

David Dwan

# The Great Community

Culture and Nationalism in Ireland









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for Liam and Anne Dwan



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## Abbreviations Used in the Notes

W. B. Yeats

- A *Autobiographies* (London, 1955)
- CL 1 *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats. Volume 1: 1865–1895*, ed. John Kelly and Erick Domville (Oxford, 1986)
- CL 2 *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats. Volume 2: 1896–1901*, ed. Warwick Gould, John Kelly and Deirdre Toomey (Oxford, 1996)
- CL 3 *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats. Volume 3: 1901–1904*, ed. John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard (Oxford, 1994)
- 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)
- L *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Alan Wade (London, 1954).
- LNI *Letters to the New Island* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, and London, 1989)
- M *Memoirs*, ed. and trans. Denis Donoghue (London, 1972)
- PI *Prefaces and Introductions*, ed. William H. O'Donnell (Houndmills, Basingstoke, and London, 1988)
- SS *The Senate Speeches of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Donald R. Pearce (London, 1960)
- UP 1 *Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats. Volume 1*, ed. John P. Frayne (London, 1970)
- UP 2 *Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats. Volume 2*, ed. John P. Frayne and Colton Johnson (London, 1975)
- V *A Vision* (London, 1937)
- VP *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York, 1957)





## 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?’<sup>1</sup> He insisted that the greatness of a nation derived from its pursuit of ‘fine life’.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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’.<sup>4</sup> 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.

1 W. B. Yeats, *Explorations* (London, 1962), 28. Hereafter cited as E.

2 W. B. Yeats, *Memoirs*, ed. and trans. Denis Donoghue (London, 1972), 180. Hereafter cited as M.

3 For influential accounts of nations as ethical communities in recent times, see David Miller, *On Nationality* (Oxford, 1995), 24–25, and Margaret Moore, *The Ethics of Nationalism* (Oxford, 2001), 25–51.

4 Thomas Davis asserted that the nation was a ‘spiritual essence’, but he attributed the term to Edmund Burke. *Nation*, 17 December 1842. ‘Nation is a moral essence,’ Burke had argued, ‘not a geographical arrangement’. *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke. Volume 9. I: The Revolutionary War, 1794–1797, II: Ireland*, ed. Paul Langford, R. B. McDowell, and William B. Todd (Oxford, 1991), 253. Hereafter cited as *W & S* 9.

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’.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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’.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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’.<sup>9</sup>

5 According to Matthew Arnold ‘true culture teaches us to fetch sweetness and light’ or beauty and truth. The Greeks were ‘the great exponents of humanity’s bent for sweetness and light united’. See Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge, 1993), 106, 141. For Plato, both truth and beauty derived from ‘the form or character of the good’. See Plato, *The Republic*, ed. G. R. F. Ferrari, trans. Tom Grifflit (Cambridge, 2000), 215.

6 J. S. Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill. Volume 10: Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society*, ed. J. M. Robson and D. P. Dryer (London and Toronto, 1969), ‘Bentham’, 75–116, 98: ‘There is no need to expatiate on the deficiencies of a system of ethics which does not pretend to aid individuals in the formation of their own character; which recognises no such wish as that of self-culture.’ Mill did not invoke the term ‘self-culture’ in ‘On Liberty’ but he provided his most famous defence of the principle in its third chapter. See *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill. Volume 18: Essays on Politics and Society*, ed. J. M. Robson (London and Toronto, 1977), 213–10; 260–75.

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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> All nationalism, Ernest Gellner argued, aims to render politics and culture co-extensive; in this context, ‘cultural nationalism’ has also a circular aspect.<sup>13</sup> If it is difficult to isolate ‘cultural’ or ‘romantic’ sub-species of nationalism, this reflects the indeterminate character of the species itself.<sup>14</sup> Nationalism is a vague ideology, not least because it draws upon a broad range of different and even rival political vocabularies.<sup>15</sup>

‘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.<sup>16</sup> But

- 10 D. George Boyce, *Nineteenth-Century Ireland: The Search for Stability* (Dublin, 1990), 78, maintains that the Young Irelanders were ‘cultural nationalists’; Alvin Jackson, *Ireland 1798–1998* (Oxford, 1998), 53, declares that ‘the Young Irelanders were primarily cultural nationalists’. But Oliver MacDonagh, *States of Mind: A Study of Anglo-Irish Conflict, 1780–1980* (London, 1983), 76, insists that the Nation was the mouthpiece of ‘romantic nationalism of the German and more specifically the Prussian type’. S. J. Connolly, *The Oxford Companion to Irish History*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 2002), 633, has also described Young Ireland as a ‘romantic nationalist group’. Richard English, *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland* (London, 2006), 142, presents them as ‘romantic, cultural nationalists’.
- 11 Isaiah Berlin, ‘Nationalism, Past Neglect and Present Power’, in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (London, 1979), 333–55, 349. Berlin provided other and somewhat different assessments of nationalism in ‘The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will: The Revolt against the Myth of an Ideal World’ and ‘The Bent Twig: On the Rise of Nationalism’, in Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, ed. Henry Hardy (London, 2003), 207–37; 238–61.
- 12 He distinguished between ‘political’ and ‘cultural’ forms of nationalism particularly in the case of Herder. See Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (London, 1976), 181–82. For this distinction in an Irish context, see John Hutchinson, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism* (London, 1987).
- 13 See Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983), 13: ‘that fusion of culture and polity which is the essence of nationalism’. J. S. Mill was convinced that democracy can only flourish where ‘the boundaries of government ... coincide in the main with those of nationalities’. This reflected his conviction that a functioning democracy required a shared civic culture. See J. S. Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*. Volume 19: *Essays on Politics and Society*, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto and London, 1977), 548.
- 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.<sup>17</sup> 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 *Nation* declared that ‘the principle of rational democracy is advancing in every land’.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> In 1837, J. S Mill proclaimed that in Ireland ‘the spirit of Democracy has got too much head ... too prematurely’.<sup>20</sup> 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’.<sup>21</sup> Here a fantasy 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

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 *Autobiographies* (London, 1955), 559. Hereafter cited as A.

18 *Nation*, 5 August 1843.

19 Catholic Emancipation, according to one commentator, ‘inaugurated the liberal democratic era’. Fergus O’Ferrall, *Catholic Emancipation and the Birth of Irish Democracy* (Dublin, 1985), 273. For a more sceptical assessment of O’Connell’s commitment to democracy, see Paul Bew, *Ireland: The Politics of Enmity 1789–2006* (Oxford, 2007), 172–74.

20 At this point Mill sponsored ‘a good stout Despotism’ for Ireland. See *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill. Volume 12: Earlier Letters, 1812–1848*, ed. F. Mineka (Toronto and London, 1963), 397. For a comprehensive account of Mill’s views of Ireland, see Bruce Kinzer, *England’s Disgrace?: J. S. Mill and the Irish Question* (Toronto, 2001). See also E. D. Steele, ‘J. S. Mill and the Irish Question: Reform, and the Integrity of the Empire, 1865–1870’, *Historical Journal*, 13 (1969), 419–50.

21 Gustave de Beaumont, *Ireland: Political, Social and Religious*, 2 vols., ed. W. C. Taylor (London, 1839), 2, 67–68.