Arrival Cities

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Writing on art and exile, Linda Nochlin noted that throughout art history mobility has been an intrinsic part of artistic careers, as artists have often

[...] been obliged to travel, to leave their native land, in order to learn their trade. At one time, the trip to Rome was required, or a study-voyage to Italy; at other times and under special circumstances, it might be Munich or Spain or Holland, or even North Africa; more recently, Paris was where one went to learn how to be an artist [...] (Nochlin 1996, 318)

Indeed, this pattern of international training and travel has been central to the development of art in Ireland, leading to an identification of the country as a place where artists left rather than as a site of arrival. More recently, scholars have sought to counter this prevailing narrative, focusing, for example, on visiting artists in Ireland during the 18th and 19th centuries (McGee 2014; Figgis 2016). In contrast to these periods of temporary migration, usually made in pursuit of pecuniary opportunity, the history of the White Stag Group is more deeply connected to a different form of artistic mobility: that is, of temporary exile during a period of conflict. Formed in London in 1935 by Basil Rakoczi and Kenneth Hall, the White Stag Group sought to bring together “notions of subjectivity and psychoanalysis in art” (Kissane 2014, 487). The two artists had come up with the name of the group, however Hall later commented that although it did not “signify much”, it was a useful way for the disparate band of artists to be recognised in the press (Kennedy 2005, 23). The collaboration between the two artists had emerged out of a previous and continuing project of Rakoczi’s, the School of Creative Psychology, founded in 1933 with Herbert Ingouville Williams. Both groups operated out of Rakoczi’s home at 8 Fitzroy Street, London. However, in August 1939, the three men travelled by train and boat (along with Rakoczi’s son of whom he had sole custody) to County Galway on the west coast of Ireland (fig.1). Hall later recalled that:
We met in Galway and as we were getting away from the war we would get away from it and be in the country away from it then in those days we did not know where the war was or what it might be in Ireland any time and any place might be bombed so Benny looked at a map for Connemara […] and we would get away from the war […] on Killary Bay. (Kennedy 2005, 19)

Fig. 1: Kenneth Hall, *Houses on Aran*, undated, oil on board, private collection (Image Courtesy of Whyte’s, Dublin).

As pacifists, all three were anxious to avoid conscription into the army, and neutral Ireland offered a place of sanctuary while also being within easy reach of Britain. Although not exiled in a legal sense, Hall at least feared conscription into the army (Kennedy 2005, 19) and Rakoczi probably wanted to raise his son away from the capital city of a country at war: this was a self-imposed and temporary exile, a purposeful decision to retreat from the unfolding conflict ensuring that they could continue their endeavours in art and psychoanalysis. While the activities and critical reception of the White Stag Group have been documented by previous scholars, to date there has been little consideration of the influence that the Group had on the cultural and artistic topography of Dublin. This essay will examine the impact of the White Stag Group on the urban environment of Dublin in the 1940s, illustrating how it contributed to the establishment of a new artistic neighbourhood.
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in the city through a series of exhibitions and social events which would have a lasting effect on the city’s cultural life, as well as outlining how it influenced other artists working in the city (most of whom had little previous exposure to subjects and concepts explored by the Group). To further contextualise the presence of the White Stag Group in Dublin, this essay will also offer a brief overview of the political cultural environment of Ireland in 1939–1945.

Ireland in the 1930s and 1940s: Independence, Neutrality and Artistic Culture

After the tumultuous years of 1916–1923 in which Ireland sought to become a sovereign, independent state, the 1930s marked a period of further nation-building, witnessing the consolidation of a sense of national identity and unity as well as the continuation of diplomatic and political exertions to win further concessions from Britain. The Irish Free State, which had come into being with the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in December 1921, was a dominion of the British Empire with the final secession taking place only in March 1949 with the enactment of the Republic of Ireland Act (1948). Partition, which separated the 26-county (and predominantly nationalist) Irish Free State from the six-county and predominantly unionist Northern Ireland, was a continued source of political trouble throughout the 1930s, a fact consolidated by the declaration of war by Britain in September 1939. As part of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland was an active participant in the conflict, while (in what was largely seen as an active statement of its sovereignty) Ireland remained neutral. Of course, given its proximity to Britain and its economic dependence on the larger island, life in Ireland changed rapidly: a state of emergency was declared, and the passage of the Emergency Powers Act (1939) enacted new governmental powers, with those relating to censorship particularly relevant for cultural life.

