

THE IRISH THEATRE,  
ITS HISTORY AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

by

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## THE IRISH THEATRE

### Introduction

#### THE LITERARY BACKGROUND OF THE DRAMATIC RENAISSANCE IN IRELAND

The Gaelic revival is but the natural outcome of the vital, living, literature of Ireland's past. Medieval Ireland has produced a rich store of folk-lore and ballads. The Gallowglass of Galloway is, according to Professor Higginey,<sup>1</sup> the first epic created by any people north of the Alps, and contains many grand and inspiring episodes. Padriac Colum writing about The Love Songs of Connacht, a collection of early Irish poetry collected by Sir Douglas Hyde, has this to say concerning it: "Dr. Hyde's collection showed that Gaelic Ireland possessed a folk-literature as beautiful as any in Europe."<sup>2</sup>

Many instances might be given of fine old tales and ballads, which live on in the memory of the Irish people by oral tradition, for it was the custom to sing or recite the old Irish legends. Thus, the Irish Renaissance has its roots in the literature of the past, and reaches back to the emotions and traditions of Medieval Ireland, finding in that early literature the haunting idealism, the brooding melancholy, and spiritual outlook of the Irish People.

In 1840 a group of Irish writers, considering the political situation of Ireland hopeless, turned to literature as the only means left

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1. The Irish Literary Movement, by Padriac Colum, The Forum, Jan. 1915, p.142
  2. The Irish Literary Movement, by Padriac Colum, The Forum, Jan. 1915, p.143.

of building their native land. The leader of the movement was Mr. Davis and with him were associated such writers as Gavin Duffy, Mangan, Walsh Callanan, John Mitchell, Sir Samuel Ferguson, Aubrey de Vere and Dr. George Sigerson. Ferguson took the old Irish epic, The Tain Bo Cualigne, and treated it as Teanyson did the Arthurian legends; Sigerson tried to make the older Irish tradition known by making metrical renderings of the Irish poetry from the Eighth to the Eighteenth Century. This work he published under the title Bards of the Gael and Gaidh. Both men opened the beauties of the early Gaelic literature to the readers of their time and greatly influenced later literary movements.

The 1840 movement was Anglo-Irish, that is a turning away from the Irish language and native culture and a beginning of an Irish literature written in the English tongue. Yet it was nevertheless an attempt to preserve the best in Irish folk-lore, ballad and legend and its eclipse in the political land struggle, of forty years later, is to be regretted. The eclipse, however, was but temporary, for soon a new group drew together in the interests of Irish culture.

In the early nineties four great writers appeared: Mr. Yeats, who stood for the expression of personality through literature; Mr. George Russell, who interpreted the world from a mystical and spiritual viewpoint; Mr. Standish O'Grady, who gave expression in literature to the heroic element in Irish tradition and history; and Mr. Douglas Hyde, who supported what is known as the Irish-Ireland idea, that is, speaking, thinking and writing in Irish. Mr. Hyde became the first president of the Gaelic League, which had for its object, the preservation of the Irish tongue, Irish folk-lore, dances, songs, and sports, and the building up

of an educational ideal and national character. The league drew thousands of young men and women into an intellectual life, which resulted in a national Irish drama.

The dramatic movement, then, emerges as the result of sixty years of literary endeavor. Politically, they were years of struggle and the blazing up of fires of old hatreds; but in the realm of literature a great awakening was taking place, the foundations of which lay back in the culture of Medieval Ireland, and the flowering of which was still to come. Why Ireland, unlike the nations about her, produced no, or, at best, very little drama is an interesting question, which must next engage the attention.

## Chapter I

### LACK OF PRE-RENAISSANCE DRAMA

#### 1. Dramatic Sense of the Irish as Illustrated in Folk-lore and Songs.

Dr. Douglas Hyde, writing in his Literary History of Ireland, has this to say about the lack of pre-Renaissance drama in Ireland: "I have seen it more than once asserted, if I mistake not, that the dramatic is an inevitable and early development in the history of every literature, but this is to generalize from insufficient instances. The Irish literature which kept on developing to some extent at least for over a thousand years, and of which hundreds of volumes still exist, never evolved a drama, nor so much, as far as I know, as even a miracle play, although these are found in Welsh and even in Cornish."<sup>1</sup> Recognizing the truth of this statement one naturally seeks for an explanation. It is not because of the lack of dramatic material in the Irish folk-lore and songs.

"Remarkable fecundity in conception of plot and incident differentiates the early literature of the Gael from that of the uninventive Anglo-Saxon."<sup>2</sup> The dialogue is concise, brief and witty and the early sagas abound in tragic scenes and dramatic intensity. The saga literature of Ireland falls into three great cycles or groups, according to Dr. Hyde. (1) The Mythological cycle, which centres in the people of pre-Illusion time, (2) The Heroic or Red-branch cycle with Cuchulainn as the dominating figure, and (3) The Peasant or Gaelic cycle, telling of the High Kings of Ireland.

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1. A Literary History of Ireland, by Dr. Douglas Hyde, Chap. XXII, p. 276, T. F. Unwin, London, 1910.

2. John Millington Synge & the Irish Theatre, by Maurice Bourgeois, p. 99, Houghton, Mifflin Co. Boston & New York, 1913.

The first group of stories is a small one but the last two consist of numerous epics with Cuchulainn, Conor Mac Neasa, Bairbre, and Eoive as central figures. In the heroic cycle is found the Irish counterpart of Schrek and Huntin, the tragic story of Bairbre, and the famous Cattle Raid of Cooley, as well as numerous other sagas all written with dramatic intensity and abounding in dramatic incidents. The third group, the Fenian tales, are, Dr. Hyde declares, far more modern in conception and surroundings. They are intimately associated with Gaelic life and thought and form the continuous literary output of twelve hundred to fifteen hundred years. In these Gaelic stories we have the nearest approach to drama, which Irish literature made. This is in the Gaelic dialogues between the last great pagan, Ossian, and the first great Christian, St. Patrick. The dialogues contrast the Christian and pagan views of life and they are still used as material for platform oratory by Irish speakers. It is quite evident, then, that if Ireland produced no drama in her early literature, that is was not because of a lack of dramatic material. The literature of ten centuries is crammed with just the material from which drama is made and from which indeed it was made by Yeats, Lady Gregory and others of the dramatic renaissance.

### 6. Irish Dramatists who have Contributed to English Drama.

Not is the absence of drama in Irish literature due to a lack of histrionic talent in the Irish people: "Dramatic talent runs wild all over the Emerald Isle."<sup>1</sup>

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1. John Millington Synge & the Irish Theatre, by Maurice Bourgeois, p. 102.

Indeed, as is well known the Irish are fluent in dramatic speech and excel in dialogue. Private theatricals take place in even the remotest districts and dramatic societies are common.

Irishmen have held their own, as playwrights in the English Theatre. George Farquhar, Richard Steele, Oliver Goldsmith, Sheridan, John O'Keefe, Samuel Lover, Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw, constitute a list of men, who gave themselves to English drama and became famous. Why did they not portray Irish life? Because the London Theatre would have none of it, and the poverty of oppressed Ireland would have denied them an Irish audience. But nevertheless they supply undisputable proof of the talent for playwriting in the Irish people, even if it be latent and undeveloped.

