

MALCOLM BROWN. — *The Politics of Irish Literature*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1972.

On the literary stock exchange the most notable growth industries during the last quarter of a century bear the names of Joyce and Yeats. It would be a nice exercise for an economic historian to quantify them, even if he were to restrict himself to calculating the cost in dollars and cents of the academic man-hours spent on them. The Joyce industry was the first to boom, but it has been overtaken if not surpassed by the Yeats one. The result of all this activity has been that Irish studies have been dominated, especially in North America, by a concentration on these two writers.

It would not be accurate to say that Professor Malcolm Brown's volume is merely another example of the Joyce-Yeats tyranny, for his aim is to show that politics was the midwife of modern Irish literature (i.e. literature in English). His method is to recount a half-century of Irish history between 1842 and 1895, tracing the development of Irish nationalism for the most part and demonstrating its effect on the growth of literature. The year 1842 marks the rise of the Young Ireland group and the publication of the weekly *Nation* by Thomas Davis and his collaborators, a convenient combination of the political and the literary; 1895 is the year of the Tory victory (preceded by the defeat of the second Home Rule bill in 1893) and of the Yeats-Lady Gregory meeting that led to the creation of an Irish national theatre. But Brown finds it difficult to keep to his *terminus ad quem* and refers frequently to events and issues belonging to the nineteen-twenties and thirties. The reason is not far to seek, it is that his real interest is in an exegesis of nationalism in the work of Yeats and, to a lesser extent, of Joyce. It accounts for the odd selection of 1940 as the end of a century of Irish nationalism.

For those students of literature unfamiliar with the history of Ireland in the second half of the nineteenth century *The Politics of Irish Literature* will be decidedly useful. No one will quarrel with the author's contention that a knowledge of the historical background is well-nigh indispensable for a proper appreciation of literature in Ireland. Davis, Yeats and Joyce were not only pre-occupied with the history and politics of their respective periods, but each in his own fashion set about, in Joyce's words, forging "in the smithy of my soul the uncreated consciousness of my race." There will be less unanimity about his assertion that for his period there is no general history to supply connective tissue, but only historical monographs "oriented almost exclusively towards parliamentary history, with an occasional side expedition into episodes of clerical intrigue," or that Irish historians neglect literature. Professor F. S. L. Lyon's *Ireland since the Famine* (London, 1971), which admittedly appeared too late to be more than mentioned in Professor Brown's bibliography, is not limited to parliamentary or clerical history, and makes more than a passing reference to literature. Such journals as *Irish Historical Studies*, the *Historical Journal*, *Past and Present* and the *Economic History Review* contain articles that do not fall under Brown's

strictures, and the same may be said of some of the series of Thomas Davis lectures or the publications of the Irish Cultural Relations Committee. He also seems to have overlooked two biographies of non-parliamentary figures published in the nineteen-sixties, M. Bourke's *John O'Leary* and T. P. O'Neill's *James Fintan Lalor* (the latter in Irish).

In some respects a title such as *The Politics of Irish Literature* is misleading. Admittedly Repeal and Home Rule, issues fought on a constitutional level, were political, as was Fenianism's objective of a republic to be achieved by force of arms. Nor can it be denied that Parnell was the single most important political figure to be enshrined in literature in Ireland. But it would be wrong to assume because of the Christmas Day scene in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist* or Yeats's Parnellite poems that the body of modern Irish literature should be viewed as the product of politics in the narrow sense of the word. Brown is on sounder ground when he stresses the importance of what Thomas Davis called "felt history," "the structure of popular affections" as the author appositely describes it, and when he illuminates his narrative by drawing upon "ballads and popular sarcasms, the passionate topical responses of hustings and newspaper office, old wives' tales, the savoury style of chance episodes, the colour of local personalities" (viii). If "felt history" still flourishes in Ireland, so that battles long ago are not old, forgotten, far-off things, it is because that at least some of the issues around which they were fought are still unresolved. Hence the passionate nature of popular history and the prevalence of historical myth-making. It may even be said that history rather than politics has dominated Irish political life, and if this is less true nowadays in the Republic of Ireland it still retains its full force in Northern Ireland.

Nationalism inevitably entails history-making at the grass-roots level, for a purely literary nationalism will remain a dilettante pursuit unless it finds an echo in the hearts as well as the minds of the people. Daniel O'Connell's success in securing Catholic emancipation was possible because he was able to organise on a parish basis the peasant masses in his support, and it is an indication of the alarm aroused by the "King of the Beggars" that the British cabinet yielded on condition that the electorate should be drastically reduced by the elimination of the two-pound freeholders, thus restricting the vote to the ten pounders. Subsequent attempts to repeal the Act of Union failed and it is noteworthy that Home Rule agitation only became formidable when it was linked with the demand for agrarian reform. In other words, the nationalist movement needed the driving force of social and economic discontent, as Fintan Lalor perceived. Brown very properly gives place in his narrative to the demands of the tenant farmers, though it is to be regretted that he finds no room for the grievances of the rural labourer, whose voice can be heard at least a century earlier in *An Spailpin Fanach* (The Wandering Harvester), an anonymous poem, and whose plight attracted some ameliorative legislation in the eighteen-eighties.

Professor Brown has drawn heavily upon the files of advanced nationalist or Fenian journals, the *Nation*, *The Irish People*, *The Irishman*, using them to cast additional light on the development of national sentiment and patriotic literature. He gives proper weight to the purveyors of such literature, notably the Sullivan family, but it is to be regretted that he has not drawn upon their best-seller, *Speeches from the Dock*, which went through many editions and reprintings up to the present. It took its name from the addresses delivered by patriots on trial for sedition or rebellion, the accompanying biographies being of a fervently hagiographical nature. Another imperfectly exploited source is the broadsheet ballad, sung and sold in fair or market, or in working-class streets, and finding its way into the répertoire of social occasions in the countryside. Such ballads, often anonymous, took as their theme the United Irish heroes of 1798 or the Fenians, as well as more mundane matters of local or passing interest. It is almost an axiom that the influence of ballads was in inverse ratio to their artistic merits, so that *Boolavogue*, *Kelly the Boy from Killan*, or *The Boys of Wexford*, to name '98 ballads of varying date, were placed higher in the popular canon than those whose authors might lay claim to some modest distinction. These ballads reached a final apotheosis when they were grouped together according to event ('98 ballads, Fenian ballads, etc.), and published in cheap, paper-covered booklets.

Professor Brown refers in his bibliography to the Fenian C. J. Kickham's *Knocknagow* (published in 1873), saying that it "provides the sharpest possible image of the forces that moved Irish history," yet, unlike Lyons, he ignores it in the body of his text. It is of very great interest to the social historian as a vivid picture of a rural community and, taken in conjunction with W. C. Upton's *Uncle Pat's Cabin* of the same period, will give the reader the sensation of "felt history." Irish social history is as yet imperfectly explored, but even historians of political nationalism and of literature must be aware that in the last analysis both the Irish independence and literary movements were made possible by the social and cultural energies of the countryside and the town (the rural connections of the small urban population should not be forgotten). The social history of nineteenth-century Ireland still awaits its historian.

Two minor caveats. Frank O'Connor (cited on p. 5) could not have seen British troops leaving Cork barracks as a result of the Treaty on a "hot summer morning in 1921," since the Treaty was not negotiated until December; O'Connell's estate was called Derrynane, not Darrynane (pp. 41, 74, 84), a spelling possible only as a phonetic rendering of the name when pronounced by an inhabitant of the "Black North."

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