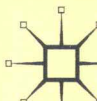


HEROIC REVIVALS

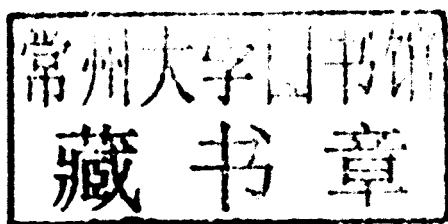
FROM CARLYLE TO YEATS

GERALDINE HIGGINS

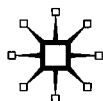


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Geraldine Higgins



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For Rob, Liadan, and Conor

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Introduction

In the General Post Office (GPO), the building that dominates O'Connell Street in the center of Dublin, the stage is set to remember and encounter Ireland's heroic history. In the central window, framed by the porticoes still bearing the bullet holes of 1916, stands Ireland's most enduring hero, Cuchulain, immortalized in bronze by Oliver Sheppard.¹ Sheppard's statue depicts the dying Cuchulain strapped to a rock, with the Morrighu (goddess of war) in the shape of a raven on his shoulder. As Yeats later recalled, "Some of the best known of the young men who got themselves killed in 1916 had the legendary hero Cuchulain so much in their minds that the government has celebrated the event with a bad statue."² Yeats referred twice to Cuchulain's presence in the GPO in his work—first, in the poem "The Statues"—"When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side, / What stalked through the Post Office? What intellect, / What calculation, number, measurement, replied?" (VP, pp. 610–11) and second, in his play *The Death of Cuchulain*, "A statue's there to mark the place, / By Oliver Sheppard done" (VPl, p. 1063). The first suggests that Cuchulain is an embodiment of heroic energy, precisely calibrated to the needs of the occasion. The second more prosaically grounds Cuchulain in "the place" where the event entered history and enjoins future memory. In fact, the Cuchulain statue marks the moment where time, space, and history intersect. It contains the nationalist narrative of the Rising in the place where the event occurred.

I want to invoke Sheppard's Cuchulain statue as the presiding symbol of *Heroic Revivals* for several reasons. The first is the remarkable fact that the Easter Rising of 1916, the foundational event of the modern Irish Republic, is commemorated by a statue of a mythical rather than historical figure. As Christopher Murray says, the Rising is represented by a "real piece of sculpture in a real place symbolically commemorating a real if ambiguously heroic event."³ What Murray does not say is that the architects of the Rising are nowhere to be found in the GPO. It is not Pearse, Connolly, or indeed any of the signatories of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic who are immortalized in Dublin's most symbolic building. Rather, it is a mythical hero, renowned for his rages, his strength, his loves, and his desire for immortality and a brave death. He stands there because the heroic ideal in the Irish context is a complex

mixture of the aesthetic and the political, the mythical and the real. He stands there too because these writers imagined him into the public consciousness and into the lives and minds of those who “went out to die calling upon Cuchulain” (E&I, p. 515). In 2009, Senator David Norris suggested rehousing the Abbey Theatre in the GPO, asking, “What could better stir the artistic imagination than this iconic combination?” In the pages of *The Irish Times*, he goes on to say, “Culture provided the imaginative spark that formed the catalyst for the armed revolution. It was, after all, an insurrection of poets.”⁴ The “iconic combination” of art and history, poetry and politics intersect in a building that is both national monument and former center of imperial communication, the site where Ireland’s heroic origin myth was forged. The GPO becomes a place of contemplation, arresting the flow of history in its chosen artifacts, its centerpiece, the Cuchulain statue representing the petrification of heroic history in selected images and figures, citable in various heroic narratives.

Although recognized as an essential component of the Revival project, the heroic ideal is too often read as the swan song of a nineteenth-century bourgeois belief in the heroic individual who can change world history, or as the dangerous germination of a belief in violent intervention that culminated in the bloody birth of the Irish Free State. According to David Lloyd, the myth of heroic continuity and tradition served not only to supplant the Gaelic culture in whose name it spoke but also to retard the evolution of Ireland as a fully fledged modern nation by fetishizing “national identity.”⁵ Indeed, in contemporary assessments of Ireland and heroism, the adherence to the idea of an unchanging heroic past, exemplified by the statue of Cuchulain in the GPO, serves to retard development, circumscribe debate, and to romanticize violence. In contrast, the dynamic heroic model preferred by the writers in this study operates as a potential site of aesthetic opposition to the power of the state. This potential is not always realized as we shall see in the fluid models of heroic identity presented in subsequent chapters.

