

IRIC – The Internationalist Review of Irish Culture

Edited by

Andrea Binelli, Enrico Terrinoni,
Spurgeon Thompson, Brian L. Thomson



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www.aracneeditrice.it
info@aracneeditrice.it

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editors

Andrea Binelli
Brian L. Thomson
Enrico Terrinoni
Spurgeon Thompson

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Foreword

Brian L. Thomson

Sex shops, horses and the methodological quagmire of export-oriented, post-industrial economies

When I moved to Dublin in the early noughties after living and working on Manhattan's Lower East Side for about eight years, I expected to experience a profound culture shock. Although my wife had Irish citizenship, I personally hailed from a line of Dutch and Scots long enough to have fought on the wrong side of the American Civil War. Plenty of the cars in the Long Island neighborhood where I grew up were emblazoned with the famous (or infamous) '26+6=1' bumper sticker, and my hometown was represented in the United States Congress by Felons alum and NORAD fundraising wunderkind (as well as late anti-terrorism czar) Peter King—but to me, Ireland was little more than the place that produced my favorite beer. It still is, although the years I spent crawling across the North Side with a mighty thirst and empty pockets conspired to transform me into a Beamish lad.

The biggest shock, of course, was just how little there was to be shocked about. Dublin, with its internet access points, its ample quota of American cholesterol factories and overpriced coffee houses, its poorly-stocked public libraries, and even its high street sex shops, immediately called to mind a passage from Douglas Adams' *Life, the Universe and Everything* in which the Hitchhiker's Guide explains that:

just as easy travel eroded the difference between one country and another, and between one world and another, so time travel is now eroding the difference between one age and another. 'The past', they say, 'is now truly like a foreign country. They do things exactly the same there'.

A seemingly endless bout of jet lag from my first transatlantic voyage even made the 11.30 closing-time seem reasonable. Granted that it would have taken a far more subtle casuist than I to mistake Dublin for New York—it was a little dirtier, and since the cops did not carry guns it was far easier to drop your trousers and have a piss on the neighbor's gardenias or the nearest national monument (whichever was closer at hand)—but it could have easily doubled for, say, Providence when the Atlantic blows in on a grey autumn day and decides to have a piss on Rhode Island.

Thus the differences between our great civilizations emerged at a more leisurely pace than I had anticipated they would, many of them only becoming clear after I had left Dublin and returned to the belly of the economic imperialist beast. In fact, I could summarize my most recent revelation with a single word.

Horses.

I fondly recall numerous protests in Dublin carried out against local and global injustices by truly shocking numbers of people (particularly to the eyes of someone recently arrived from web-booming, fashionably jaded, end-of-history NYC). Three thousand students march on the Dáil against third-level fees one day; a few thousand come out to protest Dubya's very presence on Irish soil the next. At one delightful (if futile) anti-war protest a few thousand more marched on the Dáil to be greeted by a corridor of Garda in riot gear who proceeded to arrest Socialist TD Joe Higgins when he insisted on attempting to cross the line and join the demonstrators. By contrast, I recently ended up documenting the final presidential debate in the US for the New York branch of the ACLU. About three hundred people turned out, including a dozen or so members of Iraq Veterans Against the War. When we approached the gate, we were greeted by about two dozens riot cops on horseback (and hundreds on foot, many in street clothes with only their batons suggesting their affiliation with the forces of state terror). The mounties backed their horses into the crowd as they arrested the vets—until, that is, they saw one of the vets separated from his comrades toward the rear of the crowd. A riot cop on foot grabbed him and hurled him at one of the mounties, who proceeded to have his horse repeatedly stomp the vet's face. Although I was only a few feet away from the trampled soldier, I failed to capture the scene

on film because another horse had eaten my camera a few moments before.

You can naturally imagine my surprise when I glanced at the *Irish Times* several days later and saw that the government of the Republic of Ireland had managed to withstand a protest against the revocation of medical cards for pensioners—one with nearly fifty times the turnout of the mild protest at the gates of Hofstra University—*without* the use of a cavalry charge to crush the protestors underfoot. Since the measure passed anyway, the Irish demo was an unmitigated failure—as are most isolated non-violent protests—but it nonetheless demonstrated that Irish politicians are afraid enough of the electorate’s wrath to refrain from officially ‘taking off the gloves’. On those occasions that the Garda take it upon themselves to dole out some rough justice, you can be sure that a near-endless tribunal followed by some gentle wrist-slapping lies just around the corner for precisely the same reason: an eminently healthy fear of the population (American politicians, by contrast, are canny enough to know that its own electorate likes nothing better than seeing dissenters beaten within inches of their lives...except, of course, for seeing them beaten several feet beyond their lives).

