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# An Open National Identity: Rutherford Mayne, Gerald MacNamara, and the Plays of the Ulster Literary Theatre\*

During the early decades of the twentieth century, while Ireland's Abbey Theatre tried hard to create a unified image of nationhood in the figure of a West-of-Ireland peasant, a little theatre company in the North of Ireland addressed issues of national representation by very different means. The Ulster Branch of the Irish Literary Theatre, set up in 1902, brought plays from the Dublin-based dramatic revival on tour to Belfast. However, when William Butler Yeats, one of the leading forces behind the foundation of both the Irish Literary Theatre (1899–1901) and the Irish National Theatre Society (1903), heard about the Ulstermen's artistic project, he would not allow them to use one of his companies' names and forbade them from staging dramas he was in the process of copyrighting.<sup>1</sup> Bulmer Hobson and David Parkhill, the founders of the Ulster theatre, promptly changed the company's name as well as its creative focus. "Damn Yeats, we'll write our own plays," was Hobson's response to Yeats's protective attitude.<sup>2</sup> The break with Dublin marked the start of the Ulster Literary Theatre.

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1. Sam Hanna Bell, *The Theatre in Ulster. A Survey of the Dramatic Movement in Ulster from 1902 until the Present Day* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1972), 4; John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard, eds., *The Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats: Vol. III, 1901–1904* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 597.

2. Bell, 1.

Ironically, the Belfast company's inaugural production in December 1904 took place during the same month when the Irish National Theatre Society moved into the Abbey Theatre. Between 1904 and 1915, the Ulster Literary Theatre staged twenty new plays and numerous revivals.<sup>3</sup> A number of these were dramatic failures, some of the dramas stood out, but most significant was this group's capacity to navigate between a range of conflicting identities: Ulster unionism and Irish nationalism, Catholicism and Protestantism, a northern versus southern identity. What I intend to argue in this article is that the Ulster Literary Theatre found its own surprisingly simple solution to negotiate such diverse political and cultural tensions. In particular the work of two playwrights, Rutherford Mayne and Gerald MacNamara, illustrates that the Ulster Literary Theatre explored Irish nationalism and Ulster unionism not as political concepts but as defining parameters of social and cultural identity. Their conclusion was not a separatist one. Identities are complex and ambiguous, Mayne's and MacNamara's plays suggest. Particular features and interests are never the sole property of one political, cultural, or religious faction, but are shared by a number of identifiable groups. The same applied to sectarian extremism: bigotry was a feature of nationalist militants as well as of unionist activists. MacNamara satirized such weaknesses in order to promote open-mindedness; Mayne fostered tolerance with his fair-minded portrayals of County Down life.

For the formation of the new company in 1904, Parkhill and Hobson were joined by writers such as Joseph Campbell and Rutherford Mayne, and by enthusiastic artists from the Belfast School of Art. The school's Sketching Club had already staged dramatic entertainments and showed a specific interest in elaborate stage design.<sup>4</sup> Much of this stemmed from the active involvement of Harry Morrow and his family. Morrow, who ran an interior design business that specialized in decorating, painting, and renovation, also lectured at the Belfast School of Art. His sons, Harry, Fred, Jack, Edwin and Norman Mor-

3. In 1915 the company changed its name to "Ulster Theatre" and continued to stage new Irish drama.

4. Martyn Anglesea, *The Royal Ulster Academy of Arts* (Belfast: Royal Ulster Academy of Art, 1981), 38.

5. Ophelia Byrne, *The Stage in Ulster from the Eighteenth Century* (Belfast: Linen Hall Library, 1997), 38; Bell, 16; *Nomad's Weekly*, 12 April 1902, 173.

row, participated in the school's productions.<sup>5</sup> All had a talent for painting and sketching, but Harry and Fred would become major contributors to the Ulster Literary Theatre's stage design, repertoire and production standard. Delving into conflicting political identities in an objective manner would not be easy for any of them: Hobson, Parkhill and the Morrow family all shared a nationalist bias. The first two belonged to the Protestant National Association in Belfast and were interested in using Irish drama "as a vehicle of propaganda."<sup>6</sup> Hobson was also a member of the Dungannon Clubs. The Morrow family produced anti-loyalist sketches at entertainments in their own home, and Jack and George would later draw anti-British cartoons for Hobson's paper *The Republic*.<sup>7</sup>

Nationalist and unionist sympathies competed more strongly in Ulster than in the rest of Ireland. This created a potentially volatile situation for the theatre members' political bias. Yeats and Lady Gregory avoided partisanship by imposing a "no-politics" stipulation on their Dublin theatre company.<sup>8</sup> For them, as for most of the playwrights of the Irish National Theatre Society, nationalism was not a political notion but a cultural focus rooted in the revival of "an ancient idealism"—an imaginative sensibility, as it were, dedicated to the discovery of a sincere national identity. Yeats and Gregory's decision to remain "outside all the political questions that divide us"<sup>9</sup> would not only be naïve for the Belfast-based playwrights, but it would also sound false to their individual political convictions.

The literary magazine *Uladh*, four issues of which were published during the Ulster Literary Theatre's first season, provides a wealth of

6. Bell, 3.

7. Bulmer Hobson, *Ireland Yesterday and Tomorrow* (Tralee: Anvil Books, 1968), 5–13, 16.

8. The requirement not to produce political drama was imposed by the theatre's benefactress and friend of Yeats, A.E.F. Horniman (Adrian Frazier, *Behind the Scenes: Yeats, Horniman and the Struggle for the Abbey Theatre* [London: University of California Press, 1990], 75–77). Not everyone in the Irish National Theatre Society agreed with Yeats's non-political interpretation of nationalism. In 1903, Maud Gonne, Dudley Digges and Maire Quinn left the INTS in order to set up a rival company, the National Players. Not all of their plays were propagandist, but they did not avoid political concerns.