As a result of this, the period of the war was known, and remains known, as ‘The Emergency’: a somewhat quaint expression which largely elides the reality of daily life in Ireland in the 1939–1945 period, which included heavy economic and social deprivation. Despite the state’s neutrality, Irish people did significantly contribute to the British war effort, largely through outward migration, with around 200,000 people leaving Ireland to fill labour requirements in Britain or to join the military. The economic necessity of this migration contrasts strongly with the arrival of the White Stag Group in Ireland; however, as historian Philip Ollerenshaw has recently noted, there was something of a contradiction at play in wartime Ireland:
From a cultural perspective, there is no doubt that the Emergency brought a sense of enforced isolation, but it also fostered initiatives to palliate that isolation, even if several of these did not survive long into the postwar period. The significance of refugees, conscientious objectors, tourists, artists, musicians and others who contributed to a cosmopolitan atmosphere during the Emergency is now widely appreciated. (Ollerenshaw 2018, 354–355)

Cultural life in Dublin experienced an unexpected flourishing during the war years. Articles about the city in the British press gave an overriding impression that Dublin was a rare site of conspicuous consumption and luxury, marvelling at the literal brightness of Dublin (there were only moderate blackout restrictions) and the availability of good food, before rationing was introduced in 1942. Newspapers and magazines advertised a wide selection of drinks, from Guinness to pink gin, as well as evenings out at the cinema, theatre or at a dance, weekend excursions around Dublin bay, or the golf links (Wills 2008, 6). As Clair Wills notes, these evocations both ignored the social deprivation experienced by many of the city’s less fortunate inhabitants and were also “tinged with a fairy-tale sense of unreality, as if Ireland were a fantasy refuge from the harsh outside world, a place where moral backsliding could be indulged” (Wills 2008, 6). Although speculative, it is possible that this reputation influenced Hall and Rakoczi’s decision to travel to Dublin in 1940, and perhaps influenced the decision of the other artists who later joined them there from Britain and further afield.

The conditions for making, exhibiting and selling art in Ireland during the 1930s and 1940s were limited by the general economic circumstances of the period and, added to this, debates over the purpose of art continued to dominate cultural circles. Artists were often caught between their natural connection to a broad European conversation around the form and direction of artistic practice and the political expectation that art in Free State Ireland would reflect the ideals of the nation and that work by Irish artists would be recognisably ‘Irish’ in both its form and subject matter (Kennedy 2016, 155–156). This tendency was best expressed through representational, academic painting, for example the painting of Seán Keating which, through the late 1910s and 1920s, had tracked the ambitions of the emergent Irish state, whether through tacit expressions of support for violent action, the disillusionment created by continual warfare – actual, cultural, and psychological – and the ultimate hope found in large-scale industrial projects, which pointed to a promising future for a new, independent Ireland (O’Connor 2013).
In contrast to this, a separate strand of visual art continued to engage with continental modernism, particularly that of French analytical Cubism which had been influential in Ireland from the early 1920s. Engagement with the various modern-‘isms’ had been largely reliant on artists travelling from Ireland, who would return to impart new knowledge to those not in a position to travel (Halsall 2014, 297–299), rather than through inward migration. For example, the London and Paris trained Mainie Jellett, whose Cubist paintings had received a mixed reaction in 1920s Dublin, spent much of her time in the 1930s and 1940s lecturing and teaching Irish audiences about developments in modern painting (Coulter 2014b, 242–244).

