The role of the theatre of the Irish literary revival in the politics of identity is a question central not only to the study of Irish theatre and Irish cultural nationalism, but to the broader dynamics of cultural politics at the beginning of the 20th century. This book pursues the complex relationship through a panoramic study of Irish drama and the nationalist debate 1890-1916. It demonstrates that close scrutiny of precise contexts are required if the importance of theatrical text and events are to be thoroughly evaluated. Extending the range of material examined beyond canonical works, and beyond Dublin to the influence of Cork and Ulster, it tackles many neglected and forgotten works which through reconsideration of their reception are given new force. The lesser lights of the Irish revival are also seen to illuminate anew writers such as W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and J. M. Synge. The evolution of cultural and political nationalist groups such as Irish Ireland, the Gaelic League, and Sinn Fein is similarly examined to reveal a shifting terrain of nationalist opinion disturbed by issues of class, gender, and generation. This book concludes that Ireland's theatre had a pivotal role to play in the controversies of its time and in the coming revolution.

The Union of Sceptics, 1903–1906

BEN LEVITAS

in The Theatre of Nation: Irish Drama and Cultural Nationalism 1890-1916

This chapter examines the fracture of the theatre movement and cultural nationalist alliances in the post-Boer period. Yeats, with financial backing from Annie Horniman, was able to set up the INTS in the Abbey
Theatre and establish the organisation as a professional company. Cultural nationalists, particularly Griffith and Moran, attacked the theatre for rejecting propagandist imperatives; however, their attack on Synge reveals a conservative nationalist agenda also evident in their anti-Semitic support for the Limerick Pogrom of 1903. Beyond the apparent oppositions, however, a ‘union of Sceptics’, often in left-literati combinations, operated to suggest alternatives. Journals such as Dana, the Nationist, and the National Democrat; theatre groups such as the Theatre of Ireland and the Ulster Literary Theatre; and the range of material available at the Abbey from Colum, Boyle and Lady Gregory demonstrate a broad spectrum of opinion.

The Room of Mirrors: The Debut of The Playboy of the Western World

BEN LEVITAS

in The Theatre of Nation: Irish Drama and Cultural Nationalism 1890-1916

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Item type: chapter

This chapter considers closely the debut of J. M. Synge's The Playboy of the Western World and the ensuing 'riots'. It emphasises Synge's radical credentials and argues that Synge's Playboy was a calculated provocation. With the greatest offence deferred until the final act, the riot is considered as Synge's intention, producing an avant-garde event rather than simply a play. The following controversy, including Yeats's decision of the theatre to reinforce the play's run with police presence and prosecutions, is understood as polarising opinion. However, the division was not as absolute as has previously been portrayed; northern republicans in the Dungannon Clubs found the issue petty; language campaigners found it irrelevant; and some, such as George Roberts and Tom Koehler, recognised Synge as a writer that might revivify Irish parochialism with the irreverence of nascent European modernism.

Ghosts and Spectres: Theatres of War, 1910–1916

BEN LEVITAS

in The Theatre of Nation: Irish Drama and Cultural Nationalism 1890-1916

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This chapter tracks the impact on the theatre of the radicalisation of Irish politics following the General Election of 1910. The momentary success of the Home Rule Bill (1912) is set against the 1913 Dublin lockout and the Irish Volunteer movements. Left politics, voiced by Larkin and Connolly, are considered resonant with the theatre of Robinson, O'Kelly, St John Ervine, Thomas Murray, Fitzmaurice, and Gerald MacNamara. Left-literati alliances were re-forged against the conservative nationalism of William Martin Murphy and Griffith. The First World War drove republican logics to the fore; indicated both by the pessimism of Wilson's The Slough and the excited radicalism of MacDonagh, Eimar O'Duffy, and Patrick Pearse himself. Republicanism, indicated by Pearse's references to Ibsen and Synge, is shown as having absorbed theatrical forces of display, to be reiterated in the Easter Rising of 1916.

