

“THE PROMISE OF LITERATURE IN THE COMING DAYS”: THE BEST HUNDRED IRISH BOOKS CONTROVERSY OF 1886

By Clare Hutton

IN JANUARY 1886 SIR JOHN LUBBOCK, a Liberal MP and scientist, addressed the members of the London Working Men’s College on “Books and Reading,” and recommended a list of a “hundred good books.” The *Pall Mall Gazette* decided to publicise the list, as “the hundred *best* books,” a small but significant revision which has as its ultimate reference Matthew Arnold’s idea that culture can make the “best that has been known and thought in the world current everywhere” (Arnold 113). Though Arnold himself declined to comment on Lubbock’s list, the ensuing column on “The Best Hundred Books by the Best Judges” proved to be enduringly popular. It ran for four weeks, and the responses to Lubbock – which ranged greatly in tone, manner and content – were reprinted in a *Pall Mall Gazette* “Extra” which appeared on 10 March 1886 and sold more than forty thousand copies within the next three weeks.¹ Obviously this debate took place in a context of growing anxiety amongst the intelligentsia about the seemingly endless proliferation of mass produced cheaper books, especially in the area of fiction. In the face of such abundance, it was generally felt that it was important for the “Best Judges” to instruct the newly literate classes on what to read. Indeed, as N. N. Feltes has shown in *Literary Capital and the Late Victorian Novel*, the response to Lubbock’s original list may be read as index of late Victorian ideologies of literary value.

Publishing entrepreneurs were fascinated by the idea that one could specify the “hundred best books,” and Lubbock made a deal with George Routledge for the “sole right to use as a general title the words ‘Sir John Lubbock’s 100 Books’” (Feltes 45). Interest in Routledge’s subsequent series, and the more general terms of the debate, persisted well into the twentieth century. Clement Shorter, for example, published an article on “Lord Acton’s Hundred Best Books” in 1905, to which Shorter appended his own list.² An accompanying note wryly commented on the long and successful publishing history of Lubbock’s original lecture, which had been reprinted “again and again” in Lubbock’s book *The Pleasures of Life* (1887): “the publishers have sold more than two hundred thousand copies – a kind of success that might almost make some of our popular novelists turn green with envy” (Shorter 4).

Feltes's analysis of the debate surrounding Lubbock's list is full of detail, interest, and historically inflected annotation. It is therefore surprising to note that it omits any mention of the corresponding Irish debate with which this article is concerned: Richard Barry O'Brien's list of "The Best Hundred Irish Books" and accompanying commentary, which was also circulating and being publicised in the spring of 1886. The extent to which O'Brien uses Lubbock's model shows how deceptive apparent similarities between British and Irish culture can be, and is of particular interest for three reasons. First, in the absence of sustained research into the history of reading in Ireland in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the debate stands as a useful body of anecdotal evidence, indicating attitudes towards reading Irish history and literature.³ Second, the seventy-three responses to O'Brien, which were printed in a Dublin daily, the *Freeman's Journal*, may be read in part as an intellectual portrait of the generation from which Yeats and his peers needed to gain support and approval in the course of their efforts to revive Irish literature in the next decade. As O'Brien explained, he began the debate by circulating his composition on "The Best Hundred Irish Books" amongst "notable and eminent literary judges," such as politicians, authors, lawyers, librarians, and men of religion. Many of those who responded were those with whom Yeats would subsequently quarrel and collaborate during the 1890s, when he devoted considerable energy to cultural initiatives such as the creation of the "National Literary Society," the "New Irish Library," and the creation of an Irish theatre. Third, the debate may be read as a document which bridges the divide between the politics of Irish culture, and the politics of constitution and government.