Whether such healthy sentiments will continue to flourish in Irish society, or whether nascent xenophobia and the continued efforts of the country’s financial elites to claim the laurel in globalization’s race to the bottom will gradually erode the people’s will to support them—and thus to compel their government to enforce them—is not a question that I can answer, or even pretend to predict. Doing so would require evidence that scholars of Irish history and culture have generally refrained from collating, an omission that highlights the conspicuous failure of cultural studies (and particularly cultural materialism) to gain traction in the field.

Conspicuous, perhaps, but hardly inexplicable. Contemporary Ireland is first and foremost a nation whose leadership has collectively drunk the neo-liberal Kool-Aid and that subsequently prides itself on having rapidly adapted to the demands of so-called globalization. (Former TD Higgins honorably excepted). The celebrated growth of Irish gross domestic product (GDP) during the peak years of the Celtic Tiger is a statistic whose gobsmack quotient (GQ) is matched solely by the equally rapid and far less benevolent growth in the stratification

of higher incomes and tax exemptions (SHITE) across the island. While Ireland may have successfully resisted the lure of import substitution as an economic strategy during the heady days of mid-century anti-colonial revolution, it willfully embraced export orientation shortly thereafter and has since effectively and efficiently transferred national sovereignty into the hands of foreign finance. Unsurprisingly, the corporations and financial institutions that now own the country have been less interested in wasting their profits on Irish infrastructure and social services than they have been in repatriating those profits to pay for more essential services, such as private armies to guard their loot from bumbling agents of fiscal incompetence like Henry Paulson and Ben Bernanke. Thus like its putative role-model, the US, Ireland looks like a country from the First World and banks like one with its feet firmly planted in the Third.

The dynamics of tiger-oriented growth, however, have helped to ensure that appearances trump reality in the final analysis of both scholars and—more importantly—the Department of Enterprise, Trade, and Employment. One of the boom’s least controversial effects has been the installation of a professional managerial class charged with steering the post-industrial, IT-based economy through the stormy waters of popular apprehension toward the green pastures of American-style (i.e., obscenely inequitable) prosperity. While the maintenance of Michael O’Leary’s unrepentantly Thatcherite public persona may prevent him from commending the state’s fresh young apparatchiks for a job well done, the cheap flight magnate certainly does not lack cause for gratitude. Nor, of course, do those scholars and critics whose boats (and status and pay-packets) have visibly risen on the tide of foreign capital: maintaining the enchanting fiction of an information-based economy requires a hell of a lot of teachers, and although the humanities clearly constitute the new paradigm’s steerage class, there will likely always remain wealthy and middle-class students who need degrees but who can’t do their sums and therefore require a less rigorous discipline to certify their *bona fides*.

While I doubt that scholars have consciously decided *en masse* to refrain from biting the hand that feeds them, the fact remains that institutional pressures and prejudices make it much easier to make a living in the academy if one internalizes the rules of the game and abstains from taking the odd nip at the *status quo*. Put bluntly, the most

radical critique of Joyce remains the critique of a dead letter, while the most innocuous critique of, say, *Father Ted*, introduces the very political (and inevitably polemical) problem of actual audiences. This reluctance to rock the boat is by no means native to Ireland. Radical critique in the US, for instance, has devolved into the discourse of identity politics and the attendant absurdity of ‘classism’ (i.e., prejudice against the lower classes), whose effects one may safely deride without posing the slightest challenge to political or economic orthodoxy. Radical critique in Ireland has followed a course more consistent with the island’s relative homogeneity, and has ended up mired in an equally harmless post-colonial discourse that is at best ill-suited to deal with problems arising from the re-colonization of Ireland by transnational capital. Both methods, however, possess the cardinal virtue of furnishing scholars with a means of atoning for Irish and Anglo-American scholarship’s cardinal sin: seeming partisan.