Heroic Revivals from Carlyle to Yeats examines the heroic aesthetic operating in different circumstances and in various incarnations for Standish O’Grady, George Russell (AE), J. M. Synge, and W. B. Yeats. These writers are united by the prominence of the heroic ideal in their work, their shared Anglo-Irish background of Victorian evangelicalism, and the success of their prodigious efforts to reshape the Irish cultural landscape. The choice of male, Protestant, Anglo-Irish writers is a deliberate one; each of the writers under consideration engages with the idea of heroism as a form of authority that is masculine, religious, and racial. These terms of reference also belong to wider discursive formulations such as nationality, culture, and politics, formulations that were and are highly contested markers of identity. Yeats’s heroic ideal remains

overwhelmingly predominant in the critical conversation about heroism in the Revival and it remains so here. However, *Heroic Revivals* argues that O'Grady, AE, and Synge are not merely *precursors* of Yeats but that his heroic model is shadowed and informed by the unrealized possibilities and projections of his contemporaries. In widening the scope of Yeats's search for heroic figures to include the politically motivated O'Grady, the spiritually deracinated and democratic Russell, and the linguistic liberator Synge, this book shows that the heroic aesthetic is not monolithic but modular. The obvious parallels and differences between historical and mythical men in the creation of the Revival's heroic pantheon is here replaced by a consideration of heroism as a mobile aesthetic.

The terms "hero," "heroism," and "heroic" are often used interchangeably in discussions of Revival history but I want to introduce the idea of a heroic aesthetic. By this, I mean that these writers view the past as a field of imagination to be repurposed for the present and the future. They each invoke many different kinds of historical and mythological figures to reconstitute the heroic ideal in the alembic of their imaginations and to operate as catalysts in the modern polity. The aesthetic is more often associated with an attempt to escape from the categories of politics and history "beyond good and evil" into the realm of art.⁶ Hence, George Watson's claim that in Yeats's poetry, "heroism becomes itself aesthetic, divorced from purposeful action, frozen and static, a head on a coin."⁷ In fact, the static model of Revival heroism masks a more complex and variegated picture, for the heroic aesthetic is a construct of various Revival enthusiasms, texts, figures, and ambitions as well as the contingencies of historical context.

In Ireland, as Ian McBride observes, "the interpretation of the past has always been at the heart of national conflict."⁸ The bitter battles in Irish historiography over nationalist and revisionist versions of talismanic and traumatic events reflect a wider cultural investment in ownership of the "story of Ireland."⁹ The Revival's poetic, intellectual, and emotional investment in the heroic paradigm has been inflected in diverse (often contradictory) ways by its critics—as a recuperative Romantic mythology, a substitution of Anglo-Irish cultural success for political failure, a decolonizing gesture, and an indication of proto-fascist, authoritarian politics.¹⁰ Much of the recent critical attention to the Revival has focused on its transpositions, inventions, and distortions of history in the service of national myths. Some three decades ago, Seamus Deane addressed the Revival's distortions of history in "Heroic Styles: The Tradition of an Idea," a pamphlet that, along with his essays in *Celtic Revivals*, continues to exert a huge influence on scholarship on the Revival, including my own. Most influential of all, perhaps, is Deane's claim that Yeats is guilty of a "strategic retreat from political to cultural supremacy"; indeed, Deane accuses him in an infamous phrase of "the pathology of literary

unionism.”¹¹ Moreover, while Deane engages with Yeats’s inventiveness as a cultural nationalist, he interrogates his pejorative distortions of history in the service of amenable myths of self, class, and nation. For Deane, Yeats’s way of figuring the Ascendancy as heroic is not just a myth *of* history but also a disfiguring use of myth *as* history,¹² an important distinction that informs the discussion of “hero-history” in this book. Deane claims that the Revival’s attempt to make cultural capital out of the promotion of heroism is “no more than the after image of authority on the Anglo-Irish retina”¹³ and he remains unconvinced by its aestheticization of history into heroism. In Deane’s later work, he engages with the dialectical relationship between the Revival’s assertion of Ireland’s “heroic national character” and its alter ego, “the commercial, the economic, the religiously conformist version of the contemporary Irish”—the anti-heroic moderns.¹⁴ My discussion of the Revival’s heroic aesthetic is less concerned with the relative historical “realism” of the Anglo-Irish writer’s vision and more interested in the possibility that this vision might itself constitute an alternative—and deeply conflicting—interrogation of history.