The debate was, after all, unfolding at a crucial moment in the evolution of Irish political history: the responses to O'Brien were printed between 23 March and 8 April 1886, the latter date being the day on which William Ewart Gladstone introduced his Irish Government Bill, which proposed to devolve legislative and executive powers to a unicameral assembly in Dublin and exclude Irish MPs from Westminster. This long awaited bill (the first of the so-called "Home Rule" bills) came about in the face of intense agrarian agitation. As Gladstone himself acknowledged "the primary purposes of Government" were not being attained in Ireland: "distress was chronic, disaffection was perpetual, and insurrection was smouldering."⁴ Interest in Irish culture was generated because the condition of Ireland was so high on the political agenda. Newspapers were full of general articles on Irish affairs, and the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* congratulated the *Freeman's Journal* on the apposite timing of the Irish debate: it was "highly desirable that everyone should know something about Ireland at a time when everyone will be talking and voting about it."⁵

Richard Barry O'Brien (1847–1918) was born and educated to university level in Ireland but, like many men of his class and generation, spent the bulk of his professional life in London, initially in practice as a barrister, but more significantly as a journalist working especially on titles which might be characterised as the Liberal press. He was a loyal and dedicated supporter of the Irish Parliamentary Party, and was particularly close to the leader of that party, Charles Stewart Parnell, for whom he acted as an unofficial private secretary in the period following the infamous "split" which came about in December 1890.⁶ Because of these known affiliations, he drew up and circulated his composition on "The Best Hundred Irish Books" anonymously, using the pseudonym "Historicus," in order to save the debate from a split along party lines. This hardly concealed a great deal: the debate took place in the columns of a nationalist newspaper, and the nationalism of *Historicus* is obvious from both his fervour for the project, and from facts such as the omission of the most significant poet

of the period, Samuel Ferguson, a known Unionist, from his list. Lubbock's project stands in vivid contrast to O'Brien's and, to use his own phrase, is clearly that of "Liberal Education." Lubbock's list excludes "(1) works by living authors, (2) science, and (3) history, with a very few exceptions which I mentioned rather in their literary aspect."⁷ It keenly recommends cheap editions within the "means of the general public," and is a testimony to the mentality of Victorian earnestness, with works grouped according to the following classifications: Non-Christian Moralists, Classics, Epic Poetry, Eastern Poetry, Travels, Philosophy, Greek Dramatists, Poetry, General Literature, and Modern Fiction. O'Brien was interested in a much narrower category, the best hundred Irish books (including those by living authors) not the best hundred books of all time.

One question which was very much in the air at Westminster at the time was the competence of the Irish people for Home Rule. O'Brien may have set the debate in motion in response to this concern. A cultural nationalist, he obviously also had an interest in Ireland's cultural distinctiveness, and its canon of national scholarly works. In theory he was interested in gaining the attention of any reader. In fact anyone wanting to obtain the books on O'Brien's list would have needed to be very determined; many of the books he recommended were out of print or prohibitively expensive. One respondent estimated that the "hundred books could not be bought for £50" and added his opinion that "it is difficult to coax an Irishman of the industrious classes, who constitute the bulk of the readers as well as the bulk of the nation, to spend more than a shilling or two at a time on any book whatever."⁸ Poverty was very significant in Ireland at the time, and was certainly an inhibiting factor in the growth of a national book-reading public. Ireland had remained a predominantly agricultural country after the Famine, with much of the population concentrated in rural areas, making it difficult for readers to have easy access to books. Wages were still much higher in Britain than in Ireland in the 1880s, though per capita income rose from about two-fifths to somewhat short of three-fifths of the British standard between 1845 and 1914 (O'Gráda 242). Most people simply could not afford to buy books unless, as Martin Haverty, Librarian of King's Inns, observed in his response to *Historicus*, they were "very cheap indeed" (35). These facts, however, appear to have been of little interest to O'Brien, who simply did not mention (or perhaps even recognise) the difficulties most of his countrymen might have had in procuring the books he recommended.

