

Introduction

My first job was as an Administrative Officer in the Irish Civil Service. I was assigned to the Department of Finance, Establishments Division. Our duty was to decide on the staffing arrangements in various government departments and their outlying services. The work was not trivial. How many air traffic controllers should be employed at Shannon Airport? That was a question for the Department of Industry and Commerce, in the first instance, and for the Department of Finance – in principle, the Minister of Finance – in the end. I found nothing wrong with the work, except that I had no particular flair for it, as my superiors Seán Ó Buachalla, Gerard McNerney, and Louis Fitzgerald had. It was a happy release, then, when Professor Jeremiah J. Hogan offered me an Assistant Lectureship in the Department of English, University College, Dublin. Hogan was the sole professor: he was in full charge of the Department, in accordance with the ordinance of Departments by the Irish Universities Act of 1908. Informally, he entrusted the teaching of Old and Middle English to T. P. Dunning, a scholar of Langland. He handed over Anglo-Irish Literature and Drama, as it was called, to Roger McHugh, a colleague he did not like: he wanted to keep him at a distance. English literature, from approximately the year 1500 to the later years of the nineteenth century – say, from Skelton to Newman and Hopkins – was Hogan's particular concern. American literature was not taught. My duty was to teach whatever courses Professor Hogan assigned to me in English literature, mainly Shakespeare and seventeenth-century poetry, prose, and drama. Being his man, not McHugh's, I did not teach Anglo-Irish literature.

I might have taught it, in other circumstances. My first published essay, I find, was on Charles Macklin. I wrote a dissertation on him for my MA. He was one of a number of Irishmen in the middle and later years of the eighteenth century who sought their fortunes in some relation to the London theatre: Arthur Murphy, Isaac Bickerstaffe, Hugh Kelly, and

others even more forgotten. Macklin wrote about ten plays, three of which were published – *Love à la Mode* (1759), *The True-Born Irishman* (1763) and *The Man of the World* (1781). But he was most acclaimed for performances in the roles of Shylock (1741) and Macbeth (1772). These were the subjects of my essay, a chapter from my otherwise unpublished dissertation. Further essays I published in the first year or two of my employment were on Hopkins, Yeats, Joyce, Synge, Lionel Trilling, and William Empson – this one was my first attempt at “practical criticism,” a reading of Empson’s poem “Arachne.” These essays and reviews brought forth no comment from Professor Hogan. Generally he did not approve of young men rushing into print, but he did not withhold his patronage from me.

Things rested so till I left UCD to take a job at Cambridge as a University Lecturer and a Fellow of King’s College. It happened that the Tripos had a course called Special Author, in which the set books were supposed to be the complete works of the chosen one. The Special Author that year was Swift. I gave the formal lectures for the course and arranged a “circus” of lectures on circumambient issues. Unwilling to let my reading go to waste, I turned my lectures into a book, rather inaccurately called *Swift: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 1969). I had already brought out, with J. R. Mulryne, *An Honoured Guest: New Essays on W. B. Yeats* (1965), and was working on many things in English, Irish, and American literature, including a short book on Yeats for Frank Kermode’s *Modern Masters* series, published in 1971. I returned to UCD in 1967, partly to propose a reorganization of the English Department: three equal professorships instead of one; headship of the Department to be by rotation among the three, every two years; McHugh to become Professor of Anglo-Irish Literature and Drama, Dunning to become Professor of Old and Middle English, and I to become Professor of Modern English and American Literature – “Modern” to mean, roughly, Skelton to T. S. Eliot, “American” to mean as much of American literature as my few colleagues and I could reasonably teach. In 1965 I had published *Connoisseurs of Chaos: Ideas of Order in Modern American Poetry*. Professor Hogan was now President of UCD, having been appointed to the post in October 1964.

During those years, if my memory is accurate, I taught without any ideological emphasis, except for the vague but persistent nationalism which I continued to feel from my boyhood years in Northern Ireland. I realize that that is in itself an ideological emphasis, in its adult form probably bourgeois liberal or bourgeois conservative. But I did not feel

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any pressure to take a stand on an issue of theory or principle. Richard Ellmann's two books on Yeats held out that agreeable possibility. I assumed that reading a poem or a novel meant interpreting it: what interpreting entailed could be best shown in practice, especially in F. R. Leavis's practice and Empson's. Leavis's *Revaluation*, *The Common Pursuit*, *The Great Tradition*, and his essays in *Scrutiny* provided instances of literary criticism I could point to, if called upon, as well as selected passages from Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, and *The Structure of Complex Words*. But my masters were mainly American – Kenneth Burke, R. P. Blackmur, John Crowe Ransom, and Cleanth Brooks. I knew that Brooks's criticism, and Ransom's were deeply conservative, but that did not trouble my sense of the usefulness of Brooks's readings of particular poems in *The Well-Wrought Urn* and Ransom's literary-philosophical meditations in *The World's Body*. It was a day of unusual splendor when I received from Mr. Ransom, as I always called him, a letter in his own hand telling me that he liked my essay on Yeats's *Words for Music Perhaps* enough to publish it in the *Kenyon Review*.

