

THE CELTIC RENAISSANCE AND THE ABBEY THEATRE: A SURVEY

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"The Celts were a group of related tribes, linked by language, religion, and culture that gave rise to the first civilization north of the Alps. They emerged as a distinct people in the eighth century BC.- about the time Homer was composing his Iliad and Odyssey" (Severey 1977:585). The Celts were highly civilized people, and they introduced iron to the northern Europe, soap to the Greeks (Severey 1977:585). The Celts had a very rich literature as well. Although they were different from those belonging to English literature since the Celtic literary works were more intuitive, mystical, melancholic; there were many mythological tales, love tales, sagas and poetic bardic lore.

According to modern Irish scholars, the Celts arrived in Ireland about 350 BC. The Celts are the ancestors of Irish and Scottish people. Despite the fact that the Irish have mixed ethnic origin like many other modern societies, they think themselves as Celtic.

Though Irish people had been under the domination of British Empire since the twelfth century, the British government was not successful in suppressing the Irish nationalism. An important way to suppress the Irish nationalistic movements was to discard its language and literature. In 1695, although 10 percent of the land in Ireland belonged to Protestants, Protestants were in power, and Catholics were not represented in the Irish parliament. To continue Protestant supremacy, penal laws preventing Catholics from schooling, holding office and voting were passed. Therefore, a great majority of people was denied from education. Those who were able to attend school did not have any chance to learn Irish since Irish was not taught in school. The year 1850 was an important date since by that year, a great number of Irish people was beginning to live in towns because of the Great Famine affecting Ireland between the years 1848-1849, though there were not developed industrial areas and high wages; the use of Irish

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language in towns was decreasing. "In Dublin a person could spend half a lifetime and never hear a word of Gaelic" (Kenny 1974:179). Irish was being spoken only by the peasant living in the country which represented poverty and ignorance.

While the British government was trying to extirpate Irish language, a Bavarian scholar named Johann Caspar Zeuss published a book called Grammatica Celtica and found out that Irish belonged to the Indo-European group of languages. This book was very important for the prestige of Irish nation, that was called "alien in speech, in religion, in blood" by Lord Lyndhurst (O'Connor 1967:27). By this time, another important book titled On the Study of Celtic Literature by Matthew Arnold was published, and became influential in the nineteenth century.

In the political field, while Charles Stewart Parnell was trying to win Home Rule for Ireland in 1890, he fell from esteem because of a love affair with a married woman and a few months later, he died. He became a hero for Irish younger generation. After the death of Parnell, there was a stability in the political activities for nationalistic unity since Irish people got tired of endless political struggles. Meanwhile, the Irish nationalistic scholars realized that an important way to achieve national unity was to provide cultural independence, and for cultural independence they should deal with Irish myths, legends, folklore, and revive Irish literature. This idea found many supporters and Douglas Hyde translated and published Love-Songs of Connacht in 1893. While dealing with the revival of Irish literature, the nationalistic scholars faced the language-problem since there were two diverse views on the language to be used in the literary works. On the one hand, Douglas Hyde and his followers believed that they had to revive Irish language[Gaelic], and should use it in their works; on the other hand, Yeats, Synge and Lady Gregory were insisting that they should adopt the English speech of Irish people. Especially Yeats believed that "the experience of the living imagination could only be revealed in a language as living as itself" (Ellis-Fermor 1964:68). In 1893, Douglas Hyde, Eoin MacNeil and the Reverend Eoghan O'Growney founded the Gaelic League, the aim of which was to revive Irish language, and to preserve it as a national language. These activities encouraged

many enlightened nationalistic people, and they began to learn Irish still spoken by the peasant in the West of Ireland. The Reverend Peter Leary wrote a novel in Irish entitled Seadna, and it was published in the Gaelic Journal in instalments. Some writers such as William Butler Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory and J. M. Synge used the English spoken by the Irish in their plays and Yeats turned to Irish myths to awake nationalistic feelings.

Until the 1890s, although there were some poems and prose in Irish literature, there was no drama tradition. Many of Irish people were living in the country, and they were ignorant. Those who were literate were not used to reading long books. Owing to the facts mentioned above, Irish people were not concerned with the written literary works. Yeats was the first realizing these facts and thinking to use drama as a medium to communicate with Irish people for providing national unity. Therefore, he collaborated with Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn. Then George Moore joined this group and they founded The Irish Literary Theatre. The first performance of The Irish Literary Theatre was Yeats's Countess Cathleen on 8 May 1899, and on 9 May 1899, Martyn's The Heather Field was performed. Both plays were acted by English actors since there were no Irish actors to perform in those days.

In 1900, the theatre presented many plays including The Bending of the Bough by George Moore and The Last Feast Of Fienna by Alice Milligan, whose pen-name was Iris Olkryn. It was an important play since it was the first taking its subject from Irish history and legend in the Irish Literary Theatre. She thought that this play would be translated into Irish and would be performed in Irish. However, this could not happen. The first play performed in Irish was Douglas Hyde's Casad-an-Sugan (The Twisting of the Rope). It was performed on October 21, 1901, and the cast was chosen among the members of the Gaelic League Amateur Dramatic Society.