O'Brien's essay on the best hundred Irish books consists of a remarkably dry and fact-filled discussion, organised on chronological lines, which lists and comments on works and sources in the field of Irish history. The tone is unstintingly serious and learned. There is very little spirit in the writing, and no emphasis on why these books ought to be regarded as the "best," as is evident from the following representative sample:

Spenser's "View of the Present State of Ireland" is, and deserves to be, a familiar work. Dr. Brewer's "Introduction to the Carew Calender of State Papers" is invaluable, and all those who wish to learn something of the Plantation of Ulster and other subjects appertaining to the time should peruse its interesting and instructive pages. Carew's "Pacata Hibernia" is important as a contemporary record.
(6)

O'Brien was a historian of some note himself, and at times it seems that his list of the best hundred Irish books consists of a writing up of notes gathered when he was setting out as a scholar.⁹ Several of those who responded to the debate complained about the unremitting

emphasis on history. Matthew Russell, for example, thought *Historicus* was “too true to his name” while John O’Leary identified him as not just an historian, but “an historian of somewhat Dryasdustian proclivities” (21, 28). John Healy thought that the article “might be more appropriately headed: ‘The Best Hundred Books on Irish History’” and complained that the literature of the Young Ireland movement – from 1842 to 1848 – had been underrated:

Even those who might be most opposed to the political views of that band of patriots cannot deny them the glory of having made these disastrous years the most brilliant epoch in Irish literary history. There has been nothing like it before or since. Their genius stirred the soul of the entire nation, and moves it still. (16)

Many of the others who responded, however, confessed that O’Brien’s list of books revealed a chasm of ignorance about their own nation, which they found painful to acknowledge. T. P. O’Connor, for example, the Home Rule MP who represented Liverpool, found the article “a painful revelation . . . of the depth of my own ignorance of Irish history and Irish literature” and lamented that “the study of Irish history was not part of the curriculum . . . in my student days” (32). The Archbishop of Tuam, one of a number of individuals who replied in the third person, commented that “there are but few branches of knowledge in which our people seem less versed, owing to the want of books and suitable opportunities” (11).

It was easy for those who professed such ignorance to be wholly deferential. As the debate unfolded, the terms of praise for the endeavours of *Historicus* piled up: he was “a consummate critic,” “admirable and most judicious”; his paper was “able and exhaustive” and “it would be impossible . . . to propose a better list of books” (11, 13, 24, 15). Even those who took quite strong exception to O’Brien’s “proclivities” were notably deferential. Within a few years, newspaper debates about Irish culture would become much more rancorous: it is interesting to see that the culture of polite letters really was polite at this pivotal moment. It is also interesting that the newspaper printed the responses of people of rank even if they had very little to say. Thus John Morley, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, “presents his compliments, and begs to thank the editor of the *Freeman’s Journal* for his very interesting list of Irish books”; His Eminence Cardinal Newman “is obliged to reply that he has neither strength nor leisure equal to so serious an undertaking”; and Parnell himself is content to say “that I believe the discussion in your columns will prove of great importance, and will afford valuable information otherwise unattainable to many thousands” (15, 16, 37). In some respects the list of respondents reads as a guide to the social structures of late Victorian Ireland, and the mentalities which underpinned it.

Many of those who answered *Historicus* were displeased by his rather paltry comments on Irish literature. These comments are tacked on at the end of his essay, and seem rather an afterthought. James Clarence Mangan, he says, “stands second to none among the men, and Speranza is certainly entitled to the first place among the delightful warblers of her own sex” (8). Apart from a cursory allusion to Thomas Moore whose “immortal name . . . it is not necessary to mention,” O’Brien has nothing else to commend in Irish poetry though he does mention *The Spirit of the Nation* (1843–45), the best-selling anthology of Young Ireland verse, which in his view was “calculated to make the Irish people rebels” (8). He omits dramatists and eighteenth-century Irish writers altogether and values novelists only to the extent that they “portray national character” and are therefore “in some degree historian too” (8). John Ruskin had recently commended Maria Edgeworth’s works for containing “more

