



## The Poetics of Cultural Nationalism: Thomas MacDonagh's *Literature in Ireland* (1916)

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This article examines Thomas MacDonagh's book, *Literature in Ireland: Studies Irish and Anglo-Irish*, published in 1916, as a case study in perspectives on nationalism and identity in Ireland in the early twentieth century. It takes an interdisciplinary approach, assessing the text, which is based on literary criticism and analysis, in the historical context of cultural nationalism. MacDonagh's legacy has hinged on his participation in the Easter Rising, but popular memory of that event has subsumed the diverse views of its participants into a rigid national narrative. In contrast, this article argues that *Literature in Ireland* and the 'Irish mode' in poetry that it posits present a broader and more inclusive ideal. MacDonagh defines the Irish nation based on shared history and heritage, but acknowledges the consequences of that history, such as the presence of two linguistic traditions, Irish and English. He expresses, on the eve of revolution, the need to look forward and not only back for unity. This book has long been marginalized, when mentioned at all, in both history and literary studies, but the on-going 'decade of centenaries' provides an excellent opportunity to reassess its legacy and vision.

Though remembered primarily for its political significance, the roots of the Easter Rising of 1916 spread into the rich and varied soil of Irish society and culture at the turn of the twentieth century. The militarisation of politics in Ireland and across Europe in that era contributed to growing support for physical force separatism, but cultural nationalism, a broad movement for the definition of the nation by its shared, inherited cultural traits, rather than on solely civic or ethnic grounds, played an important role in changing public attitudes. Of the seven signatories of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic, three, Patrick Pearse, Joseph Plunkett, and Thomas MacDonagh, were poets, possibly "the gentlest revolutionaries in modern history" (Kiberd, 1996, p.199). MacDonagh's role in the Rising and subsequent execution overshadows his legacy, but his academic career, particularly the manuscript *Literature in Ireland: Studies Irish and Anglo-Irish*, published posthumously in 1916, merits attention. It is a manifesto not for the necessity of violence or independence, but for the definition of the nation by its unique heritage and character. Until the last ten years, historians and literary scholars have tended to focus their discussions of cultural nationalism on the giants of the Gaelic and Literary Revivals, such as Douglas Hyde and Lady Gregory, giving less consideration to broader aspects of the beliefs of the participants in the events of 1916 and beyond. More recent scholarship has expanded the focus to include previously marginalized figures, groups, and ideologies and this article adds to the widening picture.<sup>1</sup>

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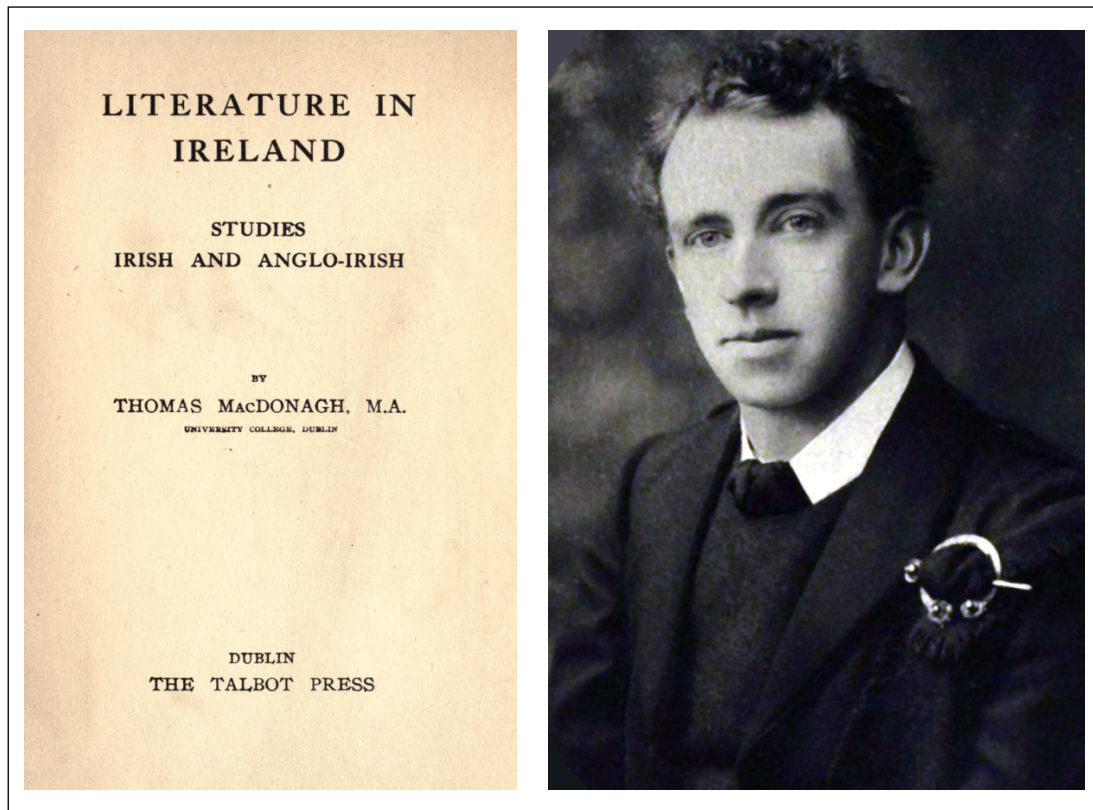
<sup>1</sup> Examples of this trend include the essays in B.T. FitzSimon & J.H. Murphy (eds.), *The Irish Revival Reappraised* (2004) and the *Irish University Review*, vol.33, no.1, Special Issue: New Perspectives on the Irish Literary Revival (2003).