Reasonably frequent loan exhibitions from the early 20th century onwards had familiarised the art-going Dublin public with impressionism, post-impressionism and cubism, but not with the more radical experimentation of, say, Dadaism or Constructivism (Marshall 2014b, 159–160). The relationship between this European-centred outlook and the aims of the national cultural revival was often fractious: proponents of the former, outward-looking approach sought to position Ireland as a contributor to European culture, with its art and literature both shaped by and contributing to a wider cultural conversation. Against this, others argued that art in Ireland should draw its inspiration solely from the life and culture of the island itself, creating a national school of painting that was seemingly unique in its subject matter, utterly identifiable as Irish (Griffith 2017, 111–112).

The Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA) remained the foremost institution connected with visual art in Ireland: it provided professional recognition for artists in Ireland and an annual exhibition akin to those at the Royal Academy, London, and the Royal Scottish Academy, Edinburgh, with which the RHA maintained close links. During the 1940s the domination of the RHA was challenged by the emergence of another annual exhibition: the Irish Exhibition of Living Art (IELA), established by a group of artists in Ireland who sought to present more modernist work (Coulter 2014a, 235–239). There was a natural alliance between the IELA and the White Stag Group, and many of the émigré artists associated with Rakoczi and Hall contributed to the IELA from 1943 onwards. Commercial galleries were slow to establish in Ireland, reflecting the sluggish nature of the art market more generally: several frame makers and restorers, such as Gorry, Combridge and Egan, had nurtured small, sometimes radical salons (O’Connor 2013, 156–158), and the establishment of the Waddington Gallery in 1928 represented a new departure for art in Ireland. Waddington cultivated established and emerging artists, often hosting exhibitions in the larger artistic centres of London and New York where there was a large Irish diasporic community (Marshall 2014a, 77; Eckett 2014, 16–17).
Despite this challenging economic and cultural environment, recent scholarship has shown how, in Dublin at least, there was some sense of cultural freedom and experimentation (Allen 2006, 186). In the 1930s, one artist described the 1920s and 1930s as “the jazz age and […] People were in a joyous mood and everywhere cabarets and dance halls were springing up” (Anonymous 1931, n.p). Michael MacLiammoir further recalled how “the Dublin ’twenties pursued their wild way, with saxophones ever waxing and skirts ever waning and Toto Cogley’s cabaret […] they discussed over their whiskey the merits of Joyce and Picasso and felt they really were nearer to the soul of things” (MacLiammoir 1932, 11). Although somewhat beleaguered by 1939, this artistic fringe in the city was poised and ready to be reinvigorated by the White Stag Group in exile.

**Arrival City: The White Stag Group comes to Dublin**

In March 1940 Rakoczi took rooms at 34 Lower Baggot Street, located to the south of Dublin city centre. Once settled, he established a Dublin branch of the School of Creative Psychology there and made it the temporary home of the White Stag Group. Hall rented a flat at 30 Upper Mount Street, located roughly a block away from Baggot Street. An undated watercolour by Hall may depict his Mount Street studio (fig. 2): loosely painted in a representational and illustrative style, it shows a bright and cheerful interior space filled with paintings, and a tall easel. A further study, part of a series of watercolours showing the back of a male nude (perhaps a self-portrait), is also suggestive of the artist’s living arrangements in Dublin (fig. 3), but introduces a sense of introspection that becomes more fully realised in his later subjective paintings. The trio were soon joined by several other artists seeking to escape the reaches of the war, many of whom had pre-war links to the White Stag Group, the School of Creative Psychology or London art circles more generally. Nick Nicholls (1914–1991), an English-born painter, had settled in Dublin in June 1939, along with French artist Georgette Rondel (c.1915–1942) and her German husband, René Buhler: this trio had been frequenters of the Fitzroy Street studio, and had previously travelled together in Sweden. During her time in Dublin, Rondel held two exhibitions at the Victor Waddington Galleries, with many of the works depicting scenes from around the city (fig. 4). This scene, entitled *Baggot Lane towards Government Buildings*, takes its view from the laneway located close to the street where Rakoczi was based, with the style and colouring echoing one critic’s praise for her “generous colour compositions” (Anonymous 1941, 4). In June 1940, the Canadian sculptor Jocelyn Chewett (1906–1979) and her Scottish husband Stephen Gilbert (1910–2007) relocated from London, remaining in Dublin until
June 1945. From 1914 Chewett had lived in London with her family and trained in Paris before establishing her career in London following her marriage in 1935. Other émigrés included Phyllis Hayward (1903–1985), a painter with an interest in psychology who had met Rakoci and Hall in the 1930s.