But Ireland has also supplied both England and America with actors of a high order. Such names on the English stage as Macklin, Peg Woffington, Spranger Barry, Sheridan, Knowles Mossop, the Blairs, the Glovers, the Boucicaults and Mrs. Henry Irving, are Irish names. Ireland also gave to the American stage the elder John Drew, Virginia Earl, Ada Bohan, and James O'Neill. Such a list, which could be considerably lengthened, testifies to an extraordinarily vital histrionic instinct among the Irish. Such testimony brings one back again to the question under consideration: Why was there no early dramatic literature in Ireland?

### 3. Reasons for Scarcity of Pre-Renaissance Drama.

Maurice Bourgeois suggests a few reasons why such is the case, reasons which seem partially adequate at least. (1) The Irish as a race are mystic and contemplative. They see and dream and so the dramatic impulse is hampered and fettered, because of that type of mind. The germ



of dramatic art, which lie embedded in the old Sagas, were thus prevented from developing.

Then, too, the Irish genius seems to have been romantic and narrative, rather than dramatic. The Greeks and Latins left great epics and dramas, but no romance. The Irish story tellers, on the other hand, kept narrative in the foreground and crowded out the dramatic.

Though the Roman Catholic church in Ireland has by its ritual fostered the mystical and dramatic, yet the literal orthodoxy of the Irish people, which considers any representation of the divine mystery to be profane and sacrilegious, prevented even the mystery plays from developing though these were common in England.

Perhaps, however, the strongest reason for the lack of dramatic development lies in the fact that Irish life was a real and perpetual tragedy. Thus, tragedy of the imagination did not appeal. English drama reached its height, as did the Greek, during a period of national freedom, prestige, and aspiration. It breathes the spirit of optimism and hope, due to the increasing national greatness. Such a day has not yet come for Ireland. Perhaps it is dawning, and that dawn may bring the flowering of the dramatic instincts of the Irish people. Certain it is that no great drama could grow out of such oppression, such as Ireland has suffered. To put it in Dr. Hyde's own words: "Nothing could develop in later Ireland. Everything, time after time, was arrested in its growth. Again and again the tree of Irish literature put forth fresh blossoms but before they could fully expand they were nipped off. Is it likely that a country where for one hundred years teachers were sent to jail for teaching, - where the possession of a manuscript might lead to the owner's death or imprisonment,"<sup>1</sup>

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1. Literary History of Ireland, by Dr. Douglas Hyde, p. 511.

is it likely that such a country could produce an epic or anything else worth while?

Whether these suggestions give the real reasons or not, certain it is that, while no dramatic work was produced in Ireland during the days of her bitter oppression, as soon as life became fairer and easier for the Irish people, then came the beginning of a remarkable dramatic movement. To this dramatic renaissance, if such a term be suitable to that which did not before exist, we must now turn our attention.

## Chapter II

### THE FOUNDING AND EARLY DAYS OF THE IRISH THEATRE

Irish people have an aptitude for at least one element in drama - speech. They think in terms of conversation, and so in the making of dialogue they are not at a loss. Mention has been made before of the great service rendered English drama by such Irish dramatists as Goldsmith, Sheridan and Oscar Wilde. They did not portray Irish life, it is true, for such was not desired by the English managers and actors. Maria Edgeworth, that delightful delineator of Irish life, wrote her novel The Absentee, first as a play. It was sent to Sheridan who was then manager of a London theatre. Sheridan returned it, assuring Miss Edgeworth that it would never pass the English censor. It dealt too seriously with an Irish problem to be produced on the English stage. It is not strange, then, that under such conditions Irish drama did not thrive.

The early nineties mark the rise of the Irish dramatic movement. Mr. Yeats had written two plays, one of which The Land of Heart's Desire, had been produced in London. The other, The Countess Cathleen, he reserved, hoping for production in Ireland. Mr. Martyn also had written a play, Bushy Field, the first drama of Irish life which seems uninfluenced by the English Theatre. Dr. Douglas Hyde was the author of a Gaelic play, The Twisting of the Rope. It was not possible, however, for the movement towards a distinctive Irish drama to succeed to any appreciable extent, until there was an Irish theatre. A knowledge of this fact led to the founding of such a theatre where plays written by Irish dramatists would be acted by Irish players to Irish audiences.

Lady Gregory in Our Irish Theatre (1913) has told the story of its founding. Mr. Yeats was eager to build or rent a little theatre where romantic dramas might be played. At Duras in 1896, Edward Martyn, Mr. Yeats, and Lady Gregory discussed the founding of such a theatre. Mr. Martyn had written two plays, Heather Field and Inove. The London managers had rejected them, and he was considering having them produced in Germany. Mr. Yeats also had plays in the production of which he was much interested. But more than all he was interested in the beginning and growth of a dramatic movement in Ireland. It was decided to begin an Irish Theatre.

The first step was to obtain the guarantee of a certain sum of money. A formal letter was prepared by Mr. Yeats and Lady Gregory and sent to friends, who might be willing to support the project. The following is a part of the letter prepared by them, and is the more interesting in that it expresses the purpose for which the project of a national theatre was entertained.

We propose to have performed in Dublin, in the Spring of every year certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence will be written with a high ambition, and so to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature. We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory, and believe that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland will ensure for us a tolerant welcome, and that freedom to experiment which is not found in theatres of England, and without which no new movement in art or literature can succeed. We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism. We are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions

that divide us."<sup>1</sup>

The amount of money desired for a three years' experiment was £300. Lady Gregory offered the first guarantee of £25. Among others willing to take the risk of the experiment were Mr. William Lochy, Lord Dufferin, Professor Mahaffy of Trinity College, The Lord Chancellor of Ireland, Mr. Douglas Hyde, the Duchess of St. Albans, Right Hon. Horace Plunkett, and Mr. John Dillon, M.P. The needed guarantee having been obtained Mr. Yeats and Mr. Marjory went to Dublin to arrange for a theatre.

Unexpected difficulties arose. The only Dublin theatres, the Gaiety, the Royal and the Queen's, were all engaged far ahead and were at any rate too expensive. To take a hall or concert room was contrary to the regulations of an old Act, passed before the Union. It forbade a performance for money in an unlicensed building under penalty of a fine of £200. The three theatres mentioned were the only licensed buildings. Happily Mr. Lochy, proved a capable friend, for aided by Mr. John Redmond, Mr. Dillon, and Mr. T. M. Healy, he had the following clause inserted in the Local Government Bill: "(1) Notwithstanding anything in the Act of Parliament of Ireland of the twenty-sixth year of King George III --- the Lord Lieutenant may on application of the council of the county of Dublin or the county borough of Dublin grant an occasional licence for the performance of any stage play or other dramatic entertainment in any theatre, room or building where the profits arising therefrom are to be applied for charitable purpose or in aid of the funds of any society instituted for the purpose of science, literature, or the fine arts exclusively."<sup>2</sup> The clause was passed and the Irish Theatre

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1. Our Irish Theatre, by Lady Gregory, pp. 8 & 9. G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York & London, 1915.

2. Our Irish Theatre, by Lady Gregory, p. 10.

became an actuality in 1899, with May 8th of that year set for the first performance.