Conclusion Mahon and the Echo
BEN LEVITAS

in The Theatre of Nation: Irish Drama and Cultural Nationalism 1890-1916
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This chapter reassesses the role of the theatre in pre-Revolutionary Ireland. Considering Yeats's 'Man and the Echo', it argues that the theatre was central to the Irish revival. Parnellism provided an important opening for cultural nationalism because it looked forward to ripening opinion rather than established consensus. Nationalism contained conflicts along lines of class, gender, and generation, all revealed in theatre as much as in the activities of Irish Socialist and Feminists; and the regional development of theatre in Cork and Ulster is emphasised. The model of Ireland as lost to tribal opposition is rejected; left-literati alliances were indicators of resistance to bourgeois nationalist imperatives. Republicanism proved open to such modernist lessons, but while Synge is presented as influentially provocative, his creative anxiety should not be reduced to revolutionary provocation alone.

'Tinkers'
Mary Burke

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The history of the Irish minority Traveller community is not analogous to that of the ‘tinker’, a Europe-wide underworld fantasy created by 16th-century British and continental Rogue Literature that came to be seen as an Irish character alone as English became dominant in Ireland. By the Revival, the tinker represented bohemian, pre-Celtic aboriginality, functioning as the cultural nationalist counter to the Victorian Gypsy mania. Long misunderstood as a portrayal of actual Travellers, J. M. Synge’s influential The Tinker’s Wedding was pivotal to this ‘Irishing’ of the tinker, even as it acknowledged that figure’s cosmopolitan textual roots. Synge’s empathetic depiction is closely examined, as are the many subsequent representations that looked to him as a model to subvert or emulate. In contrast to their Revival-era romanticization, post-Independence writing portrayed tinkers as alien interlopers, while contemporaneous Unionists labelled them a contaminant from the hostile South. However, after Travellers politicized in the 1960s, more even-handed depictions heralded a querying of the ‘tinker’ fantasy. Such change shapes contemporary screen and literary representations of Travellers and has prompted Traveller writers to transubstantiate Otherness into the empowering rhetoric of ethnic difference. Though its Irish equivalent has oscillated between idealization and demonization, US racial history facilitates the cinematic figuring of the Irish-American Traveler as lovable ‘white trash’ rogue. This process is informed by the mythology of a population with whom Travelers are allied in the white American imagination, the Scots-Irish (Ulster-Scots). In short, the ‘tinker’ is much more central to Irish and even Irish-American identity than is currently recognized.

J. M. Synge and the Aesthetics of Intelligent Sympathy

Patrick R. Mullen

in The Poor Bugger’s Tool: Irish Modernism, Queer Labor, and Postcolonial History


This chapter argues that Synge deploys a queer aesthetic in his representation of the Irish peasantry. Furthermore, it suggests that by doing so, Synge develops a more fluid and inclusive model of Irish national affiliation than other writers of the Irish Revival. Rather than seeing a break between Wildean aesthetics as they are embodied in the figure of the dandy and the figure of the peasant promoted by the Revival, the chapter reveals Synge’s project as an elaboration of queer aesthetic practices along new lines. By expanding our understanding of
the queer beyond questions of identity to modes of style, the chapter explores how the critical and ethical concerns of queer theory might be brought to bear in novel contexts.

The Abbey Theatre, 1899-1999
Robert Welch

A century ago this year, productions of W. B. Yeats' The Countess Cathleen and Edward Martyn's The Heather Field inaugurated the Irish Literary Theatre, which was to take its name from its home in Abbey Street, Dublin. Despite riot, fire, and critical controversy, the Abbey Theatre has housed Ireland's National Theatre ever since. This is the first history of the Abbey to discuss the plays and the personalities in their underlying historical and political context, to give due weight to the theatre's work in Irish, and to take stock of its artistic and financial development up to the present. The research for the book draws extensively on archive sources, especially the manuscript holdings on the Abbey at the National Library of Ireland. Many outstanding plays are examined, with detailed analysis of their form and their affective and emotional content; and persistent themes in the Abbey's output are identified — visions of an ideal community; the revival of Irish; the hunger for land and money; the restrictions of a society undergoing profound change. But these are integrated with accounts of the Abbey's people, from Yeats, Martyn, and Lady Gregory, whose brainchild it was, to the actors, playwrights, directors, and managers who have followed — among them the Fays, Synge, O'Casey, Murray, Robinson, Shiels, Johnston, Murphy, Molloy, Friel, McGuiness, Deevy, Carr, and many others. The role of directors and policy-makers, and the struggle for financial security, subsidy, and new-style ‘partnerships’, is discussed as a crucial part of the theatre's continuing evolution.

