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THE LITERARY REVIVAL: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Terence Brown

At the Sixth Annual Conference of the Canadian Association for Irish Studies held in Montreal in March, 1973 Seamus Deane delivered a lecture entitled 'The Literary Myths of the Revival: A Case for Their Abandonment'. This was less than three years's after the founding meeting of IASAIL, now IASIL, in the summer of 1970 at Trinity College, Dublin. At that Dublin meeting, the Northern Troubles, in their earliest phase, scarcely registered. No-one seemed surprised. By 1973 with Bloody Sunday in Derry, Bloody Friday in Belfast, with internment poisoning the communities in Northern Ireland and the Provisional IRA in the midst of a bombing campaign, it would by contrast have seemed surprising if a meeting dedicated to Irish Studies had not heard something bearing on the developing Irish *imbroglio*. Deane, with severe passion (I remember the tone precisely in the grand 'colonial' chamber in McGill University's Great Hall, in a city that knew its own kind of ethnic and linguistic divisions) spoke of 'Our present delapidated situation' which had 'borne in upon us more fiercely than ever the fact that discontinuity, the discontinuity which is ineluctably an inheritance of a colonial history, is more truly the signal of our condition'. Deane's lecture, which was published in 1977 set literary historians the task of unmasking what he thought were the disabling Yeatsian myths of the Irish literary revival, which had for too long enjoyed the status of literal truth. For he asserted 'Perhaps the most seductive of all Yeats's historical fictions is that he gave dignity and coherence to the Irish Protestant Ascendancy tradition'.

The Yeats imaginary was not even an historical interpretation of the past, but an aesthetic strategy. Deane argued:

The aesthetic heritage with which we still struggle clearly harbors the desire to obliterate or render nugatory the problems of class, economics, bureaucratic systems and the like, concentrating instead on the essences of self, nationhood, community and *Zeitgeist*. If there is any politics to be associated with such an aesthetic, it is the politics of Fascism. It is again surprising that this clear implication should pass almost unnoticed in the body of contemporary Irish writing and in the scattered conviction many writers still retain about the so-called autonomy of the imagination.

What Deane called for in his lecture was for a literary history to be written in Ireland which took account of the things which historians proper should address – ‘the problems of class, economics, bureaucratic systems and the like’ – adding his own demand that that history should be read as ‘colonial’.

Deane’s was a minatory performance, made the more telling in the almost complete absence of social and cultural histories of nineteenth and twentieth century Ireland extant at that date and by the very limited amount of literary criticism or literary history written by Irish scholars in Irish universities since partition and the founding of the Irish state. For in 1973, something it is difficult to imagine now, there were almost no monographs on Irish writers by resident Irish scholars (other than Daniel Corkery’s *Synge and Anglo-Irish literature*, 1931) and few thematic or general works of reflection. Classics such as Jeffares and Henn on Yeats, Mercier on the Irish Comic Tradition, had been penned by Irishmen who had made academic careers abroad. Some of the best critical works were in fact by writers, with Frank O’Connor’s *The Backward Look* (1967) an early plea for Irish Studies.

At the beginning of the 1970s historians had in fact begun to lay the groundwork for the kind of socio/cultural and political account of the Irish Literary Revival, that Deane had called for. In November 1970 in the journal *20th Century Studies* (produced at the University