The ongoing commemorative decade of centenaries provides an apt time for the reassessment of the contribution and legacy of Thomas MacDonagh.

In *Literature in Ireland* MacDonagh proposes an “Irish mode” in poetry, with distinct national boundaries. He suggests that previously verse in Ireland fell either under the category of the Gaelic tradition (if written in Irish) or English literature (if written in English). By the late nineteenth century many recognized the inadequacies of these labels and MacDonagh describes an emergent literary tradition that he calls “Anglo-Irish”, written in English but with unique Irish characteristics (1916, p.7). This literature, by and for Irish people, had the potential to ensure that regardless of political status the people recognized their valuable heritage and personal dignity while also presenting that image to the world. Ostensibly the main objective of the book is literary theory and analysis, defining the “Irish mode” and providing examples of it, but taken as a whole it contains much more. This article begins by situating MacDonagh in the historical context of cultural nationalism and the Revival, which is crucial to understanding the purpose and motivation behind his work. It then addresses his views of Irish history, the place of literature in Irish society, debates over the boundaries of the national imagination, and his hopes for the future, arguing that *Literature in Ireland* advances a unique vision of the origins and progressive potential of literature in developing the heart of the nation.

### **MacDonagh and the Revival**

During his lifetime Thomas MacDonagh was an influential teacher, writer, university lecturer, republican, and labour activist. He was born in Cloughjordan, Co. Tipperary in 1878 to a father from Roscommon and a mother from Dublin of English Unitarian heritage, both schoolteachers. MacDonagh began preparing for the priesthood until he experienced a crisis of faith and decided instead to follow in his parents’ footsteps to become a teacher. In the Gaelic League he developed a passion for the Irish language and achieved fluency as a speaker and writer, though eventually he became disillusioned with the organisation. In 1908 he moved to Dublin where he taught at Patrick Pearse’s school, St. Enda’s, and pursued first a BA and then an MA at University College Dublin, writing a thesis published as *Thomas Campion and the Art of English Poetry* (1913). He was appointed a full-time lecturer at UCD in 1911 and during this time he developed a circle of literary friends in the city. He translated poems from Irish into English, examples of which appear in the appendix to *Literature in Ireland* (1916), and he published original poems in English. He joined the Irish Volunteers the week they formed in December 1913 and the Irish Republican Brotherhood in March 1915, but despite this he only found out about plans for the Rising a few weeks beforehand. During Easter Week he was positioned at Jacob’s Biscuit Factory and after the surrender he was executed on 3<sup>rd</sup> May along with Patrick Pearse and Thomas Clarke (White, 2009). This latter event has unfortunately led to the simplification of the ideas of the leaders of the Easter Rising into a combination of zealous patriotism and a quest for martyrdom (Dawe, 1996, p.ix). Examining MacDonagh’s work and offering comparisons to other contemporary literary critics highlights both the common goals of many participants in the Revival and the diversity of opinions, and sometimes “violent disagreements – physical and rhetorical”, on the means to achieve them (McMahon, 2008, p.5).



The title page from *Literature in Ireland* (1916) and the photograph of MacDonagh published in *The Poetical Works of Thomas MacDonagh* (1916).

