

Review: *Douglas Hyde: Irish Ideology and International Impact* (Mac Mathúna and Nic an Bhaird)



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encouraging to see that it has been published by a local history society, a society that clearly has taken pride in its Irish-language heritage and in those who helped to shape it.

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Douglas Hyde: Irish Ideology and International Impact. Edited by Liam Mac Mathúna and Máire Nic an Bhaird. *Éigse: A Journal of Irish Studies*, Foilseacháin/Publications 3. National University of Ireland: Dublin, 2023. 191 pp. €30. ISBN 978-0-9015109-5-2.

The collection of Lady Gregory's papers held in the New York Public Library includes what looks like a CV for Douglas Hyde, co-founder of the Gaelic League and the first President of Ireland. The document, entitled 'Some recent criticism and reviews', was compiled in advance of Hyde's highly successful tour of the United States in 1905–6 and includes a resumé of his achievements under the headings 'Honours gained by me in Trinity College and elsewhere' and 'List of works published by me'. It is odd to see someone who needs no introduction to students of Irish history or Celtic Studies having to present himself in this somewhat awkward manner. Yet it is precisely Hyde's status in the canon of modern Irish history that makes this self-evaluation so striking. It is a reminder that Hyde's biography is also an awkward construct and that our assumptions about him need to be regularly tested and revised.

The significance of the 1905–6 tour to Hyde's becoming a national and even international figure was remarked upon by its organiser, the Irish-American financial solicitor, John Quinn: 'Outside of the Irish Societies he was almost unknown here a year ago except to some Irish, who weren't numerous enough to make up a corporal's guard. Today he is almost an international figure.' Of course, the context of this assessment is important – writing to W. B. Yeats, whose 1903–4 American tour he had also organised, Quinn was vaunting his own organisational success while also commending Yeats for having generously publicised Hyde's work during his own tour. Nevertheless, it is hard not to agree with Quinn on the importance of Hyde's tour in his rise to prominence. The funds raised for the Gaelic League amounted to \$64,000 and it is doubtful that its President would ever have to produce a resumé to introduce himself again. This crucial international dimension to Hyde's work is the focus of this collection of seven essays, edited by Liam Mac Mathúna and Máire Nic an Bhaird in the third volume of the occasional supplementary series produced by *Éigse*. A short description of the scope of this volume explains that the essays draw on the 'latest research on diaries, personal correspondence, memoir reflections, and newspaper reports in library and State archives'. Besides tracing 'developments in the formulation and explication of Irish revival ideology', the collection also sets out to investigate 'pivotal aspects of the revival movement's impact and influence as well as its interaction with the Irish diaspora and Celtic scholars in North America and Continental Europe'.

Feena Tóibín's 'On de-anglicising the Irish nation/Ar mi-sacsanughadh an chinidh Éireannaigh' draws extensively on Hyde's diaries to chart the development of his campaign for cultural revival which clearly overlapped with nationalist separatist politics. Elements of Hyde's unusual biography are worth mentioning here – he had no formal schooling apart from a ten-day stint in Dublin which ended in his contracting measles. His academic development was conducted at home in Frenchpark, Roscommon and was essentially 'self-led', apart from some instruction from his aunt and father. Staying at home meant that local Catholic nationalist influences such as John Lavin, a local Fenian, were particularly important and, indeed, Hyde would go on to meet and admire the 1867 leaders O'Donovan Rossa and John O'Leary. This deep familiarity with both the Irish separatist tradition and Irish rural society was undoubtedly of great benefit to Hyde when assuming the lead role in a national cultural organisation. His own nationalist proclivities are also an important corrective to the assumption that Hyde stood down as League President in 1915 simply because the organisation had been taken over by IRB elements. Commenting on this famous incident in a letter to Lady Gregory in December 1915, Hyde remarked, 'I kept them together for 22 years, but the war was too much for me! I shall tell you about it when I see you!' This briefest and most intriguing of summaries, quoted in Liam Mac Mathúna's essay, demonstrates the ongoing need for a carefully nuanced analysis of the end of Hyde's presidency of the Gaelic League.

In common with the first essay in the collection, Regina Uí Chollatáin's contribution mines the diaries of Douglas Hyde to answer the question posed in the title of her essay, 'A new Gaelic League idea? The global context'. Part of the focus of the discussion is the year Hyde spent lecturing in the University of New Brunswick in Canada (1891–2), a period which allowed him to visit New York. Uí Chollatáin gives a survey of Irish language usage in print journalism before and after the founding of the Gaelic League to show how transatlantic networks of language activism were fostered. One of those who typified such activity was the Donegal poet Pádraig Ó Beirn. One small correction to be noted here is that Ó Beirn first learned to read and write Irish at Ballynafeigh in Belfast from Fr David Mulcahy (1831–97) of Kilkeany, Co. Waterford, editor of *Beatha Naoimh Chiaráin Saighre: Life of S. Kiaran (the Elder) of Seir* (1895). This much is reported in *The Shan Van Vocht* (Nov. 1897) but, of course, Ó Beirn clearly developed his knowledge of the language in New York and is probably best known for his numerous contributions to Irish language writing in the United States, including a eulogy for General Ulysses S. Grant published by *The New York Times* in 1885.

