. More likely they will follow the example of Joyce and Beckett. Yet they still feel an investment in their country: the number of young Irish intellectuals who attended a meeting in New York in autumn 2015 to protest against the commemoration programme of the Abbey Theatre for the following year is proof enough of that.⁸

In Ireland, traditions often appear to die, while in fact being reborn in some new mode. The Irish language never really vaporized, despite O'Faolain's claim in 1926 that Gaelic was over; and it is probably stronger now than it was when the Gaelic League was founded in 1893. But it did die out in many places, only to be replaced by that Hiberno-English which, deriving much of its energy from the syntax of the native language, made writers like Synge and Joyce world-famous. In the aftermath of the Belfast Agreement in 1998, nationalism of the old-fashioned kind consented to abolish itself; but it has been reborn for many in subsequent years as civic republicanism. In the same way what is dying in the spiritual life of the people is not religion but religiosity. The practices of a rule-bound ecclesiocracy are surrendering to the yearnings

8 The Abbey programme for 2016 was titled "Waking the Nation" but was retitled "Waking the Feminists", by writers and critics who objected to the fact that there was only one work by a female author projected for production in the year.

of ordinary people. Despite legislation permitting divorce, familism is still strong, so much so that 62% of the population chose to endorse gay marriage in a referendum on 22 May 2015 of a kind which might not so easily have won such levels of support in other countries of Europe. Ireland remains a place where ancient and modern ideas can often overlap. There is clearly a disconnect between the religious convictions of the people and official church institutions, as there is a disconnect between the population and its political structures (which lag decades behind).

Nature abhors a vacuum. It is likely that entirely new, unimaginable institutions will emerge, just as the Abbey Theatre and Gaelic League (and ultimately a free if flawed state) filled the gap left some decades earlier by the collapse of the old Ireland. The history of a people moves always in cycles. One hundred years ago a cultural revival led – often against the wishes of its very originators – to economic, political and even military assertions of autonomy.

As the country in the spring of 2016 celebrated a centenary since the Proclamation of the Republic, many were struck by analogies between the two Irelands. The fear of a lost political and economic sovereignty had troubled Patrick Pearse and Constance Markiewicz. Trepidation about being inundated by publications of the yellow press assailed Douglas Hyde and Maud Gonne, just as global networks of social media seem to overwhelm people today. But the Revival generation turned those challenges into opportunities, offering a confident diagnosis of its situation. Then, as now, people concluded that sovereignty in an era of growing internationalism might be limited, but that it was nonetheless important for Ireland to play a role in building a better, kinder world. Then, as now, culture was at the centre of all human struggles for self-recognition; and the one domain in which an unfettered kind of sovereignty might yet be enjoyed.

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