MacDonagh wrote portions of *Literature in Ireland* before the summer of 1914, completed it in January 1916, and it was published posthumously in June of that year. The main purpose of the book is to propose and describe the Irish mode, a sort of national stylistic fingerprint in literature, and the linguistic, cultural, and historical factors that produced and maintained it. He argues that all true Irish poetry is in the Irish mode and shows the influence of the Gaelic tradition, Irish music, and Anglo-Irish (Hiberno-English) speech. MacDonagh develops this in counterpoint to Matthew Arnold's "Celtic Note", which he calls "vague and illogical" and Arnold's book, *The Study of Celtic Literature*, "largely a work of fiction" (Arnold, 1900; MacDonagh, 1916, p.5, p.55). In sentimentalizing the "Celt", Arnold "denied him parity" and thus by extension denied his nation equal status (Ward, 2002, p.128). Whether a definite "national distinctiveness" could exist in literature and its place in the development of the nation remain the crucial issues in literary criticism of the era (MacDonagh, 1916, p.xvi; Graham, 2001, p.33). The Irish mode that MacDonagh proposes applies to two languages present in Ireland, Irish and English, as both contributed to the distinctiveness of a national literature. However, he focuses on poetry written in English, because this Anglo-Irish poetry, as he terms it, requires definition *vis-à-vis* literature in England.

This central purpose places *Literature in Ireland* within the cultural nationalist milieu of the turn of the twentieth century. In Ireland, this manifested itself in the Literary Revival, Gaelic Athletic Association, Gaelic League, and other similar organizations all of which formed part of a growing interest in the country's heritage and history. P.J. Matthews calls these cultural groups and related material and political ones such as agricultural co-operatives

and Sinn Féin “self-help initiatives,” important pieces of the complex process of decolonization (2003, p.2). While strictly political nationalists argued that national dignity depended on the exercise of self-determination as an independent state, cultural nationalists strove to preserve and promote pride in cultural distinctiveness with or without political sovereignty. In his influential speech, “The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland” in 1892, Hyde claimed that by adopting English customs and language “we have thrown away with a light heart the best claim which we have upon the world’s recognition of us as a separate nationality” and many agreed with him (in: Duffy, et al., 1894). In his view, the Irish people sought an independent political state, but had forsaken many things that gave them a separate identity (Mays, 1996, p.6). Language in particular became a central and divisive issue (Anderson, 2006, ch.5; Fanning, 2003, p.11; Hobsbawm, 1992, p.59). The broad cultural nationalist movement that arose out of these goals was a progressive and formative force, “a stimulus towards innovation and change rather than a barrier to it,” and arguably more influential in its construction than its political counterparts (Matthews, 2003, p.2; Hutchinson, 1987, p.23).

Literature played an important role because cultural nationalists sought to use the power of a shared heritage and history to transcend divisions, uniting all “in the task of constructing an integrated, distinctive and autonomous community” that could bring the nation from “degeneration” to “regeneration” (Hutchinson, 1987, p.34, p.132; Mays, 1996, p.7; McKenna, 2010, p.401; Foster, 1988, pp.454-6). George Russell (AE) stated that “a nation exists primarily because of its own imagination of itself”, but Ireland had lost that unity of imagination under the influence of England and its empire (O’Driscoll, 1982, p.403). Only when the people of the land all believed in belonging to a greater national community (an “imagined community”, to use Benedict Anderson’s concept), sharing an identity and heritage, could the nation truly exist. Through the new body of writing, the leaders of the Revival sought to create an aesthetic in order to regenerate the national spirit culturally. Debates centred on how to define and delineate Ireland’s cultural distinctiveness and the beliefs of prominent figures in the movement diverged as it evolved, threatening this autonomy, but nonetheless the idea remained a potent force. As MacDonagh says in *Literature in Ireland*, “the Gaelic revival has given to some of us a new arrogance”: it developed the “heart” of the nation and created a sense of pride among the people (1916, p.167).