Primitivism, Science, and the Irish Revival
Sinéad Garrigan Mattar

The literature of the Irish Revival of the 1890s should be seen as a hinge between the 19th and 20th centuries. Its authors appropriated the ‘primitive’ through the lenses of comparative anthropology, mythology,
and colonial travel-writing, and actively strove to re-establish contact with primitive modes through ‘the study of mythology, anthropology, and psychoanalysis’. They were engaged in a complex and volitional primitivism, which became ‘modernist’ as it utilised the findings of social science. The works of William Butler Yeats, John Millington Synge, and Lady Gregory are all analysed as the product of such influences. However, this book also suggests that Celticism itself underwent a sea-change during the 19th century, recreating itself in academic circles as an anti-primitivist science known as Celtology. It was only a matter of time before Yeats and Synge, who read widely in the works of Celtology, would look to this new science to find alternatives to the primitivism of the Twilight.

Literature in English, 1921–84
Vivian Mercier

in A New History of Ireland Volume VII: Ireland 1921-84

The rubric ‘literature and society’, which seems irrelevant to much of the literary work produced in the period 1891–1921, comes into its own from 1922 onwards. Whereas the plays of William Butler Yeats, J. M. Synge, Lady Gregory, and George Fitzmaurice — compounded of myth, folklore, and fantasy — had formerly dominated the Irish theatre, the prose realism that had certainly also been a part of the Abbey tradition in the works of William Boyle, Padraic Colum, T. C. Murray, Seumas O'Kelly, and Lennox Robinson now began to drive fantasy and verse from the Abbey stage. Irish drama became a more faithful reflection of contemporary Irish society. There has been a growing tendency in Ireland, north and south, for the arts to receive assistance from business and finance. Literature benefits through prizes offered for drama, fiction, and poetry; summer schools and international conferences often receive subsidies.

Homer among the Irish: Yeats, Synge, Thomson
Richard Martin

in Homer in the Twentieth Century: Between World Literature and the Western Canon
In the 20th century, Ireland was an important site for the reception of Homer, largely through one work — James Joyce's Ulysses. This chapter tells an alternative story about Homer among the Irish by focusing not on James Joyce, but on the dramatist John Millington Synge and the scholar George Derwent Thomson. It argues that Synge's and Thomson's consciousness of Homer was shaped by their extended visits to the Aran Islands and the Blasket Islands, respectively. However, it also argues that Homeric poetry affected their descriptions of contemporary Irish people living on those islands. By discussing how ancient Greece was imported into modern Ireland, and how in turn Ireland was exported into Homeric epic in the works of both men, it offers a fascinating picture of the connections and differences between Thomson and Synge, as well as a case-study in the contingent circumstances that have often affected the circulation of Homer in the 20th century.

Introduction: Our Proper Dark
Sinéad Garrigan Mattar

This book examines the work of the first three directors of the Abbey Theatre — William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory, and John Millington Synge — and in each case suggests the nature of their personal primitivism and the extent to which it was influenced by comparative science. It discusses how critics ignored the existence of Celtology — the scientific, comparative study of Celtic culture, language, and literature that developed in the 1870s — and too often analysed the Celticism, and thus the primitivism, of the Irish Revival only in terms of the romantically primitivist tradition vocalised by both Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold. One of the reasons why the primitivism of the Irish Revival has as yet received scant attention is that a vital distinction between primitivism and ‘archaism’ has been smudged by its most eminent critics.
John Millington Synge incorporated the constructions of man's place in nature, that came to him from extensive reading in comparative science, into a primitivism which relied instinctively upon the notion of man as an organic part of the natural world. This intense engagement with scientific comparativism arguably enabled the modernism of Synge's work for the Irish theatre. Yet for all this, Synge was one of the ‘last romantics’ and as much as evolutionism was a quotidian reality to him, he never fully disavowed either his romantically primitivist vision of early man, or his view of himself as the soul-mate of the primitive hunters. He was ‘Synge’, not ‘singe’, and his relationship to the implications of Darwinism remained equivocal. With Synge, the threads of connection between the Irish Revival and the comparative mythologists, philologists, and folklorists of Continental Celtology, become a veritable cat's-cradle. The notes Synge made from the great tomes of comparative anthropology and mythology he read were selective in the extreme, and his own priorities are more than evident in his selection of material.