The two plays chosen for that first performance were Mr. Yeats's Countess Cathleen and Mr. Martyn's Heather Field. Mr. George Moore assisted in finding actors and having them trained in London. The first performance was marred by objections regarding the orthodoxy of Countess Cathleen. The play is based on an old Irish legend, which tells that during a famine in Ireland some starving country people sold their souls to demons that they might save their bodies. The Countess Cathleen sells her soul to redeem theirs. At her death she is forgiven because of her good intention, and she is received into heaven. This placing of intention before deeds was said to be contrary to the church teaching. In spite of opposition and such disagreeable behavior the initial production of the Countess Cathleen was a success.

During the time of the three years' experiment, 1899 to 1901, the following plays were produced: The Last Feast of the Fianna by Miss Milligan, Mr. Martyn's Heaven, and The Reading of the Bough by Mr. George Moore, in 1899. Diarmuid and Grania by Mr. George Moore and Mr. Yeats, and a first Gaelic play by Mr. Douglas Hyde, The Twisting of the Rope, in 1901. All the actors had been brought from London, some Irish, but still London trained. Only one performance had been given each year. Already in the Reading of the Bough a vital Irish question had been dealt with through the medium of the theatre, and Heaven had produced such a burst of national enthusiasm that the Castle had boycotted it. What was the next step? New plans for broadening the enterprise were made. But before considering that extension let us pause to consider the work and influence of some of the playwrights, who gave the national Theatre to Ireland.

### Chapter III

#### DRAMATISTS OF THE MOVEMENT

No discussion of the Irish Theatre would be complete which did not include a brief consideration of the dramatic work of those who contributed so largely to the success of the movement. In the first three years of the theatre's existence, the dramatists whose plays were produced include Mr. W. B. Yeats, Mr. Stuart Murray, Mr. George Moore, and Mr. Hyde, all staunch supporters of the theatre. In later years, after the theatre became definitely established, Lady Gregory, Padraic Colum, and J. M. Synge also played an important part in its dramatic work. Let us consider briefly the part played by each in the dramatic awakening of Ireland.

W. B. Yeats. Although Mr. Yeats played a prominent part in the New Theatre venture and contributed largely in plays during its whole period of existence, he was not at first interested in drama. He was outstanding in the field of lyrical poetry. In 1899 his first great work, The Wanderings of Oisín, was published. It tells the story of the Fenian poet's three hundred years of wandering in three far off lands. "Although it is a story Mr. Yeats is telling the beauties of the poems are lyrical beauties. In embellishment and richness of color it is Mr. Yeats's most typically Irish poem based on legend, and nowhere do his lines go with more lilt, or fall oftener into inevitability of phrase, or more fully diffuse a glamour of other worldliness. -----Mr. Yeats's Wanderings of Oisín is the starting point of the Celtic Renaissance."<sup>1</sup>

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1. Irish Plays & Playwrights, by Cornelius Weygant, The Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston & New York, 1913, pp. 40 and 41.

Mr. Yeats next turned his attention to prose. John Sherman, a novel, and Shays, a sketch, were both published in 1891. He also devoted himself to lyric poetry, publishing his work in 1890 under the title, The Wind among the Reeds. After the founding of the Irish Theatre in that year, he turned his attention for thirteen years exclusively to drama.

His first play, Countess Cathleen, was produced at the initial performance of the theatre. It is a play in five scenes, based on a story found by Mr. Yeats in a collection of Irish folk-lore. The story is not essentially Irish, for the subject is one treated in the literature of many other lands. Indeed, it is a parable of life, which is vitally true. It recounts the story of Irish peasants, who, during a period of extreme famine, sell their souls to the merchants of the devil, and are redeemed by the soul of the Countess Cathleen, who bargains here that they may be free. She is forgiven, on reaching heaven because "The Light of Lights looks always on the motive not the deed." The play's great beauty, at its first writing, lay in its lyric qualities, which qualities Mr. Yeats has made less with each rewriting. Many passages might be quoted, but the closing lines, especially, have a beauty and power hard to forget; great lines which only a great poet could write:

"The years like great black oxen tread the world  
And God, the herdsmen guide them on behind  
And I am broken by their passing feet."

The Land of Heart's Desire was presented by the Avenue Theatre in London in 1894, the first play of Mr. Yeats's to be produced. It has also been most often played, being produced in America in 1901 for the first time and very often since. The play tells the story of a newly married bride who is lured away on May-Eve by a fairy child - a folk-lore story of constant foreboding and final tragedy. Mr. Weyandt says concerning it:



"There is no greater lyric poetry anywhere in the writing of Mr. Yeats than in The Land of Heart's Desire."<sup>1</sup> Mr. Yeats, however, deploras this fact, and in its revival for the Abbey Theatre left out many passages which he considered were without dramatic value. He says: "When I saw it played with all needless and all mere lyrical passages cut away, I recalled the kind of pleasure that I had sought to create, and at last listened with the hope that this pleasure had reached those about me."<sup>2</sup>

Among his other plays produced by the Irish Theatre is Cathleen ni Houlihan, a one act play which is a dramatic fable. Cathleen represents Ireland demanding allegiance in the words: "If anyone would give me help he must give me himself, he must give me all," and Michael leaves his home, and his dream of happy married life, to join the French, who have landed at Killybegs.

The Hour Glass, Shadow Waters, Reservoir, The Green Helmet and many others might be added to the list of his contributions to drama in Ireland, but no list of productions could indicate in complete degree the value of his efforts to the Irish Theatre. Mr. Weygandt, considering the question as to whether there would have been a dramatic movement in Ireland, comparable to what there has been, without Mr. Yeats, sums it up thus: "I believe there would have been a dramatic movement, but I am sure, from what I know of the other dramatic organizations in Dublin, that it would not have amounted to much, unless some other great writer, as loyal to art as Mr. Yeats had played for them the beneficent tyrant. ----- Without Mr. Yeats as moving power, Synge had not been; without Mr. Yeats to interest her in the

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1. Irish Plays & Playwrights, by Cornelius Weygandt, p. 49.

2. Plays & Controversies, by W. B. Yeats, p. 300, Macmillan & Co., London, 1923

movement, Lady Gregory had not written her farces and folk histories; and without the Abbey Theatre plays as standard, the younger playwrights of Cork and Belfast would have written plays very other than they have written.<sup>1</sup>

2. Mr. George Moore and Mr. Martyn. Interesting in a lesser degree than Mr. Yeats, but important because of the part they played in the early days of the theatre are the playwrights, Mr. George Moore and Mr. Edward Martyn. Mr. George Moore had been resident in England, where he had attained some fame as novelist, until in 1899 he was visited by Mr. Yeats and Mr. Martyn. He was asked to join them in founding a literary theatre. This he did, coming to Ireland, working with them and Lady Gregory, during its first years and collaborating with Mr. Yeats in the writing of Diarmid and Grania. He also rewrote Mr. Martyn's Tale of a Town as The Bonding of the Bough. These two plays were produced in the Irish theatre in the years 1900 and 1901. Mr. Moore also was of real assistance in selecting and training actors. In 1911, he lost interest in the project and returned to England.