Enter the vigorously partisan *Internationalist Review of Irish Culture*. The *IRIC* aims to provide a forum for analysis that takes the best and most radical aspect of cultural studies’ methodology—its concern with *all* of the participants in the matrix of cultural production and reception, rather than traditional criticism’s narrow focus on the author (whether ‘of the novel’ in literary studies, or ‘of the event’ in the social sciences)—and applies it to our understanding of one of modernity’s most ambiguously dynamic societies.¹ While collating the evi-

¹ So dynamic, in fact, that several of the articles collected in this volume represent views that are not necessarily shared by the editorial board as a whole, but which our collective desire to maintain a popular front obliged us to include. As the *IRIC* goes to print, we are all too aware that the optimism shared by some of our authors concerning the capacity of the Irish economy to sustain meaningful reform has been hopelessly outpaced by events. Dell’s recent decision to pull up the stakes from its Irish tent and move on to the greener pastures of Poland, for instance, did not seem quite so imminent as we collected the papers presented here. Nonetheless, it would be disingenuous to suggest that such events have not sadly confirmed us in our conviction that Ireland’s long-term economic strategy is manifestly *not* sound, despite the arguments expounded by some of our contributors. A clear example of this attitude would be Tim White’s article, written when only a few ‘scaremongers’ were exposing the now evident weaknesses of the Irish version of liberalism and the effects trans-national capitalism. White’s well-informed—if partisan—account of those years is exemplary of a typically ‘Celtic Tiger’ positivistic culture. To read it now, in the light of the recent crisis, may provide us with quite a few insights for the future.

dence neglected by traditional scholars of Irish culture furnishes us with one of our principal tasks, the goals of our modest review are less pedantic than practical and transformative: by better understanding both the mechanisms through which the population at large interfaces with competing constructions of Irishness and the work that elites call upon Irish culture to perform, we stand a far better chance of undermining our self-appointed lords and masters and spoiling their chances of winning the race to the bottom.

And if that doesn't work, we can always steal their horses.

P.J. Mathews

*'Riverdancing at the Meeting of the Waters':
Irish Popular Culture
from Thomas Moore to Bill Whelan*

This essay will offer some reflections on ideas of popular culture—with particular emphasis on music—at three distinct historical moments of Irish cultural revival: at the end of the eighteenth, nineteenth, twentieth centuries. The term ‘popular culture’ is deployed in various ways in the critical literature on the subject and needs some clarification here. Firstly, it can be taken to denote a general sense of ‘authentic’ folk culture produced by ‘the people’. This can encompass everything that constitutes collective cultural expression from songs, games and religious rituals to patterns of social and political organisation—culture as it is popularly produced. Such expressions of vernacular culture are usually considered to be germane to ‘the people’ and in many cases inimical to the influence of the modern institutions of church and state.

Antiquarian interest in Irish popular culture of this nature is well represented by the writings of William Wilde, who published his influential *Irish Popular Superstitions* in 1852. In his anti-utilitarian critique of the disappearance of popular cultural practices in nineteenth century Ireland, he was subtly aware of the relationship that can exist between popular cultural expression and attempts by the authorities to regulate it. ‘Well honoured be the name of Theobald Mathew’, he wrote, ‘but after all, a power of fun went away with the whiskey’ (Malcolm 40). Behind this apparently flippant comment, one can detect a concern that something that Wilde considered to be a vital and salient feature of Irish popular life was being threatened by the rigorous demands of cultural reformation insisted upon by the Catholic-led devotional revolution that swept across Ireland from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Its main impact was to replace

popular, local and independent forms of worship with new centralised and standardised practices in a concerted attempt to consolidate the power of the church authorities. Led by Cardinal Paul Cullen, the devotional revolution marks a moment of decisive detachment of the Catholic elite from the popular cultural practices of the peasantry as well as the alignment of the clergy with the interests of an emerging bourgeois nationalism in the late nineteenth century (Mathews 46-7).

However as Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch has persuasively argued in his essay on the 'Merry Wake', traditional folk practices often operated as 'a central social mechanism for the articulation of resistance' by the peasantry to 'new forms of civil and clerical control' well into the nineteenth century (173-200). In this sense traditional popular culture often proved to be very successful in repelling the advances of the newer modernising orthodoxies. This point was not lost on J.M. Synge, who was scathing in his critique of a new upwardly mobile clergy in his play, *The Tinker's Wedding*.