### **Rewriting the Past**

In the first step towards the imagined and actual sovereignty of the nation both politicians and writers in Ireland attempted to appropriate the past for their own present needs. This was necessary, because, as Frantz Fanon argued, “colonialism is not satisfied with snaring the people in its net or of draining the colonized brain of any form of substance. With a kind of perverted logic, it turns its attention to the past of the colonized people and distorts it, disfigures it, and destroys it” (2004, p.149). Clearly many in Ireland thought that this had happened, that English rule had deprived the Irish of their own history. Consequently, political and cultural nationalists, including Tom Kettle, Erskine Childers, L.G. Redmond-Howard, Patrick Pearse, James Connolly, and MacDonagh himself, based their writings on

alternate interpretations of history, seeking to reclaim the past and counter the influence of English domination. For example, in his book *The Open Secret of Ireland* Kettle argues that Irish history should be read not as a series of failed rebellions against English rule over several centuries, but rather the opposite. He reshapes the narrative to one in which “Ireland has won all along the line” because “no other people in the world has held so staunchly to its inner vision; none other has, with such fiery patience, repelled the hostility of circumstances, and in the end reshaped them after the desire of her heart” (1912, pp.45-6). In rewriting history to escape “the cliché version of the nationalist myth,” Kettle and other participants in the Revival created a “more appealing myth,” or myths, as each had a slightly different narrative but all rejected the imperial one (Garvin, 2005, p.116). In doing so they adhered to the concept that “freedom in the future is predicated on the liberation of the past” (Richards, 1991, p.121). They regained history from the pens of the colonizer. This involved not only returning to the source in literature and history, but also selecting those sources and ideals relevant to the present and future of the nation, making it “by and large... a modernizing force” (Castle, 2011, p.293).

For MacDonagh, Irish literature, and the mentality that produces it, exists only because of the configuration of events and contingencies called Irish history (Duddy, 2003, p.20). This has much to do with the impact of the Renaissance on thought and culture: he argues that across Europe it introduced “rationality”, but he rejected this limiting authority of structured knowledge, suggesting that in Ireland there remained an element of continuum from the Middle Ages (MacDonagh, 1916, pp.5-8; Gerson, 1995, p.341). Interestingly, MacDonagh’s view seems to have retained at least some its currency, because Seán Ó Tuama echoed it several decades later it when he wrote, “from 1600 onwards there was little direct contemporary European influence on Irish poetry” (Ó Tuama, 2002, pp.xxxi-xxxiii). This is not to say that poetry in Ireland remained isolated: Ó Tuama cites the influence of French medieval courtly love poetry and MacDonagh that of Romanticism, a claim that clearly distinguishes him from the “hidden Ireland” thesis of Daniel Corkery.<sup>2</sup> The willingness to admit outside influence and the facts of history contributes to MacDonagh’s relatively inclusive vision and another piece of evidence to support it lies in his dedication of the book to George Sigerson, the scientist and poet. In his August 1892 speech to the Dublin branch of the Irish Literary Society, titled “Irish Literature, Its Origin, Environment, and Influence”, Sigerson argued that literature in Ireland showed the effects of the convergence of the many traditions brought to the island by different peoples, both in successive invasions and peacefully (in: Duffy, et al., 1894, pp.61-114). He said in that speech, “Irish literature is of many blends, not the product of one race but of several” and these traditions together create a literature that is “the guardian and the honour of our common country” (in: Duffy, et al., 1894, p.109). These diverse influences mould into the national style and are adapted to serve the purposes of the Irish people.

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<sup>2</sup> MacDonagh’s acknowledgement of European influences and placing of the Irish mode on parallel with modernist movements in literature (1916, p.8) differentiates him from Corkery’s “hidden Ireland” thesis (1924), which has generated much controversy. MacDonagh also emphasizes the points of interconnection between Gaelic and Anglo cultures within Ireland, whereas Corkery focused on their separateness. It is possible that MacDonagh’s claim that Irish poetry did not experience direct outside influence in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (when Romanticism developed) reflects a desire to depict Ireland as unpolluted by the Protestant Reformation or the rationality of the Enlightenment.

The English language represents perhaps the most significant element adopted into Irish literature. While the Gaelic League mourned the loss of Irish and sought to restore it as a national language, MacDonagh accepted the reality of language shift and realized the positive opportunity and “freshening breath” it offered (1916, p.103). It is estimated that at least half the population spoke Irish in the early nineteenth century before the Great Famine of the 1840s, but by 1861 this dropped to 24.5 percent and by 1911 it had dropped further to 17.6 percent, though with higher proportions in some regions (Census of Ireland 2006, table 01A; Ó Gráda, 2012). Despite his high regard for Irish, MacDonagh recognized that English had come to dominate as a spoken language in Ireland and therefore also as a literary one. Consequently, *Literature in Ireland* focuses primarily on the new Anglo-Irish literature. Anglo-Irish refers to the form of English spoken in Ireland (now commonly called Hiberno-English), rather than a class or group of people, because “there is, of course, no Anglo-Irish race, though many Irishmen have English blood in their veins” (MacDonagh, 1916, p.28). Unfortunately, this term would assume a pejorative usage, directed by Irish-Irelanders at writers whom they deemed alien to an authentic Ireland.

