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Excerpt from *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography* (Knickerbocker Press, 1913), Chapter One: "The Theatre in the Making"

On one of those days at Duras in 1898, Mr. Edward Martyn, my neighbour, came to see the Count, bringing with him Mr. Yeats, whom I did [Page 6] not then know very well, though I cared for his work very much and had already, through his directions, been gathering folk-lore. They had lunch with us, but it was a wet day, and we could not go out. After a while I thought the Count wanted to talk to Mr. Martyn alone; so I took Mr. Yeats to the office where the steward used to come to talk,—less about business I think than of the Land War or the state of the country, or the last year's deaths and marriages from Kinvara to the headland of Aughanish. We sat there through that wet afternoon, and though I had never been at all interested in theatres, our talk turned on plays. Mr. Martyn had written two, *The Heather Field* and *Maeve*. They had been offered to London managers, and now he thought of trying to have them produced in Germany where there seemed to be more room for new drama than in England. I said it was a pity we had no Irish theatre where such plays could be given. Mr. Yeats said that had always been a dream of his, but he had of late thought it an impossible one, for it could not at first pay its way, and there was no money to be found for such a thing in Ireland.

We went on talking about it, and things seemed [Page 7] to grow possible as we talked, and before the end of the afternoon we had made our plan. We said we would collect money, or rather ask to have a certain sum of money guaranteed. We would then take a Dublin theatre and give a performance of Mr. Martyn's *Heather Field* and one of Mr. Yeats's own plays, *The Countess Cathleen*. I offered the first guarantee of £25.

A few days after that I was back at Coole, and Mr. Yeats came over from Mr. Martyn's home, Tillyra, and we wrote a formal letter to send out. We neither of us write a very clear hand, but a friend had just given me a Remington typewriter and I was learning to use it, and I wrote out the letter with its help. That typewriter has done a great deal of work since that day, making it easy for the printers to read my plays and translations, and Mr. Yeats's plays and essays, and sometimes his poems. I have used it also for the many, many hundreds of letters that have had to be written about theatre business in each of these last fifteen years. It has gone with me very often up and down to Dublin and back again, and it went with me even to America last year that I might write my letters home. And while I am [Page 8] writing the leaves are falling, and since I have written those last words on its keys,

she who had given it to me has gone. She gave me also the great gift of her friendship through more than half my lifetime, Enid, Lady Layard, Ambassadress at Constantinople and Madrid, helper of the miserable and the wounded in the Turkish-Russian war; helper of the sick in the hospital she founded at Venice, friend and hostess and guest of queens in England and Germany and Rome. She was her husband's good helpmate while he lived—is not the Cyprus treaty set down in that clear handwriting I shall never see coming here again? And widowed, she kept his name in honour, living after him for fifteen years, and herself leaving a noble memory in all places where she had stayed, and in Venice where her home was and where she died.

Our statement—it seems now a little pompous—began:

"We propose to have performed in Dublin, in the spring of every year certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence will be written with a high ambition, and so to build up a Celtic and Irish school of [Page 9] dramatic literature. We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory, and believe that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland will ensure for us a tolerant welcome, and that freedom to experiment which is not found in theatres of England, and without which no new movement in art or literature can succeed. We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism. We are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us."

I think the word "Celtic" was put in for the sake of Fiona Macleod whose plays however we never acted, though we used to amuse ourselves by thinking of the call for "author" that might follow one, and the possible appearance of William Sharp in place of the beautiful woman he had given her out to be, for even then we had little doubt they were one and the same person. I myself never quite understood the meaning of the "Celtic Movement," which we were said to belong to. [Page 10] When I was asked about it, I used to say it was a movement meant to persuade the Scotch to begin buying our books, while we continued not to buy theirs.

We asked for a guarantee fund of £300 to make the experiment, which we hoped to carry on during three years. The first person I wrote to was the old poet, Aubrey de Vere. He answered very kindly, saying, "Whatever develops the genius of Ireland, must in the most effectual way benefit her; and in Ireland's genius I have long been a strong believer. Circumstances of very various sorts have hitherto tended much to

retard the development of that genius; but it cannot fail to make itself recognised before very long, and Ireland will have cause for gratitude to all those who have hastened the coming of that day."