Fig. 2: Kenneth Hall, *Studio Interior*, undated, watercolour, pen and ink, private collection (Image Courtesy of Whyte’s, Dublin).

Fig. 3: Kenneth Hall, *Nude in a Bedroom*, undated, watercolour, private collection (Image Courtesy of Adam’s, Dublin).
The first official exhibition of the White Stag Group in Dublin was held in Rakoczi's flat in April 1940. Hall was surprised by the number of people who attended the exhibition opening, writing to his friend, the London gallerist Lucy Carrington Wertheim (1882–1971), that “all Dublin seems to have heard of it and to be interested and the keenness about all artistic matters is certainly extraordinary to one used to London apathy” (Kennedy 2005, 21). The exhibition also included work by the Hungarian-French painter Endre Rozsda (1913–1999), whom Rakoczi had known earlier in the 1930s, and Elizabeth Ormsby, who briefly visited Dublin from London around April 1940. Works by two Irish artists were included in this exhibition: Mainie Jellett, who became an important local supporter of the Group's activities, and Patricia Wallace (1912–1973), a landscape and portrait painter who also worked as a theatre designer. A second exhibition was held in Rakoczi's home in June 1940, and over the course of the summer months the group began to plan a larger exhibition of works of White Stag and other selected artists at the
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Dublin Painters’ Gallery. However, the wartime restrictions on the movement of goods meant that this had to be deferred until the following year, demonstrating in a very real way how the Emergency impacted on cultural life (Kennedy 2005, 23). Undeterred, the group instead opted to hold a scaled down version of the exhibition at Hall’s Mount Street flat. A percentage of the exhibition admission fees and commission went directly to the artist, alleviating in a small way the artist’s dire financial circumstances.

Throughout 1941, the White Stag Group held exhibitions and events at Hall’s address, establishing it as an important centre for artistic discourse, activity and sociability in Dublin. The programme included life classes, lecture series and public recitals of gramophone records, all of which were advertised in *Commentary*, an art journal cum ‘little magazine’, produced by Sean Dorman, who also ran the Contemporary Picture Galleries at 113 Lower Baggot Street. The journal now offers an important insight into the cultural life of the city described by Ollerenshaw and Wills: in addition to a monthly article by Rakoczi over the course of 1941 and 1942, *Commentary* also ran articles on Dublin theatre (chiefly relating to the Gate Theatre which had been established by Hilton Edwards and Michael MacLiammor and which represented the pinnacle of avant-garde theatre in 1940s Dublin) and on the nascent Irish Ballet company and literary events. Although *Commentary* was made for, and certainly read by, those already open to the aims and ambitions of the White Stag Group, it was important in establishing the group in Dublin and further expands our view of the interdisciplinary cultural context in which it was operating. It speaks to a broader shift through the 1940s which, despite the constrained economic and political circumstances, sought to create new, modernist work in a variety of art forms, all of which challenged the traditional view of Irish art and culture.