Mr. Martyn was not among the very productive dramatists, but his work bears the mark of carefully considered construction. His play, The Heather Field, was chosen to be produced with Mr. Yeats's Courtesy Oathleen at the opening performance of the Theatre. It tells the story of Gordon Tyrrell, a landlord of the West of Ireland, who was an unconquerable idealist. His wife was not, and she angrily tried to make him over into a hunting, entertaining agriculturist, as were his neighbors. In the end, all that symbolizes the ideal in his life is the reclaiming of a heather field, and this becomes a passion with him. He mortgages his land to improve

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1. Irish Plays & Playwrights, by Weygandt, pp. 46, 47.

the heather field, and his wife tries to have him pronounced insane, but fails. At last, being convinced by a handful of heather buds in the hand of his son that his lifework is futile, he loses his reason. He represents the bitterness and tragedy of a dreamer in a hard and practical world.

Maev was called by its author "psychological drama in two acts."<sup>1</sup>

It is the story of a visionary girl, Maev O'Neyses, who to please her father is to marry a rich, young Englishman, Hugh Fitz Walter. She goes off into the hills with her old nurse, Peg Jerry, to see the heroes and heroines of legendary folk-lore. She, in common with her nurse, still believes those far off heroes live among the fairies. She, seeing how late at night, sees from her window a vision of Queen Maev and her spirit follows the Queen into the land of the ever-young of Tir-na-n-Ogue. Maev is found by her sister still and cold by her window. She has chosen death instead of life.

"Mr. Martyn, though an amateur, has one play to his credit that he who has read will remember, The Heather Field," says Mr. Weymann. "Mr. Martyn has too, like other amateurs, given suggestions to others that they have realized as fine art. . . . There is about the best plays of Mr. Martyn, a quality of a certain kind. They have the distinctness of objects seen under the bright hard light of late winter, when the sun grows strong, but when the winds are still keen from the Northwest and there are no leaves as yet on the trees."<sup>2</sup>

3. Lady Gregory. Lady Gregory has played an important part in

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1. Irish Plays & Playwrights, by Cornelius Weymann, p. 83.  
2. Irish Plays & Playwrights, by Cornelius Weymann, p. 94.

the foundation and work of the Irish Theatre. In Our Irish Theatre (1913) she has set forth her efforts, which, combined with those of Mr. Yeats and Mr. Martyn, began the movement in 1899. It has for twenty years had her unstinted devotion.

Her literary work for the theatre falls into two divisions, (1) Comedies, and (2) Plays of Folk-History. Her comedies are for the most part one-act farces and have been familiar stage productions of the Abbey Theatre, receiving from its audiences enthusiastic acclaim. The usual starting point of the play is some misconception - as, for instance, in The Jackdaw, where the villagers believe that a large sum of money will be paid for each jackdaw, and begin to compete for the reward. The plays though popular have no great literary value. As Ernest A. Boyd asserts, "Granting the charm of such whimsical drolleries of speech and situation as Lady Gregory originally conceived, it is impossible to reconcile them with the claims of literary drama."<sup>1</sup>

Lady Gregory has also written six Folk-History plays; three "tragic comedies", The Galvaniser, The White Cockade and The Deliverer; and three tragedies, Grania, Kinsora, and Devergilla. The White Cockade is probably the best and is certainly the most interesting of the comedies. It is the story of the cowardice of King James II after the Battle of the Boyne. Sarsfield, his brave general, brooding over his king's treachery to Ireland, pulls his white cockade to pieces counting the old names, King, knave, soldier, sailor, and finds out the king is a 'thief'.

Among the tragedies, Devergilla holds an important place. Devergilla is the one who was responsible for bringing the English to Ireland.

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1. The Contemporary Drama of Ireland, by Ernest A. Boyd, p. 136; Little, Brown & Co., Boston, 1919.

Old and unhappy, she is living in the Abbey of Mellifont and comes out to act as prize-giver to the winners of the games. A wandering minstrel sings of the havoc caused by the misdeeds of her youth. The tragedy of the death of Flann makes Flann's widow reveal the secret of Devergilla's identity. The prize-winners bring back the prince to her, and the old Queen submits to the insult.

Brannia and Fingona also go back to Irish folk-lore for a basis. None of Lady Gregory's folk-history plays have the intensity of Synge's treatment of the same theme. Indeed her position in the dramatic movement in Ireland is not decided so much by the literary quality of her work as by her devotion to the cause.

4. J. M. Synge. "In all the English drama, from Sheridan and Goldsmith to Mr. Shaw, there is only one name that will group amongst the greatest, and that is the name of another Irishman - J. M. Synge." <sup>1</sup> Yet, this Irishman has to his credit only six plays, and his dramatic career extends over at most only ten years.

Mr. Synge was born near Dublin in 1871, but early left his native land to travel and work in Germany, Italy, and France. In Paris, 1899, he was discovered by W. B. Yeats, who advised him to go to the Aran Islands, live with the people, and express their life. Synge took Yeats's advice. He spent in Aran a few years, living the life of the peasants, and recording the events of the days in a book, The Aran Islands.

In 1903 his first play, The Shadow of the Glen, was produced in

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1. J. M. Synge, a critical study, by P. P. Howe, p. 19; Martin Secker, London, 1912.

the Irish Theatre. It was not very well received, for it seemed to reflect on the chaste character of Irish women. Here, the young wife in the play, believes her husband dead and is preparing for his funeral. It is a wild night, and to her door comes a tramp seeking shelter. To him she tells of the difficulty of her life with the old man, her husband, and of Michael Dara, a young farmer, who lives in a cottage near by. She goes out, and to the tramp's horror the dead man sits up. When his wife returns he seems again as dead as before. She has Michael with her, and they begin to discuss the loneliness of her life, but rejoice that all that is over now. The dead man rises, Michael repudiates Nora, who goes off to a free life with the tramp, leaving her husband and lover to their drinks.

Riders to the Sea is a poignant tragedy with its setting on the west coast of Ireland. It is the tragedy of an old mother, Maurya, who, having lost six sons and husband in the sea, sees her last son Bartley go too. Francis Hickley says of it: "It is the most imaginative, the most passionate of all Synge's works, yet as true as any to the life he was seeking to express. All the terror of life in the fretted islands, all the mystery and cruelty of the sea are in it, and the paganism bred therefrom, the ironic fatalism, which can synthesize the almighty and most merciful Father with 'the blind gods that cannot spare' ".<sup>1</sup>

Dawson Byrne declares that it was Synge's Playboy of the Western World that brought the Abbey Theatre into the spotlight of the world, made it popular and set it on a solid footing which it has ever since maintained."<sup>2</sup>

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1. J. M. Synge and the Irish Dramatic Movement, by Francis Hickley, p. 35; the Mussen Book Co. Ltd., Toronto.

2. The Story of Ireland's National Theatre, by Dawson Byrne, p. 57; Talbot Press, Ltd., Dublin, 1920.

It certainly brought a storm of disapproval from the crowds, who gathered to see the play. Its withdrawal was demanded, but the management refused to do this. The audience was angry because they evidently thought that Synge was inferring that the peasantry of Ireland thought it a light matter that a man should murder his father. In reality he is only saying that the romantic has more power to attract than the everyday and common. The hero, Christy, is admired because he can talk well and forms to Pogson such a delightful contrast to her promised husband's cautious correctness. When Christy's father appears and Christy begins actually to do the deed, of which he had (aforetime) boasted, the romance disappears in the sordidness of reality, and the peasants, far from admiring him, set forth to punish him. In spite of its early unpopularity, The Playboy has become one of the most popular of Synge's plays.