essential truths about Ireland than can be learned from any other source whatever”; while O’Brien dismisses this sweeping claim, he does concede her authoritative understanding of the “lawlessness of the Irish peasantry” (9). According to O’Brien, the problem with Edgeworth is that she is “generally read . . . and popular in England.” He was keen to point out that Irish readers see things rather differently, and that “the Irish favourites are Banim, Griffin and Carleton” (9). The novelist, Charlotte Grace O’Brien, one of only two women to participate in the debate, did so by submitting a list of books which included Sheridan, Goldsmith, Ferguson, Aubrey de Vere and “that terrible paper of Swift’s in which he suggests the devouring of Irish children” (22). Swift’s omission was noted by several other respondents. Many agreed with John O’Leary who commented that *Historicus* made “a poor show” of Irish literature and was “imperfectly acquainted” with Irish poetry (29).

Clearly the vigour with which respondents noted omissions or priority in the O’Brien’s list was a sign of the debate’s success, and of the strength of interest in Irish culture at the time. It is fascinating to note, however, that this interest did not stretch to the literary heritage of the Irish language, which is not mentioned by *Historicus*, and is barely acknowledged by any of the respondents. This suggests very clearly the extent to which the Irish language did not exist as a feature of Irish textual culture in the minds of those who ran Ireland’s cultural and political institutions in the 1880s. For all but a few isolated scholars, the Irish language and its literary heritage was the preserve of the illiterate, and not those who had the wherewithal to participate in a newspaper discussion. English was the medium of instruction in schools and there were no official means by which Irish language speakers could achieve literacy in Irish. Thus, as Tadhg O’Donnchadha observed of the situation in 1882, “If there were fifty people in all of Ireland at that time who could read and write Irish in the native script, I’d say that would be the total number.” (“Má bhí leathchhead duine i nÉirinn go léir an uair sin go raibh léigheadh agus sgríobhadh na Gaedhilge aca sa chló ghaedlach, déarfainn gurbh é an t-iomlán é.”) (O’Leary 1). This situation changed decisively over the next decade. Douglas Hyde founded the highly successful Gaelic League in 1892, an organisation which was devoted to teaching Irish language and culture. By February 1895, the month in which Yeats drew up his own list of the “The Best Thirty Irish Books,” Eugene O’Growney’s *Simple Lessons in Irish* (1894) was a bestseller in Ireland, and Hyde’s translations of *The Love Songs of Connacht* (1893) were among Yeats’s recommendations (*Samhain* 7–8).¹⁰ As Yeats wrote a few years later: “The prose parts of that book were to me, as they were to many others, the coming of a new power into literature” (*Samhain* 7–8).

The other feature of Irish textual culture which the debate on “The Best Hundred Irish Books” scarcely acknowledges is the significance of British books within the Irish market. As Marie-Louise Legg has shown, Ireland supported a vigorous national and provincial press during the 1880s. But there were very few Irish publishers actively publishing new books at the time. Ireland was an obvious market for British publishers to exploit and it is clear that the shelves of Irish newsagents and booksellers were dominated by books which had been imported from Britain. The infiltration of the Irish market was made possible by obvious cultural and economic factors including, most notably, the government of Ireland by Britain under the Union (1800–1921), which meant, for example, that the authorities could select British school texts, and sales departments in British publishing firms could routinely treat Ireland as part of the “home market.” Other significant factors included the shared language, particularly from the 1850s; the proximity of Ireland to Britain; and the fact that many people, including politicians, landlords, journalists, emigrants and seasonal

migrants, travelled between the two countries, creating deeper and wider cultural links and synergies. Within the context of the debate, it would have been irrelevant and unpatriotic to acknowledge these facts, and only one respondent alludes to “the filthy and debasing literature that is too often vomited from the Press . . . in England” (17). Interestingly, this is exactly the line of argument which was pursued by Hyde a few years later in his famous lecture “On the Necessity of De-Anglicizing Ireland,” which argued that Irish people should arrest English influence by reviving the Irish language, and reading Irish books rather than the “garbage of vulgar English weeklies like *Bow Bells* and the *Police Intelligence*” (Hyde 159).

