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**LIGHT FROM A DISTANT SHORE: *DUBLIN UNIVERSITY MAGAZINE*
AND IRISH LITERARY CULTURE**

Ireland in the nineteenth century lacked the social and artistic infrastructures within which a home based indigenous literature might develop. There was no network of symbiotic relationships within which writers, critics, publishers and an informed readership might interact and work, consciously or unconsciously, towards the formation of a native literary tradition.

One vital component in such an infrastructure would have been the existence of quality newspapers, journals and literary magazines. It was not that there was an absence of periodicals in Ireland during this period. Around thirty such publications appeared in the first few decades after the Union but many of these were actually newspapers in another form trying to avoid the crippling stamp duty levied by the government on registered newspapers. The majority of registered newspapers were financially dependent on government grants and thus controlled by Dublin Castle.

The majority of periodicals were ephemeral radical Catholic nationalist journals of poor literary quality. Quite often they were owned and controlled by eccentric individuals such as Dr Brennan, editor of *The Milesian Magazine*. During the 1820s many magazines such as *Bolster's Magazine* presented analytical surveys of the state of Irish culture and of Irish literature but in the majority of cases literature was appraised in terms of its political correctness and propaganda value to rising Catholic nationalism rather than by its intrinsic literary merits. The development of Irish literature in English was inextricably linked to political and economic developments.

Brian English, in his survey of the Irish press, suggests that a decisive change came in the early twenties with the arrival of the conciliatory Viceroy Wellesley:

The Castle newspapers found their subsidies being withdrawn and one by one they collapsed. The independent newspaper editors, on the other hand, found that they could express themselves freely on what became the chief issue of the day – Catholic Emancipation.¹

The rise of Daniel O'Connell's emancipation movement also had a direct psychological influence on novelists such as John and Michael Banim and Gerald Griffin as their correspondence reveals. It imbued them with a new sense of national self confidence and John Banim broke new ground when he wrote *The Boyne Water* (1826), a novel about the Williamite Wars written from a Catholic, Jacobite, perspective. These early attempts to present an Irish perspective on Irish history and society in a newly acquired English drew attention to the fact that these authors had no mature literary tradition, in written English, to which they could refer. This, in part, was one reason for the stylistic shortcomings that were sometimes manifest in these pioneering novels.

Gerald Griffin emphatically rejected the English Romantic tradition of Wordsworth and Coleridge while Banim refused to consider Goldsmith as an Irish writer. There were few occasions on which the sensibility of Anglo-Ireland was engaged in a creative encounter with native culture. Charlotte Brooke's translations of Gaelic verse, Swift's paraphrase of *O'Rourke's Noble Feast*, were rare examples of such fleeting cultural interaction. In the early nineteenth century the two nations were barely on speaking terms.

One significant absence in this minor resurgence of Hiberno-English literature was the essay in cultural and literary philosophy, that was consolidated in England by the works of Steele, Addison, Doctor Johnson and others. Their work brought a refinement, propriety and wit to English literature, freeing it, in the main, from rancour and abuse. In Ireland there was a flamboyant tradition of oratory, raillery, rhetoric and invective, which can be seen across the social spectrum in the language of Swift, O'Bruadai and Richard Lalor Shiel. The latter figure had an undue and unfortunate influence on the declamatory prose style adopted by John and Michael Banim, Griffin and other Irish writers. Undoubtedly there was a dominant Irish passion for ridicule (comic or otherwise) which found various forms of expression in literature and social discourse.

This was not unconnected to political and constitutional changes and to the loss of Grattan's Parliament in 1801. Irish literary magazines of the period noted this lack of a consolidating tradition. *The Belfast Magazine* (4th, November, 1824) featured a leader article on "Periodical Literature" which recognised the revolution in taste and morals in the literature of England which the "sweet and insinuating style of Addison, the delicate

¹ Brian Inglis, "The Press," featured in: R. B. McDowell, ed., *Social Life in Ireland* (Dublin, Colm O Lochlainn, 1957), p. 99.

and frolicsome irony of Steele and the grave and dignified admonitions of Johnson" had produced. In Ireland there was no such ameliorating influence.

Brave attempts had been made by various individuals such as William Hudson, Thomas Kennedy and Doctor William Brennan to establish national literary journals without much success. The sheer number of aborted literary journals in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in Ireland is indicative of an uncoordinated desire to explore a local identity and give expression to a local perspective on life.