In another usage of the term, 'popular culture' can refer to the mass-produced offerings of 'the culture industry'—to use the phrase coined by Horkheimer and Adorno (94-136). In this definition, popular culture is primarily a commercially produced one and the emphasis is on culture as it is popularly consumed. In the figure of Thomas Moore, Ireland produced a writer whose mass-produced work achieved the pinnacle of popular success in the early part of the nineteenth century and endured in the popular consciousness well into the twentieth century, making him a figure of some importance in any historical understanding of the dynamics of the culture industry from an Irish perspective.

Moore's *Irish Melodies* were not only circulated in print form but were widely performed in drawing room and concert hall, making a lasting impression on the popular culture of his own moment in Ireland, Britain and beyond. Indeed it may not be too fanciful to suggest that in many interesting ways Thomas Moore's life anticipated that of a latter day celebrity pop star: born into the ranks of the Catholic middle-classes in 1779, Moore aspired to inhabit the realm of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy but also harboured a deep resentment of the injustices which that class perpetrated on his fellow Irishmen and women. It is this ambivalence which informs many of

his better-known works and which infuses the *Irish Melodies*. He associated himself with what were considered to be dangerous and seditious revolutionaries like Robert Emmet but he also cultivated the favour and patronage of wealthy members of the British establishment such as Lord Moira. He was at once a key figure in Irish cultural nationalism in the nineteenth century and a stalwart of the London drawing room. In his most popular work he managed to capture something of the haunted mystique of old Ireland while appealing to the genteel conventions of British taste. He was a master at trading on his liminality, offering a sentimental portrait of Gaelic defeat to his British admirers while appearing to his Irish supporters as an active member of the nationalist revolutionary underground. The complicated posturing that he was engaged in is not entirely unlike that of latter day celebrities who can trade on their anti-establishment credentials and cosy up to the world's most powerful politicians when it suits them. Indeed his triumphant homecoming to Ireland in 1835 was met with the kind of popular adulation that any latter day celebrity would envy. As Terence de Vere White noted:

No poet, before or since, has ever been accorded such a welcome in Ireland. For Yeats, after the award of the Nobel Prize, there was a private dinner in the Shelbourne Hotel. Only a cup-winning football team or, perhaps, an Olympic medallist would call out such a crowd to-day (244).¹

One of Moore's most popular melodies, 'The Meeting of the Waters', provides a good example of the easy lyric sentiment, which made him such a popular phenomenon in the nineteenth century. What is notable about this song is the fact that the speaker is decidedly underwhelmed by the scene of natural beauty that he recalls where 'the rivers Avon and Avoca' (50) meet close to Rathdrum in Co. Wicklow.

Yet it was not that Nature had shed o'er the scene
Her purest of crystal and brightest of green;
'T was not her soft magic of streamlet or hill,
Oh! No—it was something more exquisite still (50).

¹ See also Kelly, Ronan. *Bard of Erin: The Life of Thomas Moore*, 519-26.

It is not the bounty of nature, therefore, that makes this valley in Wicklow the sweetest valley in the world: rather, it is the human presence of Moore's close friends that aggrandises the natural landscape:

'T was that friends, the belov'd of my bosom, were near,
Who made every dear scene of enchantment more dear,
And who felt how the best charms of nature improve,
When we see them reflected from looks that we love (50).

This contrasts very interestingly with Wordsworth's recall of lone encounters with nature in 'The Prelude' written around the same time. The Vale of Avoca, as Moore portrays it, is certainly an idealised pastoral retreat and spiritual home, but a convivial one.

Where the storms that we feel in this cold world should cease
And our hearts like, like thy waters, be mingled in peace (50).

The key to Moore's popularity lay in the fact that his unspecified 'storms' could easily be interpreted in the London drawing rooms where his songs were performed as the pangs of a homesick Irish exile in London. In Dublin, however, they might be taken as a coded reference to the defeat of the United Irishmen or the death of Moore's friend, Robert Emmet, who had hidden in the hills of Wicklow a few short years before this poem was written. As one critic puts it, 'his evocations of Irish landscape, of the remembered valley or home of the exile, are evocations of place that the spirit never leaves of an Ireland that persists through all changes and catastrophes as the beloved place' (Deane 1055).