9. "Letter to the Guarantors for a 'Celtic' Theatre." Quoted in Lady Augusta Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography* (1913. Reprint. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1972), 20.

information on the ideological foundation of the company. At first sight, the articles appear to be an eclectic blend of literary criticism; discussions on sociology, politics, arts and crafts; as well as opinionated views on new Irish drama. They share, however, one crucial attribute: all of the contributions highlight the value of emphasizing the North's regional identity in negotiating between sectarian oppositions. According to *Uladh*, Ulster was not Ireland, so Ulster plays would be different from the "national" drama presented at the Abbey.<sup>10</sup> Although most of the key members of the Ulster Literary Theatre were nationalists, the company made a case for an Ulster identity that was pluralist rather than dogmatic. The theater was to be run "on broad propagandist lines," but "non-sectarian and non-political."<sup>11</sup> This paradox implied an acknowledgment of the complexity of society, and was only possible because the Ulster Literary Theatre viewed its objective in terms that rejected Ulster's traditional binary oppositions: Catholic versus Protestant, nationalist versus unionist. Its "propaganda" was for the recognition of Ulster as a region with a distinct identity.

Replacing political difference with regional variation opened up a surprising range of possibilities: it allowed the Ulster Literary Theatre to respond to sectarian issues and still be committed to the whole panorama of social life.<sup>12</sup> The theater's repertoire was intended as "a commentary on the political and social conditions in the North of Ireland,"<sup>13</sup> and one of its members proposed that Ulstermen needed to cooperate "without fear of compromising their political opinions."<sup>14</sup> The Ulster peasant on the stage did not avoid problematic issues, as many of the Abbey Theatre's characters did, but confronted them. Satirical plays allowed the playwrights to ridicule, if not subvert, sectarian beliefs—in particular those of a narrow-minded nature. Many of the plays of the Ulster Literary Theatre did reveal a nationalist bias; yet,

10. *Uladh*, Nov. 1904, 8; Feb. 1905, 1–2, 13.

11. *Uladh*, Nov. 1904, 3. See also Peter McIvor, "Forrest Reid, *Uladh*, and the Ulster Literary Theatre," *Éire-Ireland* 17:2 (Summer 1982), 134–41.

12. Hagal Mengel, *Sam Thompson and Modern Drama in Ulster* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1986), 23.

13. Hobson, 4.

14. *Uladh*, Nov. 1904, 18.

the company did not eschew unsettling the dogmatic principles of Irish nationalist ideology as well.

Remarkable, too, is that *Uladh* attempted to “bridge that gulf” between the North and the South of the island.<sup>15</sup> The Ulster company’s provincial focus endeavored to create an elastic concept of the nation that acknowledged difference.<sup>16</sup> While the Abbey Theatre created a national identity on the basis of an image of the West of Ireland and Kiltartan dialect, the Ulster Literary Theatre replaced that model with its own regional identity, inspired by a variety of northern dialects and customs. The Irish National Theatre Society created a unitary notion of Irish identity. The Ulster artists, on the other hand, argued that regional, social and political differences cannot and should not be transcended.

Rutherford Mayne, the pseudonym for Samuel John Waddell (1878–1967), became one of the main playwrights on the Ulster Literary Theatre repertoire. Waddell grew up in a Presbyterian missionary family in Tokyo. After the death of their mother, the six children stayed in Belfast and were educated there. Samuel Waddell studied engineering, but the liberal, multicultural environment of Japan had opened his mind to other experiences. While still a student, he joined the Ulster Literary Theatre. After graduating as an engineer in 1907, he considered a professional acting career with Mollison’s Repertory Company in England, but eventually settled in Ireland to take up a job with the Land Commission in 1909. The economic plight of Japanese peasants in the late nineteenth century had probably sharpened his views on the crucial role of the land question in Ireland<sup>17</sup>—a concern that also inspired him to write plays such as *The Troth* (1908) and *Red Turf* (1911). Later he would contribute two successful plays to the Abbey Theatre repertoire, *Peter* (1930) and *Bridgehead* (1934).

Mayne debuted as a playwright in 1906 when the Ulster Literary Theatre was invited to launch its new season of plays at Belfast’s

15. *Republic*, 28 March 1907, 1; *Uladh*, Feb. 1905, 9–12.

16. Laura Lyons, “Of Orangemen and Green Theatres: The Ulster Literary Theatre’s Regional Nationalism,” in Stephen Watt, Eileen Morgan & Shakir Mustafa, *A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 37.

17. Wolfgang Zach, *The Selected Plays of Rutherford Mayne* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2000), ix.

Queen's College. The opportunity to stage their new drama for the intellectual élite of the province was the first recognition of the company's growing artistic status. *The Turn of the Road* dramatized the story of Robbie John Granahan who prefers playing the fiddle to working on the land.<sup>18</sup> For Mayne, this tension carried autobiographic resonance: the author was close to receiving his engineering degree but also interested in pursuing an artistic career, a personal dilemma that added to the play's sincerity. Robbie John's love for the fiddle is criticized by everyone of his family, but mostly by his father: "It makes you neglect your work," he argues, "it makes you think of things you shouldn't think of. It makes you lose sleep at nights sitting up and playing, and then you can't rise in the morning. When you should be polishing the harness or mending a ditch, or watching the cattle, or feeding the poultry, you've got this damned thing in your hand and practicing on it." (15) Robbie John leaves the house with the curse of his father, but in the epilogue to the play, his family accepts his decision.

The tension between individual freedom and society was a popular theme in Dublin's literary revival, but in the North this topic had further implications. Ulster had always prided itself on its reputation as a prosperous, hard-working community, but this sense of identity was shared mainly by Protestant loyalist factions who had benefited from the growth of urban industry in the region.<sup>19</sup> This work ethic did not sit easily alongside the notion of an artistic career, with its associations of laziness, alcoholism, and financial insecurity. Defending the freedom of the artist was therefore a potentially sectarian issue. Mayne's craftsmanship, however, made it possible for the audience to support the hero's choice to be a homeless artist, without undermining the Protestant work ethic. The dialogue is packed with expressions of hard work and materialism, such as "he's a canny good son and works hard" (5) or "a bonny wee girl she is, and has a fine farm and land coming till her" (5-6). Still, Robbie John decides to make a living as a traveling fiddler.

