Culture in the Irish Free State

By **Joan Morrissey** and **David Irwin, HTAI**

Prior to independence, there was a romantic notion amongst many Irish nationalists that, once freed from the tyranny of British control, the Irish nation would simply prosper, culturally and socially. For instance, Easter Rising leader Pádraig Pearse had idealistically predicted that a free Ireland would be self-sustaining: improving agriculture and fostering industries, beautifying cities and ending urban squalor. Post-independence, however, southern Ireland was hampered by major demographic and economic challenges. The years immediately after independence were characterised by a desire to maintain order and increase cultural homogeneity; the Irish Free State was, in cultural historian Terence Brown's words, 'stable to the point of stagnation.'

In this period, the forces of Irish Catholicism and Irish nationalism worked together to produce a more homogenous, insular and conservative culture. The political division of the island of Ireland into the 26-county Irish Free State and six-county Northern Ireland only meant further cultural homogenisation in the south. According to the 1926 census, 93% of the Free State population described themselves as Irish Catholic, an overwhelming majority. Horace Plunkett remarked that in no other country was religion so dominant an element in the daily life of the people.

Of course this is not to say that a deeply religious and conservative society was incapable of creating great art. For example, An Túr Gloine (The Tower of Glass), established in 1903, had by now developed into a highly successful stained-glass church window works. Edward Martyn's artists produced some of the finest church windows in the 1920s and 1930s and represented a distinct Irish school of stained glass art. Yet the narrow-mindedness of certain sections of Irish cultural nationalism was a feature of Irish society in the 1920s. Under the chairmanship of W.B. Yeats, new Free State coins with the theme of native Irish wildlife replaced British currency. In 1928 indigenous Irish wildlife including a hare, a wolfhound, and a salmon featured on the coins. Critics complained the animal imagery was insufficiently Christian, which highlights the insularism of many during this time.

External influences were met with suspicion and consequently legislation in the new state. Despite such insularism, a creeping modernisation threatened the homogenous and conservative Irish Catholic culture. The English newspaper, cheap magazines, new dances and the advent of the cinema signalled the fact that breaks with tradition were afoot. One response to the encroachment of supposed immorality was the Committee of Enquiry on Evil Literature (1926), reluctantly established by the Minister for Justice Kevin O'Higgins. This paved the way for the Irish Censorship of Publications Act of 1929, which took aim at imported popular newspapers and magazines. The main source of such "evil" literature was deemed to be England.
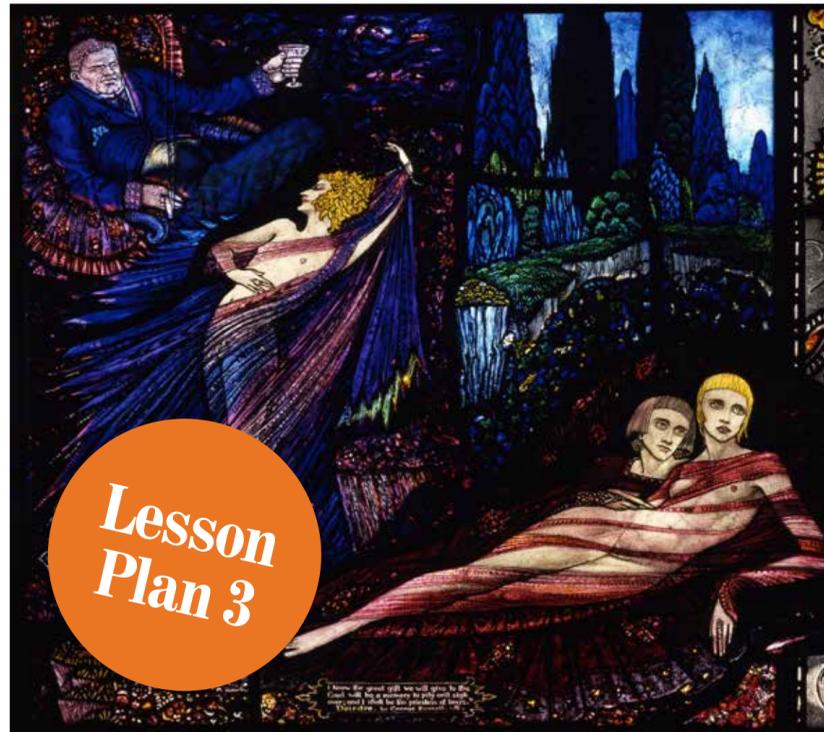
While Ireland possessed a rich literary heritage, those literary talents were often not fully appreciated or rewarded post-independence by a culture which feared as much as fostered literary production. The Catholic Bulletin lambasted Ireland's most celebrated writers such as James Joyce, George Russell, and W.B. Yeats as being primarily concerned with the acquisition of profit. This extremist publication criticised Yeats's receipt of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923 as follows: 'the line of recipients of the Nobel Prize shows that a reputation for paganism in thought and word is a very considerable advantage in the award of annual race for money'. This combative relationship between illiberal Ireland and the literary intelligentsia was a feature of the cultural landscape of this decade.