For the writers in this literary study, heroic figures, heroic ideals, and heroic mythology are at the forefront of their imaginative construction of a useable past. Yeats and his friends in the Irish Revival believed that writers could change the course of history; moreover, they insisted that the Celtic legends they had rediscovered were an alternative history. According to Standish O’Grady, “a nation’s history is made for it by circumstances, and the irresistible progress of events; but their legends . . . represent the imagination of the country; they are that kind of history which a nation desires to possess.”¹⁵ The opposition of the irresistible progress of events and the desired history of the romantic imagination can be observed throughout the course of Irish writing. However, as I argue here, the literary use of heroic history is not simply an escape from reality or a therapeutic form of emotional recompense for political failure. Rather, it offers a dynamic model of heroic intervention that is both transhistorical and atemporal. In contemporary Irish scholarship, as Joe Cleary argues, “evolutionist and stadial conceptions of history contend with more recent models that start with the assumption that there is no clear-cut dividing line between past and present; in these models, every present is non-synchronous, a coeval mix of radically disjunct temporalities.”¹⁶ Hence, the national obsession with the past as presence leads each writer to negotiate between the documented and the useable past in order to produce a new desired history. This book aims to shed light on the temporal distortions of the Revival’s hero history—not just the telescoping and foreshortening of the remembered past but also its less-examined counterpart—the projected future.

The anomalous position of the Anglo-Irish as internal colonizers or what Stephen Gwynn calls “spiritually hyphenated” is by now a cliché of Irish literary history but it dominated the debate on the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of “Irishness” for a generation. Whereas the hyphen in Anglo-Irish might gesture toward unity or at least the possible coexistence of its opposing terms, the dominance of identity politics in the Irish academy has at times rendered the hyphen as a minus sign signaling a lack rather than a hinge. Hence, we have Yeats’s lofty dismissal of an interviewer in the 1930s who claimed that his work represented only Anglo-Ireland:

Anglo-Ireland is already Ireland . . . We have not only English but European thoughts and customs in our heads and in our habits . . . You may revive the Gaelic language, you cannot revive the Gaelic race. There may be pure Gaels in the Blasket Islands but there are none in the Four Courts, in the College of Surgeons, at the Universities, in the Executive council, at Mr. Cosgrave’s Headquarters . . . But I hate all hyphenated words. Anglo-Ireland is your word, not mine . . . [H]enceforth I shall say the Irish race.¹⁷

Yeats dismisses the hyphen but reintroduces the problematic of race. In examining the proliferation of nineteenth-century theories about the Celtic race across a range of discourses, Christopher Morash shows the impossibility of disentangling the “racial supplement” from the genealogy of theories about the nation-state.¹⁸ Moreover, the exchange of the term “race” for “nation” serves to highlight the mobility of “race” as a category, malleable to the needs of the Protestant Ascendancy in asserting blood, not language or religion, as the mark of the true Celt. Certainly, theorists of nationalism have shown that the traditional emphasis on language as the primary index of nationality oversimplifies the picture. They cite the importance of historical memory in the formation of national identity together with cultural symbols that accrue national significance or cultural currency.¹⁹ While it is thus well known that national solidarity could be built just as effectively around other rallying points, *Heroic Revivals* demonstrates the sophistication with which the Revivalists circumvented the normative categories of language, territory, and birth by substituting heroic legends, landscape, and race as the new indices of Irishness. Crucially, the heroic aesthetic, central to each of these coded discourses, offers a way out of the fixed biological and political categories of Irish identity. Instead, it proposes alternative versions of the relationship between the individual and history. The lexicon of the heroic ideal—“authority,” “order,” “hierarchy,” and “race”—is here returned to the specific context of Revival usage in order to investigate the dialectical relationship between heroism and Irish modernity.

