

THE MYTH OF THE IRISH WRITER

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Within seconds of stepping off the ferry the visitor to the Emerald Isle is introduced to a strange native species known as the *Irish Writer*. These creatures are depicted on posters, tea towels, calendars, mugs, maps and other tourist mementoes and are to be found in every village store, tourist office, newsagent's, bus station and ferry port throughout the island. Some of the names will be familiar to the tourist, though most of the grey, blotchily reproduced faces will not be: they sell, which is what matters.

This promotion of the *Irish Writer* has succeeded in giving the impression that there are a disproportionate number of them in the literary world; there may be German writers, Italian writers, American writers and English writers as well as innumerable others, but the nation with that extra special propensity for the pen is the Irish. But what is an Irish writer? It is quite easy to define a French writer: he or she will probably be French, may well, though not necessarily, write about France or the French people and will probably have spent most of his or her life in France. Furthermore, the French writer, by definition, writes in French and within a recognisably French literary tradition. The *Irish Writer* cannot be defined so easily. Until the creation of the Irish Free State in 1921 Ireland was part of the British Empire. Millions of Irish men and women have migrated back and forth across the Irish Sea for centuries and still do. English, Welsh and Scots men and women have done the same. The majority of Irish migrants sought work and a higher standard of living in Britain, while the English in Ireland, often referred to as the Anglo-Irish, moved into the country as a form of ruling class, as landowners, merchants or government officials. W.B. Yeats, for example, was Anglo-Irish on his father's side through the Yeats and Butler families, and also on his mother's side through the Pollexfens who were originally from Cornwall. The populations of both Britain and Ireland are a mixture of many peoples and it is thankfully absurd to boast of having pure Irish, pure Celtic or pure English blood; they are concepts that do not exist except in the ravings of racial supremacists. It has been suggested that Celtic cultures are naturally gifted with language and are therefore able to produce great literature, this despite the fact that Gaelic has sadly been repressed by the English for centuries, while the most literate people, the writers, are precisely the ones most alienated from their Celtic roots by their English educations.

The main criterion for being considered an *Irish Writer* is accident of birth, but this seems to be rather an inadequate reason for distinguishing one writer from another. Arthur Conan Doyle was born in Edinburgh (of Irish parents) but he is not especially defined as a *Scottish Writer*, George Orwell was born in Burma but is not defined as a *Burmese Writer* and Rudyard Kipling was born in Bombay and he is certainly not remembered as an *Indian Writer*. Nevertheless George Bernard Shaw, whose family lived in Dublin for much the same imperialist reasons that Orwell's lived in Burma, is

an *Irish Writer*. Shaw himself would be the first to laugh at his depiction on tea towels of pure Irish linen: "I am" he said, "a typical Irishman; my family came from Yorkshire".

Many *Irish Writers*, such as George Bernard Shaw and Samuel Beckett were brought up, educated, served their writing apprenticeships, became successful, lived and died outside of Ireland. Often England, and specifically London, was the place they came to. Jonathan Swift and Oliver Goldsmith made their names in London and were infinitely happier there than in their native land. They became members of the English literary scene, and it was in London that they enjoyed success and popularity, and from which they had to flee when Fortune turned against them. The subject of Goldsmith's "Deserted Village" may be traced back to his native village in Ireland, but it could equally be an English village and as literature it is in the same tradition of English rural poetry that William Cowper, George Crabbe and John Clare were also to write. Another *Irish Writer* who specialised in a traditional English literary form was Oscar Wilde, who successfully revived the Comedy of Manners at the end of the nineteenth century. Since England kept Ireland in a state of numbing poverty and provincialism for centuries it is inevitable that education, ideas and culture had to be sought elsewhere.

It is not until the twentieth century that Ireland itself becomes the inspiration for *Irish Writers*. James Joyce could not bear to remain in Dublin, loathed the institutions of his native land and ridiculed attempts to revive the Irish language. And so, although Dublin becomes the protagonist of *Ulysses*, and Joyce's upbringing the subject of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, he lived, wrote and was published on the continent. W.B. Yeats spent much of his childhood in England and began his literary career there. It was in London that he learned of the French symbolist poets whose influence was to affect his own work so strongly. But of writers such as W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge, Seamus Heaney and perhaps James Joyce it is at least reasonable to say of them that they are *Irish Writers* if only because it is Ireland, its history, its people and its future, that concerns them.

Even those *Irish Writers* who are primarily concerned with Ireland itself (and they are a minority among those generally classified as *Irish Writers*) not only write within an English literary tradition, but more importantly, actually write in the English language. The reason for this is the same reason that so many Irish Writers are of English Protestant families: English imperialism. There can be no doubt that the loss of the Irish language and the hundreds of years of repression that the Irish have suffered since the Norman invasion have their origin on the eastern side of the Irish Sea. Unforgivable though the actions of the English may be, it is absurd to pretend for reasons of guilt or sentimentality that the Irish, or the Celts, have a special propensity for producing literature superior to that of other nations. There are more similarities than there are differences between writers who are *Irish* and *British* writers. Oliver Goldsmith has far more in common with George Crabbe than either of them have with William Blake; W.B. Yeats shares more with T.S. Eliot than he does with Wilfred Owen; Irishness is useless as a means of literary definition. Since ties with Britain have been so close and entangled throughout history this is inevitable and it is only when Ireland itself becomes the writers' major preoccupation that the *Irish Writer* can truly be discerned. Since it is only really in this century that a few *Irish Writers* have concerned themselves with their own country (Swift may have satirically suggested that Irish mothers sell their babies

as food, but the subject was hardly his principal preoccupation), there are really only a handful of people for whom the title *Irish Writer* has any significance, and that significance is surely political rather than literary. Delightful though it may be for English Literature academics to fragment their discipline into dozens of neat and profitable compartments, within the British Isles there is really only one tradition, and that is English. But don't tell the tourists.