In February 1942, the Group moved its premises to 6 Lower Baggot Street, which would be its final location in Dublin. In operation until 1946, this was the location for all the Group’s exhibitions, including solo or two-person shows, as well as lectures and soirees. The pinnacle of the White Stag Group’s Irish career came in 1944, when the *Exhibition of Subjective Art* ran from 4–22 January (Kennedy 2011, 188–190). The exhibition itself featured work by several of the artists associated with the White Stag Group, including Rakoczi, Hall, Chewett, Nicholls and Gilbert, as well as Irish recruits to the cause of subjective art, Thurloe Conolly, Patrick Scott and Doreen Vanston. Hall’s *Head with a Red Eye* is characteristic of the type of work he displayed at the exhibition and shows a marked stylistic change from the watercolours of Aran and his studio. The exhibition was to have been opened by the influential British art critic, Herbert Read; however a travel permit was not granted for him to travel to Ireland for the event. In lieu of this, the critic’s notes
were read to the assembled crowd, with the *Irish Times* quoting Read’s statement that “in Dublin one rejoices to find that not only has art found secure shelter, but even fresh vigour”, and that the painting and sculpture exhibited “seem to me to belong to the main stream of European culture” (Quidnunc 1944, 3). Two lectures were also held to expand on the themes of the exhibition: Read was to have delivered the first, so once again his notes were read in his absence, and the second was given by John Hewitt (1907–1987), the Belfast poet, art critic and curator. In contrast to previous events, these lectures were not held in the White Stag Group’s own gallery or premises; rather they were delivered in The Country Shop, at 23 St Stephen’s Green. Founded in 1930 by Muriel Gahan of the Irish Countrywomen’s Association, the Country Shop was established to promote Irish crafts and home produce, as well as for the display of fine art. Jellett had designed the signage for the shop and was involved in advising Gahan on the artistic programme: the presence of the White Stag Group is yet further illustrative of the extent to which they had become a central fixture in Dublin’s artistic firmament.

**Dublin’s Cultural Topography: The Effect of the White Stag Group**

When Rakoci and Hall arrived in Dublin in March 1940, the artistic topography of the city had changed little since the early 19th century (fig. 5). The nation’s key cultural institutions, which included the National Library of Ireland, National Museum of Ireland and the National Gallery of Ireland, remained in situ in their purpose-built 19th century structures in a central block flanking Kildare Street to the west and Merrion Square to the east. The city’s main art school, the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art, later the National College of Art, was also located here. Forming a sort of campus, the institutions were gathered around Leinster House, built in the 18th century as a private home, but given over in the 19th century to the Royal Dublin Society, which worked to promote agriculture, art and industry in Ireland. However, in 1922 the building became the home of the Irish parliament, Dáil Éireann, placing the library, museums and art school near the centre of political power. Allied to this, the chief commercial galleries mentioned earlier in this chapter were also located in this district of the city, forming a cultural hub around Stephen’s Green and its adjacent shopping streets.
Street directories for Baggot Street and Upper Mount Street suggest that these stretches of the city made for unlikely venues for an artistic enterprise. For example, the ground floor unit of 34 Lower Baggot Street was occupied by Dr Samuel Poznansky, an osteopath, while neighbouring buildings housed a range of physicians, dentists, bicycle shops and grocers. Upper Mount Street was more residential, with some small business and political offices, as well as a hotel and nursing home: Hall did also have an interesting neighbour at number 24, where the Ling Gymnasium and Swedish Institute were located. A more artistic neighbour could be found at number 42, which housed the Academy of Christian Art and was also where George Furlong, the Director of the National Gallery of Ireland, rented a flat. The locations of the Group’s residence/gallery spaces mark a notable eastern shift in Dublin’s cultural life through the 1940s which would continue into the 1950s. While the national and commercial galleries remained in the city centre, the area around Baggot Street became increasingly colonised by artists and writers through these decades, receiving the designation ‘Baggotonia’ as a mark of its emergence as a distinct neighbourhood: other notable enterprises in the area included the Pike Theatre, a short-lived venture known for presenting avant-garde material. The area provided a mix of residential and social spaces,
including a well-known row of public houses which through the 1950s became
strongly associated with the poet, Patrick Kavanagh.

