

Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Kelly, Matthew (2005) Essentialist Agendas: The Irish Revival. *The Irish Review*, 33 (1). pp. 125-133. ISSN 0790-7850

Published by: Cork University Press

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/29736277> <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/29736277>>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:
<http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/29600/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)



Essentialist Agendas: the Irish Revival

MATTHEW KELLY

These four books, two monographs and two collections of essays, seek to 'reappraise' or provide 'new perspectives' on the Irish Revival.¹ Although problematizing the concept, each is confident that there was such a thing on which chronological boundaries can be imposed. Chronology, of course, is difficult and *that* passage from WB Yeats' Nobel lecture gets frequent airings – PJ Mathews quotes it twice. There is little novel about challenging Yeats' master-narrative and although some of the writers locate the Revival's roots in the 1880s, few engage with Roy Foster's persuasive idea that early revivalism was politically Parnellite. On the other hand, as I have suggested elsewhere, revivalist ideas combining Young Irelandism with self-help were to be found in the fenian Young Ireland Societies of the 1880s (*Historical Journal*, 2000). Other contributors suggest stronger continuities with nineteenth-century antiquarianism, while Úna Ní Bhroiméil observes that a highly politicized Gaelic language movement was established in the US from the 1870s, part of a bid for recognition by an insecure ethnicity. However, watersheds are appealing and Mathews's contention that the real turning-point in the emergence of modern Irish cultural nationalism – that complex of language revivalism and economic self-help – was the failure of the second home rule bill in 1893, is worth further consideration.

Mathews' broader aim is to dispute FSL Lyons's 1978 thesis that revivalist politics was driven by conflict between 'two clear-cut ethnic categories'. Rejecting as emblematic Lyons's figures of Yeats and DP Moran, Mathews suggests that the division was 'one of conflict between a broad civic republican cultural politics and a more chauvinistic nationalism'. This is a striking formulation that should provoke debate. William Rooney is his alternative

KELLY, 'Essentialist Agendas', *Irish Review* 33 (2005) 125

iconic figure (and is contrasted in an interesting reading with Moran), but the brief analysis of his essays bolstered by biographical detail taken from Patrick Bradley's contemporary hagiographical sketch doesn't make for a very strong case. Referred to as a leader, it's difficult to discern how substantial the interests Rooney led actually were, while the reproduction of the familiar litany of responses to his premature death in 1901 risks establishing a new mythical figure to which all kinds of significance can be attached. As Mathews concedes, not only did Arthur Griffith abandon Rooney's civic republicanism, but he also proved an increasingly chauvinist nationalist. Yeats, also marshaled as Rooneyesque, soon withdrew from advanced nationalist activity altogether. On the other hand, a more robust civic nationalism could be found in the Young Ireland Branch of the United Irish League, which rather cuts across Mathews's claim that the home rulers were no longer 'innovators' in Irish politics. It wasn't until the formation of the Irish Volunteers in 1913 that the civic republican ideas circulating among Irish socialists and separatists became influential, but this is beyond the chronological scope of this study.

The broader case made for Rooney's particular significance is debatable. That Rooney thought the United Kingdom a colonial state is indisputable; that he was 'at odds with racial ideas of bourgeois cultural nationalism' is more problematic. For example, in an essay Mathews quotes, Rooney describes the Young Ireland oeuvre as Ireland's 'most national' because it was 'most anti-English'. Any reading of Rooney's essays shows him to have held profoundly essentialist views about nationality and it's hard to see the sense in which he was not an adherent of 'a collective ethnic nationalism'. Should 'racial' and 'ethnic' be employed interchangeably as they seem to be here?

There are wider issues raised by Mathews' use of 'post-colonial' rhetoric. Unionism is silently rejected as a category of historical analysis, despite Plunkett (a key figure in this study) being one, and actions by 'the English' (note: not the British) are designated a 'colonial strategy'. It is not clear, for example, what the 'over-zealous colonial attempts to "enlighten"' rural Ireland actually were and how these formed part of 'the enlightenment project'. Mathews links this to the nineteenth-century Catholic church's 'zeal' in countering 'pagan' influences among its flock, which he suggests reflected a 'post-colonial anxiety'. Can the same be said of the devotional revolution happening throughout Europe in this period? Recent (and not so recent) imperial historiography emphasizes the complexities of imperial agency, while historians have increasingly engaged with the linkage between the evolving imperialism of some home rulers and the constructive unionism of many self-help activists, a doctrine that itself owed much to mid-Victorian radicalism. More nuanced thinking is reflected, for

example, in Eve Patten's characterization of the Royal Irish Academy as a channel for 'latent but persistent traditions of Grattanite patriotism' rather than as a colonial outpost.