*The Turn of the Road* is a fine illustration of the Ulster Literary Theatre's focus on the construction of a non-political Ulster identity, and

18. Rutherford Mayne, *The Turn of the Road* (Dublin: Maunsell, 1907). Reprinted in Zach, *The Selected Plays of Rutherford Mayne*.

19. Jonathan Bardon, *A Shorter Illustrated History of Ulster* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1996), 166-67.

of the differences between Ulster and Dublin. The Belfast critics praised Mayne's portrayal of rural life, but not his theme of artistic freedom. They preferred to observe hard-working Ulster folk on stage rather than to ponder alternative lifestyles, such as the one chosen by Robbie John. When the Ulster company performed this play in Dublin a few months later, the *Irish Times*, too, praised the author's "real insight" into the Ulster temperament.<sup>20</sup> The nationalist *Freeman's Journal*, however, discovered in the Granahan's home a "sordidly commercial atmosphere" in which the son "is discouraged from cultivating" his musical talents.<sup>21</sup> The paper even associated Robbie John's artistic temperament with "the Gaelic ideals" of the theater company, and expressed surprise at the play's success in "the frigid North." In Dublin as in Belfast, ideology determined the appreciation of plays, but Mayne was able to move between these opposites without causing offense to North or South, unionist or nationalist. He allowed spectators to side either with Robbie John or with his industrious family.

The Ulster Literary Theatre's annual visits to Dublin fostered a closer relationship between North and South and encouraged a view of an Irish national theatre that recognized regional diversity. When the Abbey Theatre lost a substantial share of its nationalist supporters after the controversial production of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), many began to view the Ulster Literary Theatre as the more "genuine" national theater.<sup>22</sup> Dublin audiences were interested in plays that were typically Northern but which simultaneously embraced a wide range of social and cultural identities. Mayne's second play, which premiered for Dublin audiences on the company's 1908 tour, made this even more obvious. *The Drone* was another piece in which the protagonist did not find his place in the plain, industrious farming family of his upbringing.<sup>23</sup> Rather than exploring the tragic aspects of this struggle, as he had done in *The Turn of the Road*, Mayne now exploited its comic possibilities. A widowed farmer, John Murray, has supported his inert brother Daniel (the "drone") for the last twenty

20. *Irish Times*, 1 April 1907, 2.

21. *Freeman's Journal*, 30 March 1907, 8.

22. See, for example, the reviews in *Freeman's Journal*, 30 March 1907, 8; *Sinn Féin*, 6 April 1907, 3; *Leader*, 14 Nov. 1908, 306.

23. Rutherford Mayne, *The Drone* (Dublin: Maunsell, 1909). Reprinted in Zach, *The Selected Plays of Rutherford Mayne*.



years, hoping that someday, one of his inventions would bring them prosperity. The audience knows that Daniel's hard labor in his workshop consists of reading the paper, drinking and smoking. John and his daughter, however, choose to believe Daniel's dreams of inventions. They cannot admit that one of their kind could be lazy. Neighbor Sarah McMinn, her brother and an engineer come to find out more about Daniel's so-called inventions, and to arrange a match between Sarah and John. While Daniel makes a fool of himself explaining his "fan-bellows" to the engineer, Sarah and John passionately arrange the financial benefits of their match:

SARAH. I ran the house for Andy there twenty years and more, and I never once had to ask him for a pound. And what's more, I put some into the bank every quarter.

JOHN. Did you now? (*He looks at her in wondering admiration.*)

SARAH. Yes. And I cleared five pounds on butter last half year.

JOHN. (*with growing wonder*). Did you?

SARAH. And made a profit of ten pounds on eggs alone this year already.

JOHN. (*unable to contain himself any longer*). Sarah, will you marry me? (59).

John's parsimonious disposition, however, puts family loyalty at risk. Daniel and his niece threaten to leave John, but, in the end, the latter decides to break the profitable match: "I'd rather have your crack of a winter night as two hundred pounds in the bank and yon woman" (70). The first version of *The Drone* ended here, but for subsequent productions, Mayne added a third act in which Daniel's imagination triumphs over commercial impulses. Sarah's brother claims £1000 compensation for breaking the match, but Daniel offers a clever way out: he gives the McMinn family the rights and royalties for his totally useless fan-bellows, in return for waiving a court case. Like *The Turn of the Road*, Mayne's *The Drone* was not unambiguous in its portrayal of the artist in a hard-working environment. After a life of pretending to be a genius, Daniel's incompetence is painfully exposed. In the final

scene, the “drone” may turn his defeat into victory, but the original opposition between hard work and a life of leisure is not resolved. Daniel will continue to fool his family, and John will always be eager to make a profit. It is only between the opening and closing of the curtain that creative imagination triumphs over commerce.

Dublin audiences often found in the Ulster theater’s performances a more truthful representation of Irish life than in the Abbey Theatre plays.<sup>24</sup> The *Irish Times* even suggested that for the future of Irish drama “it has been left to Ulster to lead the way.”<sup>25</sup> Of particular interest is the fact that the *Freeman’s Journal* considered the Ulster Literary Theatre the perfect example of artistic decentralization. In parallel with other parts of Europe, the paper argued, regional cultural centers emerged in Ireland “to the positive benefit of the country as a whole.”<sup>26</sup> Greater cultural independence would generate artistic freedom and respect for regional differences. While Ulster had not often made itself heard on artistic matters (and many Ulster writers such as James Stephens, George Russell, and James Cousins had moved to Dublin to pursue a literary career), the Ulster Literary Theatre’s success underlined the imperative that Ireland could no longer forget the North.<sup>27</sup> The *Belfast Morning News*, too, saw the Ulster Literary Theatre as an important contributor to the foundation of “a truly national drama,” and as a powerful vehicle in connecting Ulster with the rest of Ireland:

Their fruit will yet be seen in the diffusion throughout the country of A BETTER RECOGNITION OF PECULIARITIES AND TRAITS for which racial and geographical considerations are responsible. Ulster will not lose her

24. See, for example, the *Leader*, 14 Nov. 1908, 306; *Irish Times*, 25 April 1908, 8.

25. *Irish Times*, 26 April 1908, 8.

