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978-0-521-27695-5 - Threshold of a Nation: A Study in English and Irish Drama

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THRESHOLD OF A NATION

A study in English and Irish drama

PHILIP EDWARDS

*King Alfred Professor of English Literature
University of Liverpool*

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

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To my wife

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A nation should be like an audience in some great theatre – ‘In the theatre,’ said Victor Hugo, ‘the mob becomes a people’ – watching the sacred drama of its own history; every spectator finding self and neighbour there, finding all the world there, as we find the sun in the bright spot under the burning glass.

W. B. Yeats, note to ‘Three Songs to the Same Tune’ in *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, 1934

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- 2 The death of Arthur in Shakespeare's *King John*, as drawn by Kenny Meadows, 1843 (From *Works of Shakespeare*, ed. Barry Cornwall, vol. III)
- 3 The House of Fame. Drawing by Inigo Jones for Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Queens*, 1609 (By permission of the Trustees of the Chatsworth Settlement; photograph by courtesy of the Courtauld Institute of Art)
- 4 *Cathleen ni Houlihan* at the Abbey Theatre. Drawing by Ben Bay (By courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)

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PREFACE

This book is a series of studies each of which deals with an aspect of the relation between theatre and nation, first (and chiefly) in the England of Shakespeare when the British Empire was in its very first stages, and secondly in the Ireland of Yeats at the time of the dissolution of that empire. The controlling ideas of the book are described in the introductory chapter. Here I want to say a word about its shape. From the first it was conceived as a group of more or less self-contained essays on English and Irish drama which would relate with each other and contribute to a single if panoramic view of the rôle of the dramatist and the province of the theatre in periods of expanding national consciousness. The narrative of the book as a whole is not continuous and the argument is not sequential. If the reader feels that the movement from one chapter to the next is sometimes abrupt, I can only hope that in the end an organic relationship between the chapters will compensate for their disjunctiveness. Even so, the book may seem like a fishing net, mostly holes surrounded by string. It is a study *in* English and Irish drama, not *of* it, and it has taken its own shape from the topics within the proposed subject which I was most eager to explore and to which I thought I might have something to contribute. It is perhaps the minimal gathering which can exhibit the cultural and historical arc which links Shakespeare in Elizabethan London with Yeats in post-Parnellite Dublin, but, skeletal though the structure is, the book is long enough.

I must distinguish, however, between deliberate omissions (however capricious) and those which were fortuitous. The balance between the English section (six essays, some of them very long) and the Irish section (three) looks like English arrogance. It was never my intention to include extensive critical studies of the major Irish dramatists, Yeats, Synge, and O'Casey. I wished rather to provide a

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context for plays which are well known and frequently discussed, whose relationship to the emergence of a nation is not in need of that kind of elucidation which I give to well-known plays by Marlowe or Shakespeare. Even so, as I explain in the Introduction, the Irish section suffered unexpected attrition and erosion; I hope that as a result my treatment of the corpus of twentieth-century Irish drama does not seem in its brevity altogether too tangential.

One of the following essays, 'The Royal Pretenders' (Chapter 7), was published in *Essays and Studies 1974*, edited by Kenneth Muir, and I am grateful to the English Association for permission to reproduce it here (in revised form). My inaugural lecture at Liverpool, delivered in December 1975 and published by the Liverpool University Press, was a preliminary sketch of material which I later developed in a number of the succeeding chapters. A great many sentences from the lecture have been salvaged and economically reused.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge the assistance I have had in writing this book, particularly from my colleagues Ann Thompson and Nicholas Grene, who read and commented on my typescript, from my former colleague at Trinity College, Dublin, David Greene (now at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies), who most kindly looked over the introductory chapter, from other friends and colleagues who helped to find answers to problems, and from Mrs Joan Welford, who prepared most of the typescript.

This book could not have been written at all if I had not had three months clear of teaching and administration at the Henry E. Huntington Library in California in the winter of 1977. I am deeply grateful to all who made this possible; to the University of Liverpool for granting me study leave, to the Huntington Library for awarding me a fellowship, to the British Academy for a grant, and to the United States–United Kingdom Educational Commission for very generous travel assistance. I could not have had a more congenial place to work in than the Huntington, and I owe much to the kindness and hospitality of the Director, James Thorpe, and his staff, and to the conversation of my fellow scholars, particularly William Ringler, E. S. Morgan, and Eugene Waith.

All quotations in the book have been given in modern spelling. In quoting Shakespeare I have acted as my own editor, though I owe much to Peter Alexander's complete Shakespeare (Collins), and to the New Arden and New Penguin editions of individual plays. I have brought the line-numbering into accord with that of the Riverside

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Shakespeare. My great indebtedness to the Clarendon Press *Ben Jonson* will be apparent whenever I discuss or quote from Jonson's work.

I began thinking about this book in the early seventies, when I was chained and shackled to an edition of Massinger's plays. When at last I became free to think purposefully about the venture, both history and I had moved on. The United Kingdom, which in a way is what this book is about, was now under discussion only as to what particular form its dismemberment was to take, and I had taken up residence among the ruins of one of the most important centres of Britain's imperial trade and communications. Inevitably, the study more and more assumed a threnodic note. I felt myself haunted by the spirits of the departed nation, by the energy, imagination, idealism, ambition, greed, cruelty, and stupidity which had gone into both the creation of the British nation and empire and its undoing. I also thought sometimes that I could hear more clearly the voices of the dramatists of two nations which I have tried to transcribe in the book which follows.

Liverpool, November 1978