In the British debate on *The Best Hundred Books* the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* sought the opinion of publishers because he believed that “no class of opinion on the best books could be more interesting” (*Best Hundred* 20). Accordingly, the *Pall Mall Gazette* prints the opinions of A. W. Black and Bernard Quaritch. After all there was no point in readers going to the trouble of deciding on the best books if publishers did not agree with their conclusions – and publishers could play a role of fundamental importance in the debate by making the best books available at affordable prices. The Irish debate makes no reference to the two significant Dublin publishing firms of the era: James Duffy and Son (est. 1835) and M. H. Gill and Son (est. 1856). Their activities as publishers may not have seemed that significant; it is also relevant that both of these firms combined their business as publishers with other steadier enterprises, including in both cases, printing and retail. Both firms ran book shops, and both shops also sold what might be described as “Catholic” goods – not just missals and prayer books, but also rosary beads, medals, crucifixes, holy water fonts, and so on.

The house of Duffy was certainly aware of the debate on *The Best Hundred Irish Books*; it compiled a list of “some of the Best Hundred Books relating to Ireland, now in print and published by James Duffy” and this was published in the *Publishers’ Circular* on 15 June 1886. Most of the books on this list were originally published between 1840 and 1870, when James Duffy (c. 1809–1871), the founder of the firm, was still alive. During this period, Duffy’s firm took full advantage of the new opportunities which the practice of stereotyping afforded to the publishing and printing businesses, using stereotypes as a means of keeping standard works in print over a long period. By 1886, when members of Duffy’s family were managing the business, the firm’s principal sphere of book business appears to have been the sale of stereotyped reprints by writers who had been associated with Young Ireland and *The Nation* in the 1840s and 50s. Gill and Son certainly had more energy, and was managed in 1886 by Henry J. Gill, who was a Home Rule MP, and a director of the *Freeman’s Journal*. Gill and Son advertised its own publications and other “books of Irish interest” in the pamphlet edition of the debate, and appears to have been attuned to the demand for literary excellence at an affordable price. The list included a shilling series and the “O’Connell Press Popular Library,” which consisted of 3d. reprints of popular books such as Mangan’s *Poems* and Moore’s *Melodies*. The cheap price of these books clearly suggests Gill’s desire to reach new readers – including the group memorably characterised by Yeats a few years later as the buyers of “ballad books in small county towns . . . a class quite out of reach of the 1/6 book” (*Letters* 1: 157).

One of the issues which has preoccupied historians of the Irish Literary Revival is the relationship between the demise of Parnellism and the emergence of the force for cultural revival. Yeats’s own views on this issue are pretty certain. In the opening paragraph of

“Ireland After Parnell,” one of the books of *Autobiographies*, he recalls his “prophecy,” made in 1889, of “an intellectual movement” which could only come about at the “first lull in politics.” Following the death of Parnell, Yeats experienced a “sudden certainty that Ireland was to be like soft wax for years to come” (Yeats 199). Of course Yeats’s account was written years after the events it describes, and very much in the interest of self-aggrandisement. Nonetheless his argument that the catastrophic end of the Parnellite era created a vacuum in constitutional initiatives which gave momentum to cultural initiatives has certainly proven to be persuasive.¹¹ Yet it is possible to look at the events of this period, and read the evidence rather differently. It is clear, for example, that several significant cultural clubs and societies were founded before the end of the Parnellite era, among them the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language (est. 1877), the Young Ireland Society (est. 1881), the Southwark Irish Literary Club (est. 1883), the Gaelic Athletic Association (est. 1884), and the Pan-Celtic Society (est. 1888). These initiatives are clearly signs of cultural engagement with the Irish literary heritage, and may suggest that the Literary Revival was growing in significance in the 1880s, “as a function of constitutional nationalism’s success, not its failure” (Foster 115). From the perspective of literary history, the important thing to recognise about the early 1890s is not the demise of Parnellism, but the strength of Yeats’s determination, vision and energy. As he recalled in “Ireland After Parnell”:

I had definite plans; I wanted to create an Irish Theatre; I was finishing my *Countess Cathleen* in its first meagre version, and thought of a travelling company to visit our country branches; but before that there must be a popular imaginative literature. I arranged with Mr. Fisher Unwin and his reader, Mr. Edward Garnett – a personal friend of mine – that when our organization was complete Mr. Fisher Unwin was to publish for it a series of books at a shilling each. (Yeats 200)

One of the things most obviously lacking from the debate on “The Best Hundred Irish Books” is Yeats himself, his generation, his agency, and energy (again, in his own words) as “an Irish poet, looking to my own people for my ultimate best audience & trying to express the things that interest them & which will make them care for the land in which they live” (*Letters* 2: 15).

Yet the detailed ways in which several of the respondents answered the challenge posed by O’Brien may be read as a sign that people were ready to think anew about the specifics of the Irish cultural heritage. Many of the subsequent projects and enthusiasms of the Irish Literary Revival are mentioned in the columns of the debate, the vigour of which forms, as one correspondent notes, “not a literature, so much as the promise of a literature in the coming days” (42).¹² For example, Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, the nationalist author and journalist associated with the Young Ireland movement of the 1840s, mentions that “many of the books suitable for popular reading have fallen into complete disuse” and suggests that, “it would not be difficult to publish fifty shilling volumes of fiction, biography and poetry now little known, which would win their way to the national heart” (25). Duffy had spent several years in Australia, and had become Prime Minister of Victoria in 1871, but he retired to France in 1880 and clearly continued to think a great deal about the Irish literary and political heritage. His association with the immensely successful “Library of Ireland” series of the 1840s clearly gave him the germ of the idea for a new series. Similarly, George Sigerson, who would subsequently become the President of the National Literary Society of

Dublin, speaks of the necessity of reviving interest in the Irish language and its folklore. His is a lone voice, but he speaks with passion and urgency:

Irishmen have neglected the rich folklore of their country. . . . a large portion . . . have not the remotest conception of the mental world of millions of their fellow-countrymen in the western half of the island. . . . it would be otherwise were the ‘Three Sorrows of Story’ familiar to the mind; or, at the least, if ‘The Fate of the Sons of Usnach’ were, as that beautiful and pathetic classic deserves to be, a household book in Ireland. (33)

These are foundational ideas for the Irish Literary Revival, a movement which is more accurately thought of as a general revival of interest in Irish culture, which unfolded in a number of cultural contexts (including sport, dance, literature and language).

The voice of those who believed that cultural revival should extend beyond high culture to the economic sphere is also to be heard in this debate. John Augustus O’Shea, Irish-born journalist, novelist, and member of the Southwark Irish Literary Club queries virtually every aspect of O’Brien’s list (“Some of the works he alludes to I have never heard of, and I am a man of more than average reading” [25]), then apologises for being “hypercritical,” and concludes by saying that he hopes “to live to see a regenerate Ireland, where every town of three thousand souls will have it gymnasium, baths, band, entertainments and lecture hall, and a library not of 100 but of 1,000 best books” (25), a peroration which makes him seem rather like Joyce’s Citizen. It is interesting that so many of the really engaged responses came from London. Another of the Home Rule MPs to participate was Justin McCarthy who commented that: “the best books about Ireland are, I think, after all, the legends. Any man who wants to understand the country must study them” (29). This view was echoed by Richard Garnett (1835–1906), Librarian at the British Museum, whose wife was Irish and whose son was Edward Garnett, the publisher’s reader. He remarked that:

of all Irish works of imagination . . . by far the best are those which belong to the remote past. No other country has so beautiful legendary literature. I would bring out Joyce’s *Irish Legends*, with additions from kindred sources, in the cheapest possible form and place them in the hands of every boy and girl in the country. (14)

British intellectuals of Garnett’s kind, who were generally interested in folklore and Celticism, would subsequently prove to be an important and influential group, providing both intellectual and material support for Yeats and his peers. The group whom Yeats dubs “London-Irish authors and journalists” would be significant too, and they are very much in evidence within the columns of this debate.¹³