If a song like 'The Meeting of the Waters' represses the political complexities of its historical moment a more obviously political verse like 'Oh breathe not his Name' gives them fuller expression. Here Moore can be credited with introducing the idea of the spectral or ghostly presence of the lost leader into modern Irish literature in English—the title, of course, referring to Emmet's famous speech from the dock where he famously enunciates: 'When my country takes her place among the nations of the earth, then, and not till then let my

epitaph be written' (23). The withholding of the epitaph brilliantly suspends closure on Emmet's death, and takes him into the realm of the undead, where he can exercise an influence on Irish politics well beyond the moment of his execution. The opening of Moore's song alludes to this:

Oh breath not his name, let it sleep in the shade,
Where cold and unhonour'd his relics are laid;
Sad, silent, and dark, be the tears that we shed,
As the night-dew that falls on the grass o'er his head (6).

On the face of it the song seems to draw a line under the events of 1803; 'let Emmet rest in peace', it seems to suggest. However, the word 'shade' conjures up an image of the ghost or spirit of Emmet whose memory must be kept alive, if unarticulated:

Sad, silent, and dark, be the tears that we shed (6).

Through an act of clandestine weeping a ritual of silent commemoration is enacted. Moore seems to be buying into a stereotypical and disabling Irish mawkishness, however, the closing couplet bears a potent and ominous political message:

And the tear that we shed, though in secret it rolls,
Shall long keep his memory green in our souls (6).

Beneath the indulgent sentimentalism there is an unmistakable gesture towards the existence of an underground or parallel universe of covert revolutionary solidarity that will draw strength from the memory of Emmet. This is a classic example of the ambiguity of intention that characterises the *Melodies* and makes them available to a number of different, often competing readings.

Moore tapped into the spirit of antiquarian interest in Ireland's past and popularised it for a non-academic audience. Ironically, he created a vogue out of a decidedly aristocratic notion of Gaelic history in verses like 'The harp that once through Tara's halls' and 'Dear harp of my country'. His idealised and remote Gaelic past was lightly peppered with under-stated suggestions that the glories of yore might

some day be resuscitated. Even a personal song like ‘Oft in the Stilly Night’ has a wider cultural resonance in its portrait of the decline and ending of a way of life once embodied in domestic harmony and largess.

Concluding the preface to the 1856 edition of his *Irish Melodies* Moore wrote:

I now take leave of the Irish Melodies—the only work of my pen, as I very sincerely believe, whose fame (thanks to the sweet music in which it is embalmed) may boast a chance of prolonging its existence to a day much beyond our own (xxxv-vi).

Before century’s end, however, Moore’s status as Ireland’s national poet was being assaulted by the young W.B. Yeats who had designs on that title himself. In a major statement on tradition and influence in nineteenth century poetry, Yeats was very clear about the bardic company he wished to keep:

Know, that I would accounted be
True brother of a company
That sang, to sweeten Ireland’s wrong,
Ballad and story, rann and song... (*Collected Poems* 1933 56).

However in the second stanza of ‘To Ireland in the Coming Times’ he very pointedly omitted any reference to Thomas Moore, preferring instead to be counted ‘With Davis, Mangan, Ferguson’ (56). In his *Autobiographies* Yeats, who had a clear vested interest in discrediting his poetic precursor and rival, was more explicit in his dismissal of what he described as Moore’s ‘convivial Ireland with the traditional tear and smile’ (207). Elsewhere he criticised Moore’s highly commercial verses for being ‘artificial and mechanical’ (Foster 146)—terms not unlike those later used by Horkheimer and Adorno in their famous essay on the culture industry. In a similar way, although from a very different political perspective, Yeats saw Moore’s industrially-produced verses as the opiate of the Irish nationalist masses enchanted by a writer whom he insultingly referred to as ‘merely an incarnate social ambition’ (*Collected Letters* 38). He regarded Moore’s capitulation to the mores of the London drawing room in the same way as Horkheimer and Adorno were later to view the control that the

culture industry had over the spontaneity of talented performers.² In fact, it may not be too fanciful to suggest that Yeats's clear contempt for mass popular culture began as an allergy to the ubiquity of what he considered to be the effete, capitulating and saccharine verses of his fellow Irishman.