26. *Freeman’s Journal*, 27 April 1908, 6.

27. This cultural exchange corresponded with a shift in nationalist politics, which saw a proliferation of nationalist organizations across Ulster and Ireland. Sinn Féin, for example, originated in 1905 out of an association between the Dublin-centered Cumann na nGaedheal and the Ulster Dungannon Clubs. The Dublin-based women’s magazine *The Lady of the House* also started in 1912 with “Moods and Modes in Belfast,” a series on art and life in the Ulster province. “An Irish paper that takes small note of Ulster people or Ulster doings cannot represent Ireland fairly or truly,” the editor argued in the first installment. It would give voice to the peculiarities of the North in order for all Irish people to better communicate with each other. See “Moods and Modes in Belfast,” in *The Lady of the House*, 15 March 1912, 34–36.

native characteristics by coming into closer contact with the rest of Ireland—she will keep them, but, at the same time, she will express and explain them. She will speak with her own voice—but all Ireland will understand it.<sup>28</sup> (original emphasis)

This idea of regionalism in the arts was thus attractive to nationalists and unionists, to the British and the Irish alike. A recognition of the “otherness” of Ulster facilitated communication between Ulster and the rest of Ireland, while allowing an identification of Ulster with Great Britain.<sup>29</sup> As such, the Ulster Literary Theatre could promote a flexible concept of the British Empire. In fact, in the same way as the *Free-man’s Journal* supported the concept of cultural decentralization from the perspective of a united Ireland, the liberal unionist paper *Northern Whig* made a case for decentralization from the point of view of the British Empire. “Decentralisation was inevitable if a living school of drama was to be established,” the paper stated. It quoted the well-known London critic William Archer who “saw in the formation of local companies, animated by ideals akin to those of the Ulster players, the real hope for the ultimate success of a national theatre.”<sup>30</sup> This national theater was, of course, the long-awaited *British National Theatre*, not the emerging Irish National Theatre at the Abbey.<sup>31</sup> The Ulster Literary Theatre’s simultaneous appropriation within an Irish nationalist narrative and a British perspective illustrates that regionalism was an astonishingly easy answer to the complexity of Irish cultural politics.

In 1908, Mayne also penned *The Troth*, an interesting play he wrote for William Mollison’s touring company, a group with whom the author had begun to act.<sup>32</sup> *The Troth* was darker in mood and more sen-

28. *Belfast Morning News*, 4 May 1908. Newspaper cutting in Rutherford Mayne Archive, Linen Hall Library, Belfast.

29. The same concept of regionalism allowed British critics to praise the distinctive achievements of the Abbey Theatre and recognize its benefits for British drama without suspecting any danger in its appeal to nationalist Ireland.

30. *Northern Whig*, 22 Nov. 1910, 3.

31. Although William Archer and Harley Granville Barker prepared a detailed scheme for a British National Theatre in 1907, the institution did not come into existence until 1963. Laurence Olivier was its first director.

32. Rutherford Mayne, *The Troth* (Dublin, Maunsell, 1909). Reprinted in Zach, *The Selected Plays of Rutherford Mayne*.

timental than Mayne's other plays, but its simplicity made the piece a success with audiences in London, where it was first performed, in Belfast and in Dublin.<sup>33</sup> In the pact forged between two starving tenants, one Catholic, the other Protestant, Mayne found another opportunity to weave political sensibilities that could appeal to either community into his play. The tenants set out to assassinate their landlord, promising that whoever gets caught will take the full blame, and whoever escapes will look after the other's wife. The Protestant tenant kills the landlord, but the Catholic one gets caught. The famine setting evoked one of Ireland's most tragic periods in history, and criticized poverty, evictions, and absentee landlords whose extortionate rents often served to settle their own gambling debts. Yet, by directing the tenants' anger toward the outrageous behavior of their landlord, Mayne did not accuse British landowners in general, nor did he take sides in the sectarian opposition. He circumvented political bias and subverted sectarian stereotypes by endowing a servant with Tory sympathies and a Protestant tenant with '98 rebel rhetoric. "Non-denominational solidarity" was Mayne's implied solution to the Irish problem of land distribution.<sup>34</sup>

In many ways, the Ulster Literary Theatre enjoyed a greater freedom to experiment than Yeats and Gregory's Dublin-based company did. Mayne's plays, and in particular those of Gerald MacNamara, might have caused offense had they been performed by a theater that claimed national status. The Ulster Literary Theatre's structural organization and artistic principles played a key role in facilitating this. First of all, the company kept its amateur status and made few artistic statements. This meant they rarely had to meet expectations set in return by critics and spectators. Second, most actors and playwrights remained anonymous or adopted pen-names. Rutherford Mayne, for example, was the pseudonym for Samuel Waddell, and behind Gerald MacNamara hid Harry Morrow. Although this was partly motivated by the stigma Protestantism attached to theater performance, it also kept the focus on the company rather than on individual personalities. In addition, it allowed the actors and playwrights to separate their art from their personal lives and from their politics. This outlook had benefits.

