

Scott Lyall, “Seeking God by strange ways”: Symbolism and the Irish Revival’

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This paper will argue that the Irish Revival of the late nineteenth, early twentieth century was first-and-foremost a Symbolist movement. Focusing on the writing, thought and actions of, in particular, W. B. Yeats, George Russell (Æ), and Patrick Pearse, the paper will attempt to trace the ways in which these figures were influenced by the Symbolism of the literary *fin de siècle* and the manner in which they utilised Symbolism to inspire the cultural and political revival.

Arthur Symons dedicated his 1908 edition of *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* to Yeats and here comments that ‘Your own Irish literary movement is one of its [Symbolism’s] expressions; your poetry and A.E.’s poetry belong to it in the most intimate sense’. The mysticism central to Symons’s book, the transcendental urge, the concern with the life of the soul and ‘to spiritualise literature’ in order to oppose ‘a materialistic tradition’, these would not merely be the literary inheritance of Symbolism’s religiously-infused art-for-art’s sake ethos on an elitist Modernism, but would also form the spiritual foundations of politico-cultural national revival movements in the same period, centrally in Ireland.

This paper will explore Symbolism’s influence on the occult and theosophical activities of Yeats and Æ and how magic and the occult were used by these writers to re-enchant Ireland. This bid for re-enchantment opposed advancing materialism as well as the disenchantment imbued by Darwinian evolutionism. But in small nation revivals such as Ireland, esoteric spiritualities also sought to oppose imperialism – for instance, the faeries of Yeats’s *Celtic Twilight* are key symbols of an endangered and disappearing native folk culture, not merely the fey figments of Yeats’s early imagination.

While, given its nationalistic aims, the Irish Revival is often looked at mainly in political terms, it is important to examine the religious and spiritual ideas that form a core component of this renaissance of Irish cultural and political life. Yeats, from an Anglo-Irish and Protestant background, was for long interested in occult ideas. Yeats’s reformist, conservative-Burkean nationalism is in strong contrast to the revolutionary republicanism of one of the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising, Patrick Pearse. Yet if Yeats thought of himself as a ‘Churchless mystic’, Pearse’s ambitions for Ireland were also based on mystical ideas, specifically those of the Catholic tradition. Pearse claimed that ‘Irish nationality is an ancient spiritual tradition’, and that ‘peoples are divine’. Whereas Yeats in *A Vision* tried to explain history through understanding the personality of the exceptional ‘aristocratic’ individual, Pearse sought the mystical blood sacrifice of the individual for Irish freedom. The Easter Rising was fundamentally a Symbolist insurrection, I shall argue. Yeats in *A Vision* saw history as a series of antinomies or contradictions. The historical antinomies of the Irish Revival are best exemplified in the contrasting ideas of Yeats, Æ and Pearse that yet led to the similar aim of re-sacralising Ireland.