The Well of the Saints, a comedy with a dash of the supernatural, and Spire of the Sorrows, which was unfinished at his death, complete the list of Synge's dramatic works. Yet, small as the list of his plays is, he shows himself a great artist, in creating character, in revealing life, and in the use of language - "the wistful, passionate language" of the Irish peasant. "It would be difficult to name another contemporary whose perdurable qualities are more certain. If he had lived he could not but have added to the number of his plays; and yet, in the six plays he has left us, what that is essential in life has he failed to include? Try as we will, in looking back over his work, we cannot be rid of the sense of his absolute achievement."<sup>1</sup>

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1. J. H. Synge, a critical study, by F. F. Howe, pp. 212 - 213.

5. Later Dramatists. The dramatists, who from the opening of the twentieth century have contributed vital and soul-stirring work to the Abbey Theatre, are many. Their productions have introduced a new trend in dramatic art. They have turned aside from the mysticism of W. B. Yeats and the folk-lore interests of Lady Gregory and have followed the leadership of J. M. Synge in dealing with the hard realities of peasant life in Ireland. Their work, therefore, forms part of that trend in British dramatic art toward plays fraught with the significance of unsolved social problems.

(a) Padriac Colum.

The Land (1905)

The Fiddler's House (1907)

Thomas Muskerry (1910)

Padriac Colum is among the earliest of those later dramatists he having come into touch with the Abbey Theatre in 1903. He was born at Langford, Ireland, in 1861 and, after a rather scanty education in the local schools, began at the early age of twenty-two to write for the Abbey Theatre. He is interested, if one may judge from his contributed plays, in three things: the love of wandering, the love of the land, and the love of women. He is also interested, but in lesser degree, in religion and his native land. He is poet as well as dramatist and his lovely lyrics published in Wild Harth (1909) are considered his best literary work. His three chief contributions to Irish Drama are: The Land (produced 1905), The Fiddler's House (produced 1907), and Thomas Muskerry (produced 1910).

The Fiddler's House was a revised play, originally Broken Soil (produced under that name 1903). It emphasizes the struggle between love of the land in Maire Hourican, and love of wandering in Conn, her father.



Love of wandering wins in the conflict and Maire follows her father into his life on the road. Conn admits to Maire that he too is leaving the land behind but the land is nothing when contrasted with the music that comes in the night-time when the world is asleep from the far strange places.

The Land (1907) has much the same theme as Fiddler's House. Matt Cosgar, a peasant farmer, is driven from the land by the restlessness of his sweetheart Ellen. They go to America, in spite of his father's protests, leaving the weaklings of the family, Sally and Cornelius, behind. Thus the wanderlust overwhelms even love of the land, deeprooted though that love undoubtedly is in the Irish peasant; and the deciding factor in the struggle is the love of a woman. Aptly indeed the play typifies the tragedy of Ireland: the loss of her most efficient soil-lovers.

Thomas Muskerry (1910), his latest play rings with the same refrain: love of the land. In the person of the once master of the workhouse, now a pauper within its walls, he displays the deadly and lonely life of the town and calls to all the joy of having a plot of ground of one's own.

In situation and character delineation, Mr. Padriac Colum excels: in use of dialogue he is weak. For this reason, he has failed to achieve greatness in dramatic art. He is a greater poet than dramatist. This he seems to recognize himself for since 1908 he has devoted himself to lyrical poetry.

(b) E. C. Murray.

Birthright (1910)

Maurice Harro (1912)

Aftermath (1922)

Autumn Fire (1924)

The Blind Wolf (1928)

Mr. T. C. Murray, who has been for twenty years associated with the Abbey Theatre as a playwright, belongs to Northern Ireland by birth. But whatever the distinction between the North and South, politically and socially, still the life of the Irish peasant is much the same Ireland over and Mr. T. C. Murray understands and portrays that life. In 1910 he brought his second play Birthright (produced 1910) to the Abbey Theatre.

This play has a Cain and Abel, or, better still, an Esau and Jacob, flavor. The elder of the twin boys is beloved of the mother, the younger of the father. Hughie, the elder, is useless on the farm, yet, because it is his Birthright, the younger boy, Shane, who loves the land, must leave it to seek his fortune in America. His box is packed and he is ready to depart when his father's anger reaches a white heat against his brother because of his accidental killing of a favorite horse. Furiously the father orders Shane's name to be wiped off the box and Hughie's name put in its place. Hughie accuses Shane of robbing him of his birthright and in the quarrel that follows Hughie is killed. The play has had tremendous appeal both in Ireland and in America (produced during tour of Abbey players (1911-1912). Mr. Weygandt states that Americans considered it the best play of the year.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps its charm lies equally in its dignity, simplicity and fidelity to Irish peasant life and in the story background, which has been repeated more than once in sacred and secular literature.

The theme of Maurice Harle (produced 1915) is perhaps not so happy a choice. The central pivot of the play is the desire, which is strong in every Irish father and mother, to give one son to the service of the church. Maurice Harle is a student at Maynooth, in training for the priesthood. The

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1. Irish Plays and Playwrights, by Cornelius Weygandt, p. 218.

whole family have sacrificed that he may have the opportunity. But he is agonized by the feeling that he has no vocation and so is committing sacrilege. He tries to tell his family but they insist, so overwhelming him with arguments that he goes back to his work against his own conscientious knowledge that his course is wrong. Nine months later when, seemingly, the family have reached the pinnacle of their hopes; when the older son, Owen, has gained his desired bride; when Maurice himself has graduated first in his class; when the whole future is rosy with promise; then comes terrible news: the strain on conscience has been too much for Maurice and his reason has failed. His father and mother are left stung by the knowledge that they are to blame. The play is also faithful to one phase of present life: the subordinating of individual rights to those of the family.

Mr. Murray's later plays have been strong and vital. Mr. Byrne notes that, "Mr. Murray's plays are always regarded as events of importance," and, "a record audience was in attendance,"<sup>1</sup> at the playing of the Pipe in the Fields (1927). He is still a favorite playwright to the Abbey Theatre audiences.

(c) Lennox Robinson.

The Glancy Name (1908)

The Crossroads (1909)

Harvest (1910)

Patriots (1912)

The Whiteheaded Boy (1916)

The Lost Leader (1918)

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1. Ireland's National Theatre, by Dawson Byrne, p. 139.

The White Blackbird (1925)

The Far-off Hills (1928)

Lennox Robinson, one of the foremost of the later Irish Dramatists, was born October 4th, 1886, in Southwestern Ireland. His father was a clergyman with pastoral charges in the beautiful Bandon valley, and there the boy grew up. From the time he was ten years old he tried to write, and while very young he was the editor of an amateur magazine. A visit of the Abbey company to Cork brought to him a recognition of his latent dramatic talent. His first play was produced at the Abbey Theatre, October 8th, 1900; and from then till the present his work has been constantly before the audiences of the Abbey Theatre. Nor has it been only as playwright that he has had a part in the Abbey Theatre movement. During 1919 to 1921, he was manager of the Abbey, then became a director, and since 1924 he has been an actor in the Abbey Company.

His first play, The Glancy House, is sharply ironic, dealing with the Irish pride of family. Mrs. Glancy has just succeeded in paying off a debt, which makes her fars her own, when her son, John, blurts out the terrible fact that he is a murderer. His mother is horrified, as much by his determination to confess his guilt and drag the Glancy name in the dust, as by his guilt. She persuades him not to tell, but he is afraid he will. To preserve the secret, he permits himself to be struck down by a car, when he is saving a child's life. The play is cynical and, in its ending, a little improbable, but Mrs. Glancy is excellently portrayed.