33. Bell, 34.

34. Zach, *The Selected Plays of Rutherford Mayne*, xv.

The Ulster Literary Theatre attracted all sorts of audiences. In its early days, these supporters were to be found mainly in nationalist circles. In June 1906, for example, the company staged an open-air production at the Gaelic League's Feis of the Glens at Cushendall.<sup>35</sup> Later that year, the company performed for a distinguished audience at Queen's College, while productions at the Ulster Minor Hall, Clarence Place Hall, and Exhibition Hall appealed to an upper-middle class—mostly Protestant—audience that could afford to spend a shilling on entertainment. In short, radical nationalists (Dungannon Clubs), moderate nationalists (Gaelic Leaguers, Dublin audiences), and unionists (a large section of upper middle-class Belfast) all could enjoy Rutherford Mayne's plays.

This wide-ranging appeal and freedom to experiment were vital conditions for the success of Gerald MacNamara (1865–1938). His witty, comic plays criticized rigid notions of religion and politics, most of the time without offending audiences. MacNamara grew up in Belfast city. Although a member of the nationalist Morrow family (his real name was Harry Morrow; MacNamara was his mother's surname), he did not let sectarian prejudice come in the way of artistic pursuits. On the contrary, he discovered in it a source of inspiration. In his family's business and at the Belfast School of Art, MacNamara acquired skills of drawing, decorating and design. In the Ulster Literary Theatre, he proved to be an excellent actor of comedy as well as a first-class playwright. Occasionally, MacNamara joined the Dublin-based actors of the Theatre of Ireland (1906–12). When this company was looking for new plays to extend its Irish repertoire he offered them a hilarious extravaganza of musical comedies, *The Spurious Sovereign* (1910). In 1909, the Ulster Literary Theatre also staged his satire on the Irish literary revival, *The Mist That Does Be On the Bog*, in Dublin's Abbey Theatre.

*Suzanne and the Sovereigns* (1907) was the first play MacNamara wrote for the Ulster Literary Theatre. It was a collaboration with Lewis Purcell—David Parkhill's pseudonym.<sup>36</sup> In this political extravaganza,

35. *Northern Whig*, 28 June 1906.

36. Gerald MacNamara and Lewis Purcell, *Suzanne and the Sovereigns*. Ms. reprinted in Kathleen Danaher, ed., *Journal of Irish Literature: The Plays of Gerald MacNamara* 18:2–3 (May–Sept. 1988), 24–55.

King William and King James are reduced to competitive adolescents who do not fight for control over Ireland, but for the hand of the beautiful maiden Suzanne. In the same way, the Battle of the Boyne and the Siege of Derry are reduced to childish games, and it is a craving for courtly love, not for political leadership, that sends William and James into battle. The outcomes of both the Battle of the Boyne and the Siege of Derry depend on wit and deceit, not on military skill. Introducing features from slapstick comedy and farce to melodrama, MacNamara and Purcell poked fun at nationalism and unionism alike. Orange Protestants are ridiculed for their glorification of King William, and when the island of Ireland is portrayed as a poisoned gift that nobody wants to accept, Irish nationalism becomes the focus of mockery.

With potentially volatile material, satire needs to maintain a fine balance between scorn and decorum—this is particularly crucial in the theater. Audiences do not experience the work of art in the private comforts of a reading room or in the anonymity of a museum. They may or may not give vent to their opinion during the performance. When they prepared the production in December 1907, the Ulster Literary Theatre artists had their doubts whether *Suzanne and the Sovereigns* struck the right balance. The disruptions caused by *The Playboy of the Western World* in the Abbey Theatre earlier that year had not gone unnoticed in Belfast.<sup>37</sup> If audiences shouted, booed and stamped their feet at an eccentric representation of Irishness, then a mockery of the Battle of Scarva, of the Battle of the Boyne, and of Irish national identity certainly had the potential to cause offense. The play, in fact, had its origins in an anti-loyalist Christmas sketch, performed in the Morrow family home at North Queen Street, Belfast.<sup>38</sup> Presenting this sketch as a public performance in Belfast, Mayne remembers, was “a daring venture.”<sup>39</sup>

A play that satirizes political history and national identities needs to be funny in order to be appreciated by all sections of society. The advance publicity described *Suzanne and the Sovereigns* as an “extra-

37. James Kilroy, *The ‘Playboy’ Riots* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1971), 58–62.

38. Bell, 29.

39. Rutherford Mayne, “Gerald MacNamara,” *Dublin Magazine* 13:2 (April–June 1938), 53.

vanganza” and the production coincided with the Christmas pantomime season. This encouraged the reception of MacNamara’s play as a piece of harmless entertainment. The broadsheet handed out to the audience also positioned the play within the sphere of folklore drama and street ballad singers, away from the modernist “problem play” and serious social criticism.<sup>40</sup> A drawing of King William at the top of this broadsheet, rocking on a wooden hobby horse, might have caused some offense in loyalist circles.<sup>41</sup> Any tension, however, was instantly deflated when the audience read the rhyming couplets of the “Ballad of the Play” on the broadsheet:

William Three. A hero-king,  
Brave and kind and good look-ing.  
James the Second. (For him see  
Note above on William Three.)

Before even a word of the play was heard, the Ulster Literary Theatre had already placed *Suzanne and the Sovereigns* in the sphere of banter. When the lights in the theater went down, the opening scene in the Stadhuis of Amsterdam confirmed these expectations. A love-struck court painter, Van Tootil, explains that he and King William are both infatuated with a mysterious woman whom they do not know, but when a deputation from Belfast arrives, the Dutchmen discover that this woman is Suzanne, the daughter of one of the delegates. Seventeenth and twentieth-century history are interspersed with the delegates’ reference to the present state of unrest in Belfast:

MASTER: Nothing but strikes.

MCCANN: And riots.

SIR JOSEPH: We, at the present time, have absolutely no reliable reigning ruler. (28)

40. A copy of the broadsheet is reproduced in Hobson’s *Ireland Yesterday and Tomorrow*, 6–7. It is not clear whether this broadsheet was also used for the first production: the copy in Hobson’s book is dated January 1909. The only newspaper that mentioned the broadsheet was the *Northern Whig*, 22 Nov. 1910, 3.

