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The Great Community challenges received wisdom about cultural nationalism in Ireland. It describes, for the first time, the classical republican character of Young Ireland’s theory of national ideals, and traces its initial attraction to and ultimate repudiation of these ideals. Cultural nationalism, David Dwan argues, was not a reticent retreat from politics or a simple irredentism; it was an ambitious attempt to recover an ancient ideal of citizenship for a modern democratic age. Drawing on political thought from Aristotle to Edmund Burke, he examines the attractions and difficulties of this enterprise. From the start, the project relied on institutions such as the press. The vexed relationship between newspapers and Irish nationalism is the concluding moment in this revelatory account.

Cover: Interior of the Four Courts, 1922. Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.
The Great Community
The Great Community
Culture and Nationalism in Ireland

David Dwan

Field Day Files 5

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Abbreviations Used in the Notes

W. B. Yeats

A Autobiographies (London, 1955)


CT The Celtic Twilight (London and Stratford-upon-Avon, 1902)

E Explorations (London, 1962)

EI Essays and Introductions (London, 1969)

IR 1 and IR 2 Interviews and Recollections, 2 vols., ed. E. H. Mikhail (London and Basingstoke, 1977)


LNI Letters to the New Island (Houndmills, Basingstoke, and London, 1989)


SS The Senate Speeches of W. B. Yeats, ed. Donald R. Pearce (London, 1960)


V A Vision (London, 1937)

Edmund Burke


Introduction

1 Nationalisms, Cultural and Romantic

W. B. Yeats hoped to create a ‘great community’; ‘what other game,’ he asked, ‘is so worth the labour?’1 He insisted that the greatness of a nation derived from its pursuit of ‘fine life’.2 For much of his career, he remained committed to the idea of an ethical community organized around a shared conception of the beautiful and the good.3 Before Yeats, the most articulate advocates of this view of political association in Ireland were the Young Irelanders of the 1840s. These patriots subscribed to a set of civic and humanist principles that stretched back to Aristotle and Cicero and which gave their nationalism a distinctive orientation. A nation, for Young Ireland, was not reducible to the possession of a common domicile or collective identity; it was a moral entity or ‘spiritual essence’.4 It supplied ethical horizons to its citizens and invested them with a sense of shared purpose. The expression of this common purpose was the object of all genuine culture. Neither Yeats nor Young Ireland deployed the word ‘culture’ frequently or systematically, but it is a term that may be used to designate a set of values and practices that they regarded as central to the well-being of the nation. The aim of this book is to examine this vision of culture and to study the model of nationalism to which it gave rise.

The term ‘culture’ has, of course, a complex history and is extremely difficult to define, but there are at least four interrelated ways in which the notion operates. First, the word ‘culture’ functions, as it did for Matthew Arnold, as another term for what the ancients might have called ‘the good life’. A genuine community, for Young Ireland and for Yeats, necessarily pursued this supreme end. Young Ireland also believed, however, that this pursuit needed to be rooted in a particular tradition or historical community. This accounts for the group’s emphasis on culture in a second or sociological sense. But if culture implied a set of goods that were internal to historical forms of life, there were also privileged settings for its acquisition. This links with a third interpretation of culture in which specific activities and institutions such as ‘the arts’ played a dominant role. Young Ireland and the early Yeats often assumed that there was a natural unity between these three versions of culture, but the relations between each were often extremely dissonant. Moreover, while Young Ireland assumed that culture was a public good, Yeats soon discovered that such a notion was severely tested by another (or fourth) view of culture as a private value. What J. S. Mill called ‘self-culture’ did not necessarily harmonize with certain collective ends.

These different and often rival conceptions of culture play a key role here. I begin by outlining Young Ireland’s efforts to promote a vision of an ethical community through the forum of the Nation newspaper and then move on to consider Yeats’s initial enthusiasm for and subsequent rejection of these ideals. He was deeply attracted to the Young Irelanders’ communitarian vision: they ‘were not separated men; they spoke or tried to speak out of a people to a people; behind them stretched the generations’. But he ultimately concluded that their ideals were at odds with the basic facts of modern social organization; they also violated core values that moderns had fought for and cherished. The ‘superficial ideality’ of Young Ireland was not simply mistaken, it was also oppressive. I examine the grounds for this conviction and explore Yeats’s alternative — and highly problematic — account of the good life, which he opposed to the ‘wreckage of Young Irelandism’.