The Crossroads, Harvest and the Patriots, produced by the Abbey in 1909, 1910 and 1915, all deal with situations in Irish life. In The

Crossroads, the heroine, Ellen, gives up the man she loves and marries a rich farmer that she may use his money to teach new methods of Agriculture in Ireland, improving land conditions, and so lessening emigration. Disaster follows; she loses her two sons, her farming operations fail, and her husband learns of the former lover, Brian. The play ends on a note of tragedy, as Ellen, now drudge and slattern, waits in the locked room for the punishment, which the now hated husband promises to mete out to her when he returns from his tavern carousal.

Harvest (1910), shows the break up of the home in Ireland through wrong educational methods and training. Education, which leads from the farm, but bestowed at the expense of those who remain on the farm - that is the sin of the schoolmaster and of the educational system.

Patriots (1912), is a satire on sham agitation, and the weakness of physical force.

Of his other plays the White Headed Boy (produced in 1916), seems to have had the most favorable reception. It had a run of nine months in 1920 at the Ambassador's Theatre, London, a run of two weeks in Manchester the same year, and, in 1925, at the Criterion Theatre, London, a run of six weeks.

In criticism of this eminent playwright, Allardyce Nicoll declares that the tragic situations of Mr. Robinson's work are particular rather than universal, and that "he has allowed cynicism to take the place of a higher, more humane and kindlier tragic emotion." This fault, he asserts, is serious for "great serious drama rarely if ever will permit the introduction of bitterness."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless such excellent dramatic work is to the credit

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1. British Drama, by Allardyce Nicoll, p. 391. Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1925.

of Mr. Robinson and in many ways he has played an important part in the history of the Irish Theatre.

(d) Sean O'Casey.

Shadow of a Gullman (1923)

June and the Paycock (1924)

The Plough and the Stars (1926)

The Silver Tassie (1928)

Sean O'Casey, a recent dramatist of the Irish Theatre was a Dublin laborer, who was much interested in the Abbey. The members of the Labor Union of Liberty Hall needed a play for Christmas and O'Casey wrote them one with the significant title On the Run. The play was such a tremendous success that he offered it to the Abbey for production. Under a new name, The Shadow of a Gullman, it was produced in 1923, and was an instantaneous success. But its success was not comparable with that of June and the Paycock, produced in the following year. His second play made O'Casey famous and he is still considered, after J. M. Synge, the most outstanding dramatist of the Abbey Theatre.

The setting of June and the Paycock is Dublin in the days of intense bitterness between the Republicans and the Free Staters. The sufferings of the tenement-dwellers are painted in unforgettable language, and yet the tragedy has for its background farce which is as true as the tragedy. The delineation of Jack Boyle, the Paycock, and his friend Joxer Daly are masterly pieces of work; the wretched Johnny stirs painful sympathy; Mary the young life-loving daughter is an unhappy figure as she faces her wrecked future; but supreme in interest stands that undefeatable personality, Mrs. Boyle, with

her love, her loyalty and her abounding common-sense. Her final words, as she goes down the stairs to identify what she already knows is the body of her son, wrings the heart with a real sympathy for all broken human beings: "Mother o' God, Mother o' God, have pity on us all. Sacred heart o' Jesus take away our hearts o' stone and give us hearts o' flesh. Take away this murderin' hate and give us Thine own eternal love."<sup>1</sup>

A very different reception was that given to O'Casey's third play, The Plough and the Stars (produced 1926). It is generally considered his best dramatic work but in spite of its dramatic excellence its production met with as great opposition as did Synge's famous Playboy. The actors were forced to cease playing, because of rioting, on the third night of its production, and the next evening the play was given with the military in charge of the theatre. The play is a drama of the revolution of 1916. As in June the men argue, drink and fight while the women worry and suffer. "His critics", says R. M. Fox, in the New Statesman, "reproach him with omitting the heroism and highminded resolution, and submerging the ideals of the revolution in squalor. O'Casey's own statement is that he views life as a dramatist. He does not claim to write about the heroic side of the struggle but only of the life he knows."<sup>2</sup>

What has been described by the Literary Digest of August 1926 as "the greatest literary quarrel since the days of Pope," broke out in the Spring of that year when the Abbey directors rejected Sean O'Casey's new play, The Silver Tassie, a four-act tragi-comedy, dealing with the war. Mr. Yeats,

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1. June and the Paycock, Sean O'Casey, Act. III, MacMillan co., 1925.
  2. Sean O'Casey: a Worker Dramatist, R.M. Fox, The New Statesman, April 10, 1926.

writing to its author April 20th, 1928, objects to the play because O'Casey, not being interested in the Great War writes out of his "opinions", which no great dramatist must do. He goes on to say, "there is no dominating character, no dominating action; neither psychological units nor unity of action."<sup>1</sup> Mr. O'Casey with fiery vigor denied the truth of this criticism and demanded his play. The Silver Tassie has been published in book form but not yet produced. The regrettable quarrel has meant O'Casey's complete separation from any part in the Abbey Theatre.

Walter Starkie, commenting upon the plays of Sean O'Casey declares, "There is no doubt that O'Casey is the strongest genius the Abbey Theatre has produced since Synge."<sup>2</sup> R. M. Fox agrees with him asserting, "He is in the tradition of Zola and of Hauptmann, who brought naturalism to the German stage. He is even more akin to the Russian realists, especially Gorky, who has the same bitter contempt for hazy idealism."<sup>3</sup>

(c) Other playwrights.

Other playwrights of the movement include William Boyle, who wrote The Building Fund (1905), and The Eloquent Dempsy (1905); G. B. Shaw, who has one Irish play to his credit, John Bull's Other Island (1911); George Shiels, whose work, although he is crippled, bubbles over with wit and humor and whose two plays Bedmales and Insurance Money (both produced 1921) were such outstanding successes; and Rutherford Mayne, whose Red Turf was well received in 1911. Many minor playwrights too have contributed to the success of the Abbey Theatre.

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1. A Dublin Tempest, Farwell. The Literary Digest, Aug. 4, 1928, pp. 24-25.

2. The Plays of Sean O'Casey, by Walter Starkie. The Nineteenth Century, Aug. 1928, p. 333.

3. Sean O'Casey - A Worker Dramatist, by R.M.Fox, The New Statesman, April 10, 1928



## Chapter IV

### THE FLOWERING OF THE DRAMATIC RENAISSANCE

#### 1. The Founding of the Abbey Theatre

The last performance of the Irish Literary Theatre was marked by two important innovations. On that last night the first Gaelic play ever produced in any theatre, The Twilight of the Gods, by Dr. Douglas Hyde, was given by a native Irish cast. These new players were a group of amateurs trained by Mr. W. G. Fay and his brother, Mr. Frank J. Fay. With their coming into the work of the theatre a new chapter of its history opens.