According to Baudelaire “modernity is the attitude that makes it possible to grasp the ‘heroic’ aspect of the present moment. Modernity is not

a phenomenon of sensitivity to the fleeting present; it is the will to heroize the present.”²⁰ *Heroic Revivals* argues that the pressure to construct a national identity arises out of the encounter with modernity, is in fact a parsing of the Irish modern rather than the “invented tradition” identified by Hobsbawn.²¹ The congruence of such a unifying (or invented) tradition with a sense of national destiny (or engagement with modernity) sets up a paradoxical relationship between that which is ancient and that which is new.²² It is no accident, as Terry Eagleton suggests in his discussion of the “archaic avant-garde” that a country whose sense of historic time is so close to mythic repetition should produce texts where past and present intermingle so freely.²³ The paradox of Irish Revival writing is this celebration of the heroic individual who is *outside* history while invoking history as the transformative mechanism underpinning his authority.

In the past few decades, much attention has been paid to the elitism and authoritarianism implicit in the Revival’s doctrine of heroism. Recent studies have begun to dismantle what Matthew Kelly calls the “essentialist agendas” of the Revival and the parameters of the Yeatsian historical paradigm by focusing on the Revival’s extraliterary contexts and rival constructions of cultural nationalism.²⁴ Intervening in these debates, I aim to underscore the *flexibility* of the heroic model and its availability to different cultural projects engaged with modernity in the volatile period between the fall of Parnell (1890) and the Easter Rising (1916). As the title of my book suggests, the Irish Revival was a pluralist enterprise, even if characterized by bids for authority and dominance. By looking more closely at the Revival’s cultural and political Venn diagrams, the heroic aesthetic is revealed as a complex phenomenon with contradictory trends, some recuperative and conservative and others more radical and progressive in scope.

My analysis begins with Carlyle’s belief in the necessary intervention of the heroic individual in history, a belief that becomes in the work of Standish O’Grady, an assertion of “desired history” against Arnold’s “despotism of fact.” While O’Grady is often disparaged as an eccentric fantasist, I show that his recovery of Ireland’s heroic legends is motivated by a desire to invigorate the insipid modern age by invoking archetypes of heroic masculinity who will “rule matters with a strong hand.” Indeed, O’Grady described the heroes of legend as “the ideals of our ancestors, their conduct and character were to them a religion, the bardic literature was their Bible.”²⁵ His minatory essays warn of the consequences of ignoring his message—impotence and enervation. O’Grady’s retrieval of Ireland’s bardic past and his subsequent desire to infuse the Celtic race with a sense of heroic destiny serves as a rallying cry to the Anglo-Irish to seize the cultural initiative by producing new set texts for the present.

As we will see in chapter 2, O'Grady's discoveries are experienced as a spiritual conversion by AE, but he radically alters the aristocratic elitism of O'Grady's work. While O'Grady wrote to inspire the Anglo-Irish landlord class to assume the burden of leadership, Russell intends to democratize the heroic ideal and to restore Ireland to its pagan Golden Age. Taking up the implicit contradictions in Russell's deliberate effort to mobilize this "race-memory" of the Celtic past, I show how his mysticism, his cult of childhood, and his millennial yearning for apocalyptic change are crucially bound up with his heroic aesthetic. For Russell, the heroic contract between the leader and the led must be renegotiated to include the occult manifestation of a predestined "national character" and the recognition that heroism belongs in a democratic "deep horizontal comradeship"²⁶ rather than a strictly vertical, hierarchical one.

The aesthetic and the political come together once more in chapter 3 as I demonstrate how Synge's resistance to the heroic gigantism of his peers is intimately linked with his radical dramatic strategies. In Synge's work, the construction of heroic masculinity is informed by the related discourses of primitivism and fin-de-siècle decadence. His plays both promote and parody a model of masculinity that threatens the mores of conventional rural communities. The focus of the chapter is *The Playboy of Western World* as a revolutionary text that lays bare the mythmaking tendencies of the Revival. Indeed, Synge's parodic version of Cuchulain in Christy Mahon, "Playboy of the Western World," can be traced back through Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* to O'Grady's version of the heroic cycles.²⁷ However, Synge's subversion of the heroic tales owes less to O'Grady than to the prevalence of the romanticized and aggrandizing myths that are his legacy.