Yeats may have taken his cue from the radical polemicist William Hazlitt, a scathing critic of writers who allowed themselves become what he called 'intellectual pimp[s]' and 'hireling[s] of the press' (49). As early as 1825 Hazlitt damned Moore's verses for draining the radical energy out of his Irish subject matter:

If these national airs do indeed express the soul of impassioned feeling in his countrymen, the case of Ireland is hopeless. If these prettinesses pass for patriotism, if a country can heave from its heart's core only these vapid, varnished sentiments, lip-deep, and let its tears of blood evaporate in an empty conceit, let it be governed as it has been. There are here no tones to waken Liberty, to console Humanity. Mr. Moore converts the wild harp of Erin into a musical snuff-box! (174)

A sense of Moore's languid capitulation also informs Joyce's Stephen Dedalus in his reflections on the statue of 'the national poet of Ireland' which he views as he traverses College Green:

He looked at it without anger: for, though sloth of the body and of the soul crept over it like unseen vermin, over the shuffling feet and up the folds of the cloak and around the servile head, it seemed humbly conscious of its indignity. It was a Firbolg in the borrowed cloak of a Milesian (*A Portrait* 194).

These weighty thoughts contrast very well with those of Leopold Bloom who, on passing the same statue in the Lestrygonians episode of *Ulysses* muses about the appropriateness of placing the author of 'The Meeting of the Waters' over a urinal. On balance, though, Joyce was far more positive about the value of Moore's work. As Anne Fogarty has argued, Joyce's tendency is to depict popular culture as a

² 'Any trace of spontaneity in the audience of the official radio is steered and absorbed into a selection of specializations by talent-spotters, performance competitions, and sponsored events of every kind. The talents belong to the operation long before they are put on show; otherwise they would not conform so eagerly' (Horkheimer and Adorno 96).

site of resistance and the very basis by which his characters may contest the debilitating effects of capitalism and of political imperialisms (2008).

The waning of Moore's reputation in the latter half of the nineteenth century was, not surprisingly, more pronounced among the literati than among ordinary people. The density of reference to the *Melodies* in Joyce's work is an interesting case in point: for, although Joyce could never claim to be a popular writer—particularly in the early part of the twentieth century—his work is heavily invested in the quotidian realities of his own moment which are reflected through a deep engagement with Moore's work. In the twentieth century, the songs were given an extended after-life by the recordings and wireless broadcasts of popular artists such as John McCormack, Margaret Burke Sheridan and the British tenor Webster Booth. As late as 1991, Seamus Deane could confidently write that 'Moore is still in terms of popular appeal, Ireland's national poet' (1053).

The *Melodies* have also made their mark on contemporary popular culture: the tune of 'Come on Eileen' by Dexy's Midnight Runners (which became the biggest selling UK single of 1982) is introduced by the opening bars of 'Believe me, if all those endearing young charms'. And versions of the *Melodies* have been given by a range of popular cultural icons from Bugs Bunny—who also famously played 'Believe me, if all those endearing young charms' on the piano in a 1950s cartoon—to Nina Simone who recorded a powerful version of 'The last rose of summer' in 1964. 'The Minstrel Boy', too, has informed the soundtracks of numerous films—particularly those with obvious Irish-American themes.³ That song, of course, has a deep connection with police and fire departments across the United States and was prominently used during the post-9/11 mourning period. Moore's *Melodies* were once hugely popular because of their poetic manipulation of a late-eighteenth-century sense of a vanishing, yet enduring, Irishness: ironically, in the present cultural moment, they have themselves become vestigial signifiers of Hibernian ethnicity in

³ Examples include: *The Departed* (2006, dir. Martin Scorsese) and *Gettysbury* (1993, dir. Ronald F. Maxwell). It was also prominently used on the soundtrack of *Black Hawk Down* (2001, dir. Ridley Scott)—a film with no obvious Irish themes.

American popular culture. Any casual search for Thomas Moore in that great repository of contemporary popular culture—Youtube—will confirm as much.