Those peaceful days ended in 1965 when Conor Cruise O'Brien published an essay called "Passion and Cunning," a revisionist survey of the work and life of W. B. Yeats: it was a chapter in a collection of essays called *In Excited Reverie*, edited by A. Norman Jeffares and K. G. W. Cross to mark the centenary of Yeats's birth. O'Brien interpreted Yeats's life and work – some of us thought invidiously, indeed maliciously – to show that the poet was always of an incipiently authoritarian and indeed cunning disposition, even before he was attracted to Mussolini and, on Irish ground, to General O'Duffy; and that even his best poems were incorrigibly marked by that disposition. Those of us who wrote about Yeats could not ignore an attack so vigorous. Nearly every critic of Yeats, from the early days of Louis MacNeice, Austin Clarke, and Stephen Spender to Ellmann, had adverted to Yeats's last years and tried to account for his authoritarian rage, but none had presented a comprehensive portrait of the artist as a deplorable man, as O'Brien had. I tried to take Empson's line, that one hoped that writers would rise above the prejudices of their time but if they didn't, there was no merit in pulling a long face about it. I'm not sure that I convinced anyone. Ideological strife could not be avoided, especially when it started taking violent form in Northern Ireland in 1968, and more generally in Europe and the USA. Killings of Loyalist and nationalist, Catholic and Protestant, in the North made it difficult to think that one could read a poem in a spirit of

disinterestedness. The history of Ireland, which many of us read as “cultural nationalists,” again became rough ground. Revisionist historians began to deconstruct our myths, especially the one according to which the Rising of Easter Week 1916 and the establishing of the Irish Free State amounted to good but unfinished business. The Yeats Summer School at Sligo – I was its first Director – became for several years a scene of ideological strife. Northern Ireland was now an international issue: how could Christians be killing one another? The Troubles, as we started calling them again, brought forward a new generation of poets, novelists, playwrights, and filmmakers, and gave them concentrated themes of division and betrayal. Seamus Heaney, the most famous of these, kept his poetry clear by saying not too much about the Troubles, short of saying nothing; he wrote as if anthropology or archaeology, not history, were his discipline. I made myself notorious for a day by saying, at an open meeting of students and faculty in UCD, that the aim of an education in the humanities was “to enable students to overhear a distinguished mind communing with itself about a work of art.” There was an ideology of disenchantment at large, rueful, often punitive, secular (Fintan O’Toole, John Banville), Frankfurt Marxist (Seamus Deane), feminist (Nuala O’Faoláin, Eavan Boland), and Loyalist (Conor Cruise O’Brien).

In 1980 I left UCD again, this time to take up an appointment to the Henry James Chair of English and American Letters at New York University. The chair was not so called in any relation to me. I gather that it was named in honor of Leon Edel, biographer of Henry James, when Harvard tried to coax him away from New York University. I assumed, what turned out to be true, that “English” in the title of the chair would include “Irish” without any fuss. I regarded myself as a “generalist” rather than a specialist – though I learn with dismay from the *OED* that a writer in the *Economist* for December 2, 1961 referred to “the complacent belief that a well-trained ‘generalist’ could turn his hand to anything.” I have indeed turned my hand to many things, some of which I have assembled in three books, *We Irish* (1986), *Reading America* (1987), and *England, Their England* (1988). A number of review-essays remain uncollected because I could not see how to interpret the authors I wrote about in a clear relation to their Irish settings. I think of Goldsmith, John Butler Yeats, Jack B. Yeats, Liam O’Flaherty, and Eavan Boland in this regard. I continue to teach courses in Irish Studies at New York University under its Director, J. J. Lee, along with courses in English and American literature for the Department of English. Now that the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 seems to have resolved the Troubles by yet again

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affirming the status of Northern Ireland within the British Empire, and giving nationalists the empty promise of some day voting for a United Ireland, it has become possible to teach Irish literature in a more-or-less equable if sad setting. There is a lull. The “culture wars” appear to be over. A year or two ago I taught a course on “Yeats and the Abbey Theatre” as if I were an art historian teaching a course on French Impressionism. I am almost nostalgic for the years in which I wrote fighting essays and books on Deconstruction. Almost: not quite.