### **Present Realities: Defining Anglo-Irish Literature**

Because Anglo-Irish literature shares a common language with its English counterpart, MacDonagh set out to define its fundamental distinctiveness. As Yeats wrote, “there is no great literature without nationality, no great nationality without literature,” a principle that MacDonagh seems to have believed (cited in Regan, 2006, p.88). MacDonagh puts forward three main theses: first, that Anglo-Irish literature only became worthy of that special designation and recognition when English became a common language among the Irish people with a literature written by and for them; second, Irish ways of life and thought are distinctive enough to merit their own literature and English literature cannot do them justice; and last, that English in Ireland differs from elsewhere, with its own rhythm and character, showing the influence of the Irish language on it (1916, pp.viii-ix, p.58). These three qualifications make Anglo-Irish writing a “distinctly a new literature, the first expression of the life and ways of thought of a new people, hitherto without literary expression” (MacDonagh, 1916, p.23). In MacDonagh’s view this new literature, resulting from the language shift, is written by and for Irish people but in English, something unimaginable before the mid-nineteenth century, though modern histories of Irish literature dispute this dating and generally include earlier writings (Kelleher & O’Leary, 2006).

What makes this new Anglo-Irish literature “Irish” is the orientation of the writers towards Ireland (not England) and the maintenance and adaptation of older styles and to a different language, and MacDonagh devotes a great deal of space in *Literature in Ireland* to poetic analysis, using it to support his ideas on cultural distinctiveness. He argues that in the Irish mode, verse is accentual, a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, but not used in the same way as in English poetry. In the latter, generally the emphasis is on syllables, like in iambic pentameter, the common metre of Shakespearean verse. In Irish verse, the line or phrase becomes the metrical unit. Therefore, MacDonagh says “to read correctly Anglo-Irish poetry one must follow either Irish music or Anglo-Irish prose speech” (1916, p.70). Irish music, both song airs and dance tunes, also centres on phrases and the connection between

this and poetry is perhaps best illustrated through example. One poem (and song) that MacDonagh addresses is “An Páistín Fionn”<sup>3</sup> (first verse below):

*Grá mo chroí mo pháistín fionn,  
A croí is a haigne ag gáire liom,  
A cíocha geala mar bláth na n-úll  
Is a píob mar eala lá Márta.*

Oh my fair Pastheen is my heart's delight;  
Her gay heart laughs in her blue eye bright;  
Like the apple blossom her bosom white,  
And her neck like the swan's on a March morn bright! (In: MacDonagh, 1916, p.182)

He says of it,

I remember once hearing this latter song sung in Irish by a large number of people in the South of Ireland. The singers swayed their heads slightly in a slow, drowsy way; the song went on through its full length, verses and chorus, without a break. When I read the poem now, the original or Ferguson's version, I find in it – read into it perhaps – that continuous swaying. (1916, p.79)

Samuel Ferguson's translation appears in an appendix to the book, but when listening to the original rendered by a great *sean-nós* singer this “continuous swaying” becomes quite apparent, as in recordings of singer Níoclás Tóibín (1928-1994) from An Rinn, Co. Waterford.

MacDonagh uses the example of Yeats's “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” to demonstrate how Anglo-Irish literature has adapted this characteristic of verse from the Irish (Gaelic) tradition. He takes the first line of the second stanza, “And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow”, saying that English metrists would divide it into sets of two syllables, “And I | shall have | some peace...”, but it evades this inaccurate simplicity. Instead, it should read like “musical verse”, though it is not and was never intended to be a song. It has the same “general movement, changing from a slow beat to an easy rise and fall”, the same “continuous swaying” as present in “An Páistín Fionn” that makes it characteristic of the Irish mode (MacDonagh, 1916, pp.67-8). In addition, “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” has “acoustic appeal”, imagining a place as much through sound as through visual imagery. The reader *hears* the “bee-loud glade”, “the cricket sings”, and “lake water lapping with low sounds”, lending credence to MacDonagh's claim for poetry following the sounds of either Irish music or prose speech (Regan, 2006, pp.91-2). Critics past and present have given credence to the poetic facets of MacDonagh's literary criticism (Pound, 1916; Davis, 2004, pp.149-52). However, whether or not we accept the objective existence and characteristics of the Irish mode is incidental: what truly matters is the ideology it represents and debates over its boundaries.