Until the arrival of *The Nation* and the establishment of *Dublin University Magazine* in the 1830s there was no central, stabilising forum for the encouragement and development of Irish writing. The extent to which these journals fulfilled this task in an appropriate manner is debatable. John Banim, one of Ireland's first national novelists, had spoken of the need for a cheap periodical that was "truly national". In his view *The Dublin University Magazine* despite its other good qualities was too much the vehicle of a caste. Many journals had surveyed the state of Irish literature and had called for a more realistic expression of Irish life. A typical example is the article "The Past And Future Of Ireland – In Reference, Particularly, To Her National Literature" which appeared in the April 1st issue of *The Ulster Magazine* in 1830.

This is really a reflection upon what the editor sees as the lost cultural glory of Ireland and an analysis of the way in which colonisation had retarded the development of the country and dissipated the energies of both the colonists and the colonised: "literature will not linger among those who are ever engaged in warding off anticipated injury, or avenging inflicted wrongs." This was a common enough observation amongst the nationalist orientated journals of the period and the article ends with an optimistic declaration that a new era had arrived and that the hour of cultural regeneration was at hand.

There were other, contrasting, viewpoints though, and perhaps the most significant survey of the "Past and Present State of Literature in Ireland" is the article bearing precisely that title which appeared some seven years later in *The Dublin University Magazine*.² It was significant because it accurately reflected the social tensions which surrounded the subject of Irish literature in early nineteenth century Ireland and showed how political ideology inevitably warped any assessment of cultural history or cultural priorities. The *DUM* was the organ of Irish Toryism and this article is revealing because it shows the intellectual struggle in which Ascendancy Ireland was engaged as it tried to come to terms with the changing social and cultural conditions associated with the rise of a new Catholic nation.

² *Dublin University Magazine* 52/9 (March, 1837).

A similar review appeared in *Dublin University Magazine* in March, 1837, during the decade when Daniel O'Connell's Catholic emancipation movement was in full flow. In this review the writer attempts to maintain a tone of patrician equipoise in the midst of the political and cultural chaos which he sees as characteristic of the age he is living through. However, it was impossible for the writer to maintain this Augustan sense of balance because journals such as *Dublin University Magazine* were themselves protagonists, perhaps one should say combatants in the developing power struggle for political and cultural supremacy that was taking place in nineteenth century Ireland.

At the outset the Dublin writer admits the complexity of the relationship between literary and political culture in Ireland. The author clearly states that literature is a national concern and sets out the terms of the debate in these terms "the literature of a nation, and of this nation in particular, is affected by its political state and is influential upon it." Unionist and nationalist ideologues were in agreement on this at least. The *DUM* writer is clearly thinking in terms of 1780 and the "Protestant Nation" and of that era rather than in terms of 1837 and the new reality that was then presented. In this debate there is no concession to F. R. Leavis' idea that literature should be concerned with what is interior, private and personal rather than with what is collective and public.

Writers are seen as contributors to the development of civilisation and aesthetic principles are understood to have social and political resonances. The writer of the article is concerned about the tempestuous state of society, of the "preternatural rapidity of progression" which is reflected in the "teeming but not superfluous trifles of modern literary journey-work." He goes on to advocate a social theory which "embraces the most important principles of national welfare":

It is one of the most important distinctions between us and England, that its literature and civilisation have begun in distant ages. When the morasses and forests of Ireland were yet under the domination of "the ragged royal race of Tara," as they are not unaptly described by our "national" lyricist Moore, and our fine peasantry were the oppressed slaves of chieftains as unlettered as themselves; the fathers of English poetry, the Chaucers, the Gowers, and the Surreys, and the Spensers had long bequeathed their deathless names and writings to the mind of their time.

Whatever elements of truth there are in these observations it is hard not to detect an attitude of colonialist condescension underneath the measured language of the writer.

Implicit in his assessment is the belief that England alone was the source of any credible literary values or indeed of any civilisation. However if one sees nineteenth century Ireland as a cultural *tabula rasa* then what the writer suggests has a certain logic and consistency. Throughout the article

there is no suggestion that the Anglo-Irish of this generation looked back with fond recollection to any identifiable group of novelists, poets or dramatists who represented or gave voice to a commonly held culture. All the examples cited are either medieval or Elizabethan English writers and it is the view of the author that each of these, in their own way, contributed to a developing British culture and constitutional awareness.

