

Cúchulain Will Fight, And Cúchulain Will Be Right

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A review of

Eugene McNulty, *The Ulster Literary Theatre and the Northern Revival*

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In the years before the shade of Cúchulain ‘stalked through the Post Office’ in the Easter Rising, he stalked across Ireland’s stages. At the Irish Literary Theatre in Dublin he was understood as a nationalist symbol, a personification of the revived heroic age. That he symbolised something more complex in his native Ulster is indicated in an 1896 poem by the Belfast Protestant nationalist Alice Milligan:

Next day at sunset, erect, alone

Cúchulain died by a standing stone –

Died, but fell not, with sword in hand,

And his face to the foes of the Northern land .

(quoted p. 35)

If the legendary, martyred Irish hero leads our thoughts in one direction, the unfallen enemy to ‘foes of the Northern land’ leads them in quite another. As a representative of the heroic past, Cúchulain was a talismanic figure for Irish nationalists; as a hero who died fighting the men of Ireland for Ulster, he was a symbol of the pugnacious independence of his province. Eugene McNulty’s study of the revival in northern (later Northern) Ireland subtly teases out much in this vein, showing the Ulster incarnation of the movement to unsettle many contemporary ideas of Irish cultural history.

The Ulster Literary Theatre (1904-34) that is the focus of this book reflects Cúchulain’s insider / outsider status. Founded as ‘The Ulster Branch of the Irish

Literary Theatre' in support of the nationalist aims of its unwilling parent company, it dropped the reference to the Dublin-based theatre from its name after a demand for royalties. This early example of imitation, rivalry and independence in relation to its southern counterpart has echoes in all kinds of relations between northern and southern activists during the revival period. As was the case in the south, the centenary commemorations for 1798 were the crucible in which the cultural agenda for the next decade came together. Northerners, too, took trips into the rural and Irish-speaking west – Donegal rather than Connemara – to pick up lore and tunes from peasants. However, as this book makes clear, the Ulster revivalists had to contend with so much that those in the rest of Ireland did not have to that a distinctly northern version of revivalist practice came into being.

The opening section of the book finds the parallels between the preoccupations of the theatre's founders and writers and those of Alice Milligan. Much of her writing drew attention to legends (like that of Cúchulain) and historical events (like the rebellions of the O'Neills and the United Irishmen) in which Ulstermen and Ulster had played pivotal roles in the national story. The message was clear: it was an appeal to the rest of Ireland not to ignore the north. This preoccupation (one shared by the ULT and its publication, *Ulad*) illustrates the extent to which, long before partition, Ulster was recognised as different enough from the rest of Ireland to possibly be considered, even by nationalists, as not really a part of Ireland.

AE (George Russell); Moira O'Neill (Nesta Higginson) and Ethna Carbery (Anna Isobel Johnston) are all cited by John Wilson Foster as evidence that writers from the northern province who stayed in Ireland during the revival had to parenthesise their Ulster identities. McNulty argues for a more complex

understanding of events, whereby Irish nationalist concerns were given a distinctly northern inflection. This was recognised at the time: a recurring motif in contemporary reviews of ULT productions is the contrast between the substance of northern realist myth and the shadowy worlds conjured at the Abbey Theatre – a viewpoint espoused in this 1906 review of the Ulster dramatist Lewis Purcell’s play *The Pagan*:

It is not in his eyes the decorative dream-world of Mr Yeats, where frail figures murmur beautiful words in a world of shadow, but a world of coherent ideas, bright, various and many-coloured, where blood runs in men’s veins and on occasion ginger is hot in the mouth’.

(quoted p. 111)

Here we see familiar ideas of Ulster difference taken from a production by a theatre company whose central aim was to prove that Ulster was Irish. This reviewer’s approach raises a difficult question for a nationalist theatre: was Ulster so different from the rest of Ireland as to justify the formation of a separate political entity? In other words, was an Irish nationalist theatre that sought to express Ulster distinctiveness an inherently self-contradictory exercise?

The question, in the end, became irrelevant. The final chapter, which brings to light the brilliance of Gerald MacNamara’s (Harry Morrow) wicked, uproarious satires the northern and southern foundational myths, also shows the limitations of the theatre itself. Satire is sanctimony’s funny twin: both start from a corrective impulse, and what sanctimony does by exhortation, satire does by wit. How could a politics based on the collision between incompatible binary worldviews be satirised when this

binary thinking had clearly prevailed, and represented the majority view? The short answer is that it couldn't for long. Contradictions in the theatre's dual mission to 'northernise Ireland and Irishise the north' (p. 114), that might have proved generative in another time and place, were disabling in an increasingly polarised Ulster.

The final chapter engagingly shows (in spite of a style that sometimes bears traces of the doctoral thesis in which it had its origins) that the multiple ambiguities and alternate futures that the ULT embodied could not withstand the imperatives of Northern Irish culture. McNulty situates the glory days of the ULT as falling prior to 1912; there followed a plateau and, between 1920 and 1934, it declined. The lack of a permanent home and a state subsidy all played their part, but the reason for this that irresistibly presents itself was that moment when political possibilities could be questioned in the arena of popular culture had passed. What replaced this moment was a situation that became all-too familiar in the Northern Irish twentieth century: a stand-off between rival, incompatible certainties.