<sup>3</sup> In the text he Anglicizes the spelling to ‘Pastheen Finn’.



### “For the Irish People”: Inclusion and Exclusion

The inclusion of Yeats in the new Anglo-Irish poetry in the Irish mode raises the issue of whom MacDonagh’s vision of the nation encompasses. As he accepts Yeats (though not without some criticism), a Protestant, his exclusion of the eighteenth-century writers Swift, Sheridan, and Goldsmith created much controversy, which he acknowledged (1916, p.vii). Bearing in mind his emphasis on the connection between the nation and literature, MacDonagh applies the criterion for this new literary form back in time to discover its origins and grounds for inclusion. Based on the fact that he embraces Dublin street ballads as examples of folk poetry, clearly he does not in any way exclude people or writers from inside “the Pale”. Rather, he states that the roots of Anglo-Irish literature are in “the life and ways of the Gael”, that it has within it “memories of the old Gaelic literature” and the “rhythm of Irish music” and it comes “from the new English speakers of the country whose fathers or grandfathers spoke only Irish” (1916, pp.23-4). His excludes Swift and his contemporaries with the justification that they remained with their faces to England, an attitude “rather of dissent from an English orthodoxy than of consent in an orthodoxy of their own or of Ireland’s” (1916, p.vii). Both Richards and Stewart seize on this statement as proof of an “exclusivist and conservative” view (Richards, 1991, p.127; Stewart, 2000, p.32). However, they judge by today’s increasingly pluralistic standards (e.g. Kelleher & O’Leary, 2006) and focusing on this one case ignores the content and themes of the rest of the book. Instead, in MacDonagh’s opinion Anglo-Irish literature that comes “from the new English speakers of the country” illustrates exactly the kind of practical opportunity he saw in the language shift. In his view, Anglo-Irish literature could now constitute a valid national form of literary expression because English had become a widely spoken language in the country.

MacDonagh specifically includes those who made an effort to participate in the life of Ireland and forge an Irish identity, like Yeats and Synge, saying that Anglo-Irish “is worth having as a term only to apply to the literature produced by the English-speaking Irish, and by these in general only when writing in Ireland and *for the Irish people*” (emphasis added, 1916, p.28). Though he expressed some doubts about nationalist leaders and developments, Yeats clearly intended to write with this purpose in mind and saw a place for himself within it, saying that a truly national literature is created by writers “who are moulded by influences that are moulding their country, and who write out of so deep a life that they are accepted there in the end” (in: O’Driscoll, 1982, p.414).<sup>4</sup> Taking this into account, on the spectrum of opinions of inclusion and exclusion within cultural nationalism MacDonagh seems fairly inclusive and progressive, at least compared to “Irish-Irelanders” like Douglas Hyde and D.P. Moran, and later Daniel Corkery, in whose eyes writers using the English language could never purport to express the ways of life and character of the Irish people. While Hyde included Anglo-Irish literary traditions in his 1892 speech, by 1900 his opinions had shifted and “he attached the idea of Irish nationality solely to the Gaelic tradition” (Stewart, 2000, p.35). Likewise, Moran (1900; 1905) saw in Ireland two distinct civilizations with

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<sup>4</sup> This sentiment is also evident in Yeats’s poem “To Ireland in the Coming Times” in which he identifies himself with historic figures and writers, including Ferguson and Mangan, whom MacDonagh praises, and expresses the wish that “I would accounted be / True brother of that company / Who sang to sweeten Ireland’s wrong / Ballad, story, rann and song.”



irreconcilable ways of life, a view that has until recently dominated criticism of the Revival and had a reductive influence on what was a “multi-layered” phenomenon (Ferriter, 2005, p.92; Matthews, 2003, pp.98-103, p.147). While Corkery (1931) admitted the existence of an Anglo-Irish literature he strongly believed it could in no sense be deemed a national literature.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to this, MacDonagh includes all writers who willingly devoted themselves to the nation and accepted an Irish identity without trying to hold onto English standards or roots, an idea in keeping with the essential project of cultural nationalism.