The short pieces I have reprinted here are those which are – or seem to be – in conversation with the longer essays on Swift, Yeats, and Joyce.

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PART I

Ireland

CHAPTER I

Race, nation, state

A few autobiographical sentences may not, I hope, be amiss. I was born in Tullow, one of the minor towns of County Carlow, itself a minor county of the Irish Free State, as it was then constituted. But my home – though I rarely felt at home there – was in Warrenpoint, a town only slightly larger than Tullow, in County Down, just across the Border in Northern Ireland. My father was the sergeant-in-charge of the local police force, then called the Royal Ulster Constabulary. We were a Catholic family, living in the “married quarters” of the police barracks, not a comfortable situation in domestic, social, or political terms. My impulses were entirely nationalist, and I regarded the RUC as an alien instrument of occupation: its function was to enforce the status of Northern Ireland, a political entity I deplored. Whatever misgivings my father and mother felt on this issue, they did not discuss them in my presence. Religion and politics were beyond the pale of conversation.

Warrenpoint is a seaside resort on Carlingford Lough, but it is also distinctive for having the largest public square in Ireland. For that reason, when I was growing up, it was famous for political marches, Unionist flourishes, nationalist shows of resentment. Those occasions were equal in one respect, though not ecumenical in any: each party had two days in the year to itself. We had not yet learnt to call the summer months the marching season, but the lines of ideological possession were not in dispute. Nationalists started off the year on March 17, St. Patrick’s Day. Unionists took over the town on July 12, the not-quite-accurately calculated anniversary of the victory of King William III at the battle of the Boyne in 1690. There were two further occasions. Nationalists who were also Roman Catholics – as nearly all of them were – celebrated the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin on August 15. But they marched to a softer tread on that day than on St. Patrick’s Day, since they could hardly claim that the Blessed Virgin was Irish. Finally, on the last Saturday of August,

* The Parnell Lecture 1997–98 at Magdalen College, Cambridge, published in Warwick Gould (ed.), *Years and the Nineties: Years Annual, No. 16* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001), revised 2009.

Unionists celebrated Royal Black Preceptory Day, a festival I did not understand. The success of an occasion was measured by the number of bands that joined the parade and the distances the celebrants had traveled by bus or train. Unionists included members of the Orange Order and the Apprentice Boys: they wore black suits and bowler hats, with orange sashes diagonally across their chests. The bands featured banner images of King William on his white horse casting King James to the ground. Nationalists had no event to show as dramatic as that one, but their banners in green, white, and orange presented a communal figure of Ireland that supposedly included the mythical Kathleen ni Houlihan as vividly as the historical Wolfe Tone, Robert Emmet, and Daniel O’Connell. The lettering on nationalist banners was Celtic, a notional mark of allegiance to Irish, a language we labored to learn and on rare occasions to speak. The music on those marching days consisted of political songs and ballads that could be played to brass, pipe, and drum; on the Unionist side “The Sash My Father Wore,” on the nationalist side “Who Fears to Speak of ‘Ninety-Eight?’” and “A Nation Once Again.” It seemed a harmless custom: there were grim faces, steadfast to some undefined purpose, but I did not feel obliged to take them too seriously. Political passions on display in Warrenpoint were not as fierce as in other towns and villages in the North; in Harryville, Dunloy, and Drumcree, for instance, as in recent years.

I will put an end to these reminiscences now, because my memory has been shown to be fallible. When I published a memoir called *Warrenpoint* some years ago, I relied on my powers of recall to an extent I soon had cause to regret. Errors of fact are there to embarrass me. So I will not claim that my relation to the marches was analytic or otherwise thoughtful. I did not wonder, for instance, as I have wondered since, when precisely Ireland had been a nation rather than a site of quarrelsome tribes, such that in Thomas Davis’s poem of 1842 or thereabouts it must become a nation once again. It had certainly ceased to be a nation on January 1, 1801 when the wretched Act of Union came into force. Presumably that was what Davis had in mind:

When boyhood’s fire was in my blood
 I read of ancient freemen
 For Greece and Rome who bravely stood,
 THREE HUNDRED MEN AND THREE MEN.
 And then I prayed I yet might see
 Our fetters rent in twain,
 And Ireland, long a province, be
 A NATION ONCE AGAIN.¹

¹ *The Poems of Thomas Davis* (Dublin: Duffy, 1853), p. 73.