In 1901, Martyn withdrew from the group since he and Yeats had different ideas on the subject of the plays. While Yeats was insisting on "peasant plays", Martyn was concerned with the plays taking their subjects from middle class.

In the same year, a group of young talented actors led by William G. Fay and Frank Fay performed Russell's Deidre in 1901, and in 1902, they performed Yeats's Cathleen ni Houlihan. The name of this company was The Irish National Dramatic Company. Then the Fay brothers decided to form a group producing only Irish plays. Therefore, the Fays met with Yeats, Lady Gregory. In consequence of the meeting, The Irish National Theatre Society, which was a combination of the Irish Literary Theatre and the group of the Fay brothers, came into being. Yeats was elected as the president of the society; Russell, Maud Gonne and Douglas Hyde were the vice-presidents; W. G. Fay was the stage manager. The society performed its first play in a place on Lower Camden Street, then they moved into another place in Molesworth Street in 1903. The society performed three plays in this year, and these plays were The Hour-Glass by Yeats, Twenty-Five by Lady Gregory and The King's Treshold by Yeats. This year was also important since Yeats and Lady Gregory turned to the great sagas of Irish history. Again in this year, the first play written by Synge, who was an important figure in the revival of Irish drama, was performed.

In 1896, Yeats met Synge in Paris and told him to go to the Aran Islands, where he could find suitable subjects for his plays. Synge went to the Aran Islands, observed the peasant life, and became the greatest playwright of Irish peasant life.

In 1903, the society performed some of its plays in London. The performances were very successful, especially a rich English woman named Miss Homiman admired them. In 1904, she bought the Mechanics Institute Theatre in Abbey Street, and this place was changed into the Abbey Theatre. She gave the free use of this theatre. Lady Gregory's Spreading the News and Yeats's On Baile's Strand were presented as the first productions of the Abbey Theatre on December 27, 1904. Thus, 1904 became the year when famous Abbey Theatre was born.

The fame of the Abbey Theatre was growing day by day. While Yeats, Lady Gregory and Synge were making contributions to the repertory of the Abbey Theatre, the Fay brothers were finding native players for the performances of

these plays. Especially the Fay brothers' acting style was providing a great prestige for the Abbey Theatre.

William Fay was a talented comic actor and Frank Fay was a fine verse-speaker. Dissatisfied with the pantomimic movement and other obtrusive stage business of Beerbohm Tree's romantic acting and with the understated naturalism of Hawtrey and Gerald du Maurier, they collaborated with Yeats in the creation of a new histrionic style. In the portrayal of heroes of myth and legend, they taught their company to move with a measured dignity like that of classical French actors,...In plays of peasant life, their actors sometimes walked with a clumsiness appropriate to their roles (Armstrong 1967:9).

In spite of the growing fame, the Abbey Theatre faced many problems. In 1907, the theatre began to present Synge's The Playboy of the Western World. The play was protested since it was thought that certain lines in the play were insulting Irish woman. The presence of Miss Horniman had disturbed some members of the society such as the Fay brothers. Since Miss Horniman was an English woman, they thought that the Abbey Theatre would deviate from its purpose, and would be a commercial theatre. In 1908, the Fays quarrelled with Yeats, Synge and Lady Gregory; left the theatre. In 1910, Miss Horniman withdrew her agreement. She was angry with the management of the Abbey Theatre since they had not closed the theatre on the death of King Edward VII. Yeats and Lady Gregory became the patentees of the theatre.

In the years between 1916 and 1923, some struggles in the political field came into being, and they affected the literature in general, the drama in particular. These events were World War I, the Easter Rising, The Anglo-Irish War, the establishment of the Irish Free State, and Irish Civil War. During these years a stability was observed. However, this stability did not last long since a brilliant playwright, Sean O'Casey appeared. His The Shadow of a Gunman was performed in the Abbey Theatre in 1923; in 1924, Juno and the Paycock, and in 1926, The Plough and the Stars were produced. In these plays, O'Casey described the corruption of personal and political relationships during the Easter Rising and the Troubles of 1921.

When the Free State was established, the government subsidized the Abbey Theatre. Thus, the Abbey Theatre became the first subsidized theatre in English speaking-world.

Finally, we can say that the Abbey Theatre is not a place where many plays were performed, but a symbol of the Celtic Renaissance.

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ÖZET

M.Ö 350'de İrlanda'ya yerleşen Keltlerin soyundan gelen İrlandalılar, 12.yüzyılda İngiliz hakimiyeti altına girdiler. 18. yüzyılın sonlarına doğru halkın yıllarca süren sonuçsuz politik mücadelelerden bıktığını gören milliyetçi İrlanda aydınları, milli birliği sağlamak için İrlanda edebiyatını canlandırmaları gerektiğini düşündüler. Ancak, İrlandalıların büyük çoğunluğunun okuma-yazma bilmemesi, bilenlerinse uzun kitablara okuma alışkanlıklarının olmaması, İrlandalı milliyetçi yazarları tiyatro eserleri yazmaya yöneltti. Bu nedenle, 19. yüzyılda İrlanda edebiyatında, özellikle tiyatro alanında, büyük bir canlanma gözlemlendi. Abbey Tiyatrosu, Kelt Rönesansı olarak da anılan bu dönemin önemli bir sembolüdür.