A key aim of the new state was to emphasise the cultural differences between Ireland and the United Kingdom, chiefly the separate language tradition. After all, Pádraig Pearse, himself an educator, had said: "A country without a language is a country without a soul" (Tír gan teanga, tír gan anam). In practical terms, the privileging of the Irish language in primary schools saw the elimination of lessons in drawing, science, nature study, hygiene, and the majority of domestic studies. Many social and cultural historians argue that such prioritisation was misguided and did a disservice to a population being reared for export to England, the United States and other English-speaking countries. In any case, the rapid rate of decline in the number of Irish speakers since the Famine continued apace after independence, despite such linguistic dogmatism. The demotivating pedagogical preoccupation with grammar rather than oral fluency was surely one reason for this failed educational policy.

The Irish Free State inherited a primarily agricultural economy. According to the 1926 census, 53% of employment was in the farming sector. Secondary industries such as brewing, the creameries, biscuit-making and woollens could not provide the rate of job creation needed to foster prosperity in a more diverse economy. The devastating effects of land subdivision had been demonstrated in the Famine and so from the 1870s land was passed to the eldest son (The practice known as primogeniture). For younger siblings in rural Ireland, therefore, few opportunities existed, which led to couples marrying later. In Ireland, the percentage of the population which was unmarried was higher than any other country where records were kept.

In the final decades of British rule, rural towns and villages had seen a decline in cultural activities such as fairs and festivals. George Russell noted that these centres lacked recreational facilities which would encourage cultural pursuits (libraries, gymnasiums). Writing in the Irish Statesman, Russell remarked that Irish rural social life often meant informal outdoor gatherings by a gate, a wall or under a tree. The lack of village halls meant "dancing at the crossroads."

As was the case prior to the break with Britain, the culture remained an oral one. The main form of entertainment was through conversation. The essayist Stephen Gwynn noted Irish people read little, with talk as their literature. The strong oral and storytelling tradition in Ireland, combined with a high degree of sociability meant that there was a thriving pub trade in the early days of independence. A report commissioned by the Irish government in 1925 noted there were 191 towns or villages in the 26 counties where the number of pubs was 'excessive'. In Charlestown and Ballaghaderreen every third house was licensed to sell liquor. There existed one pub for every 20 people. Ireland had, in proportion to population, twice as many pubs as England and thrice as many pubs as Scotland.

While pubs were plentiful, then as now, Ireland was in the grip of a serious housing crisis. Urban tenements and rural cottages were rife with overcrowding. The picturesque white-washed, single-story cottages, though quaint to modern eyes, did not meet the needs of large families at the time. The 1926 census recorded some striking residence statistics: there were 22,915 families living in one-room residences and 39,615 housed in two-room dwellings. 43% of houses in Mayo were overcrowded; the figure for Donegal was 41%, with 39% in Kerry.

As this article has outlined, there were many who supported the notion of Ireland as a Gaelic Catholic nation, with the hegemony of the Irish language and Gaelic games, and the resistance of foreign cultural influences. But a preoccupation with the promotion of Gaelic culture in political and cultural circles would be of little value to the Irish people if more practical concerns were not attended to. Due to the lack of economic opportunity, the housing crisis, and what was for many a restrictive culture, emigration was the only option for those seeking to make a better life for themselves. In the 1920s, a staggering 43% of people born in Ireland were living abroad, mostly in the English-speaking countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and India.

Prior to independence, Irish nationalists had presented an idealised vision of a free and thriving Ireland. But post-independence Ireland was a culturally restrictive place. Partition had reinforced the sense that this new state would be Gaelic, Catholic and Irish-speaking. The vibrancy of Irish culture, as embodied in men of literature like W.B. Yeats, was certainly challenged by the coalescence of the more regressive features of Irish society in the 1920s, as evidenced in the government's Irish language policy, publications such as The Catholic Bulletin, and in legislation such as the Irish Censorship of Publications Act. With its insular instincts, struggling economy and crisis-ridden housing sector, perhaps it is no wonder that so many Irish people chose, or were forced, to emigrate at this time. Pearse the idealist and his co-signatories of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic had promised to "cherish all the children of the nation equally", but the children of the nation were fleeing in droves. It is easier to campaign in poetry than to govern in it.

Lesson Plan 3

Padraig Pearse

Painting by Paul Henry: 'Errigal, Co. Donegal.'