The subject of Liam Mac Mathúna's essay is Douglas Hyde's intellectual links with John Quinn, Lady Gregory and W. B. Yeats. This contribution is a model of clarity, pursuing a clear line of enquiry which synthesises the substantial body of published biographical material for all four individuals while introducing numerous insights from various archival and privately-held sources. A particular focus is given to the dynamics of personal relationships and institutional affiliations, Gregory and Hyde's friendship being an excellent

example of how a history of mutual respect and cooperation was compromised at various intervals, most emphatically when Hyde yielded to pressure to publicly disassociate the Gaelic League from the Abbey's American tour of *The Playboy of the Western World* in 1911–12. The earnest tone of the private exchanges which followed this rift reveals the depth of the friendship which preceded it. Many other insights emerge from Mac Mathúna's essay, among which are President Theodore Roosevelt's familiarity with the heroes of the Ulster and Finn cycles, to which he had been introduced by Irish nannies.

Aoife Whelan takes the *Irish Independent* newspaper as a case-study to examine how Hyde's vision of a de-anglicised Ireland was articulated in the press. By publishing Gaelic League reports and speeches, the paper became a significant force for the dissemination of the Irish-Ireland agenda even when not agreeing with Hyde, as was the case during the campaign for compulsory Irish in the National University of Ireland. On this issue an *Independent* sub-leader sided with the views of Canon Peter O'Leary, Shan Ó Cuív, Richard Foley and others. Central to Whelan's case-study is Eoin Ó Neachtain's Irish language column for the *Independent*. This was important for myriad reasons, not least for nurturing contemporary discourse in Irish and normalising the practical use of the language. This was clearly one of the successes of the Gaelic League as its formal symbolic use of Irish gradually gave way to everyday communication. Accordingly, Ó Neachtain's column comments on how the 1908 Oireachtas was less energetic than previous years but that the use of Irish had become markedly more commonplace.

Two essays by Fiona Lyons and the collection's joint editor, Máire Nic an Bhaird, examine recently digitised archival material in the first instance and items from private collections in the second. The digitised collection of 90 postcards belonging to Hyde and a memoir mostly written in 1918–19 are the subject of Fiona Lyons' essay which is accompanied by colour reproductions of some of the postcards. The provenance of the postcards – Scotland, Germany, Hungary, United States – gives some glimpse of Hyde's international range of correspondents, but inevitably it is the transatlantic network of contacts that is most significant. Indeed, while some of the authors in this collection occasionally refer to Hyde's range of activities as being 'global', the evidence presented suggests that 'transatlantic' or 'international' is more accurate.

Máire Nic an Bhaird presents an account of sources recently made available through private sources, in particular the family of Hyde's grandson, Douglas Sealy (1929–2013). Her discussion focusses on the artistic gifts of the various generations of the descendants of Douglas Hyde and of his wife Lucy Cometina Kurtz, an Englishwoman of German lineage. We, and they, can be thankful for this critical exception to Hyde's de-anglicisation vision. Some colour reproductions of Úna Hyde's art are also given here as well as a discussion of some of her subjects which included the eccentric Lord Ashbourne whose sister, Violet Gibson, tried to assassinate Mussolini in 1926.

The final essay in the collection is also the longest, 'President Hyde, Professor Pokorny and Irish reaction to the Holocaust'. While the main concern

is with Hyde's role in the Pokorny affair, this essay includes a fascinating discussion of the interaction of key figures in relations between Ireland and Nazi Germany. The author, Brian Murphy, has also written an account of Hyde's presidency, *Forgotten Patriot: Douglas Hyde and the Foundation of the Irish Presidency* (2016). Murphy draws on this monograph and Pól Ó Dochartaigh's *Julius Pokorny, 1887–1970: Germans, Celts and Nationalism* (2004) to examine Hyde's response to Pokorny's request for help as he came under increasing threat during the Nazi's relentless pursuit of Jews and those of Jewish descent following the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 – while Pokorny was himself Catholic, his grandfather was Jewish. Using previously unpublished sources, this essay sheds a great deal of light on Hyde's failure to offer any support for the plight of someone whom he had known for many years previous to the war. There are, undoubtedly, mitigating factors to which Murphy gives appropriate consideration in his assessment of the case. The constitutional limitations of the presidency and the state's policy of neutrality, Hyde's age and failing health (he suffered a stroke in 1940), the role of the *éminence grise* within the President's office, Hyde's secretary Michael McDunphy, are all part of what was a complex set of circumstances. Nevertheless, despite Hyde's admiration for the Jewish people – he professed to having a good working knowledge of Hebrew and made various statements in praise of the Jewish people and the revival of Hebrew – Murphy's conclusion is that the President acted with indifference to Pokorny's plight.

It is fitting that the final essay in the collection should provide us with such a nuanced view of Hyde's final years of public life, bringing to a close a remarkable life-story with a profound influence on modern Irish history. Becoming the figure of international importance that emerged from the US tour of 1905–6 carried with it a burden of responsibility, particularly in Hyde's final role as first President of the Republic of Ireland. It is quite right that his record should be held up to scrutiny and while some of the essays in this collection tend towards the presentation of biographical material rather than a critical investigation of Hyde's work and legacy, the overall contribution is to a much greater understanding of one of the architects of modern Ireland.

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Ollscoil Mhá Nuad