The Constitution was not simply a set of legislative arrangements and conventions which outlined the political mechanisms and parameters of the state. It was something which reflected the organic growth and development of British civilisation itself. From the late eighteenth century onwards, especially in the reflections of people like Edmund Burke and the eccentric Cambridge historian and novelist Charles Kingsley, it had acquired an almost mystical aura. In fact the Constitution was frequently utilised as a symbol of reaction by members of the Protestant Ascendancy class. During the nineteenth century the movement for Catholic Emancipation was seen as a threat, not to a privileged economic caste in Ireland, but to "the Constitution."

Behind the symbolism lay privileged access to education, the large estates and considerable property belonging to individual landlords and the established, Anglican, Church of Ireland. The editors of provincial Catholic newspapers used a similar diction and pleaded for the right to enter the sacred portals of the temple of the Constitution. It is in this reverential spirit that the writer of the article approaches his subject.

With his emphasis upon the superior antiquity and sophistication of English literary culture the *Dublin University Magazine* promoter of Ascendancy values is paradoxically forced into an acceptance of the isolation and marginalisation of his own hybrid culture. As the argument contained in the essay develops, the sense of isolation from the mother country, England, becomes more plainly manifest.

Switching focus now to Ireland, the author, who vacillates between a sense of English and Irish cultural identity, admits that in Ireland the cultural situation is very different to that which pertains in England:

Our literature, or rather our literary cultivation has been recently engrafted; and under circumstances which must have controlled its influence most unfavourably.

To this mind-set all is disconnected and alien; real life, real civilisation is located elsewhere; it is not to be found in Ireland itself:

The civilisation of our higher orders was but a light across the waters from another shore too feeble in its expansion to shed influence on the crowd. It was isolated refinement, seated on the verge of primitive rudeness. The link between the educated and uneducated classes was too broad - a dark impassable gulf from the depths of which national animosities, barbaric prejudices and superstitions, and the resisting powers of a domineering hierarchy, exhaled their anti-civilising influences.

The self-imposed quarantine mentality of the Anglo-Irish of the nineteenth century is revealed here expressed in a language of isolation and separation. Tom Paulin has noted the same obsessive diction of separation in the published sermons of Ian Paisley:

I stand at the edge of the sea. I look over its waves, and my loved ones are across in another continent. Between me and them stretches the waves of the briny depths. I know what it is to be separated from them. Nothing separates like the sea. What a barrier the sea makes. Separation.³

Behind the theological metaphor of the saved and the damned which Paisley intended one can, perhaps, sense that the colonial umbilical cord has been cut. In some respects the dispossessed Gaels also shared this sense of being cut off from a sustaining tradition. In our own time the poet Thomas Kinsella has also reflected upon another "light from a distant shore" across the dark gulf which has separated him from his own Gaelic cultural roots. However, while one of these ethnic cultures began to develop a forward-looking political momentum the other clung tenaciously to its acquired social position.

In this instance the writer in *DUM* seems to be involved in a form of damage limitation. Surveying the state of English literature in 1837 he looks with dismay upon the rise of democratic notions and an associated decline in aesthetic standards, a falling away from the Augustan norms so cherished at Trinity College Dublin:

the causes which have brought the popular mind more largely into discussion of public questions, have necessarily called for a more superficial method and style. Profound and general views may preside in the cabinet of the statesman, but when he stands up in his place he must keep to the level of the hustings if he would be heard or read.

The development of democracy in England had brought linguistic crisis in its wake and as for "wit and the tasteful embellishment of style," its day had long since gone by. Not for the first time a crisis of the English language was being announced linked to political developments. This shock to the body politic provoked not only an aesthetic crisis but a degree of psychological disorientation and a new use of the term ascendancy. Now the *DUM* writer talks of an "ascendancy of change":

The old conventions of the human mind soon begin to dissolve before the ascendancy of change: the ancient forms of thought and the barriers of style were broken down to let in a deluge of opinion, and to enlarge the bounds of speech to the measure of these new and vast accessions to the stock of knowledge.

³ Tom Paulin, *Ireland and the English Crisis* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1984, p. 162.

This is reminiscent of Kierkegaard's anxieties in *This Present Age* and also sounds like the sort of angst that the Internet generates in some quarters today. The demotic tendencies of the age and the reconstitution of the collective mind had, in the view of the writer, resulted in a style, "expanded beyond all due bounds, swollen with a new language, the result of new theories, and stripped of the old harmony and terse idiom of a style that had gradually arisen from the classic models, came into vogue, and obtained possession of the rising generation." The "terse idiom" referred to here was an idiom of power, a retention of language within certain, exclusive, privileged limits.

