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**The Past as Prologue: Irish Historicism and National Literature**

**in the Essays of Duffy and Yeats**

The influence of the Irish Revival movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries is nowhere more apparent than in the pages of Irish authored journalism, drama, fiction, and poetry. Irish intellectuals like Sir Charles Gavan Duffy and W.B. Yeats took upon themselves the responsibility of shaping a new national literature grounded in Ireland’s history but fixated on its capacity to birth a modern Irish nationalism. In W.B. Yeats’s essay *The* Celtic Element in Literature and the essays by Sir Charles Gavan Duffy in The Revival of Irish Literature, the authors offer their shared belief that Ireland’s past can serve as the basis for a new unified Irish nationalism while starkly diverging on the principles for how that history should be used, with Duffy focusing on historical events and biography leading to education and morality and Yeats focusing on the emotional power within Ireland’s ancient legends and mystical religion. In this essay, I highlight how each author advocates for their preferred use of historical material and argue that despite their differences both authors implicitly agree that literature engrained in the commonality of a collective history notably devoid of divisive political rhetoric can produce a new Irish nationalism.

Sir Charles Gavan Duffy approaches his nationalism as a journalist, placing importance on unification through education. Duffy begins with the general thesis that (Duffy 1894, 19). He then submits that “the Celts are among the most teachable of races” (Duffy 21) and therefore new educational “ideas” will create a generation of patriotic Irishmen who are “wiser, manlier, more honest…more prosperous” (17). Drawing on this core assumption of the value of education, Duffy asserts that illustrative history and targeted biography are the best suited applications for Ireland’s past because when Irishmen learn about their “great men” (25) in “noble books” (29) filled with “picturesque biographies…or vivid sketches of memorable eras” (24) they will become more disciplined and more active participants in the nation.

W.B. Yeats, the poet and dramatist, favors a nationalism centered on the universal understanding and glorification of the primal Celtic religion, rooted in mystical spiritual beliefs and “the ancient worship of Nature” (Yeats 1961, 176). Yeats argues that the arts “utter themselves through legends” (187) and in particular “the Irish legends move among known woods and seas and have so much of a new beauty that they may well give the opening century its most memorable symbols” (187). To Yeats, a national literature “constantly flooded with the passions and beliefs of ancient times” (185) would vividly remind the Irishman of his greatness within the world, thereby generating a progressive and positive unity for the future.

Within their preferred uses of Irish history, Duffy favoring educated morality based in historical events and biography and Yeats favoring genuine passion birthed from the clarity of legend, both authors recognize that the new Irish literature must be authentic and concentrated to generate contagious Irish nationalism. While no doubt a rhetorical pandering of sorts, Duffy derides the “literary garbage” (Duffy 1894, 12) of the late 19th century and pays passing homage to the legends of Ireland, on his way to establishing the need for the national literature to be a historically significant, yet morally decent literature of “good books…[that] will awaken all that is best in our nature and teach us to live worthy lives” (30). Duffy carefully explains the need not just for better literature including “Irish stories of surpassing interest,” but a literature with ideals and values that will make readers “better men and better Irishmen” (14). Duffy’s conviction that human nature is depraved leads him to conclude that because “education is far stronger than nature” (20) only an Irish literature which educates the Irishmen through the use of worthy historical events can create an Irish nationalist with sufficient character to make a greater impact on a greater nation.

Yeats too emphasizes the need for a cohesive and impactful national literature, but draws from a different source of focused energy. To Yeats, the ancient Celtic legends, emphasizing nature, beauty and heroism, adeptly portrayed in national literature, have the power to deeply inspire the emotion and imagination of the Irish people. Yeats advocates for literature permeated with the passionate inspiration of the ancient Celtic life which favors “a nature more lyrical than dramatic” (Yeats 1961, 182) and is marked by “delight in wild and beautiful lamentations” (182). He celebrates the “wild melancholy” (Yeats 184) of the Celts because the “imaginative passions…did not live within our own strait limits and were nearer to ancient chaos” (178). This “chaos” is not a negative aspect of the Celts, but a core feature of Irish legend that honored ancient imagination and celebrated the beauty of nature thus becoming the “the only movement that is saying new things” (Yeats 187). Just as Duffy wants to use worthy biography and history to ignite nationalism, Yeats wants the prized mystical, imaginative elements of Irish legends reawakened in the national literature to generate “a new intoxication for the imagination of the world” (186-187).

Despite their marked differences in the nature of proper content, both Duffy and Yeats make clear that properly constructed Irish literature can and will produce a desired Irish nationalism. Within this idealistic debate and call to the past, both Duffy and Yeats withhold any discussion of political, religious, or militaristic division. This allows each author to focus on the unifying features of a historically rooted national literature. Duffy expressly states that “if the races who inhabit these islands are even to understand and honor each other, it must be on the condition of comprehending the past not hiding it away” (Duffy 1894, 41) and asserts equality of all Irishmen no matter what religion, stating “[w]e regard all Irishmen who love their country, whatever be their creed or pedigree, as equally our countrymen” (40-41). Duffy claims that a literature filled with meaningful historical events would be sufficiently unifying to generate a national identity so potent that “the Irish settler in Canada, the Irish digger in California and Australia” would be filled “with more love and enthusiasm than even in the homesteads of Lienster and Munster” (33). Yeats too avoids ideology and politics, noting that “the old Irish” did not “weight and measure their hatred” (180) and were able to manage their passions such that excessive “[l]ove was held to be a fatal sickness in ancient Ireland” (180). Because the Celt’s ancient, mystical, emotional idealism produced a superior capacity to be experientially present, Yeats asserts that if properly represented in literature Irishmen could reawaken “a certain power of saying and forgetting things, especially a power of saying and forgetting things in politics, which others do not say and forget” (181). In this way, Yeats offers the ancient idealism as a way forward to unification and away from the political.

Duffy and Yeats do not advocate a violent nationalist agenda in their rhetoric but rather approach nationalism in pedagogical terms, asserting that Ireland’s past is the proper building material for a national literature. Through such a literature, which stresses the value of historical commonality and Irish virtue, a unified and impactful Irish nationalism could emerge.

**Works Cited**

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