Mathews is absolutely right to underline the increasingly anti-imperial and non-clandestine character of separatist nationalism in this period, although neither development was as novel as he suggests. Part of the problem is his sometimes undisciplined language and slightly tendentious reasoning. The opening vignette attempts to draw together his different strands, relying on '[i]t is quite possible' and 'it is quite conceivable'. This is followed by an analysis packed with turning points, last hurrahs and epiphanic moments. For example, the Atkinson/Mahaffy affair apparently signaled 'the breakdown of colonial sanction over cultural value in Ireland', yet the Irish remain wedded to 'bourgeois values'. I was constantly confused by the distinction drawn between bourgeois and colonial values, and reluctantly suggest that Mathews runs the danger of implying that some values are bourgeois when held by Irish Catholics/nationalists and colonial when held by Irish Protestants/unionists. I would also take issue with the tendency to classify all Protestants as Anglo-Irish. Lady Gregory's puritanical reading of Irish myth suggests 'she can be accused of internalizing the colonial critiques of Mahaffy and Atkinson', but, '[e]ver-expedient', she is excused because she hoped her collection "'might be made a school reading book'". The problem is that Mathews merely conjectures that this explains Gregory's approach, other analyses (see below) suggest otherwise. It wasn't schoolboys who objected to Synge's plays! The impression created is that were it not for 'colonials' like Mahaffy and Atkinson dictating moral standards, we'd now be celebrating Kiltartan rather than the Woodstock Festival and early twentieth-century Dublin for second-wave feminism. If Stephen Howe's (not unproblematic) *Ireland and Empire* (Oxford, 1999) has proved too strong a medicine for some, forthcoming work by Jennifer Ridden should do much to clarify and advance the Ireland and imperialism debate.

Although much of the material in this book will be familiar to specialists, it is stimulating, provocative and, at times, infuriating. It would have benefited from a cold shower and a greater awareness of recent work in Irish historiography: Mathews seems unaware of articles such as Senia Pase-ta's on the royal visits of 1900 and 1903 (1999) and Terence Denman's on nascent Sinn Fein's anti-recruiting campaign (1994), both in *Irish Historical Studies*. Ironically, this monograph is essential reading *because* it demands such careful handling.

Mathews's polemical strategies are not unique in this company. Nicolas Allen's fascinating essay on the cultural revival and Darwinian evolutionary discourse identifies a 'decolonizing moment' that lasted thirty years. In one

of two excellent pieces on how cultural nationalism was informed by the brotherly impulses of theosophy, 'the ghost discourse of the revival', Selina Guinness, presumably with some irony, describes Charles Johnson's return from India owing to his wife's ill-health as a 'typical display of colonial chivalry'. Lady Aberdeen's home rule enthusiasms and wearing of the green are explored by Janice Helland, who argues that by her sartorial choices she conflated her body with Celticness. The wonderful image of the Lord Lieutenant's wife living in a mocked up cabin and sitting at a spinning wheel during the Chicago World's Fair with a two-thirds scale model of Blarney Castle as backdrop will stay with me, but given the well-established home rule credentials of the Aberdeens (they were also Scottish home rulers) and their personal popularity, I was mystified by Helland's claim that Lady Aberdeen's 'attentions and motives remain suspect in an atmosphere of colonialism'.