The Fays had become interested in a play written by George William Russell, or A.E. It had its source in the old Irish legend of Bohairde. They began rehearsals, planning to produce the play in St. Teresa's Temperance Hall, Clarendon Street, Dublin. Mr. W. B. Yeats offered his Gathleen of Moilinn as the second play, and Miss Hand Conne accepted the title role, because of its patriotic intensity. These two plays were produced in April 1902, before audiences which crowded the theatre. The success of the effort encourages the founding of a national theatre, with Irish plays written by Irish dramatists, and produced by Irish players. A hall in which they might rehearse was necessary and a meeting was called to obtain the necessary funds. This was done and again in November the Fay Company produced The Spicing Lad, by Conne, The Laying of the Foundations, by Ryan, and A Pot of Broth by Yeats, as well as repeating Bohairde and Gathleen of Moilinn.

In 1903 the Fays and their associates formed themselves into the Irish National Theatre, with Mr. Yeats as president. It was at this time

that Lady Gregory began to write for the theatre.

The Fay brothers produced plays of dialogue rather than action, for Mr. Frank Fay was a great admirer of Coquelin the French actor. Coquelin declares against the movement because "The audience cannot look in two places at once, the eye is such a tyrant that it distracts from the subject, then necessary to be considered, directing the attention to useless and obstructive movement. The value of repose is so great that it is difficult to estimate it."<sup>1</sup> This repose was gained by the actors trained by Fay, as was also clear enunciation and beauty of elocution. Frank Fay also showed wisdom in selecting able actors and actresses for his work. Sinclair O'Donovan, Sara Allgood, Maire O'Neill, and others as famous, were his discovery.

The players of the Irish National Theatre were invited by the Irish Literary Society to give two performances at Queen's Gate Hall, Kensington. This they did, May 2nd, 1903, and were well received. Out of this visit to England grew the interest of Miss A.E.F. Horniman in the project, and her promise of help to provide a place to produce their plays. This help did not come immediately, and in the meantime a hall was rented at 34 Lower Lander Street, Dublin. It was dilapidated, and the roof leaked, but it was all they could afford. Here was produced Lady Gregory's first play, Resurrection, and here rehearsed J.M. Synge's In the Shadow of the Glen.

In 1904 Miss Horniman fulfilled her promise of help, and the long struggle with poverty was over. She obtained the lease of a little theatre in Dublin, formerly called the Mechanics' Institute Theatre. She had it re-arranged and rebuilt at a cost of £7000; she gave it the name Abbey Theatre

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1. The Story of Ireland's National Theatre, by Dawson Byrne, p. 21.

and presented it to the Irish players, free of charge for six years. The Abbey Theatre had its opening night, Tuesday, December 27th, 1904. The program included the plays, Cathleen ni Houlihan, and On Ballinacorney Strand, by Yeats, Barraband the Boss, by Lady Gregory, and In the Shadow of the Glen, by J. M. Synge.

2. The Development of the Movement, 1904-1929. The year following the founding of the Abbey Theatre was spent by the actors in travel. Their first tour was to England where they played at Oxford and Cambridge, and St. George's Hall, London. They presented well-known plays: Synge's Hell of the Saints, and In the Shadow of the Glen, Yeats' On Ballinacorney Strand, and Cathleen ni Houlihan, and Padriac Colus's The Land. The eminent critic Mr. Symonds<sup>1</sup>, writing to the author Mr. Green greatly praised the art displayed by the Fay brothers. Referring to the term, "clever", a term bestowed on them by English actors, he asserts that it is not cleverness in acting but the natural simplicity of actors, which brings beauty and life upon the stage.

From London the players went on to Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds and Cardiff, everywhere winning appreciation because of their simplicity and restraint in acting. Leaving England, they next played in theatres at Aberdeen, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Newcastle-on-Tyne. Their lengthy tour brought them not only success but a confidence in their own artistic ability.

The year 1907 is outstanding in the history of the Abbey Theatre for it is the year in which Synge's Playboy of the Western World was produced. Frank Padleigh Chandler comments thus upon the Playboy: "Despite the extravagance of its satire, Synge's drama is one of the most delightful of

1. Sunday Times, Dec. 3, 1905.

modern comedies. There is a freshness about it to what the playgoer's taste, grown dull on society plays.<sup>1</sup>

But in spite of its artistic excellence, the play was very badly received for the angry Celtic audience accused the reallery to be national and, being deficient in a sense of humor, felt that Synge was laughing at Irish character and not at an universal desire to exalt paganism into heroism. Nevertheless, in spite of its stormy reception the Playboy makes the year an outstanding one in the history of the Irish Theatre.

The next year saw the partial break-up of the original group of Irish players. Mr. W. G. Fay desired to have full control of his actors and this was refused him by Mr. Yeats. Mr. Fay withdrew from the theatre and as he had been producer, actor and manager, the loss was great. Nor was this loss all: his wife, Miss Brigit Dempsey, his brother, Mr. Frank Fay, and a friend, Mr. Ernest Vaughan, also resigned. Mr. W. G. Fay and his wife have since played with many managers in London and he has produced successfully for many companies. The theatre felt keenly the loss of Mr. Fay's management, for the work he had accomplished through the early years of the Abbey's existence cannot be over-estimated. His place was taken temporarily by Miss Sara Allgood but at the end of three months, she found the task too heavy and resigned.

The players of the Abbey Theatre were honored in 1911 by being asked to play at Shakespeare's Memorial Theatre, Stratford-on-Avon, during the annual festival. The same year, in October, they paid their first visit to America, where they opened their program at Boston with Synge's Playboy. During the fortnight spent by them in that city, they produced Yeats' Cathleen

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1. Aspects of Modern Drama, by Frank Wedgwood Chandler, pp. 272-273.

of Houlihan, Murray's Birthright and Lennox Robinson's Harvest and The Crossroads besides a number of Lady Gregory's comedies. Extracts, quoted by Mr. Dawson Byrne from the dramatic reports of the time, give high praise to the company: "We find in the acting the same sincerity of purpose and expression that we have come to look for in those plays. What a relief to find a company so void of self-consciousness, of posturings and those ghastly affectations that form the scrip and scrippage of many a star on either side of the Atlantic. To select any special players would seem almost an invidious task, but Maire O'Neill as Nora in The Shadow of the Glen, as Peggy Mike in The Playboy, and as Deirdre, is surely the perfect embodiment of Synge's imagination; while Miss Sara Allgood as old Maurya in Riders to the Sea and as Mary Boul in The Well of the Saints, leaves no touch of character, of pathos, or humor undefined."<sup>1</sup>

From Boston they travelled to New York, Chicago and Philadelphia and were everywhere received with like enthusiasm, although in each city The Playboy was a disturbing factor. In Philadelphia the actors were arrested on a charge of immorality because of the feeling over the play, but eventually they were released. Soon after they embarked for Ireland, arriving there in the early months of 1912.

Mr. Yeats had formed a second company to play in the Abbey during their absence, so the returned players spent the summer filling engagements in Manchester and London. December found them on their way to America again, where they found a warmer welcome and an even more enthusiastic one than the year before. It was after their return home in 1913, that the following appreciation was penned by Mr. Maurice Bourgeois: "The Abbey

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1. The Story of Ireland's National Theatre, by Dawson Byrne, pp. 95 and 96.

Theatre is now a fixture in Ireland's dramatic Renaissance. Its official as well as unofficial history so far remains untold; and, indeed, it is much too soon to attempt a record of its achievements, or form a mature judgment of its merits. But it has overwhelming vitality as is evidenced by the some sixty Irish plays it has brought forth in the first eight years of its existence.<sup>1</sup>

In 1914 the Abbey company came for the first time to Canada playing in the Princess Theatre, Toronto. On their return to Ireland they narrowly missed sailing on the ill-fated *Empress of Ireland*. The outbreak of war in August interfered with theatre productions and the year 1915 was spent playing chiefly in music halls.