### A “Resurgent Ireland”? Visions for the Future

As addressed above, through the Revival, cultural nationalists sought to repossess the Irish past (both its historical and mythical elements) and use it to create a viable identity. However, some remained overly focused on the past and unable to recognize present realities, let alone provide a positive and constructive vision for the future. The Gaelic League seems to have fallen into that trap, lamenting the loss of the Irish language, but retaining overly ambitious goals regarding its future and ineffectual means of pursuing them, while a high turnover of members meant few developed true proficiency in the language (McMahon, 2008). MacDonagh and others, including Sigerson, recognized that the past, the rich cultural heritage of Ireland, had much of value to offer, saying “we are true to the best of the old literature when we are true to the part of it which we inherit now in the twentieth century, when we discover in ourselves something of its good tradition” (MacDonagh, 1916, p.112). However, the key to this is the process of discovery: selecting “the best” of the old and using it to move forward. Translations from Irish into English constituted part of this undertaking (Brown, 2010, pp.23-4). Not solely a substitute for learning Irish, they were often conceived of as a way of arousing interest in learning the language (Crotty, 2006, pp.80-1). MacDonagh appreciated that “the literature of tomorrow will be in terms of the life of tomorrow” (1916, p.112, p.137). He recognized the importance of emphasizing a shared history and cultural legacy to create a unified identity, but one with fairly expansive boundaries, certainly with borders encompassing both linguistic traditions. The argument put forward in *Literature in Ireland* suggests recognition of the complexity and needs of an independent Ireland, rather than the impossibility of returning to a pre-colonial past.

Apart from this ideal unifying vision, in this book MacDonagh offers little suggestion of how he hoped events would proceed in the nationalist cause. Nonetheless, in his introduction to the text Padraic Colum suggests the author had a “prophetic outlook” and hopes for a “resurgent Ireland” (in: MacDonagh, 1916, p.xv). Colum knew MacDonagh personally so perhaps he read the text with more in mind than the average twenty-first century reader knows. The language used in the book implies a connection between literary trends and political separatism, describing the Irish mode as a “revolt”, “independent”, “a separate thing”, “a period of disturbance, of change”, “revolution”, and “free from the old

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<sup>5</sup> Corkery argued in *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* that the English language could not properly express Irish life; Russian national literature is written in Russian so by extension Irish national literature should be in Irish. However, this ignores the example of colonized peoples who have literatures in the language of the colonizers. Corkery further says that Anglo-Irish literature was written primarily by writers from the Ascendancy (colonizing) class living outside Ireland and for an audience outside Ireland, thus disqualifying it from any status as national literature, which must be “written primarily for its own people” (pp.2-6).

authority” (MacDonagh, 1916, pp7-8; Davis, 2004, p.150). While he uses these terms to place the development of Anglo-Irish literature on a parallel with the avant-garde, they evoke nationalist rhetoric. However, the text offers only two direct references to fighting for “the cause”, perhaps because the author wrote some of it before the outbreak of the First World War radicalized his views.

Many strong workers in the national movements are good poets too; no Irish poet or dreamer knows the day when he may be called into action in the ancient fight. (MacDonagh, 1916, p.16)

It is well too that here still that cause which is identified, without underthought of commerce, with the cause of God and Right and Freedom, the cause which has been the great theme of our poetry, may any day call the poets to give their lives in the old service. (MacDonagh, 1916, p.103)

In both of these instances, he suggests that should the opportunity arise, he would take a gun to stand with his compatriots in “the ancient fight”, which could (and did) claim his life. However, unlike some of Patrick Pearse’s work, which contains a feeling that he not only extolled but *desired* martyrdom, MacDonagh seems much more restrained.<sup>6</sup> He may have willingly fought and died for Ireland’s independence, but he was not determined to do so and neither does he continually allude to a tradition of martyrdom as a theme in history or literature.

MacDonagh’s original poem, “Of a Poet Patriot” contains similar sentiments. It originally appeared in 1903 under the title “To William Rooney”, but he changed the name eleven years later to add universal appeal. It has frequently been interpreted as a self-epitaph, though it is unclear if the author had that intent:

His songs were a little phrase  
Of eternal song,  
Drowned in the harping of lays  
More loud and long.

His deed was a single word,  
Called out alone  
In a night when no echo stirred  
To laughter or moan.