Much that *is* new is to be found in the two collections of essays under consideration and it will be impossible to do justice to their richness in the space allowed. Prominent themes include the way revivalist activity in Ulster reveals the fragmented nature of revivalist culture, the ideological significance of theosophy, the ideas of George Russell and the remarkable *Irish Homestead*, and the role of women. Catherine Morris's essay on the Belfast cultural nationalist, Fenian and Methodist Alice Milligan is fascinating. It generously reproduces her doggerel remembering her parents threatening that the Fenians would come get her if she didn't behave – and Alice secretly wanting to be whisked off into the night. Was there a sexual element to this fantasy? Marnie Hay analyses the short-lived journal *Uladh*, exploring the creative tensions between regional and national identities in the north. This compliments Richard Kirkland's subtle piece on the northern revival, which, among other things, observes that at the *Feis* of June 1904 the Glens of Antrim were promoted as a repository of Irish authenticity to rival the West of Ireland in the revivalist imagination. Similarly, Brian Griffin's entertaining treatment of Katherine Frances Purden's popular fictional portrayals of flat Co. Meath, oddly influenced by popular images of the mountainous west, provide another idealised Irish landscape. Purden's vision of contented social relations between tenant and landlord, however, could have been more contextualized. The RIC County Inspectors monthly reports held by the National Archive in London contain a wealth of information on rural politics and social relations. Elaine Cheasley Paterson's piece on the Dun Emer Guild restores the centrality of a figure like Evelyn Gleeson, both as revivalist thinker and financial sponsor. We learn that the going rate for a revival professional was around about £125 per year, whether for Lilly or Lolly Yeats or a Gaelic League organizer.

Paterson explores how 'authenticity' became a 'profoundly political pretext for evaluation'.

Michael McAteer's piece on the *Countess Cathleen* suggests that preoccupations with what this most revised play reveals about Yeats' relationship with Maud Gonne have obscured the historiographical strategies at work. McAteer suggests that the time-frame changes, going from the sixteenth century, when Cathleen could easily be identified with a Gaelic aristocracy, to a later vagueness, reconciled the play to Yeats' increasing preoccupation with the need of the descendants of the Ascendancy to assume the cultural leadership of Ireland. More than this, via McAteer's needlessly lengthy discourse on Marx's theory of exchange, Cathleen's sacrifice is revealed as reflecting 'an aristocratic code in which values of sentiment are placed above pragmatic self-interest'. In accepting the sacrifice, the starving peasants defer to the Countess's superior ethos. From a different perspective, Leeann Lane addresses this theme in her interesting discussions of Russell's didactic idealisation of the Irish peasant. Reading Shaun Richards' piece comparing the work of Synge with that of contemporary playwright Martin McDonagh reminded me of the cruelty and violence of *Playboy*. McDonagh, who claims not to have read Synge until already established as playwright, commented on 'the darkness of the story', a reminder that the reaction to the play was not entirely driven by Sinn Fein chauvinism.

Sinéad Garrigan Mattar's fascinating new book establishes the importance of comparative science, anthropology and ethnology to the primitivism of the Big Three, WB Yeats, Lady Gregory and JM Synge. Her aim, admirably achieved, is to explore their actual reading, patterning it against their artistic development and preoccupations, establishing how their polemical interventions were shaped by this reading. From the outset the multiple meanings of primitivism are stressed, implying that it cannot be reduced to analyses of a dominant discourse or over-arching paradigms. It is, however, possible to identify two general sensibilities, the romantic and the modernist. By this formulation, the romantic perspective finds in the primitive the highest values of civilisation but in a simpler and purer form than that found in complex modern societies. Modernism refutes this, finding the passionate impulsive savagery of the primitive 'other' revelatory as to the true condition of humanity, which is disguised in modern societies by the precarious veneer of civilisation. Literary primitivism, Mattar argues, tended to be a generation behind scientific thought. But some were more outdated than others; Gregory carried the romantic tradition into the twentieth century, Synge almost programmatically bore the modernist burden, and Yeats, caught somewhere in between, was a law unto his occultist self.

In her opening chapter Mattar traces the emergence of the modernist Celtology in comparative science by the 1880s through the ideas of Arnold, Renan, de Jubainville, Whitely Stokes, Kuno Meyer and Andrew Lang. Explored in parallel are their amicable relations with the literary primitives, the scientists monitoring their interpretations of the Irish epic, gently chiding the popularisers for their naivety but pleased to see them generating a wider audience for the material. As de Jubainville said of Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, 'In my opinion she has *arranged* the Irish texts too much'; he regretted her moderation of 'the authentic, if half savage, atmosphere of the Irish epic'. This period saw the professionalization of academic life and study and this tolerant blurring between the scientific and the literary suggests much about the intellectual culture of the time.