41. Belinda Loftus, *Mirrors: William III and Mother Ireland*. (Dundrum, Co. Down: Picture Press, 1990), 25.

The farcical mood continues: King James bribes the starving Lundy with a sandwich in order to settle the Siege of Derry. Van Tootil, smoking a cigarette, scares Lundy to death because he is “full of gunpowder” (41). Lundy switches back to the Williamite forces with a burlesque-style Oath of Allegiance. The actual confrontation between the two kings at the Boyne River takes place off-stage, but a messenger brings the news to the White Horse Inn, near the battlefield. At this point, the accumulation of witty jokes and comic references reaches a climax: King William is announced as champion of the “game” with 304 points to 291 for King James:

MCCANN: Well, you see, he [William] was to cross the river on a white horse and he didn't. It was a brown horse. He lost 15 points for that. The prayer brought him 27, and the fortunate escape 19, but then James was allowed 21 on that for being a good shot. Up till this James wasn't doing so bad at all, but the thing that killed him altogether was the running away. He lost 50 in the first place for running away at all, then 19 for exceeding the speed limit. But the road got that bad after a while that he couldn't go on. Then he lost 15 more for trying to run away and not being able. (49)

The portrayal of the monarchs in battle brought about in the house “one huge gargantuan gigantic giggle.”<sup>42</sup> The description of the Battle of the Boyne illustrates the second essential ingredient in making a satire successful across the sectarian divide: mockery needs to be even-handed. In the broadsheet, the “For him see/ Note above on William Three” placed the two kings on a par. In the rest of the play, too, MacNamara and Purcell transformed the Christmas sketch into a performance without prejudice. Loyalist and nationalist creeds were slated with equal vigor. If the balance had not been maintained, the complete reversal of Protestant iconography and cultural discourse could have been perceived as an insult. Loyalists in the audience may have taken offense at the ludicrous representation of the Siege of Derry, at the mocking picture of William's officers de Ginkel and Schomberg, or at the flawed personality of King William himself. However, for every blow in the loyalist camp MacNamara and Purcell

42. *Nomad's Weekly and Belfast Critic*, 16 Jan. 1909, 8.



prepared one for the nationalist. The Earl of Tyrconnell was no better than King William's officers, King James was as juvenile and foolish as King William, and Irish national identity as a whole became the object of scorn. When both kings fail to win Suzanne's love, Irish history becomes a sentimental utopia in which the monarchs forget all party differences and become truly brothers. William even offers Ireland to James as a gift. Turning back the clock of history to the eve of the Battle of the Boyne may have been every nationalist's wish, but the playwrights subvert these expectations once again into a travesty of Irish nationalism: King James refuses the gift because he has "enough trouble already" (53). Ireland is declined by all the officers, Williamite and Jacobite alike. In order to resolve the satirical burlesque, Mac-Namara and Purcell resort to melodrama first—"I have no friends left," weeps William, upon which James and William fall into each other's arms (53)—and then to the pantomime deus-ex-machina solution: a "fairy" appears to announce the end of the play and the beginning of the New Year.

At *Suzanne's* first production in the Exhibition Hall in December 1907, and at its revivals in January 1909 and November 1910 (the last one at the Belfast Opera House), newspapers were full of praise for the authors' representation "without bias and without a spice of malice."<sup>43</sup> The *Northern Whig* critic denied that the play had a political meaning: "The world is a quaint place, but if it contains a partisan who sees anything unseemly in 'Suzanne' he must be one of a type who in 'Alice in Wonderland' would find a deep political meaning in 'You are old, Father William,' and spy high treason in the mad tea party."<sup>44</sup> Even the *Belfast News-Letter* pointed out that the audience was "kept in roars of laughter," and that nothing in the play "should be taken seriously."<sup>45</sup>

By separating its art from its politics, the Ulster Literary Theatre managed to turn the stage into an isolated fictional space that gave its artists the freedom to criticize religious and political doctrines in Ireland. None of the critics pointed out that the fairy did not resolve the Irish question at the end of the play. In fact, outside the "safe" area of

43. *Evening Telegraph*, 30 Dec. 1907. Newspaper cutting in Rutherford Mayne Archive, Linen Hall Library, Belfast.

44. *Northern Whig*, 27 Dec. 1907, 5.

45. *Belfast News-Letter*, 12 Jan. 1909, 9.

the theater, sectarian opposition intensified over the Home Rule issue. After the General Election of 1910, the Irish Parliamentary Party was in a strong position to push the Irish Home Rule Bill through the Westminster parliament. The Parliamentary Act of 1911 removed the veto power of the House of Lords so the passage of the Home Rule Bill seemed inevitable. Resistance from Northern Irish Protestants, however, grew more forceful. Confrontation tactics such as the establishment of the Ulster Volunteer Force, the anti-Home Rule declaration of the Solemn League and Covenant, and the Larne Gun Running steadily galvanized the Ulster unionists' opposition to any form of separation from Britain.<sup>46</sup>

In this context, did the humor of *Suzanne and the Sovereigns* have a cathartic effect, or was the satire so "light" as to preclude serious political engagement? To some extent, the play did raise an awareness of the way in which cultural identities become stereotypes, but the reviews illustrate that *Suzanne* did not have the effect one could expect from good satire. The play did not make the audience, nor the critics, "think." Take, for example, the following quotation from the *Northern Whig*. On the day after its favorable review of *Suzanne and the Sovereigns* in November 1910, in which the reviewer noted that "those who do not laugh from curtain to curtain are not to be congratulated on their sense of humour,"<sup>47</sup> the paper published a bleak anti-Home Rule editorial:

Abundant and gratifying are the indications that, by the spirit in which [*the Ulster men*] have withstood all the attempts that have been made to deprive them of their birthright as citizens of the Empire, and to subject them to a regime under which their civil and religious liberties would be extinguished, the Unionists of Ulster and of Ireland are animated no less resolutely than of old, and that, upheld by glorious memories of sacrifice, and struggle, and victory, Ulster will once more put on record before the world her passionate loyalty to the Imperial connection, under which this province has served herself heir to the rewards of industry and freedom. Assuredly Ulster will fight.<sup>48</sup>

46. Robert Kee, *Ireland: A History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980. Reprint. London: Abacus, 1995), 145–47.

