

THE IRISH MOVEMENT

It is notable that the first and perhaps the most powerful single movement in contemporary English literature developed in Ireland. Already at the beginning of the new century a vigorous literary and nationalist movement known as the Celtic Revival was in full swing. William Butler Yeats, George W. Russell ("A.E."), Douglas Hyde, and George Moore were separated by taste and tradition, but they had a common aim; they proposed to create a national literature, which, though written in English would express the unique spirit of Ireland and, founded upon Irish lore and legendry, would create an independent tradition of its own.

The movements for social and economic reform in Ireland had sprung to life. The first, the Gaelic League, founded in 1893 by Douglas Hyde, had as its object the study of ancient Irish literature and the preservation of Irish as the racial language. The second, organized about six years later as the Irish Agricultural Organization Society by Horace Plunkett and abetted by George Russell, was a co-operative movement with a simple slogan: "Better farming; better business, better living." The social economy implicit in both movements strengthened the national culture. George Russell successfully combined agrarianism and mysticism. Douglas Hyde was able to unite a love of folklore and continual warfare against the survival of the feudal system; William Butler Yeats dealt simultaneously in magic and politics. The movements joined and became steadily more radical. Unrest, suddenly rising and severely put down, grew increasingly violent; rebellion flamed everywhere; the hope of a few dreamers became the battle flag of an embittered nation. The Irish renaissance ended in revolution; Eire was born, of the blood of its poets. A poet, Douglas Hyde, became its President in 1938.

The Independent Irish Literary theater, later called the Abbey Players, grew to be a center of activity. Yeats wrote his compelling plays of atmosphere, symbolism and deep emotion for this theater. Cathleen ni Houlihan, a prose play, first performed in 1902, brought allegory to a new high in patriotism.

"Even the most liberal-minded members of the audience could not fail to see in the poor harried woman who had lost her fields and for whom men gladly died--a woman who never aged and who had 'the walk of a queen'--the figure of Ireland."

The Land of Heart's Desire, 1899; Where There is Nothing, 1903; The Hour Glass, 1903; and The Kings Threshold, 1904, were famed for their summoning of the past in terms of the present. His plays were only the beginning of a career which led him to a place in literature as a major poet of his age.

Lady Gregory (1859-1932) wrote 24 plays besides various translations all noted for their apt characteristics in setting and idiom. However, John Milington Synge was by far the most original playwright of the Abbey group. Synge's works are only a few, but his "Playboy of the Western World" contains a richness while "Shadow of the Glen" and "Riders to the Sea" are "masterpieces, classic in form and noble in conception." Synge used the language of simple peasants "to show that what is exalted or tender is not made by feeble blood."

"I have thought," Synge wrote, "that at the side of the poetic diction, which everyone condemns, modern verse contains a great deal of poetic material, using poetic in the same sense. The poetry of exaltation will be always the highest; but when men lose their poetic feeling for ordinary life, and cannot write of ordinary things, their exalted poetry is likely to lose its strength of exaltation, in the way men cease to build beautiful churches when they have lost happiness in building shops."