7 W. B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions (London, 1969), 510. Hereafter cited as EI.

8 E, 447.

9 M, 154.
These ideological battles are worth exploring in some detail, because they reveal much about the nature of what scholars have called ‘cultural’ or ‘romantic’ nationalism in Ireland. This terminology has its uses, but it has also produced conceptual muddle and historical error. Isaiah Berlin regarded nationalism in general as a form of ‘political romanticism’; from this perspective, the phrase ‘romantic nationalism’ is tautological. Berlin, on the other hand, made a strong distinction between ‘political’ and ‘cultural’ forms of nationalism, but the sense and historical validity of this distinction is open to question. All nationalism, Ernest Gellner argued, aims to render politics and culture co-extensive; in this context, ‘cultural nationalism’ has also a circular aspect. If it is difficult to isolate ‘cultural’ or ‘romantic’ sub-species of nationalism, this reflects the indeterminate character of the species itself. Nationalism is a vague ideology, not least because it draws upon a broad range of different and even rival political vocabularies. ‘Romantic’ or ‘cultural’ nationalisms are not entirely discrete political doctrines. In the most reductive accounts, nationalism becomes a free-floating identity politics isolated from broader questions of sovereignty, citizenship and the nature of freedom and justice; analyses of its ‘cultural’ or ‘romantic’ strains yield second-order simplifications that often appear to be removed from all recognizable forms of politics. For some scholars, the defining feature of cultural nationalism in Ireland is its non-political character. But


14 Henry Sumner Maine, Popular Government (London, 1885), 27: ‘Nobody can say exactly what Nationalism is.’ Indeed, the dangerousness of the theory, for Maine, ‘arises from its vagueness’.

15 The parasitical nature of nationalism leads one commentator to conclude that it ‘has no necessary substantive content’. See Andrew Vincent, Nationalism and Particularity (Cambridge, 2002), 6.

16 Hutchinson, The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism, 15, distinguishes ‘cultural nationalism’ from ‘political nationalism’ in Ireland. He puzzlingly claims, however, that the cultural nationalist ‘has a politics, but it is very different from that of the political nationalist in its goals and modes of organization’.
this is an unhelpful simplification that reflects a historically impoverished conception of politics. Yeats liked to suggest that culture supplanted politics after the death of Charles Stewart Parnell, but this was an inaccurate description of the historical reality; it was also a misconstruction of his own practice.\textsuperscript{17} The ethical community of Yeats and of Young Ireland was not a ‘romantic’ distortion or aesthetic sublimation of politics, but had a distinctive political logic which this study sets out to describe. This logic cannot be understood, however, outside of the democratic context in which it was articulated.

2 Culture and Democracy

In 1843 the \textit{Nation} declared that ‘the principle of rational democracy is advancing in every land’.\textsuperscript{18} Its advance seemed to be particularly fast in Ireland. Daniel O’Connell’s extraordinary mobilization of the masses — in his respective campaigns for Catholic Emancipation and the Repeal of the Act of Union — was interpreted by many as the dawn of democracy in Ireland.\textsuperscript{19} In 1837, J. S Mill proclaimed that in Ireland ‘the spirit of Democracy has got too much head ... too prematurely’.\textsuperscript{20} Gustave de Beaumont, on the other hand, provided a more upbeat assessment of democratic developments in Ireland; he spoke of O’Connell’s Catholic Association in rapturous terms, noting ‘the deep democratic character in this government of a people by one central power emanating from the universal will, expressed or understood; collecting within itself all the national elements; omnipotent by popular assent; absolute in every one of its actions, though constantly subjected to the control of all’.\textsuperscript{21} Here a fanasty of popular sovereignty supplanted the concrete realities of O’Connellite politics, but other, more sceptical commentators regarded O’Connell as the harbinger of democracy. The Young Irelanders were initially supporters of O’Connell and endorsed his campaign

\textsuperscript{17} E, 45: ‘The fall of Parnell had freed imagination from practical politics, from agrarian grievance and political enmity, and turned it to imaginative nationalism, to Gaelic, to the ancient stories, and at last to lyrical poetry and drama’. See also \textit{Autobiographies} (London, 1955), 559. Hereafter cited as \textit{A}.

\textsuperscript{18} Nation, 5 August 1843.