47. *Northern Whig*, 22 Nov. 1910, 3.

48. *Northern Whig*, 23 Nov. 1910, 6.

The *Northern Whig* invoked the loyalist “memories of sacrifice, and struggle, and victory,” of which the Battle of the Boyne was one of the most powerful, in order to oppose the introduction of Home Rule. The night before in the theater, the same memories provided harmless merriment from curtain to curtain.

Revivals of *Suzanne* provide a good measure for the spectators’ changing ability for self-reflexivity. At a 1914 revival of *Suzanne and the Sovereigns* at the Belfast Opera House, the *Sinn Féin* reviewer regretted that the comic spirit of the original was “sadly lacking.” The apparently revised production exhibited “an obvious descent from the sublimely comic to the ridiculous, a sacrifice of wit to the commonplace joke-mongering of the Commercial Theatre.”<sup>49</sup> A republican journal would, of course, be extremely sensitive to the growing extremism of unionist ideology during the years leading up to World War I. As such, the *Sinn Féin* critic might have found the sectarian banter painful rather than funny. The Belfast-based unionist press, however, received the “willfully grotesque” humor more wholeheartedly,<sup>50</sup> and praised the fact that “all its apparent recklessness is marked by the rarest discretion and good temper.”<sup>51</sup>

A 1916 revival in Dublin proved again to be very successful, despite the recent memories of the Easter Rebellion. The Ulster players hired the Gaiety Theatre for a full week in November of that year and even held a special performance for “a number of wounded soldiers” under the patronage of the Lord Lieutenant.<sup>52</sup> The location of the Ulster company’s production within the context of World War I illustrates the war’s level of influence on Irish mainstream opinion and cultural life. At least three-quarters of every newspaper edition was devoted to war coverage on the continent and to its political and social impact at home. Unionists as well as a large number of nationalists joined the British forces on the European continent. Although they did so for different reasons, their joint efforts seemed to reduce North–South tensions and to open up opportunities for some kind of rapprochement.

49. *Sinn Féin*, 14 March 1914, 2.

50. *Belfast News-Letter*, 3 March 1914, 3.

51. *Northern Whig*, 3 March 1914, 9.

52. Advertisement in all Dublin papers, e.g., *Dublin Evening Mail*, 1 Dec. 1916, 2. On that particular evening, the Ulster company staged Mayne’s *The Turn of the Road* and MacNamara’s *Thompson in Tír-na-nÓg*.

By playing for wounded members of the army, the Ulster company indirectly endorsed Irish participation with the allied forces—an endorsement that the Gaiety spectators did not seem to criticize. Possibly, the outbreak of World War I had more impact on this audience’s horizon of expectations than the Easter Rising had, although the response of Irish nationalists to the 1916 Rising and the timing of their growing support for republicanism is “a matter still in debate.”<sup>53</sup> On the occasion of the 1916 revival of *Suzanne and the Sovereigns*, the *Irish Times* supported the play’s potential to reconcile Irish opposition. “If the Government would send the Ulster players on tour with this clever piece through Ireland,” the critic argued, “they might perhaps solve the Irish question more easily for ‘Suzanne and the Sovereigns’ provokes Orange and Green to laugh heartily at themselves and each other.”<sup>54</sup> The climate for political satire changed again after World War I. Purcell’s and MacNamara’s play was never again produced on a major Irish stage. The success of the Sinn Féin party, the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1921, ongoing sectarian violence, and increased anxiety associated with loyalist iconography and republican identity made a production of the play a greater risk, both north and south of the new border. No further productions of the play could be traced.

MacNamara’s *Thompson in Tír-na-nÓg* enjoyed more long-term success after it was first performed at the Belfast Opera House in December 1912.<sup>55</sup> The play introduces the audience to legendary heroes in *Tír na nÓg*, the Land of Eternal Youth. One day, Finn MacCumhail, Cuchulain, Queen Maeve and Grania discover they have lost their ability to speak Irish. A spell has been cast over everyone replacing Irish by English, “the bark of dogs,” because a newly arrived stranger refuses to

53. Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, “Nationalist Ireland, 1912–1922. Aspects of Continuity and Change” in Peter Collins, ed., *Nationalism and Unionism: Conflict in Ireland, 1885–1921* (Belfast: Queen’s University Press, 1994), 64. Ó Tuathaigh points out that censorship at the time made reliable information very scarce, while rumors colored many of the accounts of the events.

54. *Irish Times*, 1 Dec. 1916, 6.

55. Gerald MacNamara, *Thompson in Tír-na-nÓg* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1912). According to MacNamara’s nephew, the play was originally written at the request of the Gaelic League. MacNamara, however, did not spare the Gaelic Revival from satire, and rumor has it that the League rejected his piece (Bell, 43).

speaking Irish (9). His name is Thompson, a staunch unionist and victim of the Battle of Scarva. The legendary heroes assume that Thompson's heroic act has earned him eternal life in *Tír na nÓg*. Thompson, however, is convinced he is in a lunatic asylum:

CUCHULAIN: O, how I fought for Ulster. (*excitedly.*) When the great battle fury was on me.

THOMPSON: Now don't get excited, Mister—I know what the battle fury is—I've had it often—every Twelfth—and Thirteenth.

CUCHULAIN: Whose hosts lay dead and bleeding at my feet.

THOMPSON: Now if you keep talkin' like that, they'll never let ye out. (19)

The absurd presentation of Irish heroic history is followed by a swipe at loyalist celebrations. This sets a dynamic that is sustained throughout the play, avoiding partisanship while maintaining a satirical impact. Home Rule, too, is the object of scorn: when Thompson tries to discuss the topic with Cuchulain, the latter counters his comments with the question, "Are you too lazy to rule yourselves?" Ulster unionists, then, are shown to be ignorant of Irish history:

KING: Do you know aught of your country's history save that of this Battle of the Boyne?