At this time there was a serious attempt by some English writers such as Charles Kingsley and Bulwer-Lytton to restore the English language to its "Anglo-Saxon purity" in the cause of English nationalism. Novels such as *Hereward The Wake* by Kingsley were intended to illustrate the superior qualities and democratic traditions of the Anglo-Saxon peoples. From this viewpoint an English language that accommodated and absorbed the dialect and argot of the lower classes in England, the speech of the various regions of Britain and of the Empire was a development that gave cause for concern. The writer in *DUM* seems to have suffered from a similar neurosis about the expansion (and thus infection) of the English language.

He goes on to brood about this fall from classical grace that was perceived as an assault upon an Imperial decorum in language – language to be found only within the portals of places such as Trinity College Dublin:

Bombast; fantastic niceties; gallicisms; paradoxes involving truisms, and affected violations of English idiom – At magnum fecit, quod verbis Graeca Latinis miscuit.

While this may read like a hostile review of *Finnegan's Wake* the writer is in fact referring to the corrupt emanations of the periodic press of London in his time (again how contemporary this sounds) and of the unhealthy influence of the sort of popular fiction found in circulating libraries.

There is, he writes, "no wit, no profundity, no attic repose" and from even a cursory acquaintance with the popular melodramatic fiction of this period it is difficult not to sympathise with this point of view. The rise of a mass and indiscriminating reading public content with the lurid romance and crime of the "Newgate" novel was seen as one manifestation of a much wider problem. Such a readership was also susceptible to the dangerous illusions of romantic nationalist literature. In the midst of this situation the writers of *Dublin University Magazine* saw their role as a restorative one. Their mission was to bring a regulated and principled tone into public discourse and to simplify, chasten and purify what sir Walter Scott had called "the well of English undefiled." The restoration of a sense of linguistic ascendancy seems to have been closely linked with

notions of a maintenance or restoration of political ascendancy. Here we have something that goes beyond a natural conservative fear of chaos and is rather a resistance to social realities:

Our literature is that of England – we are substantially English in name, laws and prospects. We have had the full benefit of the literature of England, and must partake of its changes. The effects we have been noticing can be traced here also – in our social circles and public institutions. Like our intellectual nurses, our social and forensic tones are changed from what they were.

The essay continues in this vein with the writer even asserting that in Ireland there was no “real” literature and that in the day of Flood and Grattan the spirit of the time did not favour the development of even a partially indigenous literature in Ireland. As a stark declaration of the realities of cultural imperialism this could not be bettered. The possibility of an indigenous Irish literature that had something significant to say about life and that could address the world was beyond the comprehension of the writer.

Another source of anxiety was the rhetorical style of speech and writing called into existence by the disturbed state of the country:

The miserable cant of a barbaric patriotism was tricked out in the waste of political commonplaces, and adorned with the meretricious tinsel of extravagant conceits and metaphors ... real talent set off, and occasionally redeemed this sad degeneracy – Shiel and O’Connell could not be without meaning; but their followers and admirers made sad work.

No Pegeen-Mike-style tribute to “fine talking” here to be sure. A long diatribe follows, in which the harmful effects of democracy upon a “half barbaric” peasantry is deplored. The writer comes to the sad conclusion that in tandem with their innate mental vulgarity the people have acquired a degree of political astuteness or “country cuteness.”

What is worse, the masses, while imbibing “fallacious principles”, have combined the “fierce democracy of Athens” with the “logical cunning of Maynooth.” In an Ireland which had become an arena for revolutionary factions, the gentry, both Whig and Tory, had become self-absorbed and socially isolated. Given this sort of reaction from the Establishment journal of the day it is not surprising that some elements in southern Unionist society should retreat into an idealised pre-Christian Ireland of their own imagination, as was the case with Sir Samuel Ferguson, or into a surrealistic world of Gothic nightmare, as was the case with Maturin and Lefanu.

Towards the end of the essay there is an apparent change in the author’s attitude which makes this article more than a lament for changing times. There is an expressed desire for “calmer and more abiding” interests

upon which public interest should be focused. After a sustained denigration of Irish cultural achievement the writer suddenly decides it is time to reassess the **actual** literary and cultural potential of Ireland. The political impetus of the times forces him to this action. And so he arrives at a more optimistic assessment of the situation: "Our actual capabilities are, we are inclined to believe, much undervalued," he writes.

The "overpowering demand" of the English market is seen to be detrimental to the development of Irish literature. This is a definite change in the orientation of the writer, although there is a harking back to "England, our sister, with whom we have so long taken sweet counsel"; despite the Elizabethan nostalgia in the diction he has now conceded that the English, as a nation, "underestimate our literary pretensions." This underestimation is attributed to the bad impression created by sectarian and party conflict in Ireland.