Conclusion
Sinéad Garrigan Mattar
in Primitivism, Science, and the Irish Revival

The primitivism of the Irish Revival has been misunderstood for too long because its complex and varied politics have been seen as depending on a particularly uncomplicated attitude towards the past. This book has shown that William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory, and John Millington Synge all looked to the past — and to contemporary survivals of the past — as it was envisaged by comparative scientists or (in the case of Lady Gregory) by travellers and colonialists who had themselves assimilated the lessons of comparative science. For all the serendipity and anti-scientism of Yeats's approach, there was a pattern to the way he used comparative anthropology and mythology. For Synge, the iconoclasm of his vision owed much to his early acceptance that the romantic primitivism of Celticism was utterly outdated by the end of the 19th century because of the revelations made by comparative philologists, mythologists, and anthropologists. Lady Gregory's primitivism was stubbornly romantic and, despite knowing many comparative mythologists and anthropologists personally, science did not make her vision change.
This chapter takes as its scope the substantial canon of Irish literature in the first decades of the twentieth century that engaged intimately with violence. It argues that the expression of violence can be understood according to four categories, each of which the chapter develops with respect to a host of writers, whose styles and political positions are widely divergent. The categories are not entirely parallel in structure, but together provide a capacious picture of the language of violence in the period: keening (or ritual lamentation), generative violence (the mode of the Rising), reprisal (the dark doppelganger of generativity), and allegory (in which the nation or body is likened to a tree or building). In tracing these four modes, the chapter invites a loosening of the ordinary political binaries that characterize criticism of this period. Prominent figures include, for keening, Synge and O'Casey; for generative violence, Synge, Yeats, Pearse, and other leaders of the Rising such as Plunkett and MacDonough; for reprisal, Mitchel, Yeats, Synge, and O'Casey; and for allegory, Yeats. Ultimately, the chapter charts an entirely new scheme for reading the violence canon in this period, attuned to the historical shifts eventuated by uprising, war and the institution of the nation state.

The Scales of Modernity I
Cóilín Parsons

This chapter analyzes John Millington Synge’s The Aran Islands in relation to its attempts to represent the increasing infringement of the global in this supposedly most isolated and traditional of places. The Ordnance Survey sought to answer a similar, and increasingly pressing question in the 1840s: how can the discrepant scales of modernity be represented? This chapter identifies Synge as struggling to find a form to represent the scales of modernity, and to capture the scale bending of the everyday life of colonial modernity. The Aran Islands is a hybrid form that emerges in response to the challenge of modernity in Ireland. The idiom for
which Synge reached to solve the problem of scale he encountered in describing a “primitive” place crosshatched by global forces was drawn substantially from the historical and cartographic work of the Ordnance Survey on the Aran Islands in the 1830s, in which Synge was well versed.

**A Temper of Misgiving**

Ben Levitas

in *Uncertain Futures: Essays about the Irish Past for Roy Foster*

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This essay explores how W. B. Yeats was defined in the early twentieth century not just by his own work, but in his public representation of J. M. Synge’s. It suggests that as Yeats’s view on nationalism hardened in his defence of Synge, particularly in the context of his death, it became detached from change: frozen until the American tour of 1912 delivered a jolt of reassessment, then amplified by the shock of 1916. Examining his 1911 essay ‘J. M. Synge and the Ireland of his Time’, his 1923 Nobel lecture, and the journals later published as Estrangement and The Death of Synge, it is suggested that Yeats came to construe the construction of identity—his own and Ireland’s—as forms of masked performance. In the shift from certainty to reassessment lie the origins of doubt as a core aspect of Yeats’s later theatre, politics, and poetry.