Irish Literary Revival

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The Irish Literary Revival—also known as the ‘Irish Literary Renaissance’ or ‘The Celtic Twilight’—describes a movement of increased literary and intellectual engagement in Ireland starting in the 1890s and occurring into the early 20th century. As a literary movement, the Irish Literary Revival was deeply engaged in a renewed interest in Ireland’s Gaelic heritage as well as the growth of Irish nationalism during the 19th century. Indeed, the Irish Literary Revival was only a part—though a significant one—of a more general national movement called the ‘Gaelic Revival,’ which engaged in Irish heritage on the intellectual, athletic, linguistic, and political levels. For instance, the Literary Revival coincided with the formation of the Gaelic League in 1893, which sought to revive interest in Irish language and culture more broadly. Furthermore, Standish James O’Grady’s *History of Ireland: Heroic Period* (1880), and Douglas Hyde’s *A Literary History of Ireland* (1899), as well as James Clarence Mangan and Samuel Ferguson’s poetry, influenced subsequent generations who sought to carve out and define a distinctly ‘national’ Irish literature. The Irish Literary Revival is also sometimes referred to as the Anglo-Irish Literary Revival because it revitalized Irish literature not through the Irish language, but in English. In addition, many of its leading members were part of the Anglo-Irish protestant class. As a movement, the Irish Literary Revival is difficult to encapsulate, partly because of the range and reach of its various members, and also because the work that emerged from it was often experimental and widely diverse in focus, style, and genre.

The beginnings of the Irish Literary Revival were centered in Dublin and London, with William Butler Yeats constantly moving between the two as its primary organizer. In 1892, Yeats set up the Irish Literary Society in London with the help of T.W. Rolleston and Charles Gavan Duffy, while also founding the National Literary Society back in Dublin with Douglas Hyde as its president. Yeats also published during this period: an anthology of Irish folklore titled *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888), followed by a collection of folklore in *The Celtic Twilight* (1893). Other publications from this period include Hyde’s *The Love Songs of Connacht*, a collection and translation of poems and songs from the western province of Connacht, which went on to influence Yeats, John Millington Synge, and Lady Isabella Augusta Gregory.

Theatre and theatrical innovation played a prominent role in the literary revival movement. The first Irish national theatre, the Abbey Theatre, now also known as the National Theatre of Ireland, was founded in 1904 and became an important aspect of the Literary Revival. The Abbey functioned as a home for many leading Irish playwrights and actors of the 20th century such as Yeats, Lennox Robinson, Sean O’Casey, T.C. Murray, Lady Gregory, and Synge. Many of the plays written for performance at the Abbey were specifically political in nature, such as Robinson’s *The Lost Leader* (1918) and O’Casey’s dramas of the Dublin slums *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926).

While Yeats was certainly the most prominent poet of the movement, the mystic George Russell (‘Æ’) also played an important role in the Irish Literary Revival. Significantly, Æ’s first book of poems *Homeward: Songs by the Way* (1894) lead to his subsequent friendships with Joyce and Yeats. Æ’s home in Dublin also served as a meeting place for all those interested in the economic and artistic future of Ireland. As with Irish theatre from the literary revival movement, the poetry from this period also exemplified the often inevitable link between literature and politics. For instance, poets such as Patrick Henry Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh, and Joseph Plunkett were all executed in 1916 for their participation in the Easter Rising. Such incidents only fueled the movement’s investment in the necessity of political engagement, as well as the importance of reimagining a different future for Ireland.

The Irish Literary Revival was a vibrant period of creative flourishing that did not stop with poetry and theatre. For instance, John Eglington began the journal *Dana* in 1904, while Stephen Gwynn, Joseph Maunsel Hone, and George Roberts founded the publishing house of Maunsel and Company in 1906. *The Irish Review* was founded in 1910 by Professor David Houston, and published not just literature, but academic-sociological essays on the political and climate of Ireland at the time. All of these institutions were deeply committed to the publication, translation, and proliferation of the Irish experience, both past and contemporary.