I am glad we had this letter, carrying as it were the blessing of the generation passing away to that which was taking its place. He was the first poet I had ever met and spoken with; he had come in my girlhood to a neighbour's house. He was so gentle, so fragile, he seemed to have been wafted in by that "wind from the plains of Ath- [Page 11] enry" of which he wrote in one of his most charming little poems. He was of the Lake School, and talked of Wordsworth, and I think it was as a sort of courtesy or deference to him that I determined to finish reading *The Excursion*, which though a reader of poetry it had failed me, as we say, to get through. At last one morning I climbed up to a wide wood, Grobawn, on one of the hillsides of Slieve Echtge, determined not to come down again until I had honestly read every line. I think I saw the sun set behind the far-off Connemara hills before I came home, exhausted but triumphant! I have a charming picture of Aubrey de Vere in my mind as I last saw him, at a garden party in London. He was walking about, having on his arm, in the old-world style, the beautiful Lady Somers, lovely to the last as in Thackeray's day, and as I had heard of her from many of that time, and as she had been painted by Watts.

Some gave us their promise with enthusiasm but some from good will only, without much faith that an Irish Theatre would ever come to success. One friend, a writer of historical romance, wrote: "October 15th. I enclose a cheque for £1, but confess it is more as a proof of regard for you than of [Page 12] belief in the drama, for I cannot with the best wish in the world to do so, feel hopeful on that subject. My experience has been that any attempt at treating Irish history is a fatal handicap, not to say absolute bar, to anything in the shape of popularity, and I cannot see how any drama can flourish which is not to some degree supported by the public, as it is even more dependent on it than literature is. There are popular Irish dramatists, of course, and very popular ones, but then unhappily they did not treat of Irish subjects, and *The School for Scandal* and *She Stoops to Conquer* would hardly come under your category. You will think me very discouraging, but I cannot help it, and I am also afraid that putting plays experimentally on the boards is a very costly entertainment. Where will they be acted in the first instance? And has any stage manager undertaken to produce them? Forgive my tiresomeness; it does not come from want of sympathy, only from a little want of hope, the result of experience."

"October 19th. I seize the opportunity of writing again as I am afraid you will have thought I wrote such an unsympathetic letter. It is not, [Page 13] believe me, that I would not give anything to see Irish literature and Irish drama taking a good place, as it ought to do, and several of the authors you name I admire extremely. It is only from the practical and paying point of view that I feel it to be rather rash. Plays cost more, I take it, to produce than novels, and one would feel rather rash if one brought out a novel at one's own risk."

I think the only actual refusals I had were from three members of the Upper House. I may give their words as types of the discouragement we have often met with from friends: "I need not, I am sure, tell you how gladly I would take part in anything for the honour of Old Ireland and especially anything of the kind in which you feel an interest; but I must tell you frankly that I do not much believe in the movement about which you have written to me. I have no sympathy, you will be horrified to hear, with the 'London Independent Theatre,' and I am sure that if Ibsen and Co. could know what is in my mind, they would regard me as a 'Philistine' of the coarsest class! Alas! so far from wishing to see the Irish characters of Charles Lever supplanted by more refined types, they have [Page 14] always been the delight of my heart, and there is no author in whose healthy, rollicking company, even nowadays, I spend a spare hour with more thorough enjoyment. I am very sorry that I cannot agree with you in these matters, and I am irreclaimable; but all the same I remain with many pleasant remembrances and good wishes for you and yours, Yours very truly—"

Another, the late Lord Ashbourne, wrote: "I know too little of the matter or the practicability of the idea to be able to give my name to your list, but I shall watch the experiment with interest and be glad to attend. The idea is novel and curious, and how far it is capable of realisation I am not at all in a position to judge. Some of the names you mention are well known in literature but not as dramatists or playwrights, and therefore the public will be one to be worked up by enthusiasm and love of country. The existing class of actors will not, of course, be available, and the existing playgoers are satisfied with their present attractions. Whether 'houses' can be got to attend the new plays, founded on new ideas and played by new actors, no one can foretell." [Page 15]

One, who curiously has since then become an almost too zealous supporter of our theatre, says: "I fear I am not sanguine about the success in a pecuniary way of a 'Celtic Theatre,' nor am I familiar with the works, dramatic or otherwise, of Mr. Yeats or of Mr. Martyn. Therefore, at the risk of branding myself in your estimation as a hopeless Saxon and Philistine, I regret I cannot see my way to

giving my name to the enterprise or joining in the guarantee." On the other hand, Professor Mahaffy says, rather unexpectedly, writing from Trinity College: "I am ready to risk £5 for your scheme and hope they may yet play their drama in Irish. It will be as intelligible to the nation as Italian, which we so often hear upon our stage."