The year 1916 was a tempestuous one for the Abbey Theatre, and resulted in the loss to it for a time of the actors, who had played in it for so long. The manager, St. John Ervine, tactlessly interfered with the freedom of the company, and it resigned. Under the leadership of the actor, Mr. Arthur Sinclair, the members formed a company of their own, which they named the Irish Players. They toured England with great success, playing in theatres and music halls. After St. John Ervine resigned his position of manager, Mr. Keogh, his successor, invited Mr. Sinclair to come back but he declined the offer. Since that time, however, the original Abbey players have very often played at the theatre.

The opening of a School of Acting, in the Abbey Theatre, proved a new and interesting development. The Abbey players often left to play for other companies for short periods of time and it was felt wise to train

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1. Mr. John Millington Synge and the Irish Theatre, by Maurice Bourgeois, pp. 127-128.

recruits to take such vacant places. In 1921 a room within the theatre building was modelled into a little theatre, capable of seating one hundred and fifteen of an audience. Here pupil-actors are training in voice production and natural acting and under the direction of Mr. Michael Dolan, some notable actors and actresses have been trained. The little theatre also serves as a place where a playwright may try out his new play. This new development has proved itself of real value for both purposes.

The next few years are noteworthy because of the plays of a group of new dramatists: George Shields, Lennox Robinson, Dorothy McArdle and greatest of all Sean O'Casey, whose first play was produced in 1923. These years were stormy years in Ireland for the bitter struggle between the Free Staters and the Republicans was at its height, but the theatre carried on in spite of protest and damage.

On 27th December, 1925, the twenty-first birthday of the Abbey Theatre was celebrated. In the twenty-one years two hundred and sixteen plays had been produced: the work of eighty-six authors. Mr. Yeats and Lady Gregory, those two indefatigable friends of Irish drama, were both present at the anniversary celebration. Little had they imagined that the small beginning in 1904 would have produced such splendid results. Nor had they imagined that the little theatre idea would spread, as it has, through the British Isles and over the American continent.

In those latter days, the favorite playwrights of the theatre have been Brinsley MacNamara, T.C.Murray, Bernard Shaw and Sean O'Casey. The outstanding names among the players are those of Sara Allgood, Maire O'Neill (now Mrs. Sinclair), Michael Dolan, Rutherford Mayne, Barry Fitzgerald and F.J.McCormick. The Abbey Theatre is alive and still full of interest

for the dramatic world of today as is indicated by the following clipping from the Free Press, Winnipeg, January 31st, 1931: "Next September the Abbey Theatre Company will leave Dublin for a six months' tour of the United States. They will present plays of Sean O'Casey, Lady Gregory, W. B. Yeats, J. M. Synge, George Shiels and T. C. Murray and we may be pardoned a brief prayer that they will find their way to Winnipeg before they return to the famous theatre, which for years has been the pivot upon which the Irish dramatic movement has centred. No movement of modern times has been so significant as the rise of the Irish drama and the opportunity of seeing the work of the great Irish playwrights comes seldom enough."

2. The Growth of National Feeling. In the thirty-one years since its founding the Irish Theatre has played a great part in the development of a national consciousness in Ireland. Ernest A Boyd sums up the effect of the theatre thus: "If the Literary Revival has meant a great deal to us, the reason must be sought in the fact that it was always something more than 'mere literature'. It has been a manifestation of nationality, which has given us a literature and a theatre essentially different from those of any other English speaking country. After long years of purely political struggle, the soul of Ireland once more found expression in literature. W. B. Yeats cannot be mistaken for an English poet; similarly, Synge is an Irish dramatist in a sense which makes the adjective meaningless when applied to Sheridan or Oscar Wilde. The mere accident of birth in Ireland has never been sufficient to entitle a writer to a place beside those who have given us a national literature."<sup>1</sup>

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1. The Contemporary Drama of Ireland, by Ernest A. Boyd, pp. 197-198.



Conclusion

THE FUTURE OUTLOOK

1. The Effect of Political Freedom on the Future of the Movement.

What of the future? Is the Irish Renaissance a movement which has reached its zenith and now must decline? One can never prophesy the future with certainty, but the outlook is promising. Every nation has its period of dramatic greatness, and that period is usually one which coincides with the enlarging national outlook. Evidence of this has been noted with regard to the dramatic powers of the Elizabethan period in England. Ireland has at the cost of centuries of struggle achieved at least partial nationhood. Her eyes turn towards a future of hope and progress, denied her for the centuries since the Normans first landed on her coast. Every aspiration as a free people will lead to the possibility of a great and moving drama.

2. In what language will the Drama of the Future be written?

Here opinions differ. Maurice Bourgeois in answering the question: "Should not Irish plays be written in Gaelic only?" has this to say: "It may be urged in defence of the present Anglo-Irish experiment that, should the modern dramatists assimilate the Gaelic language they would in a sense renounce their vast cosmopolitan public, who would no longer understand them." Yet he adds: "So are preparing as we hope for a day when Ireland will speak in Gaelic as much as Wales speaks in Welsh, within her borders. Very likely the coming of complete Home Rule will determine in the end the creation of a National drama in Gaelic only."<sup>1</sup>

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1. John M. Synge and the Irish Theatre, by Maurice Bourgeois, pp. 117-118.

On the other hand, Dr. Hyde<sup>1</sup> believes that Gaelic is understood by the larger group of the Irish and should be the medium for a dramatic work.

Another writer, Cornelius Weygandt, believes that the language in which the drama is written is not important. "It is in character, in ideals, in atmosphere, in color, that a drama must be native."<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the best summing up of a much disputed subject is that given by Shaw Demand. Writing in the Outlook of October, 1924, he expressed his opinion in this way: "Right from the beginning of the Irish Renaissance, there have been two schools - one, the "Gaelic", the other, the "Anglo-Irish". Men, like Winzome, little James Stephens, believe that Irishmen must learn to write in the Irish, not in the English, and in this he has the support of the more extreme theorists of the Gaelic League. Others, like John Eglinton, and that exceptionally gifted mind, Ernest A. Boyd, share with anglicised Irishmen like Bernard Shaw and Frenchified Irishmen like George Moore, the view that English forms the better, even the more natural medium for the modern Irishman.

The truth is that both media are efficient according to the individual. The English of the Irish artist is perhaps the richest of all English, often with an Elizabethan flavor, but always written in the Irish idiom. The Irishman of the future will be bilingual, and each writer will probably choose his or her medium at will.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. The Outlook for Ireland and Irish Drama. In whatever language

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1. Literary History of Ireland, by Dr. Douglas Hyde.
  2. Irish Plays and Playwrights, by Cornelius Weygandt, p. 24.
  3. The Irish Renaissance, by Shaw Demand, the Outlook, Oct. 13th, 1924, p. 24

then, Ireland's dream may be written, one feels confident that the dramatic movement which had so small a beginning and which has surmounted so many obstacles of prejudice, poverty, and indifference, has not reached an early decline. It, and the little nation in which it has developed, stand facing a future worthy of their great literary past, and worthy too of the little group of courageous souls, who in 1899 gave to the Irish people an Irish National Theatre.

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