Lesson Plan	Culture in the Irish Free State.
Junior Cycle Key Skills	Being literate- managing information and thinking – communicating – working with others.
Junior Cycle Statements of Learning	SOL 6: The student appreciates and respects how diverse values, beliefs and traditions have contributed to the communities and culture in which he/she lives. Students will learn about the roots of their historical inheritance through exploring aspects of the history of their own locality, such as interviewing older people about religious practices and traditions.
	SOL 9: The student understands the origins and impact of social, economic and environmental aspects of the world around him/her.
	SOL 24: The student uses technology and digital media tools to learn, communicate, work and think collaboratively and creatively in a responsible and ethical manner. Students will engage with and critically evaluate ICT when locating historical sources and evidence and in the creation of responses to questions about the past.
Leaving Certificate History	Later Modern Field of Study – Irish History 1815-1993, No.3. *The pursuit of sovereignty and the impact of partition, 1912-1949* 'Society and economy' - Impact of partition on economy and society; State and culture; language, religion and education; the promotion of cultural identity.
Initial Stimulus Idea	Give students the following questions at the end of the class before this topic to spark interest: 1. What does it mean to be Irish? According to Tommy Tiernan, it means we're not British. 2. Some say that the only thing which changed with independence was the colour of the post boxes, to what extent is this true? Assign the article as reading for homework.
Warmer: Student self-assessment of topic	These are often a novel way to assign and assess work completed, at home, in-class using the students' own devices, or when remote learning. To make your own, or to make one as part of a history department, check out https://www.clickschool.co.uk/pages/cloze/
	If your school has a BOYD policy, whereby students 'Bring their Own Devices' to class or to use at home, the cloze fill exercises here allow students to repeat the activity until they have done well. I ask students to screenshot and send their final result to my email to monitor completion.
First activity: The Flipped Classroom.	Firstly, ensure students read the article on culture in the Irish Free State for homework. Students complete a traditional "three Rs" (reading, writing and arithmetic) activity at home and become familiar with the content of the lesson beforehand. This enables them to process and reflect at their own speed. It also allows them to engage in pair and group work in the classroom setting in order to assess and consolidate their learning. Students are encouraged to make notes using the article.
Comprehension & Literacy	Literacy game ("Stop!")
	Give students thirty to sixty seconds at the start of this activity to re-familiarise themselves with the content of the article by skim reading. The teacher has pre-selected 10 or 12 difficult words or concepts. The teacher will call out these words and students must listen, trying to retain the words that the teacher calls out. They cannot note them down. When the teacher has finished, the students scan the article to find the words. Whoever finds them first shouts 'Stop!' Students engage in this activity as it's a legitimate excuse to shout ('Stop') in class! This activity is also suitable for pair work. Ask paired students to discuss the meaning of the words, devise definitions and give example sentences.
Assessment	Give students at senior cycle a guiding question to which they write a response.
	'Evaluate the success and weakness of the Free State in promoting Irish culture.'
Differentiation	Give weaker students guiding concepts to help their paragraphing skills: education; emigration; land; religion; religious art; censorship, literature and currency.
Technology and homework	Assessing video homework using Edpuzzle
	As this is the decade of centenaries, there is a rich repository of material now online, including videos and lesson plans (see the RTE website, for example). Using short video clips can be a great way to introduce a topic when remote teaching or using a "flipped classroom" approach. To monitor and assess whether students have viewed the assigned video in its entirety, I create an assignment online (using Microsoft Teams) asking students to view the video by logging into the educational website Edpuzzle.
	It is easy to create an account on Edpuzzle. The teacher can search for an educational video on a given topic, and post this video to all of the members of a particular class. You can insert questions into the video to encourage critical viewing. Another advantage of using Edpuzzle is that you are given a report of student engagement. For example, the report breaks down how much of the video was watched by a student and how long they spent viewing. In recent years, I have created a bank of assessment comments, which can quickly and accurately give each student the feedback they need, which is of course a crucial aid to their learning. Simply copy and paste a comment into the Microsoft Teams feedback box to keep a record of whether students have completed the task.
Movement Breaks for students	Outdoor oral assessment As the weather improves, taking the students outside adds novelty, increases student engagement and where necessary, facilitates a sensory movement break. Divide students into pairs. Students play one game of rock, paper, scissors and the loser goes first. With the teacher using her phone as a timer, students must speak for one continuous minute about the lesson's learning intentions. Students now swap roles.
Differentiation	Students who successfully completed the task, now compete in new pairs, speaking for two continuous minutes.
	Students who struggled with the task may use the notes made for homework to scaffold their answer. Remake pairs using the students who could not complete the challenge, allowing them to use the notes they made for homework to help.
Extension activity - revision	Pictorial note-making
	To promote reflection on the learning and more engagement with content, have students create revision notes in the form of symbols, diagrams and simple pictures, with a 20-word limit. This can be a particularly effective homework activity. To ensure students complete it comprehensively a teacher may consider allowing these notes during informal assessments (such as teacher questioning in class). It's visual, engaging, creative and fun.
Further Development	For resources connected to this topic, including online resources and how to give feedback to students on Microsoft Teams and other useful links related to this topic, see https://padlet.com/Missmiss/FreeStateCulture

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