And many joined who had seemed too far apart to join in any scheme. Mr. William Harpole Lecky sent a promise of £5 instead of the £1 I had asked. Lord Dufferin, Viceroy of India and Canada, Ambassador at Paris, Constantinople, St. Petersburg, and Rome, not only promised but sent his guarantee in advance. I returned it later, for the sums guaranteed were never called for, Mr. Martyn very generously making up all [Page 16] loss. Miss Jane Barlow, Miss Emily Lawless, the Lord Chancellor of Ireland ("Peter the Packer" as he was called by Nationalists), John O'Leary, Mr. T. M. Healy, Lord and Lady Ardilaun, the Duchess of St. Albans, Doctor Douglas Hyde, the Rt. Hon. Horace Plunkett, Mr. John Dillon, M. P., all joined. Mr. John Redmond supported us, and afterwards wrote me a letter of commendation with leave to use it. Mr. William O'Brien was another supporter. I did not know him personally but I remember one day long ago going to tea at the Speaker's house, after I had heard him in a debate, and saying I thought him the most stirring speaker of all the Irish party; and I was amused when my gentle and dignified hostess, Mrs. Peel, said, "I quite agree with you. When I hear William O'Brien make a speech, I feel that if I were an Irishwoman, I should like to go and break windows."

Then Mr. Yeats and Mr. Martyn went to Dublin to make preparations, but the way was unexpectedly blocked by the impossibility of getting a theatre. The only Dublin theatres, the Gaiety, the Royal, and the Queen's, were engaged far ahead, and in any case we could not [Page 17] have given them their price. Then we thought of taking a hall or a concert room, but there again we met with disappointment. We found there was an old Act in existence, passed just before the Union, putting a fine of £300 upon any one who should give a performance for money in any unlicensed building. As the three large theatres were the only buildings licensed, a claim for a special license would have to be argued by lawyers, charging lawyers' fees, before the Privy Council. We found that even amateurs who acted for charities were forced to take one of the licensed theatres, so leaving but little profit for the charity. There were suggestions made of forming a society like the Stage Society in London, to give performances to its members only, but this would not have been a fit beginning for the National Theatre of our dreams. I wrote in a letter at that time: "I am all for having the Act repealed or a Bill brought in, empowering the Municipality to license halls when desirable." And

although this was looked on as a counsel of perfection, it was actually done within the year. I wrote to Mr. Lecky for advice and help, and he told me there was a Bill actually going through the House [Page 18] of Commons, the Local Government (Ireland) Bill, in which he thought it possible a Clause might be inserted that would meet our case. Mr. John Redmond and Mr. Dillon promised their help; so did Mr. T. M. Healy, who wrote to Mr. Yeats: "I am acquainted with the state of the law in Dublin which I should gladly assist to alter as proposed. Whether the Government are equally well disposed may be doubted, as the subject is a little outside their Bill, and no adequate time exists for discussing it and many other important questions. They will come up about midnight or later and will be yawned out of hearing by our masters."

A Clause was drawn up by a Nationalist member, Mr. Clancy, but in July, 1898, Mr. Lecky writes from the House of Commons: "I have not been forgetting the Celtic Theatre and I think the enclosed Clause, which the Government have brought forward, will practically meet its requirements. The Attorney-General objected to Mr. Clancy's Clause as too wide and as interfering with existing patent rights, but promised a Clause authorising amateur acting. I wrote to him, however, stating the Celtic case, and urging that [Page 19] writers should be able, like those who got up the Ibsen plays in London, to get regular actors to play for them, and I think this Clause will allow it. . . . After Clause 59 insert the following Clause: (1) Notwithstanding anything in the Act of Parliament of Ireland of the twenty-sixth year of King George the Third, Chapter fifty-seven, intituled an Act for regulating the stage in the city and county of Dublin, the Lord Lieutenant may on the application of the council for the county of Dublin or the county borough of Dublin grant an occasional license for the performance of any stage play or other dramatic entertainment in any theatre, room, or building where the profits arising therefrom are to be applied for charitable purpose or in aid of the funds of any society instituted for the purpose of science, literature, or the fine arts exclusively. (2) The license may contain such conditions and regulations as appear fit to the Lord Lieutenant, and may be revoked by him."

This Clause was passed but we are independent now of it,—the Abbey Theatre holds its own Patent. But the many amateur societies which play so often here and there in Dublin may well [Page 20] call for a blessing sometimes on the names of those by whom their charter was won.

We announced our first performance for May 8, 1899, nearly a year after that talk on the Galway coast, at the Ancient Concert Rooms. Mr. Yeats' Countess Cathleen and Mr. Martyn's Heather Field were the plays chosen, as we had planned at the

first. Mr. George Moore gave excellent help in finding actors, and the plays were rehearsed in London. But then something unexpected happened. A writer who had a political quarrel with Mr. Yeats sent out a pamphlet in which he attacked *The Countess Cathleen*, on the ground of religious unorthodoxy. The plot of the play, taken from an old legend, is this: during a famine in Ireland some starving country people, having been tempted by demons dressed as merchants to sell their souls for money that their bodies may be saved from perishing, the Countess Cathleen sells her own soul to redeem theirs, and dies. The accusation made was that it was a libel on the people of Ireland to say they could under any circumstances consent to sell their souls and that it was a libel on the demons that they counted the soul of a countess of more worth than those [Page 21] of the poor. At Cathleen's death the play tells us, "God looks on the intention, not the deed," and so she is forgiven at the last and taken into Heaven; and this it was said is against the teaching of the Church.

