



Maud Gonne (extreme right) in the lead role in a 1902 production of 'Cathleen Ni Houlihan'. Later it was customary to spell it Kathleen NI Houlihan. COURTESY OF THE ABBEY THEATRE ARCHIVE

A Poets' revolt

PJ Mathews on how culture heavily influenced the Rising and its leaders

ONE of the enduring ideas about the 1916 Rising is that it was a 'poets' revolt'. This may be partly to do with the fact that the most famous statement about the event is, itself, a poem. Yeats's 'Easter 1916' gave us the unforgettable refrain *'A terrible beauty is born'*, but it also portrayed leaders like Pearse and MacDonagh as cultured men of letters as well as revolutionaries. There is no doubt that poetry and theatre played a huge role in the events that led to the Easter Rising but it is unlikely that any of the volunteers who saw action on Easter week signed up for combat solely because they read patriotic poems or attended nationalist plays.

It is true that many of the leading figures were deeply interested in culture: Patrick Pearse was a writer and an important figure in the Gaelic League; Thomas MacDonagh lectured in English literature at UCD and wrote poetry; and Máire Nic Shiubhlaigh was a central figure in the shaping of the Irish theatre movement. They came of age in a city where experimental art was being created, new theatres were being opened, and a new enthusiasm for the Irish language was finding expression. The pubs and tearooms bristled with energy as people debated the themes and controversies of the latest literary magazines.

The production of the revolutionary play, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, by WB Yeats and Lady Gregory is often cited

as a moment when ideas of romantic nationalism radicalised a generation of rebels who would end up in the GPO in 1916. There is no mistaking the political message behind this drama. The old woman, Cathleen (an allegorical figure who represents Mother Ireland), has lost her four green fields and appeals to a young man to help her get them back. The hero, Michael, is moved by this story and leaves his bride-to-be to help the old woman. As he leaves, Cathleen is transformed into a beautiful young woman 'with the walk of a queen'.

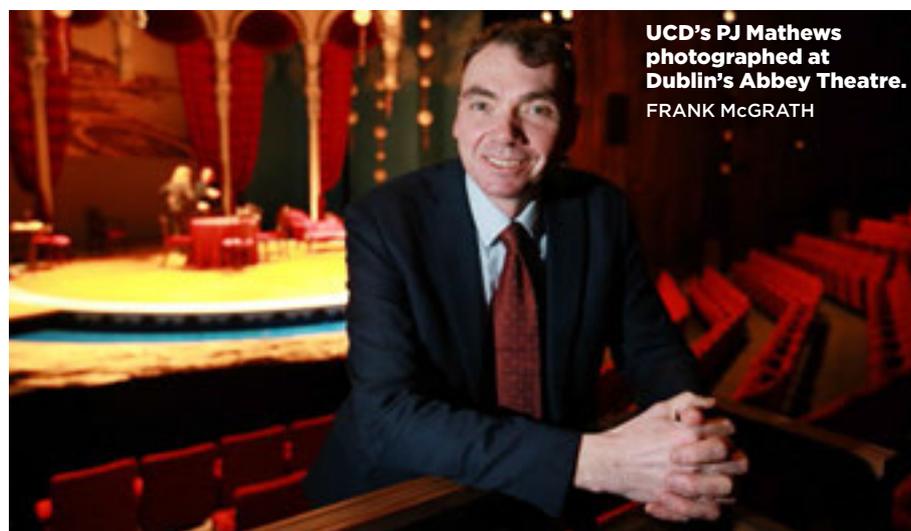
This influential play of the early Irish theatre movement was produced in St Teresa's Hall in Clarendon Street on 2 April 1902. It marked the beginning of a ground-breaking collaboration between a talented band of part-time actors under the direction of Frank and Willie Fay, and the playwrights of the Irish Literary Theatre. Starring Maud Gonne in the title role, it was a huge popular success and was revived many times in the years leading up to 1916. In fact the play was performed at the Abbey just weeks before the Rising.

Set near Killala, Co Mayo, it recalls the

United Irishmen rebellion of 1798 and blends ideas of Fenian revolution with Celtic other-worldliness. The play draws heavily on the Gaelic *aisling* tradition in which Ireland is personified as a woman. As is often pointed out, this is a rather disabling notion of female possibility. The only option open to the female character in this instance is to inspire male heroic action. There is something paradoxical, however, in the fact that the actress who played the lead role, Maud Gonne, was anything but a passive woman at this time. She was a leading advocate for women's rights, a defender of the poor and an important figure in artistic circles.

It is instructive, however to look at what else was happening at the time *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* was written. It is obvious that Yeats and Lady Gregory wrote it as a way of counteracting the appeal of the British monarchy in Ireland. The visits of kings and queens were often greeted with enthusiasm by a large proportion of the Irish people. Many welcomed the celebratory occasion and relished the opportunity to catch a glimpse of the king or queen. Yeats, however, was vocal in his objection to royal visits. He pointed out that in Ireland public displays of loyalty were often followed by protracted periods of revolutionary action against the Crown. Royal visits, it seems, could unmask the rigid hierarchies underpinning the ruling system.