Having examined O'Grady, Russell, and Synge, I turn in chapter 4 to Yeats's participation in the construction of what Eavan Boland calls "Ireland's hero-history." Throughout this chapter, my emphasis is on a tension that is key to understanding Yeats's poetic endeavors; namely the tension between the intended stability of such "monumental history" and the instability of its textual and cultural forms. This instability is especially vivid in Yeats's dates with heroic history, which are both personal and political, not mere matters of record but as Nicholas Grene says, "Movable markers to be included or withheld, rendered accurately or falsified, depending on the literary purpose in hand."²⁸ We can see this in his best-known date poem, "Easter, 1916" in which the date as title invites the reader to meditate on the transformative effect of the event on calendrical or historical time. Ultimately, I show that Yeats refuses to allow his pantheon of heroes to remain frozen in monumental history, as he oversees the creation of the dynamic heroic space of his Irish National Theatre.

However, Yeats is not alone in this enterprise. Indeed, as I emphasize throughout this study, one can see the vitality of the Revival's heroic aesthetic in part through the flexibility of its interpretation of Cuchulain that "bright particular star of strength, daring and glory, that will not set or suffer aught but transient obscurity till the extinction of the Irish race."²⁹ O'Grady's recovery of the mythic Cuchulain as the archetypal heroic figure is described by George Russell as the "greatest spiritual gift any Irishman for centuries has given to Ireland."³⁰ Indeed, each of O'Grady's successors calls upon Cuchulain in his various guises, shaping the hero according to the dictates of changing cultural and political contexts.

In O'Grady's writings, Russell finds the "submerged river of national culture" and he proselytizes to resacralize the world to create a spiritual version of the Irish heroic. Russell's Cuchulain belongs to the "childhood of the race" and is a reflexive figure "the typical hero of the Gael, becoming to every boy who reads the story a revelation of what his own spirit is."³¹ When O'Grady learned that Russell intended to stage a production of *Deirdre*, he was horrified, insisting that the "Red Branch ought not to be staged," and urging writers to "leave the heroic cycles alone, and don't bring them down to the crowd; not, at least, through drama and the stage."³² Russell's decision to release the heroic figures from O'Grady's Gaelic aristocracy into the space of the theatre typifies his desire to democratize heroic identity and to relocate that spark of divinity in everyman.

For J. M. Synge, the heroic figures of O'Grady's mythologies are too remote from "the fundamental realities of life."³³ His rejection of "a purely fantastic, unmodern, ideal, breezy, springdayish, Cuchulainoid National Theatre"³⁴ introduces what Yeats called the "new savage music" of the Irish Literary Theatre. Synge harnesses primitive energy to a modernist sensibility, which denies its own participation in the project of Irish modernity. Likewise, in his poem, "The Passing of the Shee," subtitled "After looking at one of AE's pictures," he rejects the "plumed yet skinny Shee" of AE's ethereal mysticism and searches for inspiration down "in Red Dan Sally's ditch" with the tinkers and poachers.

W. B. Yeats answers O'Grady's call to reanimate Cuchulain as the savior of Irish life with missionary zeal. In his introduction to *Fighting the Waves*, Yeats attributes his interest in Cuchulain to O'Grady "who had retold the story of Cuchulain that he might bring back an heroic ideal." (VPI, p. 567) Yeats has another purpose in mind for these "legends of barbaric heroes with unpronounceable names,"³⁵ declaring in 1903 his aim to "re-create an heroic ideal in manhood—in plays of old Irish life" (CW III, p. 335). Yeats's Cuchulain cycle bookends his career as a dramatist with *On Baile's Strand* performed at the Abbey in 1904 and *The Death of Cuchulain*, the last play that Yeats worked on before his own death in 1939. These plays are important also in charting Yeats's

movement away from the monumentalizing tendencies of nationalist Ireland toward heroic space.

Before looking more closely at O'Grady's recovery of Cuchulain, it is worth noting that the Cuchulain statue with which I began this introduction has its own encounter with modern Ireland in Beckett's novel, *Murphy*, when Neary is moved to "seize the dying hero by the thighs and begin to dash his head against his buttocks, such as they are."³⁶ A. J. Leventhal remembers receiving a postcard from Beckett in the 1930s asking him to go to the Dublin post office to "measure the height from the ground to Cuchulain's arse" and adds "a crowd gathered round...and I was lucky to get away without arrest."³⁷ As is apparent from this anecdote, Cuchulain functions both as the object of worship in the hallowed temple³⁸ dedicated to the memory of Ireland's heroic origin and as the symbol of the ambiguities inherent in the Revival's anxieties about heroic identity.