If the story of transnational Irish popular culture begins with Thomas Moore in the early nineteenth century, it wasn't until the end of the 1800s that writers and intellectuals began to theorize the impact of mass cultural production on the Irish psyche during the industrial century. In 1892 Douglas Hyde, sounding the keynote of the Irish Revival, wrote that: 'the present art products of one of the quickest, most sensitive, and most artistic races on earth are now only distinguished for their hideousness' (78). In the course of his influential essay, 'The necessity for de-Anglicising Ireland', he built up a narrative of Irish cultural degeneration brought on by the unthinking absorption of what he perceived to be vulgar British pop culture: 'We must set our face sternly against penny dreadfuls, shilling shockers, and still more, the garbage of vulgar English weeklies like *Bow Bells* and the *Police Intelligence*' (82). Hyde, however, was not against popular culture *per se*, but discriminated along national lines. He was careful to suggest that 'every house should have a copy of Moore and Davis'. In this sense he diverged from Yeats who, as we have seen, found most forms of mass-produced culture repugnant (whether home-grown or not). Yet there was one form of mass-produced popular culture that Yeats found irresistible—the newspapers. His not-inconsiderable body of writing for the press ranges from literary journalism to letters to the editor. In this body of work Yeats displayed considerable journalistic acumen over the span of his career: to make ends meet during lean times, to publicise his literary endeavours, to plead Ireland's cause, and to further his own political agendas.

The fact remains, though, that Yeats is squarely associated with an uncompromisingly hostile view of popular culture. In her book *Our Irish Theatre*, Lady Gregory recalls a lecture which he gave in February 1900 attacking the scourge of British popular culture in Ireland: 'The materialism of England and its vulgarity are surging up about us', Yeats thundered. 'It is not Shakespeare England sends us, but musical farces, not Keats and Shelley, but *Titbits* [sic]' (26). This is an early expression of notion of the 'filthy modern tide' that he

would develop in his later poem ‘The Statues’ (*Collected Letters* 376). For the record, *Tit-Bits* was one of the most successful of a wave of popular magazines that appeared in Britain in the closing quarter of the nineteenth century. It catered to a new readership created by compulsory education and was characterised by a combined emphasis on improvement and amusement. With a masthead that read: ‘from all the most interesting books, periodicals and contributors in the world’, it clearly functioned as the *Reader’s Digest* of its day. It is not a surprise that it would appeal to that fictional embodiment of Victorian middle-brow trivia, Leopold Bloom, who famously creates a filthy modern tide of his own as he reads *Tit-Bits* while emptying his digestive system at the end of the ‘Calypso’ episode of *Ulysses*:

Asquat on the cuckstool he folder out his paper turning its pages over on his bared knees. Something new and easy. No great hurry. Keep it a bit. Our prize titbit. *Matcham’s Masterstroke*. Written by Mr Philip Beaufof, Playgoers’ club, London. Payment at the rate of one guinea a column has been made to the writer (Joyce 83).

The revivalists’ answer to what they saw as the coarsening influences of mass culture was to invest heavily in retrieving what they believed to be *the* authentic folk culture of the people. As John Fiske has argued, though, bemoaning the loss of ‘the authentic’ can be a fruitless exercise in romantic nostalgia (27). However it is also important to point out that revivalist appeals to vanishing folk practices did also play a strategic role in subverting the distortions of the colonial mindset. Lady Gregory, Douglas Hyde and J.M. Synge were enthusiastic folklorists who created new literary possibilities from their experiences in the field. Once again, as with Thomas Moore, the representation of vestigial traces of a true and essential Irishness was central to the revival project—in this case, though, it was an earthy, peasant Irishness which had been actually encountered, in contrast to Moore’s delicately-polished fragments of antiquarian Gaelic aristocracy. Needless to say, the revival produced a highly mediated and constructed version of national identity rather than the real thing—whatever that might be. This version, however, was recruited as a bulwark against the advance of popular culture from the

imperial centre that was being enthusiastically embraced by a rapidly modernising Irish bourgeoisie.

Inevitably this process led to an untenable bifurcation at the heart of the revival project whereby the category of 'mass popular culture' was associated with foreign imposition while so-called 'authentic Irish folk culture' was sequestered almost exclusively for high-minded literary purposes. This may have produced some fine contributions to European modernist literature but it didn't always speak to the thousands of Irish people who were regular readers of *Tit-Bits*. J.M. Synge, however, was to emerge as one of the earliest critics of the Yeatsian esoterics that quickly became synonymous with the Revival. In the preface to his poems written shortly before his death in 1909 he wrote that:

When men lose their poetic feeling for ordinary life and cannot write poetry of ordinary things, their exalted poetry is likely to lose its strength of exaltation, in the way men cease to build beautiful churches when they have lost happiness in building shops (xxxvi).