In addition it is observed that Ireland has "no literary centre, no publishing mart" while the "lifeless and dull marts" of Dublin are unfavourably contrasted with the magnificent ostentation of London, the great Imperial city "stretching its arm judiciously and authoritatively over all the nations under heaven." Despite this manifestation of colonial inferiority and the awareness of the comparative cultural poverty of Ireland the writer makes a cautious assertion of the natural abilities of the Irish nation:

Notwithstanding all we have said, Ireland has advanced and is advancing. We do not despair of her fortunes – rich abundant and beautiful has been, and is the vegetation of her mind.

A litany of the great names of Anglo-Irish tradition follows. The virtues of each is extolled – Burke, Sheridan, Grattan, Curran and "our Goldsmith, with whom England has not, in his own walk, one other name to compare." The stylistic merits of Goldsmith are recognised but they are such that in his verse "the natural, the simple, the graceful, the pathetic, the sublime without inflation, the flowing without redundancy" are to the fore. In this paradigm Goldsmith completes an **English** tradition and there is no perceptible Irish dimension to his verse (a view endorsed by the Catholic nationalist writer John Banim). No consideration is given to the possibility that an Anglo-Irish literary movement could draw upon indigenous sources. Again the sense of cultural inferiority re-asserts itself:

We challenge no ridiculous comparison with our maternal soil – the land of Newton, Shakespeare, Milton, Bacon, the unrivalled minds of Europe; – such master spirits are not the common produce of their time.

These constant vacillations are symptomatic of a developing cultural neurosis and a longing for stability. There is a recognition that there "is

a change upon the spirit of the time" but that amongst "the higher and nobler class of spirits" there is a trustful expectation of more congenial times.

The hope is clearly expressed that the gifted members of the ascendancy class will reassert their dominance – but this time in the social and cultural sphere rather than in the area of politics. This is a real shift in thinking and is an anticipation of the literary renaissance that was to occur some sixty years later. The "light of civilisation" is to be spread at home. Of course by the time the literary revival had happened the concept of "civilisation" had widened considerably but the key notion of dominance by a cultural elite was retained by Yeats, Lady Gregory and others.

In the essayist's view there was no reason why *Dublin University Magazine* should not emulate *The Edinburgh Review* in providing a forum and critical standard for Irish writers:

There is no reason, but for those which arise from long-clinging prejudices, why Dublin should not be the centre of Irish cultivation, in all that improves and humanises. An Irish press, may, we trust, well supply the place which a native legislature once held – a focus of talent, and a nursery for the production of eminent men.

These aims seem laudable enough and had the coterie who controlled *Dublin University Magazine* been able to overcome their own "long-clinging prejudices" and taken a less exclusive stance (Whigs and Emancipationists were excluded from their columns) the magazine could have become a significant forum for literary culture in Ireland. The Tory caste who controlled the organ were too deeply entrenched within their own tradition to accommodate change and development. As if in confirmation of this the leader-writer asserts: "we shall not relinquish the right to fling aside our literary tiara ... and to lay about us among our friends of the press as long and as stoutly as our spirit impels." It was this same polemical attitude which belied the professed aspirations of the Trinity journal to "supply a momentous desideratum in the state-craft of the day."

The pioneers of modern Irish literature would have been helped in their developmental phase by contact with a journal such as *Dublin University Magazine* if the journal had provided mature and balanced deliberations upon Irish life, politics and literary culture in addition to the more basic and inspirational energy released by the nationalist paper *The Nation*, which appeared some time later.

The antagonistic and polemical nature of Irish political life and the psychological constraints attributable to cultural imperialism did not encourage any cross-fertilisation of the two main currents of Irish culture at this time. This confluence lay in the future. The melding of these variant mind-sets was no easy task and it took the efforts of a talent such as Sir Samuel Ferguson to attempt the task much later in the century. In Biblical Hebrew

the word for holiness, "kadosh," implies separation. In one of his more sentimental poems Ferguson, a Tory Unionist and High Court barrister, pledges to turn his back on the "vaunted braveries, wealth and high command" preferred by the Imperial system and looks with a nostalgic longing to "the fair hills of Holy Ireland." Though Ferguson idealises his country and recreates an imaginary past, what is significant, is that for this Ascendancy figure at least, the "light from a distant shore" was coming from Ireland - a place that could be truly imagined as home.