Mr. Martyn is an orthodox Catholic, and to quiet his mind, the play was submitted to two good Churchmen. Neither found heresy enough in it to call for its withdrawal. One of them, the Rev. Dr. Barry, the author of *The New Antigone*, wrote:

"BRIDGE HOUSE, WALLINGFORD,
"March 26, 1899."

"DEAR MR. YEATS,

"I read your *Countess Cathleen* as soon as possible after seeing you. It is beautiful and touching. I hope you will not be kept back from giving it by foolish talk. Obviously, from the literal point of view theologians, Catholic or other, would object that no one is free to sell his soul in order to buy bread even for the starving. But St. Paul says, 'I wish to be anathema for my brethren'; which is another way of expressing what you have put into a story. I would give the play first and explanations afterwards. [Page 22]

"Sometime perhaps you will come and spend a night here and I shall be charmed. But don't take a superfluous journey now. It is an awkward place to get at. I could only tell you, as I am doing, that if people will not read or look at a play of this kind in the spirit which dictated it, no change you might make would satisfy them. You have given us what is really an *Auto*, in the manner of Calderon, with the old Irish folk-lore as a perceptive; and to measure it by the iron rule of experts and schoolmen would be most unfair to it. Some one else will say that you have

learned from the Jesuits to make the end justify the means—and much that man will know of you or the Jesuits. With many kind wishes for your success, and fraternal greetings in the name of Ireland,

"Ever yours,
"WILLIAM BARRY."

So our preparations went on. Mr. Yeats wrote a little time before the first performance: "Everybody tells me we are going to have good audiences. My play, too, in acting goes wonderfully well. The actors are all pretty sound. [Page 23] The first Demon is a little over-violent and restless but he will improve. Lionel Johnson has done a prologue which I enclose."

That prologue, written by so Catholic and orthodox a poet, was spoken before the plays at the Ancient Concert Rooms on May 8, 1899:

The May fire once on every dreaming hill
All the fair land with burning bloom would fill;
All the fair land, at visionary night,
Gave loving glory to the Lord of Light.
Have we no leaping flames of Beltaine praise
To kindle in the joyous ancient ways;
No fire of song, of vision, of white dream,
Fit for the Master of the Heavenly Gleam;
For him who first made Ireland move in chime,
Musical from the misty dawn of time?

Ah, yes; for sacrifice this night we bring
The passion of a lost soul's triumphing;
All rich with faery airs that, wandering long,
Uncaught, here gather into Irish song;
Sweet as the old remembering winds that wail,
From hill to hill of gracious Inisfail;
Sad as the unforgetting winds that pass
Over her children in her holy grass
At home, and sleeping well upon her breast,
Where snowy Deirdre and her sorrows rest.

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Come, then, and keep with us an Irish feast,
Wherein the Lord of Light and Song is priest;
Now, at this opening of the gentle May,
Watch warring passions at their storm and play;
Wrought with the flaming ecstasy of art,
Sprung from the dreaming of an Irish heart.

But alas! His call to "watch warring passions at their storm and play," was no vain one. The pamphlet, *Souls for Gold*, had been sent about, and sentences spoken by the demons in the play and given detached from it were quoted as Mr. Yeats' own unholy beliefs. A Cardinal who confessed he had read none of the play outside these sentences condemned it. Young men from the Catholic University were roused to come and make a protest against this "insult to their faith." There was hooting and booing in the gallery. In the end the gallery was lined with police, for an attack on the actors was feared. They, being English and ignorant of Ireland, found it hard to understand the excitement, but they went through their parts very well. There was enthusiasm for both plays, and after the first night London critics were sent over, Mr. Max Beerbohm among them, and gave a good report. Yet it was a stormy [Page 25] beginning for our enterprise, and a rough reception for a poetic play. The only moment, I think, at which I saw Mr. Yeats really angry was at the last performance. I was sitting next him, and the play had reached the point where the stage direction says, "The Second Merchant goes out through the door and returns with the hen strangled. He flings it on the floor." The merchant came in indeed, but without the strangled hen. Mr. Yeats got up, filled with suspicions that it also might have been objected to on some unknown ground, and went round to the back of the stage. But he was given a simple explanation. The chief Demon said he had been given charge of the hen, and had hung it out of a window every night, "And this morning," he said, "when I pulled up the string, there was nothing on it at all."

But that battle was not a very real one. We have put on *Countess Cathleen* a good many times of late with no one speaking against it at all. And some of those young men who hissed it then are our good supporters now.