By presenting its exhibitions in dual-purpose residential spaces, the White Stag
Group broke with the gallery hire system that prevailed elsewhere in the city, but
reports show that it also offered something new in the way that art was displayed
in Dublin. A preview article in *Commentary* described how the galleries at 6 Lower
Baggot Street had “white walls and gay curtains of striped blue and white [to]
form a fitting background for the post-surrealistic work, initiated by Picasso and
Matisse, and developed in Paris, London and Dublin by the painters of the White
Stag Group along their own lines” (Anonymous 1942, 15). In 1943, the *Irish Times*
further commented that “many of our galleries and their exhibitors could learn
a lot about how to mount an exhibition from the exhibition opened last Friday
at 6 Lower Baggot street, by five members of the White Stag group […] . Frames,
handing, and spacing are all admirably done.” Unfortunately, however, that was
the extent of the critics’ praise, as they also noted that “the pictures themselves
[…] are mostly products of that dream vision in which it is difficult to follow the
artists. Some of them seem to be the products of tortured minds, but without
the clarity and sharpness which characterise undoubted works of art by tortured
minds” (Anonymous 1943, 2).

Among the publicly held archives for the White Stag Group there also appears a
suggestion of another part of Dublin’s topography: that of its gay subculture during
the war years. On the reverse of an invitation for the October 1940 exhibition, a
previous owner (unfortunately unknown) has reused the paper to type out a few
lines of poetry about attending at White Stag Group event in Upper Mount Street.
The poet does not seem to have particularly enjoyed his evening lecture – perhaps
that advertised on the reverse, “Since Cubism” by Rakoczi – closing with the line
“Of these they talked; Would that I might have walked!” However, it is the middle
section of the ditty that is the most intriguing as it reads: “Euston Road has come
to town. Soho? On no, Merely Homo.” While homosexuality was illegal in Ireland
until 1993, the limited evidence suggests that there was an active scene in Dublin
throughout the earlier part of the 20th century: although, as Diarmaid Ferriter
notes, this is often revealed only in police reports (Ferriter 2009, 163). In the
1940s, middle-class cultural circles seem to have been more liberal; for example,
the relationship between Edwards and MacLiammor was tacitly acknowledged
by those who knew them, and their involvement in the theatre often provided
a sort of ‘cover’ for their camp behaviour. The modernist author, Flann O’Brien
(writing as Myles na gCopaleen), frequently alluded to the White Stag Group
in his weekly satirical column for the *The Irish Times*: it was among the groups
he labelled ‘corduroys’, aesthetes connected with literary, theatrical and artistic

Kathryn Milligan
circles in Dublin, and who could be identified by “the stench of oil paint” and the “fearfully interesting books littered about the floor” (na gCopaleen 1941, 2). Writing in the late 1950s, Terence de Vere White continued this moniker, writing that “[a]t the outbreak of war a corduroy panzer division descended on Dublin […] Their commissariat was ‘The Country Shop’ […] where at midday their multi-coloured uniforms provided a bright contrast to the meek tweeds and sober suits of the regular customers” (de Vere White 1957, 111). As Wills notes, this language (particularly as employed by O’Brien) seems to show “a not very subtle attack on the small gay subculture that grew up around the White Stag Group, and […] the Gate Theatre” (Wills 2008, 287). Dorman later suggested that Rackozi and Hall were themselves a couple, stating that “They made no secret of the matter, as why should they?” (Dorman 1983, 104). Whether the suggested sexual proclivities of members of the White Stag Group were true or merely gossip wrought by their being artists and foreign, and therefore somewhat exotic, this does add another aspect to their presence in Dublin.

**Conclusion: The Reception and Impact of the White Stag Group**

Looking at the reception of the art exhibited by the Group, the small artistic circles in which they were operating must be borne in mind: critics who were sympathetic to internationalism and experimentation in art were among the wider social circle of the group and so were unlikely to offer anything but support and praise to the Group’s activities in Dublin. At the other end of the scale, critics from the more traditionalist view were already predisposed to dislike Hall, Rakoczi and their peers (Arnold 2005, 55). Reading through contemporary reports it is evident that the perceived newness of the White Stag Group, its psychological impetus and artistic technique were more likely to be commented on, rather than any robust discussion of the artwork itself. A note of interest was added by Jellett in October 1940, who, having faced significant criticism for her own Cubist paintings in the early 1920s, sought to connect the work of the White Stag Group (as she did her own) to non-representational Celtic art – such as that found in illustrated manuscripts such as the *Book of Kells*. The press reported that at the opening of the exhibition she stated that:

*The aim of the group was to interpret the times in which they lived. It was not hidebound to any particular school or cramped by academic conventionality. […] In the exhibition were many*
foreign members, who brought with them ideals from abroad.
In the old days Irish monks were continuously going abroad,
all over the Continent, and brought back with them new ideas.
(Anonymous 1940, 6)

The 1944 Exhibition of Subjective Art attracted more vitriolic criticism than any of
the exhibitions over the previous four years. This came from general press reports
as well as from established art critics: for example, a somewhat satirical column
in the Irish Independent wrote that:

Sometime in the middle of the Great War Dada-ism was born in
the Cabaret Voltaire of neutral Zurich. In the middle of the World
War neutral Dublin is having its ‘white stag’ of subjective art. The
rose by any other name smells just the same. And whether we
call Dada-ism cubism, vorticism, futurism, surréalisme [sic], or
subjective art, it is, just the same, the periodic outcropping under
a new name of the fantastic and the grotesque. For it is fantastic
when a few scrawls and a few daubs which resemble most the
first endeavours of our tiny tots, left alone with a pencil and
some colours, are presented as serious art. (Anonymous 1944, 2)

Theodore Goodman, a theatre critic and figure on the fringes of the White Stag
Group’s circle, also took a longer view of the Group’s work in Ireland, albeit
coming to quite a different conclusion: viewing the Exhibition of Subjective Art
as the culmination of their exhibitions in Ireland to date, he noted that “Whatever
one may think of their aesthetic value, Dublin should be grateful to the group for
the spade-work they have done in preparing a reactionary public to receive some
of the really important experimental work of the last forty years when at last it
reaches these shores after the war” (Goodman 1944, 3). The lines of connection
drawn between the White Stag Group and the art of the past (whether distant
as in the case of Jellett’s example or more recent European movements) offered a
clear attempt to link their work to a broader history of art, and the invocation of
neutrality by the anonymous Independent reviewer makes an interesting connection
between the states of Ireland and Switzerland.

By the end of 1945, the artists of the White Stag Group had begun to disperse
once more: Hall returned to England, along with Chewett and Gilbert, followed
by Rakoczi and Nicholls in 1946. In establishing alternative venues away from
the commercial galleries of St Stephen’s Green, the Group expanded the artistic
topography of the city, drawing artists, writers and other cultural producers towards
the city’s southern boundary, which would increase and coalesce in the 1950s. Despite the relative brevity of their temporary exile in Ireland, the activities of the White Stag Group offered the rising generation a different vision for artistic practice in Ireland, challenging artists to move away from the constraints of the existing cultural infrastructure, whether through engagement with their activities or through likeminded artistic bodies, such as the IELA. The importance of the Group to younger artists such as Patrick Scott was immense: in the 1950s Scott and his cohort ushered in a new phase of modernist experimentation in Irish art, the foundations of which can be found in the path laid by the White Stag Group. Thinking about the White Stag Group in relation to art and exile in the interwar years raises several issues important for broader considerations of this topic: for example, when viewed comparatively, the distance travelled by the White Stag artists was short and the duration of their stay brief. For Hall, Rakoczi and many others of the cohort, their decision to leave Britain was largely made from a place of privilege rather than direct persecution, coercion or financial necessity: it enabled them to continue the School of Creative Psychology and the Group more generally, leading to the Exhibition of Subjective Art in 1944, undoubtedly the pinnacle of their achievements. In Ireland, they not only found a place of refuge, but their presence was highly valued by the cultural cognoscenti, even if this did not translate to positive press reviews. Ultimately, the impact of the White Stag Group’s temporary exile in Dublin was more influential on the city and Irish artists rather than vice versa: at a time when the opportunity for Irish artists to travel abroad for artistic training was curtailed, it was, in many ways, brought to their doorstep instead. The case of the White Stag Group points to the two-way nature of artistic mobility, and to an instance where the impact of arrival and relocation outweighed that of exile.

Note

1 White Stag Group Invitation, ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art, National Gallery of Ireland.

References