It was largely to neutralise the mystique of the British monarch with an Irish



UCD's PJ Mathews photographed at Dublin's Abbey Theatre. FRANK McGRATH

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Left: A promotional poster for the Abbey Theatre's scheduled programme for Easter week, 1916

Right: A John Butler Yeats portrait of Máire Nic Shiubhlaigh, a central figure in the Irish theatre movement of the time.
COURTESY: ABBAY THEATRE ARCHIVE

Below: Rebel leader Patrick Pearse, who was a writer and an important figure in the Gaelic League; and Lady Augusta Gregory, playwright and founding member of the Abbey Theatre.
GETTY IMAGES

See 'The Abbey Theatre and the Easter Rising, 1916' exhibition on the Google Cultural Institute on www.google.com/culturalinstitute/project/easter-rising-1916



equivalent, that he and Lady Gregory exhumed the old Gaelic sovereignty goddess, Cathleen Ni Houlihan. This figure embodied the nation in the form of a woman (as Queen Victoria did in Britain) who could inspire the loyalty of the people, and the bravery of young men. When the ageing Victoria came to Dublin in 1900 her mission to recruit young Irishmen to fight in the Boer War was widely commented upon. *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* was performed on the Dublin stage shortly afterwards to remind Irishmen of their duty to reclaim the sovereign nation. Yeats had this play in mind when he later wrote the lines 'Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?' It was much parodied by post-independence writers such as Seán O'Casey and Denis Johnston who regarded it as the apotheosis of a dangerous, unthinking nationalism.

The themes of stoic idealism and mystical sacrifice can also be found in the poetry of Patrick Pearse. His poem, 'Fornocht Do Chonac Thú' ('Naked I Saw Thee'), reiterates the idea of self-denial found in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* and, eerily, anticipates Pearse's own death. Once again, the turning away from earthly delights is seen as a necessary precursor to heroic action. Joseph Mary Plunkett's most famous poem, 'I See His Blood Upon the Rose' is more overtly Christian in tone. It embraces the mystical idea of the incarnation of Jesus in the beauty of the natural world. In contrast to Pearse, the note of self-denial is not so pronounced. If

anything, the poem endorses the idea of Christian fulfilment in this life as well as the next.

Plunkett's friend and fellow signatory of the Proclamation, Thomas MacDonagh, was more secular in his thought. His play, *Metempsychosis*, a comedy performed by the Theatre of Ireland in 1912 is very revealing in this regard. Significantly, in the light of MacDonagh's subsequent execution in 1916, the play stands as a firm critique of martyrdom to an abstract principle. In fact it pointedly satirises the wilful, conscious ending of a life for the sake of some intangible ideal or sense of a higher plan. Furthermore, it exposes to ridicule those who proffer such ideas to others but are unwilling to follow such deathly doctrines themselves.

The mystical strain in poetry and drama is a discernable tone in the literary soundscape of the period. However, it is hardly the dominant note. Critics of the Rising often zeroed in on this element after the fact to claim that the rebellion was spearheaded by a group of crazed religious fanatics with a militarist death wish. It also suited the agenda of an ascendant conservative elite who were eager to claim the Rising in the name of the Catholic faith.



People who had previously gathered to discuss literary matters and political issues were now running guns and taking part in military manoeuvres. Others were volunteering to fight in the trenches

In reality most of the leading figures were deeply committed civic activists rather than tortured romantic souls. Many, too, were important leaders in the re-emergence of enlightenment values of civic participation and citizenship that revolutionised Irish life in the decades prior to 1916. During this period people gathered in their thousands in meeting rooms and parish halls all over Ireland to create a new civic culture outside the scope of institutional religion, the colonial state and conventional politics.

The 1916 generation led a whole range of clubs, leagues, and societies, dedicated to nationalism, fenianism, women's suffrage, socialism, republicanism, anti-conscriptionism, Irish language revivalism and trade unionism. Significantly, many of the leading figures also contributed to influential publications like the *Irish Review*, founded in 1911 by Mary Colum and others. This robust and energetic journal combined an interest in literary and cultural matters with social theory and critique. It was a melting pot of ideas on republicanism, female suffrage and the rights of children — many of which would find their way into the 1916 Proclamation.

What is most striking, however, is the speed with which cultural and intellectual energies and activities across the networks of activism transformed into military organisation in response to the Home Rule crisis of 1912 and in the context of a militarist zeitgeist sweeping Europe at the outbreak of the First World War. People who had previously gathered to discuss literary matters and political issues were now running guns and taking part in military manoeuvres. Others were volunteering to fight in the trenches.

There is no question that an interest in literature and theatre brought many like-minded people of radical intent together in the years preceding the Rising. It is doubtful, however, that abstract devotion to *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* was a major factor in the unfolding events.

The actions of Easter 1916 were initiated by men and women who regarded themselves as equal citizens but who, paradoxically, lacked elected authority. These actions were justified in their minds by the fact that in Ireland no elected national authority was permitted to exist, or could come into being, without the use of force.

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