By way of conclusion I want to compare the moment of the O’Brien debate, with a snapshot of the months around February 1895, when Yeats’s list of “The Best Thirty Irish Books” was published in the Dublin *Daily Express*. Though he was only twenty-nine of the time, Yeats’s career as a writer was well established. He had published several original works in book form – including *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* (1891), *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics* (1892), and *The Celtic Twilight* (1893). *Poems* (1895), consisting of considerably revised texts of some of his early verse, was in press and would usefully provide a regular income over the next three decades (Foster 152). In addition, Yeats had compiled several successful anthologies including *Fairy and Folk*

Tales of the Irish Peasantry (1888) and *Stories from Carleton* (1889). Success beyond the publication of his own books – in broader cultural arenas – had been harder for Yeats to achieve. While he and others had been successful in establishing the National Literary Society of Dublin and the Irish Literary Society of London, the debates at these societies often became very heated, and focussed on political rather than cultural agendas. Yeats, with his privileged Protestant background, often found himself caught in the crossfire. As he recalls in “Ireland After Parnell,” he became “absurdly sensitive, glancing about me in certain public places . . . to discover imagined enemies; and even now, after twenty or thirty years, I feel at times that I have not recovered my natural manner” (234). The most vitriolic dispute of this era was undoubtedly that which surrounded the selection of titles for the series of books which became known as the “New Irish Library.” Yeats had hoped to edit this series of books but found his plans hijacked by Charles Gavan Duffy, whose successful negotiations with Unwin led to the publication of twelve titles in the series between 1893 and 1897.¹⁴

Despite his failure to control and direct this particular initiative, a failure which he would characterise in “Ireland after Parnell” as “the failure of our first attempt to create a modern Irish literature,” Yeats continued to work as a propagandist for Irish letters (218). His list of “The Best Thirty Irish Books” was compiled in order to stir up interest in questions of nationalism and literary excellence, and, as he told his friend John O’Leary, “in the hopes of a long discussion like that in the *Freeman* on the best hundred” (*Letters* 1: 446). As one would expect, his list gives a high priority to literary titles and purportedly excludes “every book in which there is strong political feeling” and includes “only books of imagination or books that seem to me necessary to the understanding of the imagination of Ireland” (*Letters* 1: 440). Yeats wrote to several people asking them to respond to his article, and even went to the trouble of contacting O’Brien, asking him to “slang my frivolity” (*Letters* 1: 446). But his list of books did not succeed in stirring up much interest and certainly does not compare to the earlier discussion of 1886. O’Brien did not reply. People had become weary of orchestrated controversies of this kind, and there was increasing resistance to spin and “log-rolling” (“A reviewing B, and B in turn reviewing A, and both going into raptures of admiration”).¹⁵ In 1896, the Irish publisher Edmund Downey told D. J. O’Donoghue that he was:

convinced that all the talk . . . about the ‘Irish Literary Revival’ simply prevented any such literary revival. People got disgusted with the lies written and spoken. It was much easier to sell Irish books before any of the books began to be talked, & everything pointed to a real revival in the literature concerning Ireland – but the Book-Mongers spoiled it all. Christ save us from any more of them!
(Van De Kamp 178)

Yeats’s experiences as a “book-monger” had ultimately proven to be quite trying. Ireland – after all, even after Parnell – was not like “soft wax,” and Yeats was gradually coming to terms with the fact that he could not play the role of “democrat in literature” (*Letters* 2: 130). He would need to define his ideas for future cultural initiatives more carefully. Crucially, he had also come to realise that the movement he was creating could not always please the crowd, because “Nationalist abstractions were like . . . a part of the mind turned to stone” (*Autobiographies* 234).