In the end, argued Synge, the best writing should be appealing to 'strong men, and thieves, and deacons, not by little cliques only' (xxxvi).

The Irish revival is often considered to be a movement characterized by a definite hostility to the popular culture of the entertainment industry—especially that imported from Britain—and indeed, there is much truth behind this assessment. Yet it does not tell the complete story: there were other forces within revivalism that supported the development of popular entertainments along Irish lines. The Gaelic League, after all, was intent on seizing the Irish language from antiquarians and making it popular again by associating it with popular entertainment. Horace Plunkett's Co-operative Movement was also hugely important in its encouragement of local initiatives—such as sports, traditional music and village libraries—for the betterment and amusement of ordinary people. Yet if one thing distinguishes the popular culture of the revival, it is the emphasis on a participatory, parish-based idea of cultural engagement in opposition to the passive, consumerist model of the culture industry (*Irish*

Homestead, 9 Nov. 1901, 744). Ironically, during the 1990s it was the commercialisation of this largely participatory ‘traditional’ culture—be it dance, music or Gaelic games—which fuelled a whole new phase in the story of Irish popular culture, increasingly being played out on the global stage.

If anything embodies the global appeal of Irish culture in the 1990s it is the phenomenal success of *Riverdance*. It has become the critical norm of late to take pot shots at this ageing warhorse and I’ve taken one or two myself (Mathews 7-14). Yet considering it in relation to the comparable transnational success of Moore’s *Melodies* is instructive. Like the *Melodies* in its day, *Riverdance* has come to be regarded, perhaps unfairly, as *the* stable signifier of a complex and rapidly evolving Irish cultural dynamic, and is regularly appropriated as the uncontested soundtrack to the Celtic Tiger years. However, it is revealing to compare the critical reception of both: Moore, as we have seen, was berated for his sentimental portraits of moribund Irishness while *Riverdance* was criticised for its overly-exuberant celebration of indigenous culture. In both cases a highbrow hostility to the popular embrace of a homegrown hit is palpable, and worth interrogating.

The story of *Riverdance*’s inception as relayed by Bill Whelan is instructive and demonstrates how a participatory and collaborative idea of cultural endeavour became a highly successful commercial product. Of particular significance is Whelan’s proximity to, and involvement in, highly fertile moments and movements in contemporary Irish popular music—from traditional to rock. In many ways, the extraordinary appeal of the *Riverdance* score can be explained by his deconstruction of the imposed divide between purist notions of Irish traditional music promoted by the cognoscenti, and more promiscuous forms of commercial music popularly enjoyed.⁴ Such a schism, as we have seen, extends back in time to a Yeatsian aversion to Moore’s *Melodies*.

Whelan’s analysis of the achievement of his precursor, Seán Ó Ríada, sheds much light on his own methods and motivations:

⁴ One could draw parallels here with Moore’s popularising of specialised, antiquarian knowledge of the ancient Irish past in the *Melodies*.

What Ó Ríada did was take old Irish melodies, and re-orchestrate them in a way that made sense to the ears of his contemporaries. They recognised that this was *their* music, but in a way they had not heard it before (2008).

But even Ó Ríada was careful to keep his jazz-pianist self and Irish composer self in two separate compartments. Whelan's outstanding achievement, however, is in his synthesis of the avant-garde and the popular, which owes much to his experiences with Planxty. Combining complex experimentation—in the fusion of rhythms and modes from Irish and Eastern European music—with popular appeal, Whelan's music managed to transcend the highly compartmentalised relations that pertained within the substrata of Irish music throughout the twentieth century. Significantly, the critiques of *Riverdance* that have emerged in its wake often re-trace the contours of Yeats's criticisms of Moore's *Melodies*, interpreting the music as a capitulation to market forces and international taste. Such analyses, however, are blind to Whelan's robust interrogation of the stifling, conservative and schizophrenic tendencies that often characterised the guardians of Irish traditional music from the 1950s onwards.

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