Gregory's use of ancient Irish texts and folklore was put to overt political use. Like Mathews, Mattar argues that *Cuchulain* was a response to the Atkinson controversy and that Gregory sought to provide the Gaelic League with accessible retellings of ancient Irish texts and collected folklore that would justify the study of Irish according to the moral precepts of the day. 'As an interpreter of folklore she was ruthlessly subjective but as a collector she was remarkably objective.' Like Yeats, Gregory had her masks, morphing between theatre director, folklore collector, nationalist propagandist, and peasant woman; she had a touch of the Lady Aberdeens. Indeed, particularly striking is the case made here for the influence of colonial travel literature on Gregory's literary primitivism and the credence she extended to the British ideal of sensitive colonial administrations, each adapted to local cultural expectations. If, on the one hand, Gregory's collection of folklore attested to her hope (shared with the unionist Standish James O'Grady) that the Ascendancy might equip itself finally to fulfill its rightful purpose as the paternalist guardians of Irish society, on the other, her primitivist idealization of the Irish peasantry answered a psychological need to construct an alternative image to the lived experience of agrarian agitation that showed this an impossible dream.

Synge could not be accused of being behind the times. Mattar demonstrates how Synge's autobiographical claim to have abandoned science was disingenuous. His reading of the comparative scientists was systematic, developing from his childhood fascination with natural history and his adolescent engagement with Spencerian evolutionary science. Synge's attitude is captured in his dictum that 'If science is a learning of the truth, nature and imagination being a less immediate knowledge of the same, the two when perfect will coincide'. (Never mean in acknowledging her indebtedness to other scholars, Mattar notes in the text that this quotation was first commented upon by Mary C. King in a 1985 study.) Mattar

provides a nice reading of Synge's *Aran Islands* and a full analysis of his plays from the primitivist perspective. The irony, as Mattar points out, is that the moral economy of Synge's West, informed by scientific analyses of Irish epic, bears a close resemblance to Atkinson's appraisal of the moral degeneracy of this literature. It would have been fascinating to know how well acquainted Atkinson was with comparative science. Of particular interest is how primitivist ideas shaped the powerful sexuality of Synge's women: where Gregory censored, Synge was true to the ancient texts. Pegeen's use of 'the word "shift"' seems tame when compared to the excised line 'If I lay a hand on you I'll make my garters of your hair'. It's a pity the putative location of the line in the play is not given: is this a threat of violence, an expression of where unleashed sexual desire would lead, or both?

Yeats's 'plunder' of comparative science was as idiosyncratic, promiscuous and agenda-driven as might be expected. Magpie-like, he put it to his own purposes, absorbing it into the evolving Yeatsian world-view. The contrast with Synge's approach was characteristic, and one is again struck by the differing effects of Synge's 'formal' education and Yeats's voracious autodidacticism. Making sense of Yeats's occultism is difficult and Mattar's lucidity is extremely welcome, but at times something of the gentle irreverence Roy Foster brings to the subject is needed. I was reminded of the letter Foster quotes in *The Apprentice Mage* to Gregory in which Russell expresses his exasperation with Yeats's ill-informed name-dropping. Indeed, as Mattar argues, following Warwick Gould, Yeats used Frazer *contra* Frazer, Nutt *contra* Nutt and Clodd *contra* Clodd. But a strong case is made for his more faithful use of the work of Andrew Lang, Balliol classicist, fellow of Merton, and self-identified 'Psycho-Folklorist'. His belief that psychical research and occult religion were relevant to the study of the primitive paranormal appealed to Yeats, while Lang the polymath – the novelist, the poet, the academic, the columnist and the author of 'fairy books' for children – provided a model in other ways too. By examining carefully the development of Yeats's ideas about the Celt through the canonical essays, Mattar shows how his ideas became increasingly reconciled to those of Lang. They evolved from an exclusivist model of the (Irish) Celt to an inclusivist idea of the primitive, whether, according to Lang, the subject was Maori, the Red Indian or the Zulu. 'What is called "Celtic" is really early human', Lang argued in 1897, 'and may become recrudescant anywhere, for good or for evil'. In his review of Yeats's *The Celtic Twilight* Lang asserted: 'The great Celtic phantasmagoria is the world's phantasmagoria.' By the time he wrote 'The Celtic Element in Literature' Yeats silently acknowledged this, eliding 'Celtic' into the 'changeable' in 'all old literatures'. Having established Yeats's use of the comparative scientists, a dense

and closely argued chapter follows delineating his attempts to find dramatic form for his 'ritual of revolt'.