But his songs new souls shall thrill,  
The loud harps dumb,  
And his deed the echoes fill  
When the dawn is come. (In: Colum and O’Brien, 1916, p.11)

In this, people remember the poet for “his deed” and in a sense MacDonagh’s own death and subsequent legacy fulfilled that prophecy, with his intellectual work “drowned” by his role in the Easter Rising. William Rooney, the poem’s original dedicatee, died not for “the cause” but of tuberculosis, though during his life he was an active member of the Gaelic League, a poet and journalist and his views of Irish language and literature shared many similarities

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<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the most famous epigram of Pearse’s connection between martyrdom and the nationalist cause comes from his oration at the grave of O’Donovan Rossa: “Life springs from death; and from the graves of patriot men and women spring living nations” (1922, pp.136-7). Much of his poetry expresses similar sentiments.

with MacDonagh's (Rooney, 1909; Matthews, 2003, pp.102-3). The life and work of both suggest that a nationalist, and particularly a writer, could contribute to developing the state. Though MacDonagh is remembered primarily for his final "deed", this view oversimplifies his legacy. Both "Of a Poet Patriot" and *Literature in Ireland* indicate that he wanted first and foremost to advance the cultural foundations of the nation and its writers. Today, scholars accept the existence of an Irish literature in the English language (though the debate over its boundaries continues). MacDonagh's text is revolutionary for suggesting this possibility, for its willingness "to really begin again and to defer to a future which is beyond knowledge but not speculation" (Graham, 2001, p.40).

## Conclusion

MacDonagh concludes the preface of the book (dated January 1916) with the words, "these wars and their sequel may turn literature definitely into ways towards which I looked, confirming the promise of our high destiny here" (1916, p.ix). What is that high destiny and was the promise fulfilled? Did he merely express a utopian but possibly unrealistic desire? Hutchinson notes that "all ideological movements find it difficult to translate their general principles and aspirations into concrete political programmes once they occupy government" and this seems to have occurred in Ireland (1987, p.306). Post-independence Ireland espoused primarily negative definitions of the nation, an Irish-Ireland constructed in opposition to the idea of England: Catholic (not Protestant), spiritual (not materialistic), Gaelic (not English), agricultural (not industrial), rural (not urban), conservative (not liberal), and morally pure (not licentious). Supporters of this reactionary vision sought to claim the legacy of the Easter Rising and their view dominated for decades, leading to denial and exclusion of many, exemplified by the regime of literary censorship. One writer commented on this difference even in 1928, stating that "between the literatures of MacDonagh's day and ours, there lies a whole world of difference in inspiration and idealism, a gulf that is tragically wide" and "the Ireland of today is in reaction from the Ireland of yesterday... Idealism has swung round to disillusion" (Hurley). For many years the harsh realities of war and then governance largely subsumed those dreams.

In a recent essay Michael Pierson questions whether a progressive vision ever existed, asserting that proponents of the Revival ignored social class and perhaps naively assumed that a shared national identity could overcome divisions (2013, pp.193-204). His view and analytical focus on Yeats shows similarities to arguments first put forward by Seamus Deane three decades earlier (Deane, 1985, p.33; Brown, 2010, pp.14-15).<sup>7</sup> While both correctly point out that revivalist writers often favoured unifying visions over depictions of a divided reality, they fall into a focus equally narrow to that of which they accuse Yeats by ignoring the ideas of more marginalized writers such as MacDonagh. The definition of Irish literature in MacDonagh's work clearly held a place for all the people of Ireland, as long as their orientation and dedication remained to that island rather than across the sea to England.

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<sup>7</sup> Deane first delivered the lecture 'The Literary Myths of the Revival' in 1973, though it was not published until later. In it he addresses the influence of Yeats and other Revival writers: "This Romantic-aesthetic heritage, with which we still struggle, clearly harbours the desire to obliterate or reduce the problems of class, economic development, bureaucratic organization and the like, concentrating instead upon the essences of self, community, nationhood, racial theory, Zeitgeist" (1985, p.33).

Though he does not address social class, Dublin working-class writers could easily fit these qualifications and in the long term his views have proven prophetic. Colin Graham notes,

MacDonagh's fascinatingly tentative "Irish" is not only a pointer to a national literature which he wants to see confident and creative. MacDonagh is also envisioning, through his criticism, a new Ireland moving towards statehood, and in this, in his relative acceptance of two linguistic pathways for Irish writing, and in his aversion to pugilistic rhetoric, *MacDonagh is a genuinely visionary literary critic* (emphasis added, 2006, p.576).

MacDonagh's pragmatic acceptance of the inroads made by the English language in Ireland (along with a love and respect for Irish), his emphasis on the interpenetration of the two linguistic traditions, his forward-looking views of poetry, and his relatively inclusive conception of the boundaries of Irish literature marked him out from many of his more polemic contemporaries. *Literature in Ireland* transcends the narrow "battle of two civilizations" view of the Revival to embrace a pluralistic and aspirational vision of Irish literature and the centenary of the Easter Rising and the book's publication provides an apt time for its recognition and reassessment.

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