THOMPSON: I know that King Charles was beheaded.

KING: Was Charles an Irishman?

THOMPSON: No.

KING: What more do you know?

THOMPSON: I know that King Henry VIII was a 'Roman' till he was converted. (33)

After criticism of the British school system in Ireland, the play ridicules Gaelic League propaganda when Thompson's "un-heroic" battle is

discovered: "Ach, don't burn me," he cries out, "and I'll learn Gaelic, and I'll make the children learn it—I will sowl [sic], and I have a parrot at home that my uncle brought from foreign parts; it can only whistle 'Dolly's Brae,' but be heavens I'll learn it [in] Gaelic, too." (36).

No one portrayed MacNamara as a Protestant bigot or a Fenian lout, but the *Belfast News-Letter* suggested that the humor in *Thompson in Tir-na-nÓg* verged on provocation: "So long as the audience accept Mr. MacNamara's bona fides they will be kept in good humour, but one trembles to think what they might say if they imagined that beneath his levity there was some sinister motive. Which side would be the first to cry out one could not even venture to predict."<sup>56</sup> The climate in which MacNamara presented his satire certainly did not lend itself to blameless lampooning. The Solemn League and Covenant, an anti-Home Rule declaration signed by 25,000 Ulster unionists two and a half months before the premiere of MacNamara's play, increased political tensions in Ulster.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, MacNamara's level-handed method of caricaturing in *Thompson in Tir-na-nÓg* gave him the freedom to strike blows and release the pressure within the audience.

*Thompson in Tir-na-nÓg*'s effectiveness was not limited to 1912; it was brought back through numerous revivals. In December 1917, for example, when MacNamara's play was staged at the Gaiety Theatre, a Dublin critic commented:

Where others who have tried the same course move as gingerly as a ship in a mine-field, Mr Macnamara drives riotously ahead, with a gale of laughter from his victims filling the sails of his craft.

It is not that he deals half-hearted blows. Few of his fellows wield a sharper sword or can drive home such deadly thrusts. But there is never malice in his wit, and, above all—and we imagine this enables him to take risks that with anybody else would provoke a riot—he never lectures his audience from Olympian heights. If Mr Macnamara has a fault it is that he stuffs his play too full of good things.<sup>58</sup>

56. *Belfast News-Letter*, 10 Dec. 1912, 4.

57. Roy Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600–1972* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 1988), 466–69.

58. Quoted in Bell, 48.

The Ulster Literary Theatre, and in particular the plays of Gerald MacNamara, Lewis Purcell and Rutherford Mayne, illustrated that a theater could engage issues of political or social partisanship and still appeal to the entire nation. The theater's ability to negotiate contentious issues without offending either side can also be detected in other plays in its repertoire: Lewis Purcell's short play about land reform, *The Enthusiast* (1904), demonstrates that the chief obstacles for economic progress are rooted in sectarian opposition. In *The Pagan* (1907), the author offers Protestants an opportunity to align themselves with the Gaelic revival by endowing a Celtic warrior with typically Protestant ideals of self-confidence and diligence.<sup>59</sup> A lesser known playwright, William Paul, contributed to the Ulster Literary Theatre's repertoire in 1912 with his even-handed treatment of sectarian opposition entitled *Sweeping the Country*.<sup>60</sup> Gerald MacNamara continued to ridicule unionist fanaticism in plays such as *No Surrender!* but the satirical tone became less impartial.<sup>61</sup>

The Abbey Theatre directors favored an approach to literary drama that was *apolitical*—"outside all the political questions that divide us."<sup>62</sup> In contrast, many of the Ulster plays can be considered *un-political*. The Ulster playwrights tackled sectarian differences from a position that supported neither Protestant nor Catholic, neither unionist nor nationalist opinion. By encompassing the political arena, the Ulster Literary Theatre stood in marked contrast to the Abbey company, which struggled to exclude from its theater "the inspiring turmoil of the nation in the streets."<sup>63</sup> The Ulster Literary Theatre showed that a theater cannot and should not function in a political vacuum. For them, regionalism was the best solution to cope with political and religious differences. This perspective anticipates the regionalism advocated by a number of Ulster artists in the 1940s and '50s. Writers such as John Hewitt and Sam Hanna Bell adopted this regionalist ethos as a means of promoting local culture and defining

59. Lewis Purcell, *The Enthusiast* (*Uladh*, May 1905, 29–32) and *The Pagan* (Dublin: Maunsel, 1907).

60. The play was never published.

61. Lyons, 46–47.

62. Letter to the Guarantors, qtd. in Gregory, 20.

63. Frazier, 240.

their identity.<sup>64</sup> As such, Hewitt's famous 1947 essay "Regionalism: the last chance" went in against the contemporary unionist idea of culture in the North.<sup>65</sup> Sam Hanna Bell, a great admirer of the Ulster Literary Theatre, was similarly concerned with a unique Northern identity. The Ulster population's diversity ought to be celebrated, not regretted, he argued. The foundation of a Northern cultural journal *Lagan* in 1943, his novel *December Bride* (1951), and his collection of folk stories for the BBC radio series "Fairy Faith" were all inspired by the need to define Ulster as a separate region with its own unique identity.<sup>66</sup> In the work of the Ulster playwrights and actors during the previous decades, Bell recognized a unique approach of open-mindedness and genial banter, which allowed them to be truthful to their own integrity, and to celebrate the nation in its diversity.

64. For a useful discussion of the dissenting Protestant voices of the 1940s and '50s, see the final chapter of Gillian MacIntosh, *The Force of Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999), 180–219.

65. John Hewitt, "Regionalism: the last chance," *Northman*, 1947. Reprinted in Tom Clyde, ed., *Ancestral Voices: the Selected Prose of John Hewitt* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1987), 125.

66. MacIntosh, 194–95.