I was left approving of Synge, feeling a slightly condescending benevolence for Gregory, and grateful to Mattar for genuinely providing further illumination of the sources of Yeats's extraordinary intensity and conviction. I was left understanding further how Yeats's use of the work of others ensured, to use Renan's phrase, that over his long creative life he did not wear himself 'out in mistaking dreams for realities'.

These books provoke some wider thoughts on recent Irish cultural history. First, although the influence of post-colonial theory is not to be decried, I cannot help but detect too much readiness to adopt the one-size-fits-all approach. More than this, by referring to 'English' and 'Gaelic' or 'Irish' cultural values there is the danger that the essentialist agendas of the revivalists themselves are being internalized by their historians and critics. Joep Leerssen's brilliant notion of the Irish tendency to auto-exoticism should remind us that the Irish were as likely as the English to think stereotypically about themselves and others, and that 'their' Irishnesses, far from registering objective differences from 'their' most immediate other, the English/British, were invented/constructed/subjective assertions of difference. Second, throughout the period addressed by most of these works, the political culture of home rule remained dominant, not just electorally (at a local and a national level) but also through the popular press. The *Irish Homestead*, the *Leader* and *United Irishman* were relatively marginal, the latter two being chiefly Dublin affairs. The *Northern Patriot*, the *Shan Van Vocht*, Bulmer Hobson's *Republic* and *Uladh* had extremely small circulations. All were dwarfed in readership by the *Daily Independent*, the *Freeman's Journal*, and a large number of provincial newspapers, unionist and nationalist. Leeann Lane suggests that the *Homestead* 'created possibilities for the reception [of] revival discourse amongst a wider society', but it is not clear how extensive these possibilities were. Were there any observable patterns of distribution and what kinds of distribution figures are available? Had Purden's tenants read Plunkett and Russell? If such research suggested minimal direct influence there nonetheless seems little doubt that revivalist ideas did permeate home rule thinking. Despite Plunkett's critique of the structure of a rural life dominated by the drink interest and the Catholic clergy alienating some home rule nationalists, the self-help ethos became *de rigueur* on home rule platforms. Just as the Irish Party assimilated the language of fenianism, so too did it vampirise the revival. Consequently, the move away from the élite figures advocated by Mathews needs to go beyond second-tier figures like Milligan, T.W. Rolleston and Robert Lynd, to explore mainstream political and cultural mentalities. Work needs to be done on the political

cultures of the United Irish League and the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and the networks of journalists and political activists that transmitted ideas. The multi-disciplinary impulse must lead towards the hard graft of empirical research in socio-cultural history as well to the insights of theory and adjacent historiographies. Forthcoming work by Mike Wheatley will demonstrate how much can be learnt from regional study paid for by the purgatory of Colindale or the discomfort of the newspaper-reading stands at the National Library of Ireland. The foundations of a new cultural history of Ireland are being fashioned, which is alert to political identities as well as artistic and aesthetic agendas, but, at least to this reviewer, it seems much remains to be done to make sense of popular revivalism, the self-help movement, and, by extension, nationalism and unionism.

Notes

- 1 Betsy Taylor Fitzsimon & James H. Murphy (eds), *The Irish Revival Reappraised*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004. ISBN 1-85182-757-9, hbk, €55/£50/\$55.
Anne Fogarty (ed.), *Irish University Review. Special Issue. New Perspectives on the Irish Literary Revival* (Spring/Summer 2003).
P.J. Mathews, *Revival. The Abbey Theatre, Sinn Féin, the Gaelic League and the Co-operative Movement*. Cork: Cork University Press, 2003. ISBN 1-85918-365-4, pbk, €29.00.
Sinéad Garrigan Mattar, *Primitivism, Science, and the Irish Revival*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. ISBN 0-19-926895-9, hbk, £50.00.