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NOTES

1. An advertisement for the first copies of “The Best Hundred Books by the Best Judges” appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette* on 10 March 1886 (15); the sales figures are from *Publishers’ Circular*, 1 April 1886, 328.
2. In their correspondence Lord Acton and Mary Gladstone had frequently discussed what should constitute the “hundred best books.” Acton eventually sent her his own list, which, in 1883, she recorded in her diary. The list was not made public until July 1905, when it was published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* by Clement Shorter. The list is also available at http://www.acton.org/research/acton/lord_acton_100.php (accessed 1 February 2010).
3. For studies which deal with the history of reading in Ireland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries see Adams, Casteleyn, Cunningham and Kennedy, eds., Daly and Dickson, eds., Legg, and O’Ciosáin. As yet, no one has studied the social history of the mass reading public in Ireland during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
4. Gladstone’s address to the House of Commons, Westminster, 7 June 1886.
5. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 31 March 1886, 3.
6. Intense faction-fighting split the party in December 1890 once the scandal of Parnell’s long term relationship with Mrs. O’Shea became public. Those who called for Parnell’s resignation included Gladstone, the Nonconformists in the Liberal Party, and some Catholics. Parnell continued as leader of the Party but lost the crucial support of forty-five “anti-Parnellites.” He was in failing health and died in October 1891. The factions of the party did not reunite until 1900.
7. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 12 January 1886, 2.
8. Sir Charles Gavan Duffy to the Editor of the *Freeman’s Journal*, 26 March 1886. The debate on the “Best Hundred Irish Books” was reprinted in pamphlet form (O’Brien [Historicus]). All further references given in the text are to the pamphlet edition, which reprinted all of the replies which originally appeared in the *Freeman’s Journal*.
9. By 1886 O’Brien had written: *The Parliamentary History of the Irish Land Question; The Irish Land Question and English Public Opinion, with a Supplement on Griffith’s; and, Fifty Years of Concessions to Ireland, 1831–1881*. Later works included: *Irish Wrongs and English Remedies, with other Essays; Thomas Drummond, under-secretary in Ireland 1835–1840, Life and Letters; The Home-Ruler’s Manual; The Life of Lord Russell of Killowen; A Hundred Years of Irish History; Irish Memories; and, John Bright. Edited works included: The Autobiography of Wolfe Tone; John Redmond: Home Rule Speeches; and, The Irish Nuns at Ypres, an Episode of the War*.
10. See also Hutton, “Reading *The Love Songs of Connacht*: Douglas Hyde and the Exigencies of Publication.”
11. See, most notably, Kelly.
12. Bearing in mind Yeats’s “Apologia addressed to Ireland in the Coming Times” (1892), this phrase has an interesting resonance (“Know that I would accounted be/True brother of that company/Who sang to sweeten Ireland’s wrong”).
13. For the London Irish of this period, see Sheehy. See also Hutton, ed., “Francis Fahy’s ‘Ireland in London: Reminiscences.’”
14. The twelve titles in the New Irish Library were (in volume order): Thomas Davis, *The Patriot Parliament of 1689*, edited and with an introduction by Charles Gavan Duffy (1893); Standish O’Grady, *The Bog of Stars and Other Stories and Sketches of Elizabethan Ireland* (1893); Martin MacDermott, ed., *The New Spirit of the Nation* (1894); E. M. Lynch, *A Parish Providence: A Country Tale*, with an introduction by Charles Gavan Duffy (1894); Alfred Perceval Graves, ed., *The Irish Song Book* (1894); Douglas Hyde, *The Story of Early Gaelic Literature* (1895); John Todhunter, *Life of Patrick Sarsfield, Earl of Lucan* (1895); J. F. Taylor, *Owen Roe O’Neill* (1896); R. A. King, *Swift in Ireland* (1895); Charles Gavan Duffy, *A Short Life of Thomas Davis* (1896); Michael MacDonagh, *Bishop Doyle: A Biographical and Historical Study* (1896); Sir Samuel Ferguson, *Lays of the Red Branch*, with an

introduction by Mary Ferguson (1897). Each book was available in either paper or cloth covers, priced 1/- and 2/- respectively.

15. John F. Taylor to the *Freeman's Journal*, 7 September 1892, 5.

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