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Davis's reference to Greece and Rome recalls the three hundred who died at Thermopylae – the hot gates – and the three Romans who kept the Sublician Bridge. I didn't know the references, or stop to learn them, when I committed the song to memory or let it inhabit my mind. I should have wondered why Ireland, to become a nation rather than a province, must exhibit the bravery of Greece and Rome.

In the south of Ireland, so far as I recall, there were no parades of Orange or Green, except for an Orange march every year in Bundoran, County Donegal, for reasons I don't understand. The anthologies read in schools south of the Border featured patriotic poems but not marching songs. The most memorable poem in that context was Thomas D'Arcy McGee's "The Celts":

Long, long ago, beyond the misty space
 Of twice a thousand years,
 In Erin old there dwelt a mighty race,
 Taller than Roman spears;
 Like oaks and towers they had a giant grace,
 Were fleet as deers,
 With wind and wave they made their 'biding place,
 These Western shepherd-seers.²

The Celts were thought to be mighty because epic tradition required them to be.

It is customary to say that Ireland was a nation in the twelfth century, but I don't understand how the conspiracies and struggles for power among local kings fulfilled the concept of a nation. We read of Diarmait MacMurchadha in conflict with Tighernan Ua Ruairc not only because MacMurchadha abducted Ua Ruairc's wife Dervorgilla but because the province of Meath was to be won or lost. We hear of the High King Ruairi Ua Concobhar in league with Ua Ruairc; of MacMurchadha submitting himself to King Henry II of England to gain his support in recovering his territory; of the bishops giving Henry their allegiance in the expectation that he would reform the Irish church, in the twelfth century a notoriously corrupt institution. Davis's "A Chronology of Ireland" gives the relevant dates without comment, as if they spoke their own truth, as they would if they were accurate. I'll give them so far as they have been corrected:

1156: Pope Hadrian IV's bull *Laudabiliter* granting Henry II the right to incorporate Ireland in his realms.

² Thomas D'Arcy McGee, *Poems* (Boston: Sadler, 1869), pp. 176–177.

1169, May: First Landing of the Normans
 1171, October 16: Henry II arrives in Ireland
 1172: Synod of Cashel assembled under the authority of Henry II. A Council, called by some a Parliament, held by Henry II at Lismore.³

Davis does not mention the unforgivable Diarmait and Dervorgilla “who brought the Norman in,” as the Young Man on the run from the General Post Office in 1916 keeps reminding us in Yeats’s *The Dreaming of the Bones*.⁴ However, since 1172, according to Davis and the Young Ireland writers, Ireland has been merely a province.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, it was not universally agreed that Ireland had ever been a nation. Between December 1865 and May 1866, Matthew Arnold gave four lectures at Oxford on the study of Celtic Literature, in which he asserted that the Celts, and specifically the Irish and the Welsh, had for centuries been a race but not a nation. He spoke of “the shrunken and diminished remains of this great primitive race,” but only to remark their “failure to reach any material civilisation sound and satisfying, and not out at elbows, poor, slovenly, and half-barbarous.” Arnold claimed that the Celts had never achieved the degree of composition that would be embodied in a polity. The epigraph he chose for the lectures was a line from Macpherson’s *Poems of Ossian*: “They went forth to the war, but they always fell.” Taking his bearings from Renan’s *Essay on the Poetry of the Celtic Races* and Henri Martin’s *France before 1789*, Arnold spoke up for the Celts, but on the clear assumption that they had never become a nation or entered into history. They were a race, recognizable in their spirit or genius, but they had never exceeded that condition. The genius of the Celtic peoples counted for something “in the inward world of thought and science,” but for nothing “in the outward and visible world of material life.” As late as 1887, Arnold said that the Irish could be regarded as “a nation poetically only, not politically.”⁵

I use the words “race” and “nation” with the liberty of an amateur. I will assume, in default of an erudite sense of the matter, that a race, as distinct from a nation, is what sociologists call a “social imaginary.” Its status is ideal or virtual rather than palpable. It is what people living in the same country – a certain small island in the Atlantic Ocean, say – think of

³ Thomas Davis, *Essays*, ed. D. J. O’Donoghue (New York: Lemma Publishing Co., 1974 reprint of 1914 edition), p. 250.

⁴ *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Russell K. Alspach (London: Macmillan, 1966), p. 773.

⁵ Matthew Arnold, “From Easter to August,” *The Nineteenth Century*, Vol. 22 (September 1887), p. 321.